

***Proceedings of the Workshop on Newfoundland Theatre Research. Denyse Lynde, Helen Peters, Richard Buehler, eds; Voices from the Landwash: 11 Newfoundland Playwrights. Denyse Lynde, ed.***

Patrick B. O'Neill

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*Proceedings of the Workshop on Newfoundland Theatre Research.* Denyse Lynde, Helen Peters, Richard Buehler, eds. St. John's: Department of English, Memorial University. ix, 137 p., softcover, \$13.00, 1993, ISBN 0-88901-252-0.

*Voices from the Landwash: 11 Newfoundland Playwrights.* Denyse Lynde, ed. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, xx, 417 p., softcover, \$29.95, 1997, ISBN 0-88754-527-0.

## PATRICK B. O'NEILL

ON 17 AND 18 JUNE 1992, a workshop into Newfoundland Theatre Research was held at Memorial University; the published *Proceedings of the Workshop on Newfoundland Theatre Research* contain sixteen of the seventeen papers presented in St. John's. The organizers of the workshop cited three major objectives: first, to recognize the theatrical heritage of Newfoundland; second, to identify major research efforts already undertaken; and, finally, to frame strategies and approaches toward further research in Newfoundland theatre. To achieve these ends, the workshop was organized into four sessions: "Records," "Critical Models," "Theatrical Heritage," and "Working Artists."

The three papers in Part I set the stage. Richard Plant discussed the problems facing Canadian theatre researchers by reviewing the past twenty years of the discipline and raising seven questions about the best direction for Canadian, and specifically Newfoundland, theatre history in the future. This is followed by two papers that fit together very well with a nice economy of words — Heather McCallum's "Canadian Theatre Archives" and Gail Weir's "Performing Arts Materials in the Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives." In the open discussion following these papers, Gail Weir noted that students need to be trained to go out

and gather the printed documentation and oral records of the theatrical past of communities in Newfoundland and Labrador; one regrets, however, that the discussion did not speculate on the nature of memory (or how scholars react to the recorded memories of others), and the degree to which it is possible to rediscover or recreate the past from memory. Nevertheless, since that time, three workshop participants from Memorial have been awarded two SSHRCC grants to involve students in this task — “Newfoundland Theatre Research 1950-1970s” to Denyse Lynde and Gail Weir (1994-97) and “Newfoundland Theatre Research — The Community” to Denyse Lynde, Gail Weir, and Richard Buehler (1998-2001). Such grants will gather a vast array of materials into the Newfoundland Studies Archives, and perhaps then is the time to ask the questions regarding the validity of memory.

The five papers in Part II, “Critical Models,” begin the process of forming the framework of strategies and approaches toward further research in Newfoundland theatre by providing two examples of on-going research into Newfoundland theatre (the Mumpers and CODCO) and three examples of research elsewhere (two in Quebec and one in Europe). Traditionally, historical investigation proceeds in two stages: the collection, organization and description of data (the SSHRCC projects at Memorial) selected on the basis of some assumptions, and the interpretation of that data in the form of analysis and description of the theatrical conditions affecting the performance or the creation of a piece. Such historical studies are centred on an event or on a series of events. When the events are simply listed, we have chronicle; when a hypothesis is offered as an explanation for those events, we have history. Does it matter if theatre researchers arrive at the hypothesis through semiotics, post-modernism, post-colonialism, feminism or an interdisciplinary approach? Since all are valid, I think not; however, the contributors’ discussion on how they formed their strategies and approaches enhances an understanding and appreciation of their work.

The five papers in Part III by Paul O’Neill, John Holmes, Ches Skinner, Elizabeth Miller, and Michael Cook are basically chronicle and not history. Paul O’Neill’s “Theatre in Newfoundland: The Beginning” is an excellent example of what a skilled story-teller can achieve when writing theatre history that is fundamentally a narrative description of a series of events. O’Neill ignores the problem of reader-oriented writing discussed by others, and simply creates a chronicle that academics will admire for its thoroughness of research, and the general public will enjoy for its wonderful narrative. Sadly no suggestions were made in any of the discussion groups about Newfoundland topics in need of research that beginning scholars might consider pursuing. I would suggest that a comparative study of the development of the Mumpers plays in other countries might add to the understanding of the Newfoundland tradition: for example, although the Mumpers plays, also known as Gombey dancing, were banned by the Legislature in Bermuda as early as 1761 and in Newfoundland one hundred years later in 1861, they continued to be performed in these British colonies and today feature prominently in both

cultures. Would not a study of the Bermudian mumming tradition aid in the understanding of the tradition in Newfoundland? Likewise, a comparison of the relationship of "The Play of Neptune in New France" at Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, (p. 73), with the quasi-theatrical ceremonies of Neptune, much like the mummerys plays, that were conducted on sighting the Grand Banks beginning by at least 1701 and ending by order of a Quebec Court in 1816, could be enlightening.

Part IV contained papers by Ann Anderson (Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council) and by Andy Jones and Chris Brookes (Newfoundland theatre practitioners). The discussion following their presentations centred on the problems regarding publication of collective creations from the creators' standpoint. When these comments are read in conjunction with Helen Peters' academic presentation on the problems she faced while editing the plays of CODCO, a greater appreciation of how a script finds its way to print emerges. Regretfully no discussion focuses on the role of improvisation and reinterpretation of these collective creations when new productions of these works are staged. Chris Brookes implies dissatisfaction with Fabian O'Keefe's production of the Christmas Mummerys Play because the high school students "were doing an identical performance to the one we did in 1973," but directors are bound by a copyright agreement that states "Changes to the scripts are expressly forbidden without the written permission of the authors." Future producers of these printed collective pieces needed to have this problem discussed in more detail.

Charles James Fox, the great British debater, once said that "if a speech reads well it is not a good speech." While not entirely true, Fox's dictum does remind us that speech and writing are distinct modes of expression. It is paramount to remember this while reading the *Proceedings*. Although all "the presenters were given the opportunity to edit their texts," most "chose to retain the spoken style." Thus the majority of these papers retain their conference persona and lack the rigour and perspective required by the written word; this is not necessarily a criticism, but a recognition of the forum for which they were prepared. As might be expected, the papers are widely uneven, because the topics are often too large for the time given to develop them. In most cases, the participants gave the impression of knowing more about their subjects than they have been able to tell us; however, what they do present is absorbing to read and full of extremely stimulating points.

During his presentation at the workshop, Andy Jones recited the titles of 115 plays written locally during the previous twenty years, and not published. He concluded with the hope "that the academic community will delve into and help the practitioners to preserve and disseminate" Newfoundland's unique theatre tradition. Denyse Lynde took up that task and has edited *Voices from the Landwash: 11 Newfoundland Playwrights*. This volume celebrates the talent and accomplishments of Newfoundland playwrights over the past fifteen years by introducing us to two plays from 1980, to four of the 115 plays mentioned at the workshop by Jones and written between 1985 and 1992, and to four plays produced since 1992.

*End of the Road* by Michael Cook, *West Moon* by Al Pittman, *Young Triffie Been Made Away With* by Ray Guy, *Hanlon House* by Greg Thomey and Brian Hennessey, *Flux* by Pete Soucy, *Catlover* by Janis Spence, *The Only Living Father* by Tom Cahill, *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday* by Des Walsh, *Woman In A Monkey Cage* by Berni Stapleton, and *The ALIENation of Lizzie Dyke* by Liz Pickard — these are the plays and playwrights that Denyse Lynde has chosen to introduce to the public in print. It is, of course, impossible in limited space to do justice to a collection of plays as rich and as provocative as this one. The diversity of the works makes for much of the fascination of the volume. If the task of the editor is merely to win new readers for the contemporary playwrights of Newfoundland, then Dr. Lynde succeeds quite well.

The value of this work is, however, much decreased by the unforgivable omission of accurate production notes and a good bibliography. I cannot understand why a careful scholar (who helped organize the theatre history workshops in 1992 aimed at framing approaches toward further research in Newfoundland theatre) would permit the work to appear in print with no bibliography of any sort to guide the academic (and the interested reader) into a fuller study of the plays and the playwrights. Since most of these works were produced only in Newfoundland and since the *Canadian News Index* does not index Newfoundland newspapers, it is extremely difficult to locate reviews for these works in order to accept Lynde's invitation for "continued debate" on the plays and playwrights.

Although the introduction to the collection is insightful, an examination of the few reviews available locally raised some questions in my mind not discussed in the introduction. In their reviews, Peter Gard [*Artsatlantic* 13:1 (Spring/Summer 1974), 43] and Gordon Jones [*Theatrum Magazine* 37 (Winter 1993/94), 38] agree with Lynde and found *Woman In A Monkey Cage* a fascinating piece, but Gard also raised the question of a postmodern angle to the work and suggested that most audience members thought that the unnamed heroine was actually a madwoman in an asylum, and not a woman imprisoned in an intergalactic zoo by aliens. Stapleton's play seemingly does offer its "audience two sustained but conflicting readings," but Lynde ignores Gard's postmodern interpretation. As for Spence's *Catlover*, regrettably little notice is paid to it in the collection's introduction. Both J.H. Kirchoff in *The Globe and Mail* (26 February 1993) and the reviewer in the *Toronto Star* (24 February) gave less than positive reviews to the production at Tarragon Theatre; why then was it chosen for inclusion over the other 111 plays mentioned by Andy Jones at the workshop? Should not the introduction have answered this question? Finally, Gordon Jones, when reviewing *The ALIENation of Lizzy Dyke* raised questions as to "the length and undiscipline of script" in which there "is simply too much loosely woven, stylistically heterogeneous and qualitatively variable material crammed into a show for one live performer" [*Theatrum Magazine* 40 (September/October 1994), 31]. Granted that this is perhaps the most

intellectually gripping piece in the collection, should not theatre groups be warned of Jones's implied production weaknesses of the piece?

What do an editor's responsibilities to the reader entail? Some may very well disagree with the need for the editor to consult published reviews prior to writing an introduction, but most would probably agree that the history of production should be included for all the plays or none of the plays. The editor has supplied this information for only six of the ten plays. How difficult would it have been to discover that *Woman In A Monkey Cage* received a workshop in 1991 from the Rising Tide Theatre and was later produced by them at the LPSU Hall in St. John's in October 1993, and that *The ALIENation of Lizzie Dyke* was produced at the LPSU Hall by the Resource Centre for the Arts in June of 1994? More disturbing, is the fact that when the information is supplied, it is not completely accurate. *Catlover* was performed by The Ship's Company in 1991 (not 1992) and by Tarragon Theatre in 1993 (not 1992). The itinerary of *The Only Living Father* did not mention a stop in Manitoba, although the *Vancouver Sun* (28 September 1994) notes that it was performed in "every province but Quebec and in both territories" and wrongly identified the Tarragon Theatre as the venue for its Toronto production, and not the Tarragon Theatre Extra Space. If nothing else, an editor has a responsibility to accuracy.

Despite my personal disappointment that the volume provides only meagre information on the playwrights and the production history of the works, I have no quarrel with the plays included, and, indeed, the volume left me hungry for more plays by Newfoundland authors. Reading these two books provoked reflection on a number of issues central to the study of Canadian theatre in general and Newfoundland theatre specifically, and, since that was the fundamental purpose of both works, then they are a success. Thus, without reservation, I highly recommend both works.