

RIC KNOWLES

“LOOKING BACK/MAKING WORK”

Renowned scholar (and one-time member of Mulgrave Road Co-op) Ric Knowles was one of two keynote speakers at the Shifting Tides: Atlantic Canadian Theatre Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow conference. The following is a revised version of his closing remarks.

I. Looking Back, part 1

I was invited by the organizers of “Shifting Tides: Atlantic Canadian Theatre, yesterday, today and tomorrow” to frame the conference by raising some questions at the opening about issues to think about over the weekend, and offering some closing remarks on the final afternoon about some of the key things that the conference had accomplished. I prepared for the task by looking back. I re-read the proceedings of the last national conference on Theatre in Atlantic Canada, which was held at Mount Allison University in early April 1986. I also re-read the *Canadian Theatre Review* issue on *Atlantic Alternatives*, which was published in the Fall of the same year (the only issue of *CTR* so far to have focused on the Atlantic region¹). At that time, Canadian nationalism was still a powerful force, and regionalism remained a dominant conceptual frame for thinking about Canadian theatre. There were, moreover, separatist movements of various kinds and varying degrees of seriousness across the country—in Quebec, of course, but also in the West, in Acadie, and in Newfoundland. There was even a Cape Breton separatist movement that advocated closing the causeway as a first essential step to independence. The title of that conference—“Theatre in Atlantic Canada”—was transparent, apart from the caveat that Atlantic Canada (as opposed to the Maritimes and Newfoundland) was a bureaucratic invention by the federal government. But no-one questioned the central organizing principle of the conference, which was rooted in the basic belief that “culture,” as Raymond Williams said, is the “ordinary” (*Resources* 3-18), home-grown, what people in a community *do*; and the concomitant regionalist belief in community as defined by landscape and history—by the continuity of place over time.

I’m not sure that the title of the 2004 conference—“Shifting Tides: Atlantic Canadian Theatre, yesterday, today, and tomorrow,” is equally transparent. We have moved from a nationalist period to one that, on the one hand, is suspicious of nationalisms, and on the other is dominated by World Trade Organizations, globalizations,

multinationals, interculturalisms, and internets. Community is less obviously defined by geography and history now, as communities of interest establish themselves across physical and political boundaries. It is, in fact, possible to feel closer to someone down under than someone down the road, across the street, or even upstairs in the same building. It may be a mark of this change that it was possible to hold the “Shifting Tides” conference in Toronto, the very idea of which, in 1986, would have been appalling. Shifting tides indeed.

That title does continue to suggest that one principle of regional cohesion is the sea, that what is “Atlantic” about our shared enterprise at the conference has something to do with the ocean that constitutes at least one of the borders of all four provinces. But since the last such conference the fish plant in Canso, Nova Scotia—my favourite Maritimes town—has shut down and been replaced by a Maritime museum, and if “culture” and community are still defined by what people *do*, fewer and fewer people in Atlantic Canada live (or make their livings) in the ways they once did, or have the relationships to the sea that they once had.

Of course the title of the conference is “*Shifting Tides*,” and perhaps one of its goals was to come to terms with those shifts—including shifts in what each of “Atlantic” and “Canadian” *mean* now. Even “Theatre” isn’t as stable, in these days of interdisciplinary performance, performance studies, and performance art as it seemed in 1986, and we might have expected that the performances at this conference would be different in feel from those at the last. There may be some significance to the fact that the first conference featured performances by companies with such names as “CODCO,” “The Mulgrave Road Co-op Theatre Company,” and “Tintamarre”—all geographical designations and designations of collectivity—while the 2004 version featured “Zuppa Circus” and “Artistic Fraud,” names with a decidedly eclectic and postmodern resonance.

But the conference subtitle—“yesterday, today, and tomorrow”—also signaled changes that warrant tracking. I wondered, as I introduced the conference, if one useful way of thinking about this might be to turn again to Raymond Williams and translate “yesterday, today, and tomorrow” into his conceptualization of “residual, dominant, and emergent” cultural forms and values (see Williams, *Problems* 40–42). These are forms and values that exist together, resist coercive definitions of community, and map both social change and cultural continuity, perhaps helping

us to use another of Williams's concepts as a way of understanding the "structures of feeling" (*Problems* 22-27) that constitute Atlantic Canada and its theatre practitioners *as* community, and as the subject of deliberations of the conference itself.

II. Looking Back, part 2

In one of the conference's keynote addresses Mary Vingoe reminisced about the early days of the Mulgrave Road Co-op, when the company would sit around in an empty house in Guysborough County, Nova Scotia, and listen to Stan Rogers, who in songs like "Make and Break Harbour," "The Jeannie C," and "Fisherman's Wharf" sang—reminisced—about a way of life that was dying. "We didn't think they were good times then," she said, "but guess what? They were good times!" We can't *dream* now, she said, of being able to get together a handful of actors to work at starvation wages in order to tour "poor theatre" in a dilapidated station wagon to small rural communities around the Maritimes. Those were the good old days.

In a paper early in the conference George Belliveau and Josh Weale looked back too, to a brief, shining moment in PEI in the 1970s—and its brief, shining revival—when the local (which they defined as the "agrarian") served to resist what Paul Thompson, in the language of the 1970s, called "cultural imperialism" and Josh Weale, in the language of the new century, called "hegemonic globalized culture." The next day Malcolm Page described the dominant reading of Michael Cook's major work for the theatre as presenting a way of life in decline, focusing romantically on what he called "the decline of values that had sustained outport life." The day after that, Patrick O'Neill made reference to Neptune Theatre's sporadic record of presenting "regional works that come out of the salt-water mythology that is Nova Scotia," and Sharon Reid cited an example of one such work produced by Neptune, Tom Gallant's nostalgic *Step/Dance*. I myself spent much of the conference meeting old friends and former students, reminiscing about the great old rants we used to have over scotch in the rehearsal hall in Guysborough about how bad things were—or the great old shows we used to do about how bad things were, and how good they *used* to be; that is, generally waxing nostalgic about the loss of—to quote the title of Charlie Rhindress's script, the published version of which was launched at the conference—some authentic "Maritime Way of Life" that is, of course, always already dying.

The problem with nostalgia, of course, is that it is always conservative. It always posits some non-existent sort of stable

reference—an unchanging “then” that was pure and uncontaminated, that existed outside of history, a time when we didn’t have to be nostalgic (see Bennett 5 and Boym 355). And the problem with “authentic” cultures, identities, and values is that they are *always* of the past. Myths of authenticity, then, tend to serve as one of the technologies of colonization that Glen Nichols gave a good account of in relation to Acadia on the final morning of the conference: the only good (or real) Maritimer (or Newfoundlander) is a dead Maritimer (or Newfoundlander)—preferably a fisherman. (The First Nations echo here is not accidental. I was startled on a number of occasions over the course of the conference to hear folks make reference to “indigenous” plays (by non-Natives) in ways that risked erasing indigenous peoples themselves from the record. It is salutary to remember, as Alan Filewod has noted, that Newfoundland’s contemporary claims, for example, to an authentic indigenous culture rest uncomfortably on the total extermination of that island’s only genuinely indigenous nation—the Beothuks (Filewod 2)).

In any event, “looking back,” particularly in rural, realist plays about regional identities, can be a fraught, dangerous, seductive, but potentially self-defeating exercise, the ultimate, almost Rousseauian “message” of which is that a rich, poetic, and noble (if “savage” and uncivilized) way of life, as in the plays of Michael Cook, has tragically passed, and there’s nothing we can do about it but lament—in the time-honoured tradition in the Maritimes and elsewhere of remembering the highland clearances in music and poetry.

III. Looking Back, part 3

On the opening night of the “Shifting Tides” conference, at Moncton Sable’s wonderful presentation of their work, Louise Lemieux said, in passing, “we’re non-hierarchical; we’re from Acadie. We’re always looked *at*, we can never look back.” Sometime in the 1980s in the beautiful old frame house outside of Guysborough in which Mulgrave Road’s Ed McKenna and Cindy Cowan were living at the time, Nova Scotian playwright Cindy Cowan introduced me to Sue-Ellen Case’s now classic book, *Feminism and Theatre*, a book that, together with Jill Dolan’s *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, changed my life. They took me, as they did many people, to Laura Mulvey’s analysis, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (among other places) and eventually to some understanding of the pleasures and the power politics of looking, and of looking back. There was a great deal at the “Shifting Tides”

conference that served as food for thought about the politics of representation in Atlantic theatre, and it occurred to me that some of it had precisely to do with various kinds of looking, and various ways of looking back.

I suggested earlier that the conference subtitle might usefully be translated to conjure Raymond Williams's "residual, dominant, and emergent" cultural forms and values—forms and values that resist coercive (such as nostalgic) definitions of community and map both social change *and* cultural continuity. Lynne Lunde, in her conference paper, and Chris Brookes, in his message to the conference, provided a powerful example of the use of a *residual* cultural form—The Mummers' Play—in the interests of progressive social critique and social change. The Mummers' Play draws, as Brookes said, "on an ancient tradition of theatre for change." It "looks back" to the past, yes, but the Mummers also confronted their audiences/hosts with a deeply culturally rooted, profoundly *resistant*, class-based gaze, looking back in a different, less comfortable sense. In a very different presentation, Kym Bird looked back less far, this time in Nova Scotian history, to a very different kind of theatre, but one that equally resisted the homogeneity of nostalgic regional realisms and found its frame in a residual cultural form—neo-medievalist allegorical drama with a proto-feminist message to a sophisticated, urbane, early twentieth-century Maritimes society.

Dominant cultural forms were less in evidence at the conference, but Sharon Reid and Patrick O'Neill both discussed the case of Neptune Theatre, the social organization of which models the dominant, hierarchical structures of the corporate world, and, as both speakers demonstrated, it also models the reliance of such structures on a strong, individual CEO, often head-hunted, corporate-style, from elsewhere rather than emerging from within the culture, the region, the institution, or the local workforce. Neptune Theatre seems, from O'Neill's account, to have finally arrived at the logical conclusion of this modeling for theatre of the mutual reliance of individualism and consumer capitalism: the production of theatre *as* free-market "product," made wherever the workforce is most efficient (cheapest) for an audience it constructs as consumers, whose gaze rests comfortably on actors constructed as to-be-looked-at, but who cannot look back. I assume from Glen Nichol's paper on the final morning of the conference that much of what I've said about Neptune applies equally to Theatre New Brunswick, in Fredericton and on tour, though he seemed to suggest that this may be changing.

The more frequent focus of the conference's gaze has been on what seem to be variously emergent forms. Some of these, such as the corporate orientalist transcendentalism described by David Fancy, though far from either the strategic or transparent performance of regional stereotypes that Bruce Barton refers to (iii-iv) in his introduction to *Marigraph* (the anthology of Maritimes plays launched at the conference), are not encouraging, modeling as they do the downside of late capitalism (is there an upside?). Others, however, have been more hopeful, and like Mary Vingoe in her keynote address, I'll try to end with hope.

Michael Fralic focused in his talk on the productive use of satire by CODCO and its alumni to mount scathing (and prescient) critiques of what he called "the undertow of the holy sea" and the inhumanity of authoritarian, also corporate structures, particularly those of institutionalized religion. Glen Nichols spoke of an evolving post-colonial theatre scene in Acadia in which *chiac* (the rich local "*franglais*" dialect, comparable to Québécois *joual*) can take centre stage "othering" so-called standard French, and in which a living and growing contemporary culture with its own residual, dominant, and emergent forms—not simply "heritage"—was taken for granted.

Nichols, together with Sonya Malaborza, gestured toward the productive potential of local, bicultural translation, which I suggest may usefully destabilize unitary linguistic and cultural myths. Piet Defraeye and Ilkay Silk, "a Belgian and a Turk," provided another model of cultural collaboration—their own, of course, but also between the very different cultures of university and community theatre troupes. Ilkay Silk and Colleen Wagner spoke of some of the ongoing difficulties, challenges, and rewards involved in this type of cross over—and of cross over into the profession. Helen Peters in her presentation focusing on Labrador described a different use of theatre in education "to work out new empowered relationships," including intercultural relationships, *within* a larger Atlantic community, focusing, again, not on a nostalgia for a homogeneity that never was, but on a "looking back" to find *difference* at the "merging of interstices," as she said, citing Homi Bhabha.

George Belliveau and Josh Weale drew our attention to a way of thinking about theatre that did not so much involve *looking at* as *modeling of*. They talked of "theatre as a model of social organization." From the region's "yesterday" I think of the early collectives of the Mulgrave Road Co-op, such as *The Coady Co-op Show*, which explicitly involved looking for *residual* models of

regional co-operation for both its own form *and* as models for future alternatives. And much of the theatre that participants at the conference witnessed and the workshops in which they participated provided exemplary, new, and emergent (one hopes) models of this kind.

The conference's opening reading of Yvette Nolan's play, *Traps*, offered one of my favourites: theatre as a model of cultural mediation and as a site for the negotiation of cultural values among the different, intersecting communities that together constitute the Atlantic provinces, including in this case Anglophone, Francophone, and First Nations. The workshops and performances offered new variations on both organizational and creative models, many of which felt like contemporary, distinctly *non*-agrarian variants on the collective creation methods that Belliveau and Weale described, and that I remember from Mulgrave Road. Artistic Fraud's wonderful work, though its logical extreme might seem to be the elimination of the rehearsal as a site of creation, is nevertheless fundamentally grounded in a profound model of co-operation: the culmination of the largely anonymous communal chorus as key to the work—which is what distinguishes it from comparable, but comparatively soulless work by Robert Wilson, whose manipulation of performers as human automatons can be alienating. Those of us who took part in Artistic Fraud's workshop with its director Jillian Keiley and its writer Robert Chafe were also taking part in a community-building exercise that went beyond mere play, on the one hand, or the exhibition of virtuosity on the other. It modeled how much more you can get done collectively than you can accomplish as a roomful of individuals.

Zuppa Circus and Moncton Sable offered other and different models of non-hierarchical, collaborative social and creative organization. Zuppa Circus, with its processual focus on group training and its collaborative/consultative creation process are engaging the interdisciplines of movement, music, writing, and storytelling in what strike me as profound and progressive ways that include daily opportunities to train together, but also to meet and reflect and debate their ongoing work. Moncton Sable's process would seem to extend the collaborative into the communal, as the worktable becomes for them the kitchen table, where they share food, recipes, and ideas at the same time. They also model a hopefully emergent way of considering the profoundly local *materiality* of the "raw materials" out of which their theatre and lives are made: sand, mud, chalk, hay, bric-a-brac, and *words*, all of which they work with for much more than

what Baudrillard would call their “sign value” (Baudrillard *passim*). Unlike the late-capitalist transformation of the world and of the local raw material into globally marketable representational product, that is, their work insists on, as Louise Lemieux told participants at their conference workshop, “a meeting between the audience and the actors” in which the audience and the actors share a phenomenological encounter with the materiality of the determinedly local world.

All three of these workshops and performances, and most especially those of Moncton Sable, pushed common-sense understandings of that other now problematic term of the conference’s title, “Theatre.” If “theatre” has come, as many have argued, to represent a performance form mired in representation and the reproduction of the always-already rehearsed and performed, these companies extended their work beyond representation and mimesis into the realm of the performative. Their work might best be measured less for the fidelity of its reproduction of some nostalgically imagined “real” than for its capacity to *produce* potentially new realities.

IV. Making Work

I referred in my opening remarks to the only issue, in 1986, of *CTR* to have so far been dedicated to Atlantic Canada. In that issue Carol Sinclair wrote that “Being an actor in the Maritimes can feel, at times, like walking in water against the current” (59), but that “If you have more actors than you have jobs for actors, the obvious job for actors is to create acting jobs” (61)—which of course also means creating and *sustaining* (to use Mary Vingoe’s word) a theatre community in the way that people in the region have always sustained community: by Making Work (in both senses). This is what wonderful actors like Mary Vingoe and Jenny Munday and many others have been doing for decades: making work for themselves and others—mostly others—by making some of the most important works of theatre to have emerged from the Atlantic or any other region. Mary and Jenny are exceptional, but representatively so, and it is worth, in this context, talking briefly about sustainability that is tied up with, but goes beyond the purely economic terms on which Mary focused in her talk, and which Patrick O’Neill charted graphically for Neptune Theatre in his: the sustainability of people. As I’ve suggested, there is a lot of work now being made in the region that is new and exciting, and that pushes the very bounds of traditional understandings of theatre. It’s being made by a new generation of actors, writers, and creators

in companies like Zuppa Circus, Moncton Sable, and Artistic Fraud. But there have *often* been exciting new companies in the Atlantic region, companies that have relied on the youth, enthusiasm, and sacrifice of underpaid practitioners willing to compromise their life style rather than their art. Most of these companies' work could not be sustained.² One-off grants are not enough to build a life on, and we need, somehow, to find a way appropriately to sustain and provide sustenance for the life-work of folks like Mary Vingoe and Jenny Munday, to keep them in the rehearsal hall, of course, but also to allow them to live with some comfort and security. We need to find a way to make it possible to build a "maritime way of life" in the theatre that allows folks like Live Bait Theatre's Karen Valanne and Charlie Rhindress to be able to count on sufficient income to raise their four kids. I don't know how to do this. Vote NDP, I suppose, as Wendy Lill urged unselfishly at her reading during the "Shifting Tides" conference. But it is my profound hope that in another eighteen years, at the next national conference on Atlantic Canadian Theatre, we are not "looking back" nostalgically to the good old days when there was Live Bait, Moncton Sable, Zuppa Circus, and Artistic Fraud. ❁

NOTES

- ¹ CTR 128 (Spring 2007), edited by Linda Burnett and also dedicated to Atlantic Canadian Theatre, was initiated at the Shifting Tides Conference in Toronto.
- ² Halifax—which Paul Thompson is frequently said to have called "the Bermuda triangle of Canadian theatre"—is a good example of a city that has generated, but failed to sustain, a great many exciting young alternative theatres over the years. For a mid-1980s account and analysis of "The Halifax Problem" see McKenna.

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