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CELEBRATING THE FRANSASKOIS VOICE : LA NOUVELLE DRAMATURGIE  
DE LA TROUPE DU JOUR

## Theatre for the Fransaskois Voice

Following a theatre workshop offered by the *Commission culturelle fransaskoise* at *Collège Mathieu* in Gravelbourg during the summer of 1984, Alphonse Gaudet, Carmen Gareau, and Michel Quirion were inspired by Claudia Gendron (Gaudet, email 3 June) to establish a French theatre company in Saskatoon (Gaudet, email 15 June). Determined to develop a *fransaskois* theatre which highlighted self-exploration, self-definition, self-acceptance, and self-celebration, the three created *La Troupe du Jour* (*LTDJ*) in 1985. A devised piece, *Azarie* (October 1985) marked the debut of what was to become the company's focus on new play development. It repositioned the language debate in Saskatchewan by investigating the cultural marginalization of elderly *Fransaskois* in the provincial nursing-home system (Lusignan 7). The material hit a nerve with its public; the show became an instant success.

Bypassing the repertoires of Quebec and France, founding members became resolute in their endeavour to bring the *fransaskois* experience to their public. The first season's program announced their goals:

[...] le rêve est de faire du théâtre francophone, communautaire et professionnel, qui reflète la réalité fransaskoise [...]. C'est par la création et des représentations de textes fransaskois que la troupe espère développer un nouveau sens théâtral dans la communauté francophone. (Qtd. in Forsyth 141)

They incorporated *LTDJ* as a non-profit company in 1985 with Gaudet as its first artistic director. The time was ripe "de passer à un théâtre 'fait maison' qui serait le reflet du peuple fransaskois, de sa langue, de ses défis, de ses mythes" (Bonetto 3).

This paper explores two questions. The first, "What defines *fransaskois* playwrights?", draws attention to a binary feature I refer to as *dis/bislocation* and re-examines the notion of minority status as it applies to French-Canadians living outside Quebec.

The second, “How has *LTDJ* cultivated *fransaskois* playwriting?”, examines the mechanisms *LTDJ* has instituted to develop new work since the arrival of Denis Rouleau.

### “Dis/Bislocation” of the Fransaskois

Saskatchewan’s first French settlers were a heterogeneous lot, hailing from Quebec, France, Belgium, and the United States (Beaulieu par. 25).<sup>1</sup> Linguistically compatible despite cultural differences, they merged into an unusual minority population due to extraordinary circumstances, as Roger A. Lalonde noted in 1974:

Ces gens ont été métamorphosés par l’expérience de l’expatriation, par les mesures répressives contre le français et par tous les autres événements survenus au cours de leur histoire. Tous cela faisait d’eux des « Canadiens français pas comme les autres »<sup>2</sup>. (Qtd. in Beaulieu par. 25)

Settlers straddled two geographies, both “there” in linguistic expression and social customs, and “here” in practice, living and negotiating the tensions in the gap between the two.

*LTDJ*’s *fransaskois* playwrights follow this pattern: like the first settlers, linguistic compatibility and cultural hybridity are features they share. Geographically and culturally severed from the place where their French originated (*dislocation*), these individuals constantly negotiate two *francophonies* (*bislocation*), the formative one from the *pays d’origine* which is *hors contexte* in the geographical present, and the current one which dynamically lives and transforms in a Saskatchewan context. Unless a *fransaskois* playwright is a recent transplant from Quebec or has been assimilated into Quebec culture, *joual* plays an inconsequential role in the linguistic idiosyncrasies found in *fransaskois* plays. David Baudemont writes in an idiom particular to France, specifically to Alsace where German and French cohabit; Ian C. Nelson, a Francophile originating from Nottingham, England, has adopted an *Île-de-France* French distinctively coloured by French *argot*; Madeleine Blais-Dahlem and Raoul Granger incorporate certain spoken idiosyncrasies of *québécois* in their writing, but belie their Quebec origins with a standard French that occasionally is encroached upon by English constructs, such as syntax, vocabulary, and colloquial expressions. Scripts by Baudemont capitalise on the playwright’s European origin; Nelson blends British humour with French *sensi-*

*bilité* in his; Blais-Dahlem and Granger disrupt and interrogate cultural, societal, or historical values familiar to their Quebec ancestors in theirs. A patchwork of idiomatic voices, their hyphenated experiences, their *dis/bis*location of knowledge and purpose, of ethos and practice produce a unique hybridity found in *la nouvelle dramaturgie francasquoise* of LTDJ.

### Double-minority Status

A neologism coined in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the term *Fransaskois*, modelled after the word *Québécois*, presents its own problematic. Born of the sixties, Quebec nationalism was territorial and exclusive:

Généralement, on dit que l'effondrement du Canada a été causé par l'affirmation du nationalisme québécois qui a réduit au territoire du Québec et à son État provincial les enjeux nationaux des Canadiens français. Les francophones hors Québec auraient alors été laissés pour compte. [...] La provincialisation des identités francophones mena à la création de nouveaux noms pour les désigner : les Franco-Ontariens, les Franco-Manitobains, etc. (Beaulieu pars. 16, 17)

While Anglophone Canada looks to Quebec to locate the official minority voice of French Canada, all other *francophonies*, from the Maritimes to British Columbia, become marginally resituated as the geographically overlooked *voix minoritaires* outside of Canada's official minority.<sup>3</sup>

When other *francophonies* are dispatched from the fold, repercussions are inevitable. During the *Festival du jamais lu* in Montreal (2011), Madeleine Blais-Dahlem articulated her feelings of artistic alienation from Quebec interests in a public forum:

Le québécois contemporain que j'ai entendu [...], débité à une rapidité de mitrailleuse en Warp speed, [est] plein de jurons d'une religion qui fait p'us peur, plein d'élisions et de raccourcis machouillés, plein d'allusions « in » à des personnalités médiatiques québécoises inconnues hors des frontières.... [...] Le théâtre québécois—existe-t-il pour se raconter à soi-même, ou pour se faire connaître et comprendre sur le plateau national, ou même international ? [...] [J]'ai l'impression que la langue québécoise au théâtre risque de devenir de plus en plus refermée sur soi-même, un code pour les initiés, une langue qui refuse un sentiment d'appartenance aux autres franco-

phones. Ça risque de devenir une porte qui se ferme au lieu d'une fenêtre qui donne sur le monde. (Rebuttal)

Blais-Dahlem is fastidious in ensuring the particular *fransaskois* elements found in her plays relate to universal experiences. Occasionally, invited artists most often from Quebec (dramaturgs, playwrights, and directors) promote their cultural agendas when working with *fransaskois* playwrights. A positive occurrence at the best (and worst) of times, it provides *fransaskois* playwrights with a fluid margin to establish in what ways they are like, or decidedly not like, their *québécois* counterparts.

Cultural hegemony imposes itself on two fronts, by Francophone Quebec and Anglophone Canada, imprinting *fransaskois* playwrights with a double-minority status. Unlike Quebec's majority French population, less than 2% of Saskatchewan's inhabitants declare French as their mother tongue (Statistics Canada). The peculiar advantage to being overwhelmed by the majority culture is how specific *fransaskois* playwrights use English to advance their scripts. Although English drafts by Baudemont and Granger are rare, Blais-Dahlem and Nelson regularly alternate French with English drafts, allowing them to explore the myriad ways one language impacts on the other and to discover which ways they firmly resist any kind of influence. *Fransaskois* playwrights live, interrupt, and negotiate the tensions between their cultures, the official minority culture and the majority culture—a part of, but not the same as either. They write their alterity in an in-between space: historically, sociologically, linguistically, politically and/or religiously.

### New Leadership and Dramatical Experimentation

Gaudet ceded artistic directorship to Denis Rouleau in 1990. Modifications began immediately, starting with the composition of the season. Rouleau maintained three community-based productions, but the fourth—for young audiences—, Joël Richard's *Monsieur tout gris*, was professional (Rouleau). Touring the province, it strategically connected isolated *fransaskois* enclaves to *LTDJ*, making *LTDJ* a dynamic cultural hub. Laurier Gareau, regarded as the godfather of *fransaskois* playwrights, remarks that, "C'est un moment clé. Denis Rouleau a fait d'un théâtre encore très amateur une troupe professionnelle" (Léveillé 19). In a few months, *LTDJ* became the only professional Francophone theatre company in Saskatchewan. The next step was to develop its artists (Beaudoin 6).

Following Rouleau's investiture as AD, Gareau publicly called for the creation of a dramaturgical *volet* to hone the skills of *fransaskois* playwrights:

La Troupe du Jour doit aussi se lancer dans le domaine de l'écriture dramatique, car elle se doit de développer des textes fransaskois. L'établissement de cours d'écriture, de cercles d'écrivains et d'ateliers de développement de textes doivent faire partie de l'agenda de la Troupe. (5)

Although this focus waned somewhat during *LTDJ*'s early professional stage, the unexpected arrival of Alain Pomerleau in 1992 rekindled Rouleau's interest. In 1993, Rouleau directed Pomerleau's first play, *Le Vieux fou*. The play's remarkable popularity prompted Rouleau to alter *LTDJ*'s season again, reducing the community shows to two in order to add a second professional show targeting *la dramaturgie originale*.

Spurred by public enthusiasm, Rouleau acquired a \$25,000 Saskatchewan Arts Board grant in 1996 ("Moving Drama") to offer Pomerleau the position of Writer-in-Residence. Pomerleau's mission was to write plays and evolve the skills of established and emergent *fransaskois* playwrights intra-provincially (Allary 2). Rouleau further demonstrated *LTDJ*'s commitment to *la nouvelle dramaturgie fransaskoise* by including it in the company's mandate (Allay 2). Halfway through Pomerleau's two-year residency, Rouleau introduced *LTDJ*'s first *cercle des écrivains*. Established as a provisional mechanism of support, it provided *fransaskois* playwrights with writing workshops and one-on-one dramaturgical assistance. Although in its infancy, *le Cercle des écrivains* was to become the vehicle through which all new plays would be developed. Response to this initiative was so great that Rouleau created a public outlet for texts of promise: *Le Festival de la dramaturgie fransaskoise*. Although Rouleau anticipated two or three scripts of promise (Allay 2), an unprecedented five *créations originales* were given platform readings with professional artists (Forsyth 146).

Following the termination of Pomerleau's contract, *LTDJ* hosted *Le Festival de la dramaturgie des prairies*. The shift from "*fransaskoise*" to "*prairies*" signalled an "intra-" to "inter-" provincial expansion, welcoming writers associated with Edmonton's *L'UniThéâtre*. This festival occurred three times: in 1998, 1999,<sup>4</sup> and 2001 when I was one of the festival's dramaturgs. By 2003, the name changed to the *Festival de la dramaturgie de*

*l'Ouest*. Over the course of five weeks, three companies hosted the event in three major western cities: *Théâtre la Seizième* in Vancouver, *L'UniThéâtre* in Edmonton and *La Troupe du Jour* in Saskatoon. As a festival dramaturg, I witnessed firsthand Rouleau's unwavering commitment to developing *la nouvelle dramaturgie fransaskoise*.

### A Permanent Infrastructure for New Play Development

At the end of the last millennium, *fransaskois* playwrights began advocating for a permanent infrastructure to support their writing. Rouleau responded by making *le Cercle des écrivains* a cornerstone of the company, targeting all levels of writing competency for development:

Ces ateliers regroupent des écrivains de tout genre—débutants, expérimentés ou chevronnés—qui se rencontrent de façon régulière au courant de l'année, sous l'animation du conseiller dramaturgique Ian C. Nelson. Ce lieu de rencontre a favorisé l'émergence d'une dramaturgie bien de chez nous et a permis à la compagnie de découvrir des nouveaux textes et de nouveaux auteurs. (LTDJ *Projets*)

Since 2001, Ian C. Nelson—actor, director, and playwright—has been *LTDJ's* in-house *animateur/conseilleur dramaturgique*. Nelson guides writing exercises, leads group discussions on produced works, offers individual supervision and provides playwrights with insightful feedback following a production when requested (Nelson, Telephone).

Today, *le Cercle des écrivains* operates on a three-year cycle which allows texts to be produced by *LTDJ* when they meet the criteria of the artistic directorship:

La première année du cycle en est une de dépistage et de période intense d'écriture, pendant laquelle les auteurs d'ici sont jumelés avec des dramaturges. La deuxième année comprend un laboratoire de développement avec des comédiens et un dramaturge-conseil. La troisième année représente l'aboutissement du travail sur scène avec la production de la pièce par la compagnie, si la direction artistique de *LTDJ* juge que le texte est prêt et qu'il répond aux inspirations artistiques de la compagnie. Ce cycle de trois ans permet donc à *LTDJ* de développer trois textes simultanément, et ce, à différents stades. (LTDJ *Projets*)

Given the size, the fiscal means of the company, and its tiny nucleus of artists, *LTDJ* has produced a remarkable collection of new *fransaskois* plays. Dramaturgs, almost always from Quebec or Ontario, are usually integrated at phase two or three of the process, following Nelson's preliminary guidance. They have included: Alain Pomerleau, Robert Marinier, myself, Alain Jean, Marie-Ève Gagnon, Yvan Bienvenue, Paul Lefebvre, and Louis-Dominique Lavigne (Nelson et al. 2, 4-6). Cultural imperatives dictated by *québécois* interests do not necessarily fuel or interest *fransaskois* playwrights; often, they have the opposite effect. External dramaturgs work best with *fransaskois* playwrights when they can accept the "not like us" status of these artists, who are shaped by their cultural hybridity, their double-minority status and a gaze that opens out onto the world.

### Local, National, and International Tributes

Prior to 2011, *Le Centre national des Arts* (CNA) honoured two *fransaskois* plays: *Le Costume* by Raoul Granger appeared at CNA's *15 jours de la dramaturgie en région* in 1999 (Côté 25); *Rearview* by Gilles Poulin-Denis was produced at CNA's *Zones théâtrales* in 2009. That said, 2011 was *LTDJ*'s landmark year. After twenty-five years of peripatetic wanderings, *LTDJ* opened its state-of-the-art, multi-million-dollar *Centre de production* in Saskatoon. Madeleine Blais-Dahlem was recognised for "Outstanding Playwriting" by the Saskatoon and Area Theatre Awards (SATA)<sup>5</sup> committee for *La Maculée*. *La Maculée* was the only entry from the West at CNA's *Zones théâtrales* (Centre national 12-13). Company artist, David Granger, was one of seven young Francophone artists awarded a *Prix d'excellence* by *La Fondation pour l'avancement du théâtre francophone au Canada* (Centre national 30). The most outstanding accomplishment was the bestowment of the prestigious life-time achievement award, the *Prix Marcus-Banque Nationale*, on Denis Rouleau as the Francophone artist "dont la carrière a contribué de façon majeure au développement du théâtre francophone au Canada" (Centre national 30). International attention is currently on the rise. Five scenes from Blais-Dahlem's *La Maculée* will receive a platform reading at the Women Playwrights International Conference in Stockholm in August 2012. One of eight Canadian entries, it is the only translation from a French original. A Catalan translation of Poulain-Denis's *Rearview* by Elizabet Ràfols of Saskatoon's Theatre Tant per Tant (Ràfols Email 19 June) will receive a platform reading in Barcelona, Manresa and Girona come November

(Ràfols Email 20 June). Accolades proliferate: municipally, nationally and internationally.

The significant role *LTDJ* currently plays on local, national and international stages is entirely due to Rouleau's agency. He listened to his public's desire for *fransaskois* theatre and answered their need. He welcomed those with the potential to become *fransaskois* playwrights, valuing the *francophonies* they embraced, culturally, politically, and linguistically. He respected their "like us/not like us" status, encouraging their similarities and welcoming their differences as they negotiated and revalued the double-minority context in which they live. He methodically and systematically expanded dramaturgical programs to enhance their skills, finding public outlets for their works in progress. Eventually, he produced the most promising scripts. Successful plays toured provincially, nationally, and soon will appear internationally. A tiny *fransaskois* theatre company, *LTDJ* has become a national treasure. Focused on cultivating and promoting *la nouvelle dramaturgie fransaskoise*, *LTDJ* celebrates the *fransaskois* voice. Given *LTDJ*'s birth as a little-known, alternative, grass-roots organization, it has grown exponentially in terms of its reputation, thanks to the *fransaskois* voices it nurtures and to the quality of work it produces. A true *théâtre rassembleur*, *LTDJ* has given agency to the *fransaskois* voice which has found its way into the minds and imaginations of so many. ❁

## Notes

- 1 See also Lapointe and Tessier 118.
- 2 See Lalonde 10.
- 3 Beauchamp and Beddows remark that: "Depuis une trentaine d'années, au Canada francophone, se sont produits dans toutes les sphères du quotidien des événements qui ont bouleversé les espaces vitaux et les imaginaires, le plus important d'entre eux étant l'affirmation d'une différence fondamentale entre les communautés canadiennes-françaises et le Québec" (9).
- 4 *LTDJ* Programs 1998, 1999.
- 5 *LTDJ* has won six SATA awards since the launch of the award in 2008.



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