

been largely defined by the fall that marked its beginning, Cesare Schotzko provides us with a unique space to land.

TONY NARDI

TWO LETTERS ... And Counting!

Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2013. 387 pp.

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You know a Canadian theatre scene when you see one ...

... where actors whisper ‘who they are’ and ‘what they do’, realizing there’s no respect for actors in a country with no respect for culture ... (Letter Two 173)

At the heart of Tony Nardi’s *TWO LETTERS ... And Counting!* are the texts to three solo performances—Nardi calls them “documentary monodramas” (321)—written and read by Nardi in Toronto and Montreal between 2006 and 2008. *Letter One* is based on a fourteen-page email he wrote to a casting director who wanted him to audition for a racially stereotyped character in a television sitcom set in Toronto’s Little Italy; *Letter Two* is based on a seventy-five-page email he wrote to two prominent theatre reviewers about a Toronto production of Carlo Goldini’s *The Amorous Servant* in 2006; *And Counting!* is “an actor’s letter to himself” (321) evaluating Canada’s arts funding. These three works are surrounded by sundry supporting material: a “Thank You!” by Nardi, a brief introduction by his friend and high-profile constitutional law lawyer Rocco Galati, two selected reviews of Nardi’s *Letters*, a fifty-page essay by Nardi glossing the *Letters*, an afterword by Galati, Nardi’s biography, and five pages comprised of fourteen selected quotations from critics and peers. To aid the reader in approaching the performance text, innovative QR codes tagged to each play and on the back cover lead to *YouTube* clips of Nardi performing brief segments of his work (a technique that might be used to great effect in future play publications).

Taken together, this is a *magnum opus*, a *tour de force* by an actor turned Siminovitch-nominated playwright featuring three exhaustive performances set in curated conversation with critics, artists, audiences, and Nardi himself that is meant to unsettle Canada’s theatre, film, and television professions, force reexamination, and instigate renewal. Throughout, Nardi rejects a hierarchical orthodoxy in which producers, directors, publishers, and critics make pawns of actors. He then places all of them in a field of his own anecdotes, assigns blame to them (only the critics are named), and plays them for fools. Here, the theatre community is a disciplined Bourdieusian ecology, with agents—Nardi calls them “ghosts”—trading informal knowledge (gossip) of their restricted field of cultural production in order to commit career position-taking.

Swaddled beneath Guernica Editions’ cover, featuring Francis Ellington Nardi’s marker and crayon sketch entitled “Mr. Multipants,” these three first-person pieces amount to sustained actor polemics the likes of which we have hardly seen in this nation. (Think Artaud

unabridged.) They are meant to be read to an audience by Nardi. But on the page they function as an archive of invectives aimed at institutionalized racism toward Italian-Canadian actors at the hands of our “two solitudes,” with Nardi as his own case study.

Thus, Nardi takes aim at wrongheadedness in the Canadian entertainment professions. Canadians have been creating and engaging with cultural activity all wrong, in some cases too harmfully, in others too passively. Readers are cast among scholars, critics, actors, directors, and producers who are Nardi’s “ghosts,” signifying that we haunt Nardi in perpetuity. At one point, some of these ghosts find him in a bar and ask him for names: “I thought their question more interesting and revealing than anything I had written” (106).

Nardi’s hyperactive language bounces between reminiscence and critique. His voice vengefully relishes its own omnipotence, trapping its prey before the fact and bewildering the reader into a constant state of accessory after the fact. The language is often defensive, redundant, and fatiguing. Moreover, the emphatic typography seems to infer that the reader’s inner voice could hardly approach Nardi’s powerful, emotive craft without its assistance. As he says, “I will never be a cold recorder of what I see and hear” (111). Indeed, he will not: “At a banquet ... an Editor of *The Canadian Theatre Review* [*sic*], made me an offer ... to edit an entire issue ... on ‘directing’. She was sober” (157). Subsequently, *CTR* published an issue of manifestos.

Nardi’s scripts might be taken as notes leading to an unwritten version of a “backstage” play like Frayn’s *Noises Off* or French’s *Jitters*. But far from tightly structured, escapist farce, we find twisting, unforgiving polemics aching to reach the level of manifesto. Yet “The Letters simply sound the alarm,” he writes in his essay “Still Counting!” (338). There are no enumerated Artaudian treatments, no Nardilian solutions, for Canadian theatre’s cankers. In this sense one feels better off for having had the water brought to a boil, yet empty for having little else to bring to the table.

Nevertheless, Nardi is surely accurate: “there’s no respect for actors in a country with no respect for culture” (173). Is this the alienating consequence of what John Juliani once called Canadian theatre’s “edifice complex,” the eventual result of recommendations from the 1949-51 Massey Commission Report in which arm’s length funding prioritized brutalist concrete theatre buildings over audiences and practitioners? Mistreated, specialist artists employing typographical miasma to remind their indifferent, unworthy audiences that the latter cannot possibly understand the depths of a craft now viciously disciplined by the Profession, the Industry? Like Artaud, Nardi seeks to pick at the cicatrix to make us feel a pain we are too late in feeling; unlike Artaud, Nardi believes that more culture, not less, is the cure, whatever that might look like in Canada.

All of this and more is fodder for Nardi in his three letters, and the title implies that he is not done yet. (In fact, his film of *And Counting*, called *Third Letter*, appeared at the Italian Contemporary Film Festival in 2014.) But I digress, lest the present review of Nardi’s three letters provides seed for a fourth.