

(Un)Making History?

Canadian Theatre History and the *Canadian Theatre Review*

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Canadian Theatre Review (CTR) at once describes history and makes it. Playhouses are often historicized as the single most important factor in determining the development of theatre in Canada (Canada 193; Frye 224; Rubin, "Creeping" 11), but CTR did for Canadian theatre history what playhouses did for performance.¹ Journals like CTR (founded in 1974) and *Theatre Research in Canada* (which began as *Theatre History in Canada*, in 1980) as well as the Canadian Association of Theatre Research (established in 1976 as the Association for Canadian Theatre History) offered structural support and a home for scholars, artists, and students working on the field of Canadian theatre history. It is no accident that the so-called renaissance in Canadian theatre and Canadian theatre history in the 1970s coincided with the start of CTR in 1974. Any scholar, teacher, or artist interested in the history of Canadian theatre or a particular performance in Canada turns to CTR. But that's not all: CTR's issue themes, organizing principles, methodologies, case studies, and advertisements speak to historical periods in Canadian theatre. History is always already present when writing about theatre and performance because the very act of documenting a live performance piece is an act of historicizing. It is in this important vein that CTR continues to make history.

¹ Canada's Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (1951), headed by Vincent Massey and also known as 'the Massey Commission,' emphasizes the need for infra-structure in developing the theatre arts in Canada. The Massey Report begins by sharing four points of "fairly general agreement throughout the country," which stress the need for "facilities for advanced training in the arts of the theatre" and "playhouses" (Canada 193). In "Conclusion to a *Literary History of Canada*" (1965), Northrop Frye suggests that drama "depends on a theatre and consequently on a highly urbanized life" (224). Don Rubin's "Creeping toward a Culture" (1974) cites many passages from the Massey Report and notes that "the Centennial too also helped the Canadian theatre in a number of concrete ways, most particularly in the national funding of a great number of new theatre buildings across the country" (11).

Yet, considering *CTR* through the lens of Canadian theatre historiography invokes current controversies. Canadian literary nationalism—driven by the same nationalist impulse that initiated and serves as a central organizing principle of *CTR*—has recently been likened to a “raging dumpster fire” for its controversies, colonial history, patriarchal politics, and exclusionary canon (Lee; Elliott).² So, how did *CTR* shift from asserting a national theatre and documenting performance history to challenging the very taxonomies of the field of Canadian theatre history, including the colonialization of the land known as Canada and textually oriented theatre history? While *CTR* in the 1970s focuses on nation building through theatre arts and its documented history, the 1980s were pivotal in questioning text-based histories of performance, diverse identities, and theatre innovations. *CTR*, I argue, reveals that the development of the field of Canadian theatre history can be traced through its battle with the three mutually constitutive parameters of history, nationhood, and theatre. In placing the three terms—‘Canadian,’ ‘theatre,’ and ‘history’—in contestation from the outset, *CTR* simultaneously makes and un-makes a Canadian theatre history.

‘History’?

‘History’ is a loaded word in Canadian theatre that carries with it a substantiated anxiety over Canada’s past. Fifty years ago, in the first issues of *CTR*, Don Rubin and the other contributors express concerns over the loss of a Canadian theatre history as well as the lack of theatre history in a relatively nascent nation. *CTR*’s mission is clear in these early issues: to record theatre productions and the earlier history of theatre in Canada. Rubin’s opening essay in the second volume of *CTR*, “Aside: Creating the Impossible,” clarifies the national goals of building a Canadian drama and with it a Canadian culture:

It’s precisely because we do want our theatre to participate internationally that it seems of such importance at this moment to insure the growth of this indigenous drama in the years ahead. The least we can do as theatre artists is to help our own culture

² Jen Sookfong Lee’s and Alicia Elliott’s discussions of CanLit as a raging dumpster fire emerged out of a specific time in Canadian literature: it was the time of the University of British Columbia’s Accountable controversy and just after the Appropriation Prize scandal. For an extended and essential reading on the CanLit controversies and calls to change the field, see McGregor, Rak, and Wunker.

develop. Of course, if we in the theatre fail to recognize the ultimate cultural importance, the ultimate human importance, of what we are doing, if we ourselves forget that it is only by having a strong voice of our own that we can ever really be part of that wider theatrical community, then we'll never be anything but imitators and we'll never develop anything even faintly resembling a true and lasting culture. (6)

With this impassioned plea, Rubin strives to distinguish Canadian culture as its own entity (and not that of a British colony). In this way, *CTR* was consciously involved in a high-stakes project of history making and/as nation making. As Rubin warns, “[m]any of our own century’s theatrical luminaries too often are disappearing from the scene with their experiences unrecorded” (“Looking” 4). Although this line echoes Earle Birney’s (in)famous poem “Can. Lit” (1964) and its (now-problematized) assertion that “it’s only by our lack of ghosts / we’re haunted,” Rubin distinguishes himself from Birney to point out the limits of a Canadian theatre history that sees Canada as a colony.

In a 1975 *CTR* article on Canadian theatre history, Rubin wonders, “How many of us are flawed by a hubris that lets us believe that Canadian theatrical history began when we arrived on the theatrical scene? Unfortunately, there are far too many of us too ready to put down a past we know far too little about” (“Looking” 4). Rubin was arguing for a unique Canadian culture (or Canada as postcolony); these words take on a distinct resonance today in the context of decolonial (and postcolonial) historiography that is working to transform the content, perspectives, and methodologies of history. In Ric Knowles’s analysis of *CTR*’s production of performance studies, he gestures toward the history of *CTR* as a “postcolonial Canadian nationalist” journal, founded by “American draft resister Don Rubin, with the encouragement of *TDR* [*The Drama Review*] editor Richard Schechner” (87). *CTR* then initially grapples with Canada as an independent nation with its own unique identity and then moves on to struggle with Canada as a colonialist nation with its own histories of genocide and interculturalism. I argue that *CTR* constitutes the field of Canadian theatre history: from the very first issue, *CTR* conceives of Canadian theatre history as a self-reflexive process that questions the traditionally imposed limits of medium (text-based) and subject (colonial) in relation to its present zeitgeist. The past fifty years of *CTR*, and its 200

issues, archive past performances, artists, and scholars as well as the development of the field of Canadian theatre history itself.

In 2024, the subject of 'Canadian theatre history' conjures the perspective of a colonialist nation and the risks of a text-based master narrative. In a group discussion before her online keynote at the 2023 Canadian Association of Theatre Research conference, Mique'l Dangeli (Tsimshian Nation of Metlakatla, Alaska) asked a colleague about the discipline of Canadian theatre history: "Whose history are you studying?" This rich question speaks to the complexities of our time and invokes other inquiries: How can one attend to Canadian theatre history without re-inscribing a master narrative of progress or colonialism? How can Canadian theatre history acknowledge the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples and the history of slavery? What and who does Canadian theatre history leave out? Even the subject pronoun ('we') of much Canadian theatre history warrants complications and has rightly come under scrutiny by, for instance, intersectional feminist and Indigenous scholars—though it is starting to enter back into critical discussions as an inclusive pronoun, which is how I use it here. The 200th issue of *CTR* offers us a time to look at how *CTR* imagined and produced the field of Canadian theatre history.

'Canadian'?

The history of *CTR* aligns with development of Canadian theatre history as a discipline. Susan Bennett's compelling piece on the history of *Theatre Research in Canada* suggests that a theatre journal "through its own history represents a scholarly archive" and genealogy "implicated in the production and dissemination of" Canadian theatre history (221). A lot has changed since the first issue of *CTR* in the winter of 1974, so let's turn to that inaugural issue for a snapshot of Canadian theatre history—an issue that appeared in the wake of the creation of the Canada Council for the Arts in 1957, the 1967 Centennial celebrations of Canada, and the government's increases to funding in the arts. The veritable explosion of Canadian theatre in the mid-twentieth century was due in large part to the Massey Commission's 1951 report on the arts as a vital component of nation building and citizenship, which was a subject in two articles in *CTR*'s third issue (Rubin, "Changing Times"; Hendry) and was the theme of its first themed volume (*CTR* 5,

Canadian Theatre Before the 60's). In the first ten years of *CTR*, the *Federal Government Policy on Arts and Culture* reports that performing arts audiences “nearly doubled from about 5 million in 1972 to more than 9 million in 1983”; the government, not surprisingly, credits this to the fact that “federal government spending on culture increased from \$400 million in 1972 to \$1.8 billion in 1987” (Dewing 3). In 1974, Rubin’s opening article immediately establishes a conscious correlation among nationhood, citizenship, and theatre in “English Canada since 1945” (“Creeping” 6). Rubin simultaneously historicizes the development of Anglo-Canadian theatre from 1945 to 1974 and offers a historical artifact in itself for readers today: it references theatre houses (Stratford Festival, Neptune Theatre, Passe Muraille, Factory Theatre Lab, Citadel Theatre), playwrights (George Ryga, James Reaney, David French, and Ken Gass), and theatre critics (Nathan Cohen and Herbert Whittaker); it includes images from the Stratford Festival; and it beseeches a “will” to create Canadian art that is not reliant on the United States (“Creeping” 6). More specifically, Rubin highlights the Massey Commission’s call to action to create playhouses for Canadian drama (“Creeping” 8)—which re-inscribes the historical narrative that playhouses were key to the development of Canadian theatre and that text-based archives were key to creating a Canadian theatre history.

The first issue also announces the shift in terms from ‘theatre in Canada’ to ‘Canadian theatre’ that occurred around 1967, thanks to the Centennial Exposition (Rubin, “Creeping” 10–11). If Canadian literature experienced a renaissance of canonical Canadian (primarily settler) writers in the 1960s and 1970s, then Canadian theatre also produced its own canon and established the field of Canadian theatre history at this time. There is, however, a simultaneous unmaking and questioning of the field that “we know far too little about” at the same time as it is being developed (Rubin, “Looking” 4). In 2024, there is a notable change from 1974 in the use of the term ‘Canadian theatre,’ which now often accompanies or is replaced by the term ‘theatre in Canada’ (among others) to recognize the many performances by people who do not identify as Canadian. The field of Canadian theatre history, in this way, has developed from ‘theatre history in Canada’ (including performances by artists from elsewhere, such as the United States and Britain) to ‘Canadian theatre history’ (emphasizing performances by Canadian artists) and back to ‘theatre history in Canada’ but with a different connotation that acknowledges the politics of a colonial nation.

From the beginning, *CTR* complicates what it means to be Canadian in terms of regionalism. This regionalism continues to inform and even structure the way Canadian theatre is historicized and studied fifty years later: the first Carte Blanche section (now Views and Reviews) included pieces entitled "Vancouver," "Calgary," "Edmonton," "Montreal," "Toronto," and "Abroad" (*CTR* 1, 112–33). This regionalism and desire to map the Canadian theatre terrain takes hold in the 1980s with special issues titled *Toronto Theatre Today* (*CTR* 38, Fall 1983), *British Columbia Theatre Today* (*CTR* 39, Spring 1984), *Theatre on the Prairies* (*CTR* 42, Spring 1985), *Atlantic Alternatives* (*CTR* 48, Fall 1986), and, finally, *Nation and Theatre* (*CTR* 62, Spring 1990). *CTR*, and Canadian theatre history, maintains this regional approach (among many others) to theatre in Canada; research projects across Canada today are based in specific landscapes and regions, from *Performance in the Pacific Northwest* (Kovacs and Davis–Fisch) to *Futures of Prairie Based Theatre* (Brubaker, Afolabi, and Nolan) to *Performing [Atlantic] Shores* (Barker, Wright, and Davis–Fisch). The regional *CTR* issue topics from the 1980s also reveal a focus on performances 'today' rather than a history of theatre. The relatively quick departure from re-viewing a 'history' of Canadian theatre in the mid-1970s to a review of Canadian theatre 'today' in the early 1980s marked a shift from documenting the past to documenting the present that would become historical, a shift from working to define a Canadian theatre identity to challenging the singularity of a national theatre; in fact, it wasn't so much a shift in focus as a doubleness in focus from the start.

If we need more evidence that *CTR* not only serves as an archive of Canadian theatre history but actively shaped the discipline of Canadian theatre history, then we can turn to issues in the 1980s. In addition to showing how identity issues take over theatre, performance, and literary studies (among other fields), many of the organizing topics of the 1980s issues speak to distinct burgeoning fields, including politics and social action (*CTR* 22, Spring 1970; *CTR* 27, Summer 1980), Indigenous performance (*CTR* 29, Winter 1981), feminist performance (*CTR* 43, Summer 1985), sexuality (*CTR* 59, Summer 1989), and adaptation studies (*CTR* 54, Spring 1988). Of course, the terms and theoretical frameworks in these issues also speak to and from the time: a themed issue like *Garrison Theatre* (*CTR* 46, Spring 1986) cites Northrop Frye's notion of the Canadian garrison mentality outlined in "Conclusion to a *Literary History of Canada*" (227–28).

What's notable about the first decade of *CTR* (from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s) is not only how much it tells us about this historical moment in Canadian theatre and the field of Canadian theatre history but also how long *CTR*'s historical narratives grabbed hold of our imaginations, scholarship, and classrooms. From a macro perspective of the field, *CTR* was participating in the construction of the Canadian theatre history canon and syllabus. But, typical of writings on the Canadian literary and cultural imaginary of the 1960s and 1970s, there is a collective invocation of a Canadian theatre that *will* arrive. Even the cover art for the first issue—a checkerboard of graphic road-like patterns that create dead ends—suggests that with the right rejigging and effort, a path forward and a clear narrative of Canadian theatre history will reveal itself. It is this consistent underlying anxiety, promise, or what Rubin calls “will” that takes a strong hold on the Canadian theatre and literary imaginary in the 1970s: Canada is a theatre history always in the making (always in process rather than a stable entity).

We see this same sentiment of willing a Canadian theatre history into being—that is, I write Canadian theatre history; therefore, it exists—in the 1990 issue of *CTR* titled *Nation and Theatre* (and its cover art that shows an anxious, young Canada), but this time with an extended self-reflection on the significance of ‘Canadian’ (*CTR* 62). In fact, Alan Filewod asserts that *CTR* 62 was when the journal “began to question what nation actually means” (*Performing* x). Ann Wilson’s editorial reflects on the meaning of the journal’s title and questions how “the political construct ‘nation’” impacts the construction of theatre and, I would add, theatre history. Wilson cites evidence of a Canadian theatre—and imagines a response: “Of course there is a Canadian theatre. Why else would there be journals like *CTR*, *Canadian Drama*, a reference book like *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre* and the anthologies of Canadian drama which have appeared in recent years”—only to destabilize it by suggesting that “these periodicals and books are not evidence of the existence of Canadian theatre but rather the desire for Canadian theatre, for a theatre which defines [us] as a nation thereby giving us a sense of identity” (3). Scholars in *CTR* paint a portrait of Canadian theatre history with one hand while effacing it with the other hand.

'Theatre'?

Much like the terms 'history' and 'Canadian,' *CTR* has questioned the titular organizing term of 'theatre' over the past fifty years. From the early issues on, the editors of and contributors to *CTR* complicate the organizing principles of text-based works or theatre houses and instead call for a consideration of early performance-based examples of Canadian theatre history. *CTR*, then, takes what we would now call a performance studies approach to Canadian theatre history. Knowles (2012) as well as Laura Levin and Marlis Schweitzer (2017) convincingly establish *CTR*'s performance studies approach from its origins in 1974. Citing Knowles's work, Levin and Schweitzer explain that *CTR* did not include 'drama' in its title in an effort to focus on 'theatre' as performance rather than theatre as text-based drama (16), thereby "paralleling performance studies' initial rejection of drama as literary text" and, in the 1980s, "publishing on topics that performance studies now regularly addresses, including performance art, spoken word, dance and movement-based theatre, paratheater in popular culture, historical re-enactment, raves and parties, to name only a few" (16). What is important here, in the context of fifty years of *CTR*, is the relationship between the development of the fields of performance studies in Canada and Canadian theatre history; the fact that these two fields were emerging at the same time and in the same journal may help explain why Canadian theatre history wrestles with the medium of the archive itself and exposes a tension between text-based Canadian 'drama' and performance-driven Canadian 'theatre.'

We see the impact of the intertwining of a text-based and a performance-driven methodology in Alan Filewod's *Performing Canada: The Nation Enacted in the Imagined Theatre* (2002), which complicates the historicization of Marc Lescarbot's *Le Theatre de Neptune en la Nouvelle France* (1606) as the first documented performance in what we now call Canada by examining it as a performance of nationhood and an act that claimed the land through performance. In *Performing Canada*, Filewod references his work as an editor at *CTR* as part of a "radical rethinking" of the field of Canadian theatre history (x). Filewod—calling on his experience at *CTR*—notes that "'Canadian theatre' has always been a difficult and problematic term, less a definition of a thing than a site of debate and contestation. It summons two historically unstable terms to create a third site of crisis" (x). For Filewod, here, the third site of

crisis is the nation, but, of course, he is also participating in the field of Canadian theatre history and defining the discipline as a crisis that is always under contestation. *CTR* helps unpack Canadian theatre history as a discipline that scrutinizes performances of nationalism over time. If, as Filewod surmises in a 2014 article, "Disciplinaryity and Dissolution," "we may never see another academic posting in 'Canadian Theatre'" (226), then this may be because the field of Canadian theatre history has been successful in the project of its own unmaking. The fifty years of *CTR* show how the discipline of Canadian theatre history and the shifting meanings of its three constitutive terms have always been called into question.

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