

Maybe We Got Some of It Right: A Response to Alan Filewod

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I am very pleased to have been asked to respond to Alan Filewod's poignant reminiscence entitled "The Wrong Side of History, or How We Got It Wrong" (this issue), his contribution to the controversial fiftieth anniversary issue of *Canadian Theatre Review*. Alan was an important figure in the relatively small community of Canadian theatre scholars during my decades in academia. I have great respect for his writing and its forceful, passionate expression of his cultural politics. His enthusiasm about his time with *CTR* is bracing, but his regrets about the work he did there sad.

Alan and I were peers in what I would call the second generation of Canadian theatre scholarship. We travelled somewhat similar professional paths, both working in theatre outside academia while teaching. We both spent time as editors and reviewed theatre for CBC radio. Yet I can't agree that his later awakening to the realities of Canadian colonialism meant that he and his colleagues at *CTR* "had it *all* wrong" (48; my italics) back then.

Whose views may be right or wrong depends a lot on perspective. In his article "History's Sides," social anthropologist Nicholas Lackenby calls the tendency to situate oneself on the right or wrong side of history, as Alan does, "sideism" (3). Lackenby contrasts that perspective with the notion of "plural, local, individual histories" (5). To the sideist, history is a totalizing concept, a rhetorical binary that leaves little room for the local and individual.¹

Without denying the importance of critiquing colonial history, I argue that one can do so while still allowing the virtues of those local histories that live within its shadow. Babies and bathwater.

¹ Thanks to Selena Couture for drawing my attention to Lackenby's article.

Growing up American shaped my perspective on Canada, Canadian theatre, and their histories. I arrived in Vancouver to teach English at the University of British Columbia in 1972. Having acted in college, I almost immediately threw myself into the burgeoning Vancouver theatre scene. The 1970s were a heady time to be a young actor in western Canada. No one wanted to know where you had trained (I hadn't) or to see your resume (mine was slim). Federal programs encouraged the creation of new work, new companies, and cultural spaces. Canadian nationalism was at its peak in the shadow of the Vietnam War and I was totally onside with it. Why wouldn't a country—and its theatre—with a long history of cultural domination by the US want its own plays, playwrights, and theatre artists telling its own stories?

By the time I turned my academic focus to Canadian drama and theatre history in the early 1980s, I had seen a lot of new Canadian plays and been in quite a few. I was immersed in the Canadian theatrical renaissance, sharing the stage with talented Canadian actors and learning about my new country from people who had grown up here and whose stories I was helping tell. It was exhilarating. Canadian theatre was suddenly a thing and I wanted to help spread the word.



Figure 1: *Doukhobors* by Paul Thompson & Theatre Passe Muraille, dir. Ray Michal & Jane Heyman, City Stage, 1977; l-r back row: Glen Thompson, me, Pierre Tetrault, Jane Kalmacoff, Guy Bannerman; front Joe Sala, Annabel Kershaw, and Susan Shillingford. Played at City Stage on Thurlow St. Vancouver premiere. Photo credit Glen E. Erickson.



Figure 2: *On the Job* by David Fennario, dir. Bill Millerd, Arts Club Theatre, 1976; l-r: Bruce Greenwood, me, Robert Mark Weber, Bob Carey. Played at the Seymour St. Arts Club. Vancouver premiere. Photo credit Glen E. Erickson.

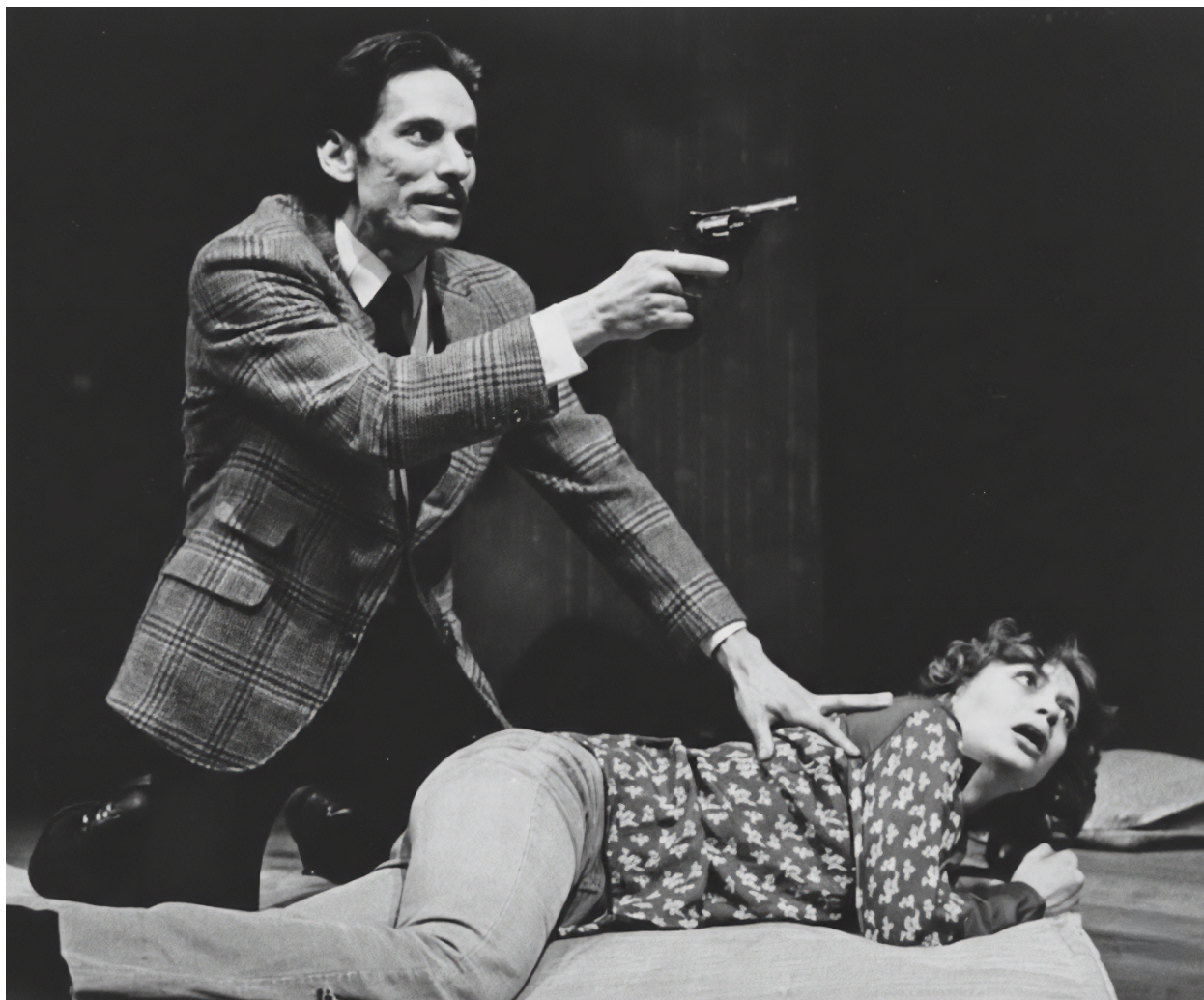


Figure 3: *The Workingman* by Tom Walmsley, dir. Pamela Hawthorn, New Play Centre, 1975. The actress is Kayla Armstrong. Played at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre. Premiere production. Photo credit Glen E. Erickson.

Among my first efforts were articles in *Canadian Theatre Review*. I saw the value of *CTR* as a potential link between the academy and the world outside, between Canadian theatre studies, Canadian theatre itself and its audiences. Because it deals primarily with contemporary theatre, includes photos, and is not refereed, it can be less academically technical and formal than other theatre journals. In *CTR* 35 (Summer 1982) I wrote excitedly about a single day when seven of eight Vancouver theatres were staging well-attended plays written, produced, and performed by Canadians (Wasserman).² I saw

² The plays and companies were the Vancouver Repertory Theatre's production of James Reaney's *Handcuffs* (part two of the Donnelly trilogy); a Capilano College student production of *Ten Lost Years* by Jack Winter and

this as a sign that people in my adopted city were embracing their own culture. My article resembled what Alan laments *CTR* was from its beginnings: “an instrument of quantification.” Of the eight articles I’ve published in *CTR* my two most substantial, maybe predictably, document Canadian theatrical attitudes towards Americans (Wasserman, “Where Were You” and “Monstrous Clowns”). I maintain a border-dweller’s perspective on Canada which, for all its sins, remains to my eye the better alternative.

In 1985 I published *Modern Canadian Plays*, an anthology of twelve scripts from the new Canadian theatre with a historical introduction and bibliographies. It became a popular classroom text that would eventually appear in five editions and expand to thirty-one plays. I thought this was a good thing, helpful for cash-strapped students and an asset to the Canadian theatre project itself. Was I naïve?

The anthology and I were attacked from many sides for various heresies, from canonization to “intellectual control” (Wasserman, “Confessions”). My enthusiasms for Canadian theatre did not entirely blind me to the sins of Canadian colonialism, although, like Alan, I was seeing through a 1980s lens. But did those of us, inside *CTR* or outside, who documented and advocated for Canadian theatre have it *all* wrong? Did the embrace of cultural nationalism, canonicity, and theatrical professionalism make one an accessory to “colonial genocide”? Should “the very concept of ‘Canadian theatre’” have been eliminated? The work of shoring up Canadian theatre in the 1970s and 1980s made it possible for the Indigenous work, the African Canadian work, the Asian Canadian work missing in those first years of *CTR* to claim their place on our stages. I don’t see how critical nihilism helps to undo colonialism or make room for Canada’s diverse theatrical storytellers. I remain unrepentant about the value of Canadian theatre, minus the scare quotes.

Cedric Smith at North Vancouver’s Presentation House; the Prairie Theatre Exchange’s production of George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre; the Arts Club’s presentations of Allan Stratton’s *Rexy!* (a satire about Mackenzie King) and Sherman Snukal’s *Talking Dirty* (a sex comedy set in Kitsilano) at its two theatres; a Tamahnous Theatre production of *Last Call!* by Morris Panych and Ken Macdonald (a post-nuclear musical cabaret) at City Stage; and Touchstone Theatre Company’s production of Judith Thompson’s *The Crackwalker* at the Firehall Theatre.

I've always appreciated *CTR*'s promise of connecting with readers beyond the campus and classroom. Yet I have never seen copies of the journal circulate in green rooms or theatre lobbies. As Alan himself acknowledges, "our main readership was in the classroom rather than the theatre." Having spent over four decades in both the university and professional theatre, I doubt that what we do in theatrical academia has much impact on the world beyond. Alan expresses regrets about his tenure with *CTR*, saying it put him "on the wrong side of history." Lackenby argues that "evoking the 'sides of history' allows people who might be marginal to feel meaningfully at the very heart of things ... rooting themselves conscientiously within a historical narrative." People making such statements "become virtuous agents in processes beyond their control" (5). The irony is that broadening, strengthening, and diversifying Canadian theatre is a process within our control, and Alan has been instrumental in that work.

I admire Alan for the strength and consistency of his politics *and* for his groundbreaking role in helping to make Canadian theatre studies a rigorous, attractive academic discipline. In this dark Trumpian age I believe more strongly than ever that the world needs more Canada and more Canadian theatre.

References

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