

"There is no such thing as a gay play": *Canadian Theatre Review* and Gay Politics in the 1970s

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When presented with the opportunity to write for this auspicious issue, I planned to briefly address how queer genders and sexualities have been represented by *Canadian Theatre Review* (*CTR*) over the course of its history. However, as I began to do this work, I quickly realized that even summarizing the six issues dedicated to these topics is a task that exceeds the scope (and word limit) of this essay. Instead, I have decided to examine the first *CTR* volume to address sexuality and, significantly, not gender: *CTR* 12, titled *Homosexuality and the Theatre*, edited by David Watmough and published in 1976. In doing so, I want to position this issue as an important flex point in the journal's history—what is, arguably, the first time the journal addressed an identity politics other than Canadian or Quebec nationalisms.¹ Examining the issue and its reception in the gay press, we see the politics of theatre and performance at a moment of stress, at a time when a liberal humanist understanding of art based firmly in playwriting and a canon of 'great' plays—central tenets of *CTR*'s early mission—is both asserted and questioned. In this moment, received assumptions about theatre and performance were beginning to be challenged by new theoretical questions about representation, politics, power, and the purposes of a journal like *CTR*. *CTR* 12 represents an early sign of a still-ongoing process at the journal, which unfolded very slowly over the next few decades: a process that questioned the politics of representation, most often led by marginalized 'others' who took greater control over their own representation and participation within art, culture, and politics, and within the pages of *CTR*, a process whereby the journal would more overtly theorize its own

¹ Although *CTR* 11 looks at theatre in Quebec, the issue has two articles on the topic and two plays by Jean Barbeau, translated by John Van Burek. Most of the issue is composed of the journal's Carte Blanche section, under which various articles on a diversity of subjects were published.

conceptions of theatre and performance and its position *vis-à-vis* the construction of 'Canadian theatre.'

Homosexuality and the Theatre

Born in England in 1926, Watmough was a successful novelist, playwright, and actor who lived in Vancouver until his death in 2017. At the time *Homosexuality and the Theatre* was published, he served on *CTR*'s editorial board but would later resign due to the fallout from the issue. The idea of publishing a volume of *CTR* that interrogated 'homosexuality and the theatre' was suggested to the journal's editor, Don Rubin, by the British-American theatre scholar and playwright Eric Bentley. Bentley had recently come out of the closet and, in Rubin's words, "suggested a special issue of *CTR* dealing with what was then his favorite topic—the politics of 'Homosexuality and the Theatre.'" It is not insignificant that the first *CTR* issue to deal with a marginalized community was proposed by a highly successful theatre scholar and artist who had recently come out. Generally speaking, and especially in this period, by virtue of their sex and broader social positioning, gay men like Bentley and Watmough could enjoy significant professional privilege and access, especially if they were not public or political about their sexuality. The broader liberalization that was taking place regarding homosexuality in Canada and elsewhere meant that by the mid-1970s, the possibility of a gay man coming out publicly was no longer completely unimaginable, socially or professionally. This said, Rubin notes that Bentley's decision to come out coincided with his decision to leave the academy. As Rubin suggests:

It was at the height of student protests and the new demands for sexual freedoms in 1968 and 1969 that Bentley chose to leave the safe confines of a tenured position at Columbia. Actively supporting the students, Bentley—twice married and the father of two—decided at this time to also come out as gay, a decision he felt his Columbia colleagues would not have tolerated.

I do not wish to diminish in any way the bravery of men like Bentley or Watmough or belittle the experiences of homophobia and marginalization—indeed, in the case of Watmough, arrest and incarceration—to which they were no doubt subject. However, in the context of this discussion of *CTR*, it should be noted that they possessed levels of professional authority and

social status that enabled them to propose and to publish the issue ahead of other marginalized groups, people who were, arguably, further from the levers of power.

With only 34 of its 145 pages directly addressing the topic of homosexuality, the issue is thematically a bit thin. The articles that directly take up the theme are as follows: an introduction to the issue written by Watmough called "Setting the Stage"; a transcript of a conversation between members of Toronto's theatre community, namely director John Palmer (marking the first time Palmer spoke publicly as a gay man), actors Peter Jobin and Elva Mai Hoover, and the review editor from *The Body Politic*, Ed Jackson, interviewed by *CTR*'s managing editor, Forester Freed, titled "A Local View"; an essay by Bentley that posits homosexuality as anathema to a culture based on fertility and purpose, not non-procreative pleasures, titled "The Homosexual Question"; a short piece by Vancouver playwright and satirist Eric Nicol, who tries to find humour in his negative experiences in the theatre with "a bunch of goddamn fairies" (24) but comes off as laughably homophobic; a thoughtful meditation addressing what it means to be a 'gay' playwright by Robert Wallace, titled "Image and Label: Notes for a Sense of Self"; and, finally, a short review of homosexuality in literature by Graham Jackson called "Theatre of Implication." As is customary for *CTR*, this issue also includes a play, though this play is not by a gay author, nor does it have any gay content. Ken Gass's *The Boy Bishop* is a historical play about eighteenth-century Quebec that, according to the author, was an allegory for English-Canadian history (Gass123). The issue does not address lesbians in its treatment of "homosexuality and the theatre," nor does it speak to the impacts and implications of gender and patriarchy on the experiences of queer women. Watmough notes that he may not have achieved all he had hoped for in the issue, citing the lack of lesbian input in particular. He suggests that this omission, as well as the "difficulty in obtaining more broadly based representation" of gay men and lesbians in the issue, is "the result of a harsh but simple reality: still in 1976 the personal declaration of homosexuality in our Canadian theatre can easily lead to unemployment" ("Setting" 6).

Watmough seems caught between the conflicting gender and sexual politics of the early 1970s, on the one hand, and the implications these new ideas signalled about theatre, performance, and the representations of minoritized

communities, on the other. At the same time, he was also working in a theatre culture that was riven by paradox, in which it was difficult to come out, and in which gay men, in particular, were thought to clandestinely wield too much power. In his introduction to the issue, he cites this homophobia by quoting John Colicos, who earlier that year said he “dislik[es] the theatre, partly ‘because the faggots have taken over. It’s to [sic] hard to work in a bitchy, carping biting milieu. The theatre needs a revolution. At the moment it’s too precious’” (“Setting” 7). While Watmough was an open and visible gay man, working in a theatre in which his presence was seen, by the likes of Colicos, as a problem in need of revolutionary solutions, his editorial decisions privileged a conception of ‘great art’ that did more to support than challenge the status quo. At a time when people feared the ramifications of coming out and making their sexuality a political issue, he contends that to privilege the contribution that “homosexuals” have made to the theatre, or to make this *CTR* issue an overt affirmation of gay politics, would be of questionable artistic integrity:

It is possible that some of our gay readers, particularly the militant young, will see in this issue a less than trenchant affirmation of the homosexual contribution to the dramatic arts. And while I am somewhat inclined to agree with them, I did not construe this particular issue to be a propagandistic weapon for gay rights, anymore than I wished it to merely sit on the fence. (Watmough, “Setting” 7)

Watmough’s logic is difficult to follow here because it seems to contradict itself. By his own acknowledgement, the issue is not an approbation of “the homosexual contribution” to theatre because that would be “propagandistic.” And yet, he wants the issue to have an unambiguous and, one would assume, positive political position, and to not “merely sit on the fence.” But how is such an equivocal position possible?

In his editorial decisions, Watmough’s own gay politics seem to come into conflict with his presumably long-held liberal humanist views about the nature and function of art and the artist. The thorny problem of the politicization of homosexuality for artists like Watmough is represented most clearly in the issue’s rather conspicuous failure to publish a gay play, which he refused to do:

It is my ardent belief that there is no such thing as a gay play: no more than there is such a thing as a straight play. There are good plays and bad plays, and they are written by either homosexuals or heterosexuals. To have included a play by a homosexual simply because of the writer's sexuality would have played into the kind of hands that tend to reduce art to propaganda. (Watmough, "Setting" 7)

Watmough would not concede to pressure in his decisions about what plays deserve critical recognition and publication as doing so would be tantamount to participating in "propaganda" —art that privileged its appeal to a particular community rather than express some kind of "universal truth." At the same time, he seems unable to see the politics at work in his understanding of 'good' plays and 'bad' plays. As he suggests of one of his own works, *Scar Tissue*, which recounts his experience of incarceration for gross indecency as a young man, "You want to find the universal elements in the experience—the things we share with straights. If it doesn't escape the gay ghetto experience, I feel it has failed" (Watmough, "An Interview" 24).

Watmough's decision to not publish a gay play is particularly significant because among the plays he rejected was *No Deposit, No Return*, written by future *CTR* editor Robert Wallace. According to *The Body Politic* journalist and University of Toronto English professor Michael Lynch, who interviewed Wallace as part of his scathing critique of *CTR*¹², when Wallace submitted his play for publication, he was asked by Watmough if he would write a piece about what it meant to him to be called a "gay playwright." Watmough published Wallace's essay but rejected his script and "ruled against publishing any script in this issue, on the grounds that he did not want to be responsible for any gay play being labelled as 'gay'" (Lynch).

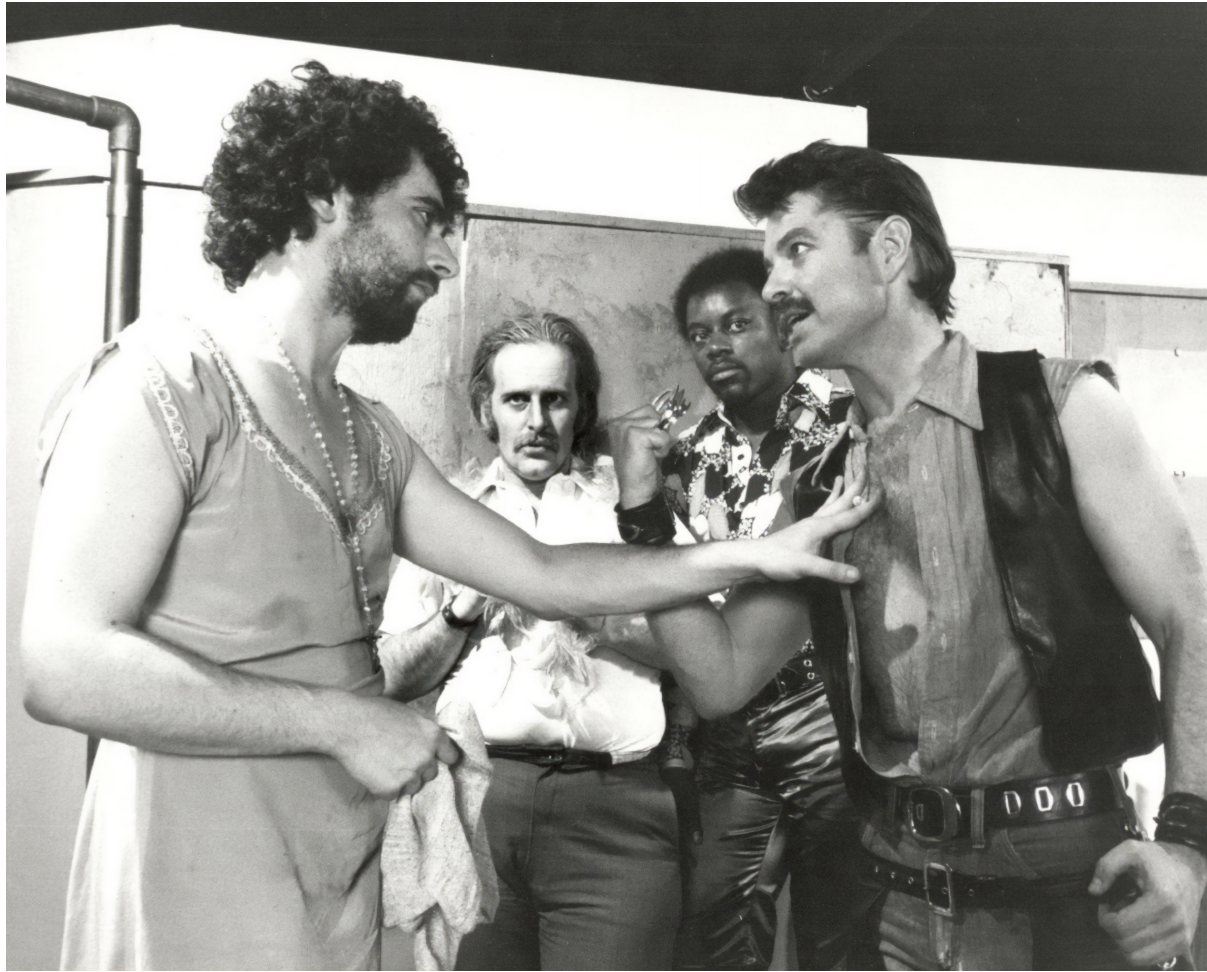


Figure 1: From Robert Wallace's *No Deposit, No Return* (1975), staged at the WSDG Gay Theatre, New York. Photographer: Les Carr, courtesy of Robert Wallace. Left to right: Saul Rubinek as Sara Lee, Anthony Baksa as Meredith, Robert Colston as Flick, and Jim Taylor.



Figure 2: From Robert Wallace's *No Deposit, No Return* (1975), staged at the WSDG Gay Theatre, New York. Photographer: Les Carr, courtesy of Robert Wallace. Left to right: David Reed-Radner as Cooper, Anthony Baksa as Meredith, Saul Rubinek as Sara Lee, Jim Taylor.

In his review of *CTR12*, Lynch uses the politics of gay liberation as his critical framework. Lynch contends that the issue falls short by neglecting analyses of three crucial areas: “homosexuals or homosexual ‘themes’ in plays; plays by homosexuals (and possibly for homosexuals) dealing with the gay experience; and gays in the theatre industry” (Lynch). Lynch’s call to examine these topics rejects the ‘universalizing’ tenets of liberal humanism, which undergirded Watmough’s philosophy of art and his editorial decisions. Instead, Lynch’s stance epitomizes the concerns of gay liberation, which were informed by a combination of the feminist, Marxist, and revolutionary politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s. His critique reflects the feminist notion that the “personal is political,” particularly emphasizing the need to

scrutinize how homosexuals are portrayed in theatre and how these representations intersect with the 'real-life' experiences of queers themselves. It underscores the significance of nurturing a sense of community among gays through the creation of works that explore their lived realities and that are possibly aimed primarily—even exclusively—at them. Finally, it adopts a Marxist viewpoint regarding the tangible significance of the conditions of production, specifically concerning the circumstances faced by gays employed in the theatre industry.

Watmough was obviously cognizant of homophobia's effects on the political complexities of theatrical performance and the material circumstances under which it is produced or not produced, as these were his lived experiences. As he states in his rebuttal to Lynch's review:

[I] ha[ve] publicly and trenchantly affirmed gay rights ever since I stood in court and received a prison sentence for homosexuality at the age of seventeen—thirty years ago. In 1954, I was responsible for the first B.B.C. radio broadcast ever on the subject of homosexuality, while through four published books of fiction and plays, innumerable on C.B.C. radio and television, in magazine and newspaper interviews, and as my interviewers from [*The Body Politic*] can attest, in my performances which number over a thousand, I have stood fair and square for gay rights and gay pride.... All in all, I think my record stands. (Watmough, "Letters")

It may be that Watmough just didn't like Wallace's play, or did not want to publish a 'gay play' as he felt he would be doing a disservice to the playwright by assigning this label. From my perspective, Watmough seems unable to reconcile the aesthetics and politics of an emergent form, politicized gay theatre rooted in an emerging community consciousness, with his liberal humanist understanding of art, its value, and its function. Unlike Lynch, whose approach to culture was informed by gay liberation politics, Watmough seems to think that art should 'rise above' these concerns. And while Watmough acknowledges that the decision to come out in the theatre at this time could have negative material effects, by not publishing Wallace's play, or any other gay play for whatever reasons, however unwittingly, he did not fight the theatre establishment's homophobia. He conceded to it.

The next issue to focus on sexuality or gender was Feminism and Canadian Theatre, *CTR* 43 (1985), edited by then-editor Robert Wallace and published nearly a decade after Homosexuality and the Theatre. In his short introduction to the issue, Wallace notes, "The genesis of this issue was my discovery last year that Rina Fraticelli's invaluable report The Status of Women in the Canadian Theatre, which she prepared for the Status of Women Canada in 1982, had never been published" (4). Wallace proposed publishing parts of the report in *CTR*, but Fraticelli suggested that "it would be more constructive to address the current status of women in Canadian theatre and to explore the ways in which feminism connects with or influences their work" (4). The issue includes ten articles that address feminism and theatre written by women from across the country; the playscript of *This Is for You, Anna: A Spectacle of Revenge*, by the Anna Collective; and its regular Carte Blanche section, which comprises three pieces that all address feminism and/or women working in theatre.

As the 1980s wore on, theoretical and political issues about inclusion, canonization, and gender, sexual, ethnic and racial diversity, among other concerns, would become increasingly central to the journal's mission, though the process was definitely a slow one. In "Undermining the Centre: The Canon according to *CTR*," an article written for *Theatre Research in Canada* in 1990, Alan Filewod notes the lack of formal, gender, and racial diversity in plays published by *CTR*.² He writes:

The legitimization of Canadian drama [through the practice of publishing plays in issues of *CTR*] has engendered a canonizing process that erases difference, and it is only now, with the transforming challenge to our notions of theatre emanating from

² This is the list of plays and Filewod's preamble: "From the beginning *CTR* championed the cause of the Canadian playwright and proposed the notion of a dramatic literature as the first condition of an autonomous national theatre. For that reason, *CTR* has published a play text in almost every issue. Let me offer some quick figures about those plays. Of a total of 67 texts, up to *CTR* 64 [Summer 1990] the list breaks down into revealing categories: 48 were written by men; 16 were written by women; three were gender-mixed collaborations. Of these, three were written for radio; all but one (Beverly Simon's *Leela Means To Play*) were produced professionally; four were by non-Canadian authors (one American, one Argentinean, one Japanese, one German); five were written for Theatre for Young Audiences; three were expressly gay in subject; four were translated from French; one was written by a Black writer."

cultural and ethnic minorities, that we can see in retrospect why that erasure was historically necessary—*but not, I think, unavoidable*. (emphasis added)

The production and reception of *CTR*12 reveals one instance of how, even in a theme issue dedicated to “homosexuality and the theatre,” the complexities of identity, politics, and aesthetics were such that erasure did occur, and it was definitely not unavoidable—with the decision not to publish Wallace’s play as the most salient example. *CTR*12 thus brings into view for the first time questions that became central to *CTR*’s mission, questions that would be rearticulated with contextual specificity in regard to other marginalized and minoritized subjects and communities. They are theoretical and material questions about constructing and deconstructing canons, authority, ‘quality,’ and access; they are formal questions about what constitutes plays, theatre, and performance; they are political questions about what ‘Canadian’ theatre is, and who makes it. They are questions about the journal’s power and its limitations in its efforts to understand, represent, and be variously engaged with the making of theatre and performance on the land now known as Canada.

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