

On Unmaking and Making in the Compost Heap of Canadian Theatre History

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It's spring time as I write this and the air is filled with the smells of rotting things—not the unpleasant sewage-like odour of improperly tended too wet compost—but the rich oxygenated earthy smell that comes from a balanced well-aired heap (City of Edmonton 7). I think of it as the smell of things growing, the smell of a place where things will bloom again after a period of stasis. This smell, though, depends on matter being unmade, losing its shape, dying off and disintegrating, so that it can be remade.¹ Compost teaches us about how the mutability of matter is intricately connected to life and growth, and this is why I'm thinking about compost after reading Kailin Wright's article "(Un)Making History? Canadian Theatre History and the *Canadian Theatre Review*" (this issue). In it, Wright traces what she calls the (un)making of Canadian theatre history in the pages of *Canadian Theatre Review* (*CTR*) and concludes (hopefully I think) by saying that her fifty-year overview of the discipline of Canadian theatre history demonstrates that the concept and each of its three constitutive terms—"Canadian," "Theatre," and History"—"have always been called into question" (19).

¹ In addition to the spring air, I am also inspired by my former post-doctoral fellow Zoë Heyn-Jones's project "Composting Research-Creation: Organic Waste Management and/as Art for the Climate Emergency." In it she considered composting as a research method in visual art and design contexts which can also contribute to addressing the urgent problem of food waste and methane gas emissions that significantly exacerbate the damage caused by carbon in the atmosphere. Information about one of her ongoing arts/ecology collective composting projects, "descomponer/regenerar" can be found on her website: zoeheynjones.com/descomponer-regenerar.



Figure 1. Simone (Simi) Castro aerating the compost pile at Edmonton Compost School during an event organized by Zoë Heyn-Jones as part of her U of Alberta post-doctoral fellowship project "Composting Research-Creation: Organic Waste Management and/as Art for the Climate Emergency" (19 Oct. 2024). Permission and photo credit: Zoë Heyn-Jones.

As with a degenerating compost pile, it's difficult to know what the original forms of some things were (except eggshells and avocado skins—they seem to keep their shape for years). Wright picks up on this confusion when she

asks, “[H]ow did CTR shift from asserting a national theatre and documenting performance to challenging the very taxonomies of the field of Canadian theatre history, including the colonization of the land known as Canada and textually oriented theatre history?” (12). After reviewing the early efforts to desire a Canadian theatre into being in the first few years, she examines the category of “Canadian” through listing issues from the 1980s that had a regional focus, noting the change from reviewing a history of Canadian theatre 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” (16). She then traces how this singularity was further dismantled by numerous issues in the 1980s that politically interrogated theatre from multiple perspectives (16–17). Wright marks a significant turn in the journal with the 1990 issue, edited by Ann Wilson, that took a critical view of nationalism (17). In my article (included later in this issue), I also noticed that shift and attributed it to an editorial team taking over the journal and the inclusion of proliferating perspectives (152–164). As I’ve now learned, through editing this *Performance Matters* issue and listening in to the roundtable conversation that included former CTR editors Robert Wallace, Natalie Rewa, Ric Knowles, Laura Levin, and Jenn Stephenson (also published in this issue), some of the mushy items we see when looking at the publications from the 1980s are actually the result of purposeful editorial decisions to seek out multiple perspectives from artists, scholars, and cultural workers in order to add oxygen to the CTR composting container. This is the sort of careful editorial tending that allowed CTR to demonstrate, as Wright says, that “a theatre history [is] always in the making (always in process rather than a stable entity)” (17).

Wright also refers briefly to the discussion of the Massey Commission report in the early issues of CTR (14–15) and explains the significance of the report’s statement regarding the need for theatrical infrastructure further in a footnote (11 n1). While Wright doesn’t interrogate the report itself much more, it is somewhat like those avocado skins or eggshells in the compost; it just lasts and lasts and lasts despite how often Canadian theatre historians develop historiographic methods and theoretical frames to expand conceptions of “Canadian,” “theatre” and “history.” That said, Wright’s brief references to the Massey Commission in her article about (un)making theatre history make me think of Sarah Garton Stanley’s 2023 doctoral dissertation, *Massey and Me: Conversations at the End of Theatre*. Stanley’s

research-creation sonic-visual experience uses the constraints of the Massey Lecture series (4) to interrogate what she calls the “Canada Show” or “installation” (20, 28) that has been running since the 1951 publication of the report. In layered (and at times multi-lingual and multi-channel) audio pieces, she explores the creation of the report in post-World War II Canada and shares a genealogy of the irreverent Harold Awards in Toronto as a “fantastic site of resistance to the Massey Commission’s yearning for a professional theatre” (36).² Other “chapters” respond to Andrea Shin Ling’s “Calculus of an Infinite Rot Part 1” installation of tree stumps inoculated with fungi and bacteria decomposing at Buddies in Bad Times theatre (Lam, “Rhubarb Festival”) and reflect on the “Cycles” she co-led at the National Arts Centre from 2014 to 2020 as part of “changing the shape of Canadian theatre” (Stanley 12–14). The work ends with a video recording of a gleaming white cake decaying in a pile of pine cones in the woods, a cake she had conceived as a guiding methodology to explore systemic thinking (75–76) in the hope that it might “shift the conversation towards a more conscious understanding of the ways in which templates for living might be re-inscribed” (83). Stanley’s enormously generative “lecture type things” (16, 24, 50, 61) add in the necessary oxygen to help with a healthy decomposition of the influence of the Massey Report on contemporary artists. In responding to Wright’s work, I want to link Stanley’s approach to the history writing Wright identifies as (un)making.

² As Stanley explains in her dissertation, “The Harold Awards is an annual event celebrating Toronto’s theatre community. Established in 1995, it’s named in honour of the late Harold Kandel, who was known for his inappropriate sounds, his incredible cackle, and his love of the heckle. The awards seek to recognize and celebrate the achievements of theatre folks who have made something good happen for the community, for the stage, for their friends. The Award places value in community. The Harold Award winners are chosen each year, by the previous recipients, building a sense of community and connection. The event has become a beloved tradition and a highlight of the theatre calendar in Toronto” (36). See also Leung.



Figure 2: Screenshot of Vincent Massey overlay on a disintegrating cake surrounded by pine cones. Sarah Garton Stanley, "The Woods: Conversations at the End of Theatre" video-lecture-type-thing-chapter, 8:53. Included with permission from Sarah Garton Stanley.

And, finally, in the circular making-unmaking-making way that becomes noticeable when one pays attention to history the way that Wright has, it is striking that her article on (un)making was included in the Looking Back section of the original 2024 publication of *CTR* 199–200. She was definitely looking back, and perhaps without realizing, also looking forward to the winter of 2025, when that issue was unmade, through the disintegration of some core shared values of fair critical academic discourse. It has, however, been remade here with a mixture of new matter that will hopefully lead to strong fresh growth that will itself one day become part of the compost heap of future scholarly histories.

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