

# A Year in the Life: *Canadian Theatre Review*, 1988

Kim Solga

## February 1988

Thirty-six years ago, the Calgary Winter Olympics opened in my very-much-not-hometown, 300 kilometres down the highway from my childhood bedroom in North Edmonton. I was thirteen, awkward, and unhappy in my changing, expanding body. Above all, I desperately wanted to feel the pull of pride that my Calgary pals were able to own as that spectacular flame, glowing with the promise of global recognition, travelled into the Saddledome. Calgary was way cool, and everyone knew where it was; Edmonton was invisible. Women's figure skating star Liz Manley dominated my imagination in the two weeks of those games: her delightful pink costume and cowboy accessories, her bright smile, her childlike overwhelm at coming second in the world. I cut out the colour front-page photo of her biting her silver medal from the *Edmonton Journal* and pasted it onto my closet door. There was Liz, just for me: she was everything I wasn't, but she was also the promise of what, perhaps, I could someday become.

How strongly these memories came back to me as I binged Carolyn Taylor's *I Have Nothing* in the autumn of 2023. Taylor's Crave miniseries leaps from one of her stand-up routines, in which she imagines choreographing an Olympic-level pairs figure skating routine to Whitney Houston's "I Have Nothing." In the series, her dreams come true: she makes the routine happen, with help from Sandra Bezic, David Pelletier, and Ekaterina Gordeeva in the skates, and so many of the 1988 icons (Katarina Witt!! Kurt Browning!!). *I Have Nothing* is a love letter to Carolyn's teenage self. In another bedroom on this land sometimes called Canada, she, too, was glued to the 1988 Olympics on the CBC, obsessed with the figure skating, busy dreaming a new Carolyn into being. At a time when she could still barely admit to herself her

emerging queerness, the games offered her a window into performances of becoming, transformational feats of strength and self-assurance, a way to dance herself into the world, anew.

In February 1988, watching Liz skate and dreaming of summer drama camp, I, too, began to understand performance as a route forward, a path into my future. That same year marked the passing into law of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act—a crucial moment of self-actualization in the history of our shared cultural imaginary, riddled with hope, imperfection, and some very strategic forgetting. Finally, 1988 was a watershed year for what would someday become my chosen discipline, as it marked the establishment in critical consciousness of feminist performance theory.<sup>1</sup>

And so: when Jenn Stephenson asked me to contribute my reading of a year's worth of journals to this special issue, I knew right away it had to be 1988. While I was watching Liz on my parents' TV, what were the preoccupations of the scholars, artists, critics, and others binging on *CTR*, paving the ground ahead of me? Do those preoccupations resemble in any way the concerns we fret over now, or are they worlds away? I was eager to find out.

## 1988: *CTR*'s version

Issues 54 through 57 of *CTR* are, in order, *Shakespeare in Canada* (Spring 1988, edited by Ann Wilson), *Collaborations: Rethinking Collective Creation* (Summer 1988, edited by Alan Filewod), *Theatre and Ethnicity* (Fall 1988, edited by Natalie Rewa), and *Critical Practice in Canada* (Winter 1988, edited by Robert Wallace).

Scanning the titles online, my first impression was commonalities: I could easily imagine all these themed issues transposed into our critical present. Our relationship to Shakespeare has recently re-entered the spotlight via, among other projects, York University's Recasting Shakespeare in Canada symposium (April 2023); the offshoot *Shaking Up Shakespeare* podcast,

---

<sup>1</sup> Elin Diamond's "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Towards a Gestic Feminist Criticism" was published in *TDR* in Spring 1988; Jill Dolan's *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* and Sue-Ellen Case's *Feminism and Theater* both came out as monographs that same year with University of Michigan Press and Routledge respectively. I'm indebted to these feminist scholars and eternally grateful for their teachings.

hosted by Marlis Schweitzer, Liam Lockhart-Rush, and Hope Van Der Merwe; and my own forthcoming book, *Women Making Shakespeare in the 21st Century*. The tradition of collective creation has shape-shifted over the years, through devising to audience participation and again to practice-as-research. Winter 2023's issue of *CTR* examines casting and race in our colonial present and is edited by Mariló Núñez, Jamie Robinson, and Marlis Schweitzer, with Yasmine Amirkhani, Liam Lockhart-Rush, and Zoe Marin. And questions about the ethics of reviewing practice have only grown more complex in the decades separating 1988 and 2024, as Indigenous, global majority, disabled, trans, and non-binary artists such as Kim Senklip Harvey and Yolanda Bonnell agitate powerfully for critical sovereignty. As I read my way through *CTR*'s 1988, what I found overwhelmingly were the seeds of today's conversations being sown, as our creative and critical communities began to grapple with the challenges, especially around equity and de-colonization, we still circle today.

The year's bookend issues, on Shakespeare and reviewing culture respectively, both take up in different ways the all-important question of who gets to decide what is 'good' theatre. *Shakespeare in Canada* begins with an introduction by Ann Wilson; she asks readers to query why productions of Shakespeare remain "monuments to the greatness of the playwright" ("Shakespeare"). Most of the articles that follow are review essays assessing recent productions, chronicling what Wilson calls "attempts to rescue Shakespeare's works from the deadliness of ... lifeless reverence" ("Shakespeare"). The productions surveyed include two *Tempests* in Toronto (for Toronto Free Theatre and Skylight Theatre, the latter starring Monique Mojica as Ariel), Guy Sprung's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Vancouver Playhouse, 1987), two works from Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan, and a handful of Shakespeares in St John's. None of the works featured come from the Stratford Festival, though the issue does include a thought-provoking piece about the material constraints of the Stratford main stage by Ric Knowles, as well as a conversation between Cecil O'Neal and John Hirsch, the Artistic Director at Stratford from 1981 to 1985.

For me, the joy of this issue lies in its critical tensions. On one hand, it thinks through Shakespeare's fraught place in the contemporary culture of a settler colony; on the other, its writers struggle at times to move past the bardolatry clung to by those for whom Shakespeare's borrowed cultural capital has

propelled careers of great privilege (including in the academy, of course). This tension is nicely captured in the contradictions that animate several of the review essays. Every review author—I note with some consternation— is male, and the majority are based in English departments. These facts do not necessarily prejudice their assessments, but they do explain method and approach. Despite their varied tones and perspectives, each article begins from the (spoken or unspoken) assumption that there is a Shakespearean source text against which we can and should measure the productions at hand; even those reviews that offer excitement over the risks taken by companies and directors ultimately praise fidelity. In what is otherwise one of the most forward-thinking pieces in the issue, for example, Mark Fortier excitedly describes René-Daniel Dubois's *Pericles* only to add, by way of a hook, "Anyone who has come expecting Shakespeare's *Pericles* is by now disconcerted. But even those who are open to adaptation and distortion begin to wonder how this will relate to Shakespeare" (13).

Paul Leonard's assessment of Richard Greenblatt's *The Tempest* offers a hallmark of this style of review. Not knowing quite what to make of Greenblatt's choices, and not knowing what to do with that not-knowing, Leonard slips quietly into 'critic knows best':

Richard Greenblatt is an accomplished director. . . . Yet this production was deeply flawed; although it seemed to delight and even enthrall the audience . . . *to me it made no sense*. Why has Prospero been introduced as a drunk? Why are the costumes of the shipwrecked courtiers so strange? Why is Caliban suddenly transformed into a rock star . . . ? The questions kept piling up, unanswered. (*The Tempest* 8; my emphasis)

From Leonard's perspective, the production should *obviously* make sense to him, and it should make sense as recognizably Shakespearean. He is an elite reader, and he has an essay to write: the production should anticipate his questions and answer them! The joy of the audience counts for little, and he gives no credit to Greenblatt for having a concept for the play that might make sense *on its own terms* (or to readers who are not academic critics). This is not to say Leonard's assessment of Skylight's *Tempest* lacks nuance or critical value; elsewhere, the article is thoughtful and insightful. But at the heart of Leonard's reading, despite his own best intentions, lie unexamined assumptions about the power relations among director, scholar-reader, and

Shakespeare (as emissary of both elite culture and colonial inheritance), as well as about the place academic criticism should occupy in that triangle.<sup>2</sup>

These same assumptions animate *Critical Practice in Canada*, the Winter 1988 issue, to which scholars and reviewers contribute essays laying out two central concerns for the future of the ecosystem. The first of these concerns can be summed up by Paul Leonard's (yes—the same person!) provocative question, "[H]ow is the theatre critic to write in postmodern culture?" ("Critical Questioning" 4).<sup>3</sup> In a pair of key introductory essays, Leonard and Ann Wilson set out what is at stake in a culture of critique that assumes that critical assessments of theatre productions are ideologically neutral and that criticism's "primary function is to pass judgement on work as either 'good' or 'bad'" (Wilson, "Deadpan" 15). Wilson firmly states that "criticism is always a political act" because in its declaration of judgment, it "inscribes a relation of power" between judged and judge. Responsible execution of critical authority, she argues, can therefore happen only when critics "acknowledge the terms" by which their cultural authority is constituted (15). Leonard, meanwhile, invokes demographic shifts in now officially multicultural Canada as he argues for the urgency of the project of critical self-awareness:

[A]s Canada becomes more genuinely multicultural, and as the social critiques of feminists, people of colour, the disabled, and the oppressed gain greater currency, it becomes difficult to maintain the illusion of homogeneity that is required to sustain confidence in metanarratives—a homogeneity implied by my use of 'we' and 'our.' ("Critical Questioning" 8)

Leonard's comments remind us that IBPOC and LGBTQ2+ artists have always called out "the illusion of homogeneity" operating in (white, mainstream) reviews of their work—though with the rise of digital cultures and social media tools, that calling out today has the capacity for significant impact,

---

<sup>2</sup> Greenblatt wrote a letter to the editor about Leonard's assessment; it appeared in issue 56 (back when *CTR* published letters!). He commented, "I don't argue that [my vision for the play] may have not been communicated clearly enough to the audience who viewed the piece. I only argue that Mr. Leonard should not presume to know the basis of my artistic intention or ideological analysis. He is not privy to that information, nor has he the right to assume it."

<sup>3</sup> I find it exciting and moving that Leonard reappears in this issue to think consciously through a question that fits so neatly his earlier, problematic assessment of Greenblatt's *The Tempest*. It reveals the hard work authors are doing in these issues as they grapple with the animating tensions of their moment.

allowing historically marginalized artists to become their own theatre's gatekeepers (and protectors).

Both these essays tend to use 'critic' and 'criticism' generally enough that the line between 'reviewer' and 'academic critic' gets fuzzy; this didn't bother me especially, since the issues they raise are relevant to both. It did, however, highlight another tension in the issue, that between academic and non-academic contributors and the nature of their concerns for arts reviewing and reporting as a career, let alone a discipline.

The "crisis of legitimation" ("Critical Questioning" 8) in reviewing culture that Leonard theorizes is also central to this issue's running concern with the slow death of reviewing traditions in print media. In a long feature called "Working through the Weeklies," Mark Czarnecki surveys recent offerings in *The Georgia Straight*, *Voir*, *Now*, *Macleans*, and the *Montreal Mirror* and charts the need to appeal to advertisers and "service" users (37), which crowds out more serious, longer, or nuanced critique. While several of the academic contributors to this issue (rightly) worry about theoretical and ideological self-awareness among their peers, contributors from the professional reviewing community fear the literal end of the line for anything they might have to write in the future, theoretically rigorous or not. As I worked through the issue's pieces on best practices in (and the many pitfalls of!) reviewing for radio, I found myself wishing I could teleport everyone into the early 2010s, when theatre critics could become rock stars thanks to their blogs, and when nobody had yet to beg their nieces to help them figure out *TikTok*.

Natalie Rewa's *Theatre and Ethnicity* would have been at press when Canada's Multiculturalism Act received royal assent. I found it to be the most compelling and forward looking of the four issues here, largely because it is the most attuned to questions of both cultural materialism and intercultural collaboration. It's also effectively diverse. Leading the issue (as usual) are a pair of scene-setting essays, this time not from academics but (female!!) culture workers: Carol Off (then a current affairs correspondent for the CBC) and Jini Stolk (then Executive Director of Toronto Theatre Alliance). Off leads with a hot take on one of the most challenging issues facing IBPOC artists in the wake of 'official' multiculturalism—figuring out how to secure funding under a patronage model that collects artists of colour under 'heritage' and everyone else under 'the arts.' Off notes that one of the ironic effects of the

multicultural rise in mid-1980s Canada was the sidelining of work by 'ethnic' companies that queried or experimented with the ideas animating official multiculturalism (7). Beverly Yhap of Cahoots, cited by Off, reveals the Catch-22 neatly: a pair of shows Cahoots sought to stage from China "didn't clearly foster government goals of bridging communities" and thus were ineligible for Heritage support; meanwhile, as the play was Chinese in origin, the Canada Council looked away. Nail in coffin: because Cahoots already received operating funds from the Ontario and Toronto Arts Councils, those funding pathways were closed too (Off 7).

Stolk, meanwhile, examines the future of non-traditional casting in Toronto in her anchor article, making a nuanced case for the need for much more open and equitable casting practices in the city. As she notes, basic equity is at stake, but so is money, as well as community representation. "Artists who are calling for a colour-blind stage have to answer to those who believe they have a responsibility to represent each playwright's vision in its purest form," she writes, especially given that companies could hardly afford to alienate their subscriber bases in what were then post-Black Monday economic times (10).<sup>4</sup> Yet community also offers ethical considerations for Stolk: "If theatre is to remain relevant and maintain an audience, we must find new ways to reach out to the community" that has yet to see itself reflected onstage, or in traditional subscriber bases (10).

The remainder of this issue features examinations of a huge range of projects happening across the country and includes pieces on two Indigenous-settler collaborations (between Headlines Theatre and Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en Tribal Council, by Virginia Cooke, and between the St John's Resource Centre for the Arts and Innu from Labrador, by Terry Goldie), two pieces on the state of Black theatre in Canada, and several pieces featuring Asian artists, including Beverly Yhap of Cahoots reporting on the challenges of making non-white theatre in a city where so few artists of colour are being trained up and given regular opportunities to shine and hone their craft (25, 27). "How much apprenticeship is enough?" Yhap asks rhetorically; it's a question that theatres like Stratford and Shaw are, despite strides, still dodging today.

---

<sup>4</sup> On Monday, 19 October 1987, global stock markets crashed, losing an estimated US\$1.7 trillion. See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_Monday\\_\(1987\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Monday_(1987)).

Summer 1988's special issue on collective creation also speaks to its multicultural moment but in quite different ways to *Theatre and Ethnicity*. There are broadly two strands of collaborative practice featured here: one is auteur-driven work, largely by Quebecers, including Robert Lepage and Michael Levine, in which aesthetics come first; the other is community-based collective creation, unabashedly populist (such as R. Murray Schafer's *The Greatest Show* in Peterborough), though often led by an impresario. Implicit throughout the issue are some troubling but unspoken binaries: Quebec versus 'everywhere else'; collectively built theatre as a form of new nationalism versus the dregs of a top-down, colonial-era theatre 'for' the public good; collective creation versus artistic collaboration. As Filewod notes in his introductory editorial:

[A]s the collective methodology [of the 1970s national theatre heyday] increasingly displaces the weight of creative responsibility from the actor/writer to the director and designer, the term ['collective creation'] gives way to a widespread preference to describe *new work as collaborative*. This may indicate a step forward for many who find that mention of collective creation evokes the tradition of the actor-created text, a principle that has been superseded in many of the collaborations documented in this issue. At times, however, I sense a denial of the past, as if we are slightly embarrassed by the air of folksy nationalism that clings to our memories of the collective creations of the 70s. (my emphasis)

The tension between Canadian theatre "then" and "theatrical difference" now (Wallace) played out across the issue, for me, as an outsized lauding of new work from Quebec in the wake of (as Filewod puts it) mild embarrassment at everything else. Sadly, no IBPOC or Indigenous work appears in the issue, and only one feminist show (the Very Best Bad Girls' *The Last Will and Testament of Lolita*)—a far cry from late 1980s New York and the heyday of collective creation at the WOW Café, I couldn't help thinking to myself. Maybe some of that energy would have helped to put the 'sophisticated auteur' versus 'folksy nationalist' binary in this issue into a bit more perspective.

In 1988, I could not have imagined the scholar I would become; all I could do was gawp at the talent on my TV and dream. While I've taken the critical measure here of 1988's worth of *CTRs*, I want to end by thanking every contributor to every one of these issues, living or not, for the critical paths

they forged ahead of me—of us. Gloriously flawed, their work forms the shoulders on which we stand today. The questions they explore and the contradictions they trouble in these pages laid crucial groundwork for the ideas we continue to work today.

## References

- "Black Monday (1987)." Wikipedia, last updated 24 September 2024, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_Monday\\_\(1987\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Monday_(1987)). Case, Sue Ellen. *Feminism and Theater*, Methuen, 1988.
- Cooke, Virginia. "Our Footprints across Canada." *CTR* 56 (Fall 1988): 44–47. [doi.org/10.3138/ctr.56.011](https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.56.011).
- Czarnecki, Mark. "Working through the Weeklies." *CTR* 57 (Winter 1988): 33–40. [doi.org/10.3138/ctr.57.008](https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.57.008). Diamond, Elin. "Brechtian Theory Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism." *TDR* 32.1 (1988): 82–94.
- Dolan, Jill. *The Feminist Spectator As Critic*. U of Michigan P, 1988.
- Filewod, Alan. "Beyond Collective Creation." *CTR* 55 (Summer 1988): 3. [doi.org/10.3138/ctr.55.fm](https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.55.fm).
- Fortier, Mark. "This Is, and Is Not, Shakespeare: *Pericles Self Destructs in Toronto*." *CTR* 54 (Spring 1988): 13–17. [doi.org/10.3138/ctr.54.003](https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.54.003).
- Goldie, Terry. "Our Land ... Our Play?" *CTR* 56 (Fall 1988): 48–50. [doi.org/10.3138/ctr.56.012](https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.56.012).
- Greenblatt, Richard. "I Feel I Must Respond ..." 3 June 1988. *CTR* 56 (Fall 1988): 4. Letter to the editor. Knowles, Richard Paul. "Shakespeare at Stratford: The Legacy of the Festival Stage." *CTR* 54 (Spring 1988): 39–45. [doi.org/10.3138/ctr.54.008](https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.54.008).
- Leonard, Paul. "Critical Questioning." *CTR* 57 (Winter 1988): 4–10. [doi.org/10.3138/ctr.57.001](https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.57.001).
- . "The *Tempest* x 2 in Toronto." *CTR* 54 (Spring 1988): 7–12. [doi.org/10.3138/ctr.54.002](https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.54.002).
- Off, Carol. "The Situation Heritage or Cultural Evolution: Federal Policy on Multiculturalism and the Arts." *CTR* 56 (Fall 1988): 5–8. [doi.org/10.3138/ctr.56.001](https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.56.001).
- O'Neal, Cecil, and John Hirsch. "Directing Shakespeare." *CTR* 54 (Spring 1988): 46–51. [doi.org/10.3138/ctr.54.009](https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.54.009). Rewa, Natalie. "Theatre and Ethnicity." *CTR* 56 (Fall 1988): 3. [doi.org/10.3138/ctr.56.fm](https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.56.fm).
- Solga, Kim. *Women Making Shakespeare in the 21st Century*. Cambridge Elements, 2024.

- Stolk, Jini. "Non-Traditional Casting: Its Future in Toronto." *CTR* 56 (Fall 1988): 9–11. doi.org/10.3138/ctr.56.002. Taylor, Carolyn. *I Have Nothing*. Crave, 2023.
- Wallace, Robert. "Towards an Understanding of Theatrical Difference." *CTR* 55 (Summer 1988): 5–14. doi.org/10.3138/ctr.55.001.
- Wilson, Ann. "Deadpan." *CTR* 57 (Winter 1988): 11–16. doi.org/10.3138/ctr.57.002.
- . "Shakespeare in Canada." *CTR* 54 (Spring 1988): 3. doi.org/10.3138/ctr.54.fm.
- Yhap, Beverley. "On Their Own Terms." *CTR* 56 (Fall 1988): 25–30. doi.org/10.3138/ctr.56.007.