

Hourglasses and Hammers: A Reflection on Forty Years of Interculturalism in *Canadian Theatre Review*

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Winter 2005. I had just wrapped up work on the Prague–Toronto–Manitoulin Theatre Project (PTMTP), which had brought together participants from the University of Toronto and DAMU, a theatre conservatory in Prague, Czech Republic. That year, the ensemble had been joined by another partner, the Debajehmujig Theatre Group, based on the Wikwemikong Unceded Territory on Manitoulin Island in Ontario. The late playwright Daniel David Moses had also joined the project as its poet and lyricist. The experience was both transformative and challenging. It occurred to me that I might unpack it in the PhD program I'd just started at what was then the Drama Centre at the University of Toronto. Someone pointed me toward French theatre scholar Patrice Pavis's 1996 edited collection, *The Intercultural Performance Reader*. The book's chapters mostly explored the Eastern forays of famous Western directors, which wasn't useful, but what was useful was the new term Pavis used to organize the discussion: 'interculturalism.'

Thinking 'interculturally' gave me a fresh way to think about the PTMTP. I wrote a paper for my graduate dramaturgy class analyzing the "dramaturgy of intercultural meeting." I recently re-read it, with the benefit of two decades of further thinking, and I could see how this new concept was clarifying. I could also see how it completely turned my attention away from any problems. A footnote eight pages into the paper reads: "[T]he choice to set aside post-colonial issues in a European/Canadian/First-Nations collaboration is itself politically charged." Back then, I could still imagine that the European co-directors of the PTMTP could make a "choice" to "set aside" something called "post-colonial issues." The next year, in 2006, I participated

in the PTMTP again, this time as an assistant director. Would this new source of knowledge help me steward the creative and ethical challenges of the rehearsal room?

Anchoring interculturalism

Summer 1982. *Canadian Theatre Review* (*CTR*) founding editor Don Rubin includes the text of a lecture given by Richard Schechner in Toronto called “The Performer: Training Interculturally” in *CTR* 35, which was on the theme of acting training. Schechner’s text, which marks one of the first appearances of the term in *CTR*, offers a wide taxonomy of global practices, touching on Noh, Kathakali dance, and European auteur directors. Reading it now, it’s hard to process statements such as “We acquire pan-human information at the level of world culture” (38). And yet the text does deliver on Rubin’s editorial promise for the issue, which set out to question the “traditions” of theatre training. As editor, Rubin was responding to a changing landscape for theatre education: actor training programs were popping up all over the country, including the National Theatre School, which was trying to find its footing. When Schechner used other global traditions to interrogate what training was for, or whether we ought to be committed to standardized forms and styles, yes, he engaged in some romanticizing of global practices, but he also unsettled the assumptions that were quickly getting baked into Canadian training programs.

If we take the pages of *CTR* as a barometer, Schechner’s interculturalism drifted right on by Canadian theatre scholarship at the time. But perhaps because of the term’s sheer elasticity, it eventually went on to become an orienting concept in the broad effort to shift away from the colonialist and nationalistic trappings of early Canadian theatre scholarship.¹ It took nearly another decade for inter-culturalism to get another mention in *CTR*, in a short 1990 opinion piece by Svetlana Zylín, then Artistic Director of Playwrights Workshop Montreal (*CTR* 63). Zylín, lamenting the withdrawal of government funding for theatre in the 1980s, noted theatre’s value in promoting “intercultural understanding and harmony” (39).

¹ It is worth remembering that for nearly two decades of *CTR*’s history, the term ‘indigenous theatre’ (lower case) did not describe Indigenous theatre (upper case) but an ‘authentically’ ‘Canadian’ theatre discrete from British and American practice.

It is fitting that Zylín followed Schechner in using this term, given that she was a member of the generation of post-war European immigrants to Canada who, despite all the talk of need for an 'indigenous' Canadian theatre, were bringing different energy, ideas, and ways of working to rehearsal halls and classrooms across the country. Joined by other immigrant artists from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, and dovetailing with a growing solidarity among Indigenous artists, this alliance of communities together lobbied for a cultural ecosystem in Canada that was more diverse than the anglo and franco repertoires. Natalie Rewa curated a discussion of the shift in an important *CTR* issue titled *Ethnicity* in 1988, in which Beverly Yhap historicized the moment:

Twenty years ago, the challenge was getting out from under a colonial mentality, creating an indigenous theatre, a Canadian theatre. It's still the same; only now the players are a motley group burning with the fervour to perform work that recognizes the new Canadian reality. That reality, a coming of age by communities—immigrant, native—is what this second generation of theatre artists is all about. ("On Their Own" 30)

Yhap's eloquent statement seems prescient in retrospect, but she was also describing an evolution that was well under way. What she envisioned for her own company, Cahoots Theatre Projects, was certainly not Schechner's interculturalism, a 'West and the Rest' paradigm within which Western artists and scholars would look to Eastern aesthetics for renewal (Lo and Gilbert 32). Interculturalism in Canada would instead trade in the multicultural language of the moment, manifest in Zylín's "intercultural understanding and harmony." To some extent, interculturalism would continue to be wielded as what Jill Dolan called a "utopian performative" (5), exemplified in phrases such as "intercultural bridge" (Levin 55) and "intercultural connections, learning, and collaboration" (Afolabi 39), or in its use in the mandates of organizations that use explicit intercultural language such as Cahoots (Yhap, "Performing" 6), Pangea Arts (Specht 44), and Urban Ink (Roberts and Roberts 73).

At the same time, the pages of *CTR* also display a constant skepticism of intercultural utopias, evident in more moderated phrases such as "intercultural dialogue" (Guevara 49), "intercultural encounter" (Nigam 17), "intercultural exchange" (Defraeye 92), and "intercultural exploration"

(Dénommé-Welch and Magowan 55). This conceived of interculturalism as a cultural process rather than a guaranteed emancipatory outcome. Influential in effecting that shift was Ric Knowles, *CTR* editor-in-chief from 2004 to 2011. Starting with his critiques of Robert Lepage's highly visible productions, and in prolific writing for more than a decade thereafter, Knowles tackled the cascading problems with working interculturality: for example the "fuzzy universalism" of some work on the international festival circuit (*Reading* 89), the "intercultural promiscuity" of the theatre anthropologists ("Inter/Cultural/Performance" 4), or the ways we can work to strengthen "fragile intercultural solidarities" among an ecology of minority communities ("Inter/Cultural/ Performance" 3). Knowles curated a pivotal *CTR* issue titled *Intercultural Performance* in 2009, which might be the high watermark for the term's use in Canadian theatre discourse. In that issue and in his multiple books on the subject, Knowles answered the older top down models of interculturalism with a call for a grassroots version built from below (*Theatre* 59). Working upward would come to mean anchoring interculturalism in creative-scholarly praxis, which Knowles both models and theorizes, emerging from his artistic collaborations with artists such as Monique Mojica, Nina Lee Aquino, and the late Majdi Bou Matar. These fruitful collaborations pursued a grounded interculturalism, better suited to the task of renegotiating the terms of engagement in a country founded on acts of genocide and theft, formed by successive waves of colonizers and interweaving diasporas, eclectic in its knowledges and traditions.

Hourglasses and hammers

Spring 2015. A full-circle moment. I'm at the University of Ottawa, gathered at the Canadian Association for Theatre Research annual conference for a keynote delivered by Patrice Pavis. I'd finished that PhD about the PTMTP, the one that Pavis's writing in the 1990s had helped me imagine. I'd become a faculty member at the University of Toronto, teaching about interculturalism and globalization, and was working on the book that would become *Staging Strangers*. I'd been doing my own 'grassroots' interculturalism, writing out of my relationships to the Debajehmujig Storytellers (as they'd been renamed) and projects by the visionary director Mumbi Tindyebwa Otu. At the conference, on 31 May 2015, Pavis delivered a keynote in French, which I was able to follow with a printed English translation. He reflected on his experience as a visiting professor in Korea, theorizing multiple modes of

performance from traditional plays to K-pop. But I recall the keynote feeling like an intercultural collision itself, palpably exposing the difference between European and Canadian modes of intercultural thinking. I was struck at the time by how Pavis still positioned himself as the locus of meaning, his analysis oriented toward making Korean performance traditions 'legible' to a presumably unfamiliar Western audience. It used his own 'hourglass model' from the early 1990s in which intercultural spectatorship comprises a source (or 'foreign') culture at one end, a 'target culture' at the other end, with the flowing sand of the 'hourglass' representing cultural representation going through various filters on the way (Pavis). That model had been critiqued, some noting the need for the hourglass to be "turned upside-down" (Lo and Gilbert 42), so I asked a question—that-was-really-a-comment because I wanted to know what Pavis thought of how intercultural praxis had evolved in Canada. I remember my question-comment flopping. When writing this piece, I looked up my notes from the keynote, and I'd written only one line: "When you only have a hammer, everything looks like a nail."

These days, the hourglass needs more than flipping. The cultural ruptures we've experienced since—anti-Black, Asian, and Indigenous violence; callouts highlighting institutional paralysis; revelations about long-standing abuses of power in the rehearsal room, to name only a few—cry out for new languages and knowledges. In recent *CTR* issues—*Equity in Theatre* (CTR165), *emPowering Theatre* (CTR170), *Time's Up* (CTR180), *Theatre after the Explosion* (CTR186), or (pause) *A Pandemic Time Capsule* (CTR188)—intercultural language gives way to the language of race and racialization.² The tone of the writing in these issues also feels rawer, a kind of no-bullshit plainness in naming problems head-on (the very problems I'd suggested could be "set aside" in that graduate paper).

Fifteen years ago, Josette Féral asked in *CTR's Intercultural Performance* issue, "Does interculturalism still have a true meaning? Can it still help us think about the phenomenon it is supposed to account for? What does it tell us about the current state of artistic practices?" (7). To refresh Féral's

² The word 'intercultural' does not appear in the *CTR* issue *Actor Training in a Changing Landscape* (CTR 160), and it's used only twice in *emPowering Theatre* (CTR 170). In (pause) *A Pandemic Time Capsule* (CTR 188), 'intercultural' is used twice, but 'race/racial' appears twenty times; in *Time's Up* (CTR 180), 'intercultural' appears zero times, and 'race/racial' eight times; in *Casting and Race* (CTR 193), 'intercultural' appears zero times, and 'race/racial' forty-five times.

questions for today: Has the explanatory potential of interculturalism waned? Does it provide a clarifying lens on the politics of performance, or does it now unhelpfully blur our focus? Might interculturalism have couched issues of race in technical language to make discussing race more comfortable for white scholars and educators? Was interculturalism ever up to the task of unsettling the explanatory position of white privilege? When Jill Carter explains that the absence of “bone deep change” in Canadian theatre has necessitated acts of Indigenous “refusal” (8), or when Yolanda Bonnell asks that Indigenous work receive more informed criticism or else critics should just stay away altogether, I do not think they are looking for tweaks to ‘intercultural exchange.’ These are declarations that our institutions and practices continue to fall short and that until such time as we can do better, some must define their own separate space, recalling the title of Yhap’s 1990 essay, “On Their Own Terms.”

Allowing time, admitting knowledges

Winter 2024. I’ve been through a year of loss, losing both parents within a year of one another, as well as two dear friends and colleagues. Inevitably, this reflection, like everything for me at the moment, became personal, the memories and relationships forcefully pushing their way into view. I kept thinking of Daniel David Moses especially. I spent scores of hours with him watching rehearsals of the PTMTP’s devised show, first in Toronto, then in Prague, then up on Manitoulin Island. Sitting in the dark in the house seats, we witnessed some unfortunate shortcuts in the work, at times some cheap jokes based on ugly ideas. There were side conversations. I listened and learned. He and I and some others conspired to push for some small changes. One time, we got particularly uncomfortable about a body-shaming joke that came up in an improvisation and quickly got included in the show. A group of us stayed after to work out how to restage it as a scene that would expose the historical baggage of racialized standards of beauty. The directors accepted the changed scene, although, truth be told, it was probably only because we’d made it funnier rather than kinder. It was remarkable how little time it took us that day to open a small window through which the audience might glimpse a different way of knowing.



Figure 1: Daniel David Moses and Barry Freeman at Studio Ypsilon Café, Prague, Czechia, in 2006. Photo by Leah Takata, used with permission.

It was no revolution. The PTMTP had done a lot of good but had run its course. Daniel David knew it, though at the time I wasn't sure he knew that I knew it. One morning in Prague, I met him for a coffee at the theatre's café, both of us being early risers. I was especially ornery that day about all the compromises of the work, and I remember unloading my frustrations on the poor man. Daniel David, whom we tragically lost in 2020, was hilarious and could be energetic and effusive, but he could also sit with perfect comfort in silence for long stretches, bringing the deep attention of a poet. That morning, he listened to me intently, smiling in a knowing way, commiserating a little. But what left an indelible impression on me was the grace with which he received my rant, which had been naïve in the sense that what I was complaining about was already so well known to him. Someone snapped a

photo. For me, what Knowles earlier called “interculturalism from below” comprises a patchwork quilt of such moments.

That interculturalism has had a conceptual presence across thirty years of *CTR* suggests that it was useful in making Canadian theatre wider. It did so by adapting itself into a grounded, materialist praxis proceeding from good relations. Today, we are rightly talking more about how good relations must involve addressing harms and revisiting the lines between artistic ‘risk’ and personal ‘safety’ for everyone. In one of my favourite pieces of writing ever to be published in *CTR*, Nikki Shaffeeullah’s “Safety and Justice in Our Artistic Spaces,” Shaffeeullah explored “how people and organizations can position themselves to minimize harm, hold themselves accountable when harm is done, and be open to shifts in processes and culture that create new frameworks for safe, generative, and innovative creativity” (9). One of her pragmatic suggestions is to “allow time” for things to surface organically. Funny, all these years, and it only occurs to me now that the ‘hourglass’ of Pavis’s model was accidentally a metaphor for limited time: that if we don’t devote enough time to understand one another and how we might best work together, we should almost expect to fail. Shaffeeullah’s piece is continuous with the “collaborative mode” Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert wished for interculturalism twenty years earlier (39), but in drawing wisdom from transformative justice and abolitionist frameworks, she models how we may learn from the struggles of Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities. If Canadian theatre manages to be wider still in the future, it will owe the change to its openness to other knowledges, not decontextualized “pan-human information,” but knowledges tethered to the lives and bodies of everyone at the table.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my students in THRB21 Intercultural and Global Theatre at the University of Toronto Scarborough in Winter 2024, who helped me think through the possibilities and limitations of this term today.

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