

The Wrong Side of History, or How We Got It Wrong

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It is now more than twenty years since I was an editor of *Canadian Theatre Review* (*CTR*), and fifty since I started on the journal as a student editorial assistant in its first years. One way or another, *CTR* was part of my life for five decades. For that reason, I find it hard to write about it. *CTR* wove many threads through my life, so that recalling my editorial experience becomes a kind of autotherapy. I have an ambivalent relationship to that history. In my retirement downsizing, I ditched all my issues of the journal, and I never kept a list of the issues I edited. I'm not even sure how many issues I produced. I have no archive to draw on as I write this.

When I think of my first years as an editor, I recall the stress of the assistant professor grind toward tenure, of evenings lost to writing and weekends lost to *CTR* manuscript sessions (in the pre-digital age, when articles were typed, cut, and pasted). And as a theatre professor, I was often involved in rehearsals at night. I have stress-embodied memories of moments when a *CTR* issue deadline, a production tech week, and end-of-term marking (ninety theatre history essays and no teaching assistant) converged. I survived it, but my then marriage didn't.

The editors of this issue have asked for articles that offer critical perspectives on *CTR*'s history and significance. I can only do that implicitly, by writing about how I came to *CTR*, why it became so important in my life, and why I walked away from it.

It is only later in a life that we can start to unpick the threads that have formed it and name particular moments and people who were formative. When I do that, I go back to Don Rubin, who probably, albeit unknowingly, had the most profound influence on the future I look back on. If I am to reflect on

my period as an editor, I have to start with Don and the path that he opened up for me. Or paths, rather. Because Don spun me in two directions that later converged when I went to grad school, and that became the pediments of my research and teaching.

I met Don in 1971, in my first week of university in the theatre program at York. I had been accepted into the drama studies stream (as opposed to performance) because when my audition notice came, I was living in Ottawa and had no way of getting to Toronto. I was accepted into the theatre theory stream by default. I was the first person in my family to go to university and was so naïve that I didn't understand that tuition had to be paid. My entire experience of theatre had been high school musicals and theatre arts classes.

When I received my course list, I saw that I had only one theatre class, About Acting, a course for rejected actor wannabees who sat in a lecture hall to hear about acting from an American professor who clutched his groin and told us that acting comes from the balls. But I saw that there was a second-year course on Drama and Social Thought, admission by permission. The professor was Don Rubin, and the secretary told me, Go ask him. I did, and he said yes on the spot and opened a part of my brain that I didn't know existed. In my first midterm, I scored a perfect 100 per cent. (Yes, I did know who threw a flaming lamp across a room.) And suddenly, drama studies seemed very, very cool. (It still does. Another part of my brain opened the next year when I took Mavor Moore's course on Canadian theatre history.)

Memory falters, but it must have been the next year that I took Don's criticism workshop. That was the year he, Joe Green, and Ross Stuart founded *CTR*. In that course, I met dazzling minds, all drawn to the mystique of the critic in the aisle seat, racing out to meet a deadline. (Ten years later, I would be doing just that as a reviewer for CBC Radio—dashing home to write a review, grab four hours of sleep, and broadcast live from the studio at 6 a.m.)

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Don taught us that criticism was both a craft and a writerly discipline. We read the (male) greats: Lessing, Shaw, Bentley, Clurman, and, for me the most

influential, Brustein. (Don is an American immigrant, and his cultural formation was very much New York and New England.) He taught us to write with economy and voice and to think succinctly. Every week, there would be a play to attend and a review to read in class. And that was a heady year in Toronto theatre. Toronto Workshop Productions' masterful *Ten Lost Years* and NDWT's stunning production of *Sticks and Stones* stand out. Don also brought in speakers: Richard Schechner, Joe Chaiken, Michael Kirby. We had a direct line to the (male) New York avant-garde.

This was the mix that spawned *CTR*. A number of factors were in play: Don's zeal for his adopted country, the career ambitions of junior professors reaching for tenure, and the dismal state of drama criticism in Canadian journalism. There was a cultural revolution under way, and the critical press was missing it, with two exceptions: Urjo Kareda in the *Toronto Star*, and Jamie Portman at Canadian Press. Don envisioned a Canadian version of *TDR* (*The Drama Review*) that would put Canadian theatre and drama on the world stage.

In *CTR*'s second year, I was one of a small team of editorial assistants. This was a practicum course, and we were willing dogs-bodies. We collated and proofread, hung around the office, and spoke of weighty matters. Three of us were charged with gathering and editing the first volume of what turned into the *Canada on Stage* series, attempting to document every professional production in Canada in 1974. And in that sentence is the worm that to my mind compounded a fundamental error over time to the point when I came to realize that we had it all wrong.

That is my segue to the second path that Don opened for me, which would later converge with the first to bring me back to *CTR*. In my third year, I won a summer scholarship that would allow me to travel on a theatre-related adventure. (The downside: it meant that I didn't have a summer job to earn tuition and living costs for the next year.) That was the summer of Opportunities for Youth, a federal program that allowed you to apply for project funding in the arts or community service and would fund it at minimum wage plus 10 per cent for overhead. Theatre groups mushroomed across the country, and I was asked to join a group of dance friends as stage manager for a folk ballet troupe to tour Newfoundland. One of the group told me there was a tradition of folk theatre there, and I decided that I would

investigate that. When I mentioned this to Don, he said he had just been to St. John's and met a guy named Chris Brookes, and I should look him up.

Sometimes, a sentence changes a life. One day in St. John's, I attended a meeting of arts groups that would be touring that summer, and there I met Chris. We chatted amiably—he was an extremely charismatic and empathic person who couldn't handle the number of people who fell for him—and after I dropped the Brecht bomb, he told me he was heading for the mining town of Buchans in the centre of the island to create a show, and would I like to come along? I went along, I became a Mummer, and I spent the next year there learning about and making community-based activist theatre.

When I returned to academia, I had a mission to bring this work—this vast tradition of non-canonical, non-professional work (or as my friend Robin Whittaker taught me, *non-professionalized* work)—into critical discourse. I came to realize, after meeting George Luscombe, that professionalism is just an economic concept and that all theatre, even mumming, entails work and disciplinarity. Out of that came my PhD and my first book. I became less interested in literary drama and more in the performances that people create together. During my PhD, I had been reviewing theatre for the CBC, becoming increasingly aware of the growing divergence (to my mind) between the literary drama and the theatrical languages of popular theatre. I was getting tired of brilliant dramatic stylists (of whom there were many) who had nothing to say beyond their own life stories or who (in words said to me by one eminent playwright) endeavoured to “psychoanalyze society.”

Over the years, I contributed to *CTR* occasionally, but it was in the back of my mind for a decade or so, until one day I had a call from Robert Wallace, who had succeeded Don Rubin as editor, inviting me to guest-edit an issue (I can't remember if this was before or after I became book review editor, but it was shortly after I started my new job at the University of Guelph).

Under Wallace, the focus of the journal had begun to shift focus from drama and dramaturgy to theatrical practice, paying more attention to who was making theatre, why, and for whom. Wallace moved it to an engagement with critical discourse and cultural diversity and by doing so ensured that *CTR* had relevance and purpose beyond the narrow world of 'Canadian theatre' as it had been understood in 1974. (In my time, we continued to expand the

boundaries of discipline and culture, and more and more we published academic critics. I think we were coming to understand that our main readership was in the classroom rather than the theatre.)

Four issues a year was a tough slog, so having a guest editor could alleviate the burden. I was excited and, to be frank, honoured by Wallace's invitation. At that time, I was very involved with a network we called the Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance, a loose affinity of collective, semi-professional, and community-based activists. The bootstrap practices of political intervention theatre became the subject of my premiere issue.

That issue seemed to work, and when Wallace decided to let *CTR* go, he invited me to take it on. At least, that's how I remember it. He had transformed the journal and in doing so ensured its continuity. He reformatted it to its present size and negotiated its acquisition by University of Toronto Press (UTP), which added *CTR* to its stable of journals and gave it financial stability. Funding from the Canada Council seemed to be secure, because federal bicultural policy necessitated that there be an anglophone journal and a Québécois(e) journal in every field. In the *realpolitik* of Canadian cultural funding, *CTR* had to exist so that *JEU: Cahiers de Théâtre* could exist. For a period, I edited on my own, then jointly with Natalie Rewa. At some point, I wanted to step back, and in time, Natalie did as well, at which point we brought *CTR* back to Guelph under an editorial team structure.

Editing *CTR* was a thrill, but the excitement for me was more in the work of production than in the dissemination of content. My memory is that when I was editor, I was always on the phone and writing letters, reading submissions, and copy-editing in three-month cycles. The most rewarding times were the layout sessions in the days before digital publication. I would drive to Toronto to spend a day, sometimes two, at UTP with the gifted layout artist Beth Earl Rose (that was when publishers employed layout artists). The work of shaping the pages, placing images, sizing text, and producing galleys, of physically producing the journal page by page, was a joy.

So, where were we wrong?

Despite our embrace of new theatrical practices and new generations of theatremakers, *CTR* remained locked into the nation-building assumption

that theatre matters because it produces playwrights, and playwrights matter because they create nation-proving drama, or because they have a particular talent for exposing human relations. In the logic of *CTR* in its early days, theatre matters because it produces a national singularity, 'the Canadian playwright,' which had been *CTR*'s questing beast from the start.

After a lifetime of working with oral histories, I am very aware that memory is fallible. I first learned this when Chris Brooks wrote *A Public Nuisance*, his memoir of the Mummers Troupe, in which he included an anecdote about me. I had, in his telling, taken a shift on a St. John's garbage truck as research for a play. I told him after I read it that he was mistaken, that I had done no such thing. He was adamant; he had a vivid memory of me bringing that story to a rehearsal. We were both alert, intelligent, and sentient, but one of us was wrong. To this day, I don't know which. I say this to frame the moment that I felt things start to slip, while I was an associate editor. It was sometime in the mid 1980s, and we were having an editorial meeting to plan the next cycle of thematic issues. There were, I think, three or four people around the table. I proposed an issue on 'Native' theatre (that was the vocabulary of the days of the Meech Lake Accord). There was a pause, and the decision was rendered: too soon.

Too soon? We eventually did an issue on Native theatre a few years later, guest-edited by Monique Mojica, to whom we gave an iron-clad guarantee that we would publish whatever she gave us without editorial interference (which led to a phone call from a furious Tomson Highway, who threatened to picket my office unless I pulled an article that critiqued one of his plays from an Indigenous woman's perspective. I said in response that I wasn't going to be the white man who censored an Indigenous woman.). But by that time, it was too late.

Too soon? This was *CTR*'s major failing: we edified settler national culture while children were dying in residential schools and disappearing into unmarked graves. *CTR* had begun as a response to the 'colonization' of theatre in Canada by British and American influences (and for Rubin, that so-called colonialism was manifest in his *bête noire*, the Stratford Festival). The rhetoric of colonialism was everywhere in the 1970s and 1980s, but for the

most part, it reiterated the trope that colonialism was fundamentally a cultural issue that could be rectified by imposing content quotas or (as was the case of GCTC in its early years) citizenship employment restrictions.

We had no clue what colonialism really was, and how deeply immersed in it we were, as its agents. In my time—I think it may be different now—*CTR* was on the wrong side of history, trying to shore up a master narrative of settler nationalism by expanding its boundaries of inclusivity, when we should have been tearing down that narrative. Our mission to document Canadian theatre, I tell my younger self fifty years later, should start with eliminating the very concept. I have written elsewhere that the phrase ‘Canadian theatre’ conjoins two historically unstable terms. By dismantling them, we expose the cultural facade of an ongoing and violent colonial project. When we do that, we start to question the journal’s commitment to ‘professional theatre’ and to canonicity. Every editor of the journal since its inception has curated important playscripts, and it is possible that was what kept *CTR* going when it faltered.

The fundamental error that I began to apprehend in 1974, as I co-edited the first volume of what would morph into the *Canada on Stage* series, was thinking that we could quantify the unquantifiable. We could do that only by a process of reduction that redefined ‘theatre’ as what we could identify and capture. The object of the project was to document every theatrical production in a given year, but in the end, it could only document those productions it could trace, invariably ‘professional’ and only in English or French. I came to realize that these amounted to a very small sample of the actual theatre culture, and the project’s priorities were embedded in the nation-building myth of professionalism and canonicity. From its beginnings, *CTR* was an instrument of quantification. We were, unknowingly, the cultural accountants of colonial genocide

That may seem extreme, but it has taken me a lifetime to understand the violence of settler colonialism and the role theatre and criticism have played in it. I wish I had seen that more clearly when I was editing *CTR*.