

It's Not You, but It's Not Me Either

Kenneth T. Williams

I haven't had a Facebook profile since the first phlegmy coughs of the COVID-19 pandemic, but if I still did, my relationship status with *CTR* would read "It's Complicated." I hadn't really thought about it for many years. There are some things in it with my name on it, but I honestly can't tell you which things and when.¹ It's been a while. I know. It's my fault because I haven't bothered to call or pick up an issue in quite some time. However, after reading the roundtable piece reflecting on *CTR*'s history of publishing play scripts, I feel compelled to share some of my thoughts on it.

True story. This was around 2009 or so. I was in a bar in Saskatoon called Lydia's. It's not there anymore, but it was a great place for live music. The crowd was usually really chill and there to have fun. I was in the washroom and some other patron had taken offence at my T-shirt. "How would you like it if I wore my white power theatre T-shirt?" he barked at me. I'd had a few drinks at this point and couldn't come up with anything wittier than "you mean, like, Shakespeare?" I know, sad, really sad. Not my best, but again, I was in a bar, in the washroom, and I was being accosted for daring to wear my Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company T-shirt, which was racist according to the white dude washing his hands.

This incident wasn't totally out of the blue. The idea of the Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company (SNTC) was born during the making of the movie *Big Bear* in the late 1990s. During the production, Gordon Tootoosis, Tantoo Cardinal, Kenneth Charlette, and Donna Heimbecker saw a need for an Indigenous-centred theatre company that could provide theatre training in

¹ Editors note: Williams was one of the playwrights featured in the roundtable "Playwriting in the New Saskatchewan: A Round-table Discussion That Didn't Really Happen," which appeared in *CTR* 154 (Spring 2013) focusing on "The New Saskatchewan."

Saskatchewan for Indigenous youth. In 1999, SNTC became a reality and moved into an old department store on 22nd Street. Its creation wasn't universally celebrated. Many a caller to radio talk shows expressed dismay that such a theatre was needed. We already have a theatre, the Persephone, what's wrong with that? The funniest comment for me was, "Do we need a theatre for every group? When are we opening a Norwegian theatre?"

I am not making this up!

Diorama, an image frozen in time reflecting a culture that has disappeared. It's nice to be noticed then catalogued. We were here once and we often told stories. Thank you for recognizing that it could be considered theatre. Yes, I know I don't look anything like the diorama, especially the clothes, but I am wearing a T-shirt. I am trying to be helpful because who has time to tan a buffalo hide anymore? It's all the more difficult since you turned my peoples' hunting grounds into national parks. Sorry, I don't mean "you" personally, but the people who looked like you. Like, a lot like you. I try to feel your pain. If I don't look, act, or try to represent the mannequins in the diorama, how are you able to know what Indigenous theatre looks like, how it acts, or what it represents? Thanks for stopping by. As a reviewer, I know you didn't pay for your ticket but I'll always cherish your comments on how you keep feeling guilty watching Indigenous theatre and wished you didn't have to.

Right. So what connects this to anything?

As per Alan Filewod's fallacy of "settler colonial nationalism," white men with the noblest of intentions, stoutness of hearts, and clarity of thought set out to map the uncharted territory that was Canadian theatre. They knew it existed because their journal was already titled *Canadian Theatre Review*. So they set out to find Canadian theatre to review in order to fill their nascent periodical with content and complete their application forms for grant money. It would have shimmering patinas of scholarship and first-person authenticity.

Similar to Jill Carter's experience, I found it nice to read when I was in university (1980s) and didn't have much of a clue what professional theatre existed in Canada. It was glossy, and because it was glossy, it was sexy. It made Canadian theatre shiny and appealing. The *Canadian Theatre Review*

was to Canadian theatre artists what the *Watchtower* is to Jehovah's Witnesses: an argument for our relevance combined as a voice for our salvation. I became a convert. A young acolyte on a mission. I was going to be a playwright! *CTR* was my guide. It was both the map and the mission.

It didn't last long. Once I entered the professional sphere, and the people I read about became friends, *CTR* ceased to be my go-to source for much of anything. The biggest reason was I didn't live in Toronto. After I moved to Toronto, I just had to make a few phone calls, send out some emails, or hang out in a pub to know what was going on.

Anything bordering on critical analysis tended to be spotlights on what non-white people were doing in our theatre spaces. Just like dioramas in museums.

What was going on in reality didn't jive with what I was reading in *CTR*. Like, never once did I see an article about why *A Christmas Carol* is our national play. What made our audience police other people's behaviour in theatre? Are we really a nation of shushers and hissers?

There are rules in warfare. Many of them deal with the rights of prisoners of war and how they're supposed to be treated after capture. If I forced an enemy combatant to sit absolutely still and prevent them from making a noise for ninety minutes, it would be a war crime. If I charged him thirty dollars and started doing a one-man show for him, it would be Canadian theatre. But would it make it into *CTR*?

If it did, who'd read it? If anyone needed to read *CTR* it was the white dude in the washroom and the various callers to radio talk shows who had no idea about anything about theatre. I'm going to make a wild but probably accurate assumption that they don't and never would, just as I seriously doubt that a theatre that was openly "white power" would make T-shirts.