

Hot Thespian Action!

Ten Premiere Plays from Walterdale Playhouse

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**Edited with a critical introduction
by Robin C. Whittaker**



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for the introduction and commentaries

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*To Walterdale's tireless volunteer artists, technicians,
builders and administrators throughout the decades.
May this anthology stand as a document of their
original efforts and successes over the years;*

and

to the unregimented artistic spirit of the playwright everywhere.

**NOTES ON OBTAINING PROFESSIONAL AND AMATEUR
PRODUCTION ROYALTIES**

The Canadian Fact

© Wilfred Watson 1967

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Chief Shaking Spear Rides Again or the Taming of the Sioux

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For amateur or education performance rights contact:

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Mutants

© Brad Fraser 1980, 2007

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Swipe

© Gordon Pengilly 1981

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The Tenth Negative Pig

© Barbara Sapergia and Geoffrey Ursell 1983

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The Three Sillies

© Mary Glenfield 1983

songs © Mary Glenfield (words and music)
and Rhuanedd Meilen (arrangements)

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Just

© Trevor Schmidt 1999

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The Beaver Effect

© Mark Stubbings 2000, 2006

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[ice land]

© Jonathan Seinen 2003

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The Trial of Salomé

© Scott Sharplin 2008

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This anthology recovers and collects well crafted, topical, and in some cases provocative Canadian plays that otherwise would have remained unavailable to wider readerships and audiences. Certainly today, Canadian plays too rarely receive a second production, particularly when premiered at an amateur theatre. At no point can this phenomenon be related to the quality of the plays because artistic directors and producers do not have the opportunity to read them (unless they take the initiative to contact the playwrights directly, or the playwrights contact them). This collection is a first step toward making ten plays available to a wider readership of producers, professional and amateur theatre artists, scholars, students, and an interested general public. That this collection is published at the moment that Walterdale Playhouse's production company, Walterdale Theatre Associates, commemorates half a century of play production gives cause for double celebration.

My own involvement with Walterdale has three "moments of origin." The first was as an audience member with my colleague James McKinnon in the fall of 1999 when we saw Kelly's *The Vampyre* directed by Cathy Lakin, who was president of Walterdale at the time. We had recently arrived in Edmonton to begin our studies in the master's degree program at the University of Alberta's Department of Drama, and we were keen to familiarize ourselves with Edmonton's highly touted theatrical landscape. James and I had moved to a city that boasted then, as it does now, more live theatre per capita than any other city in Canada (Old Strathcona Business Association), one in which over half of the population attends live theatre every year (Leger Marketing). I recall from my discussion with James then that the idea of seeing a play at a respected amateur theatre in our new home bestowed upon our theatre-going intentions an honest cachet, a healthy dose of cultural capital. We also had an eye toward producing theatre in Edmonton. After all, the opportunity to direct large-cast shows at a fifty-year-old theatre company with a variety of skilled actors, designers, and production team members is rare anywhere in this country. I would go on to see six more Walterdale productions in just over a year.

My second moment of origin at Walterdale came when I was appointed its twenty-fourth artistic director in February 2001. As a nonprofessionalized theatre company that produced a full season of seven productions a year, this was no slapdash, "amateurish" operation. In fact, as I quickly learned—and was soon quick to inform others—an amateur theatre such as Walterdale requires its participants to wear their professionalism on their sleeves. Highly structured mechanisms are the glue that holds together all this unpaid talent and enthusiasm. For fifteen to forty hours a week, the artistic director position gave me invaluable experience in forming a well-balanced progressive season, dealing with people of all ages and experiences, handling administrative duties efficiently and effectively (this was before Walterdale hired a paid administrator for the first time in 2005), and doing theatre under the "disciplinary codes of timetables, collective training, exercises [and other forms of] total and detailed surveillance"—what philosopher Michel Foucault calls "systems of power" (218–21). These were useful—nay, *integral*—mechanisms, as I would discover throughout my two-and-a-half-year term there.

My third moment of origin at Walterdale came three years later, after I began research on nonprofessionalized theatre practices as a doctoral student at the University of Toronto's Graduate Centre for Study of Drama. All this disciplined theatre at Walterdale had, after all, led to critical and popular successes for half a century; it has a story to which other companies, amateur and professional alike, could relate. I returned to Edmonton in June 2006 to start researching in Walterdale's rich archives. A year later I returned again to include in my research the Provincial Archives of Alberta's Walterdale holdings. Clearly there was a traceable history to be found in executive and general meeting minutes, newsletters, correspondences, lease agreements, and season programs. I was glad to be back in my third capacity, as researcher, to begin uncovering these traces.

It is the opportunity to engage in this sort of tripartite role-playing experience—that of audience member, practitioner/administrator (for the two are never separate in any artistic director position), and researcher—that makes the art of theatre so unique. As a publicly created and produced art, it is highly disciplined (in all senses of the word) and well documented (due to the paper trails its creative moments leave behind). What is remarkable is that more collections of work produced by theatres have not been compiled.

This anthology of some of the best new plays produced at Walterdale during its fifty years is a critical collection. It is based on the belief that the historical and cultural underpinnings of plays are as important as their language, themes, and content. Plays emerge from artists, and artists emerge from their times and circumstances. It is from this point of view that I wish to begin.

Intended for a general readership, but of particular interest to theatre and culture specialists, this anthology is carefully researched and productively critical while providing a unique document for “fans” of Walterdale to cherish. As Walterdale celebrates its first five decades, a markedly rare accomplishment for any theatre company in this country, this anthology acknowledges the talent and commitment of thousands of Walterdale members who have thrived on the joys of bringing new creations to life. These new works, recovered and selected for publication, are products of the *amore* of amateur theatre artists and the powerful tradition upon which Walterdale and its membership have built a half-century of success. Amateur theatre practice often gains local community notice, but this collection takes an important first step in giving one influential amateur company national and international recognition. The title, borrowed from the name of Walterdale's 2004/05 season, foregrounds the passionate and focused work of Walterdale's volunteer members while alluding to its present firehall home.

Just as this anthology presents a variety of written voices, it has been made possible by a number of individuals and groups. This work, and my related research on contemporary amateur and professionalizing theatre practices, would have been inconceivable without the ongoing support of Walterdale Theatre Associates and its board of directors. In the first place, thank you so many times over to Walterdale's archive manager Lance Dittrich for his ceaseless accommodation in person and from across the country, which included scanning the pre-2002 production photographs

from slides. Also, thank you to former president Judy Stelck and former artistic director Scott Sharplin for giving my on-site research the go-ahead in 2006. Kent Sutherland, Walterdale's administrator, proved an integral liaison. It is hardly possible to thank Mary and Frank Glenfield enough for offering me their lifetime of experiences at Walterdale. Theirs is the ongoing, lived memory of a theatre company, and of the city's theatre scene, for decades—a rare jewel indeed. Mary's master's degree thesis of 2001, duly cited herein, is an invaluable resource for all who intend to research the early years of Edmonton theatre. I also think of the numerous chats I had with Wendi Pope while I was artistic director and she was president. When we spoke of what it meant to be "amateur" and "professional" in the field of theatre, we were pushing away the sandy edges of a vital, insufficiently explored, discourse. David Owen—playwright, director, actor, educator, and former artistic director of Walterdale Theatre Associates (my predecessor in that position)—deserves acknowledgement for his original suggestion to me in 2001 in the lobby of Walterdale Playhouse that an anthology of Walterdale's new plays should be published. I regret that David's one-act play *Infidelity* (June 2002) did not make it into these pages, as it is an arresting and aesthetically challenging experiment in movement and dialogue.

I am indebted to Athabasca University's Press for having the foresight to publish new works produced by a nonprofessionalized theatre company. In particular I am grateful to Erna Dominey and Anne Nothof for guiding me through the publishing process. I heartily thank my two anonymous reviewers for their detailed insights and enthusiastic words. I am also indebted to Judith Johnson's careful copyediting of the manuscript. Susan Ivimey's timely transcription of *Mutants* was essential in preparing this collection. In the formative moments of the project, both Bequie Lake and the Playwrights Guild of Canada deserve thanks for helping me to contact certain playwrights. Diane Bessai's and Shirley Neuman's kind assistance in securing permission to print Wilfred Watson's play is most appreciated. At the University of Toronto, Bruce Barton's guidance has been integral to my work.

I also convey my gratitude to the kind and knowledgeable staff and volunteers at the Provincial Archives of Alberta for their assistance while I was working in Edmonton in 2007. Importantly, a University of Toronto School of Graduate Studies Travel Grant allowed me to return to Edmonton that year. My research also has benefitted from three Ontario Graduate Scholarships.

On a personal note, I wish to thank Ryland Alexander Lukowski and Amy Zarzeczny for providing me with a place to call home while doing research in Edmonton in the summers of 2006 and 2007. And from my heart, thank you to Amy Franklin for her support, and to my father Brian and my late mother Marlene for, somehow, convincing me at a very young age that writing is vital.

Robin C. Whittaker, July 2008



Sketch of Walterdale Playhouse by Amy Franklin, June 2006.