

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Overview

This selected anthology of new plays produced by Edmonton's Walterdale Theatre Associates documents one influential aspect of that company's ongoing artistic contribution to Edmonton and to Canadian culture. It is the result of an undertaking to recover a number of important plays, written at various stages of their authors' lives, which in some cases might otherwise have been lost to desk drawers and storage boxes. It may signal the beginning of a sustained effort to trace the influence of contemporary amateur theatre companies and their impact on their communities and on theatre practices today.

It is common to view nonprofessionalized theatre practice as a phenomenon of the past. This view assumes that "amateur" is "preprofessional" and therefore outdated. It holds that Canada's "little theatres" evolved into professional theatres half a century ago (if they were any good), converted to producing decades-late off-Broadway hits, or simply folded. Certainly the former is true in specific cases in which an amateur theatre has professionalized: for example, the Winnipeg Little Theatre amalgamated with Theatre 77 to form Manitoba Theatre Centre in 1958, Calgary's Workshop 14 merged with the Musicians and Actors Club of Calgary to form MAC 14 in 1966 (becoming Theatre Calgary in 1968), and the London Little Theatre in Ontario professionalized to become the Grand Theatre in the 1970s. For these companies, professionalization was a sign of cultural progress in a Centennial-fevered national (and nationalizing) context.

However, many nonprofessionalized theatres remain and thrive in the professional era. This era had its direct origins in the 1950s with the release of the Royal Commission Report in 1951 (Canada), the opening of the Stratford Festival (1953–), and the opening of the Manitoba Theatre Centre (1958–), Canada's first state-sponsored "regional" theatre. A study of the changing practices of nonprofessionalized theatres during the professional era will help to clarify the function and relevance of theatre practice in contemporary society. Other amateur theatres not to be overlooked in this pursuit are Ottawa Little Theatre (1913–), Toronto's Alumnae Theatre Company (1919–), Regina Little Theatre (1926–), and the Victoria Theatre Guild at Langham Court Theatre (1929–). They are the country's longest continuously running theatre companies. They have also contributed in no small degree to new play production and, in some cases, new play development. That they have done so during the professional era is a testament to their often overlooked, and frequently renewed, artistic and administrative visions.¹ Within this latter set of amateur theatres, Walterdale Theatre Associates holds a significant place in terms of sustained new play production, having produced over sixty new plays in fifty years.

That Walterdale has done so consistently in one of Canada's most fertile new-play regions is remarkable. It is no secret that Edmonton has been an incubator of playwriting talent since the city's "coming of age in the performing arts" (Westgate) during the 1960s. Today, many professional theatre companies offer new play development and production opportunities. These include Workshop West Theatre's Kaboom Festival, Loud 'N Queer Cabaret, Springboards, Playwrights' Garage, and Playwrights Unit; Theatre Network's Nextfest; and Northern Light Theatre's Urban

Tales. As well, the University of Alberta's New Works Festival provides students with a production format for new one-act plays. And of course, in a less regimented lottery-selection style, the Edmonton International Fringe Theatre Festival—which, after the Edinburgh Fringe, is the second largest theatre festival on the planet—allows independent artists to produce shows of their own choosing, frequently new plays. Edmonton playwright David Belke notes that in the 2002/03 season alone, over one hundred new plays were premiered on mainstages, by co-op groups, and at festivals in Edmonton (Belke). An indication of Edmonton's new play prowess can be gleaned from a number of previous anthologies. *The Alberta Advantage* (edited by Nothof), the Nextfest Anthology series, *The West of All Possible Worlds* (edited by Day), *Staging Alternative Albertas* (edited by Demers and Kerr), and *New Canadian Drama 3: Albertan Dramatists* (edited by Salter) present a remarkable variety of Alberta talent. Alongside this frenzy of new play production, Walterdale Theatre Associates produced the formidable number of new works listed in Appendix I. Nationally and internationally recognized Alberta-raised playwrights Vern Thiessen, Brad Fraser, George Ryga, Frank Moher, Warren Graves, and Gordon Pengilly have all been associated with Walterdale as playwrights or directors.

As this anthology demonstrates by way of example and critical perspective, during the decades that mark the beginning of the professional era in Canadian theatre, Walterdale Theatre Associates created conditions that have allowed it to be a fruitful contributor to new play production and one of Edmonton's most recognized theatre companies.² The factors that led to these conditions are far more diverse than many people realize. By offering a selection of "lost" and recently premiered plays, this anthology considers key dynamics in amateur theatre practice. In so doing, it holds instructional value for committed professionals and amateurs as well as readers and audiences who are interested in the development and production of new plays today.

A Brief History of Walterdale Theatre Associates

Walterdale Theatre Associates, or Walterdale, is a not-for-profit amateur community theatre company and a registered society that produces a full season of six or seven plays at Walterdale Playhouse in Edmonton's Old Strathcona Theatre District. Today, Walterdale is run by a twelve-member board of directors, ten of whom are elected annually and two (the president and artistic director) biennially from among the company's constitutive paying membership of about three hundred. Its mandated objective is to "establish and promote vital, entertaining and self-sustaining amateur theatre in Edmonton" (Walterdale, Constitution). Under this markedly wide-open mandate, Walterdale has maintained a flexible niche among other Edmonton theatres by relying on programming variety and a creative mixture of commercial favourites and challenging, provocative plays. Participation in all aspects of play production remains on a volunteer, unpaid basis, which sets Walterdale apart from a number of other amateur or semi-amateur theatres in the country that sometimes pay directors, designers, technicians, actors, or front-of-house and building staff. Participant theatre artists at Walterdale are counted among the paying members and vary widely in age,

experience, and training. While a few may become members who work on a specific show, most return for at least a few shows (Whittaker 1), and some stay on over the course of five or ten years to become part of a returning core of artists who may also practise theatre in other capacities around the city. Most specialize in one or two capacities, but some learn a variety of theatre skills. Still, most members (around two-thirds) are not involved in theatre production at all; their participation takes the form of audience support. Though membership numbers have ebbed and flowed, these dynamics have remained relatively consistent since the 1960s, when Walterdale began to attract Edmontonians at an enviable rate.

Walterdale Theatre Associates has produced plays in Edmonton since August 27, 1958. Originally called Edmonton Theatre Associates, it was founded by young actors who believed their demographic lacked opportunities to produce theatre in the city. As Mary Glenfield relates, Jack McCreath, the group's lead founder and first artistic director, "believed that there was an audience ready and waiting for good theatre, if one could tap into it" (46). The group officially registered under Alberta's Societies Act on May 13, 1960.³ McCreath stated in the *Edmonton Journal* seven months later that the city was not ready for a professional theatre until "there exists an audience of regular theatergoers amounting to three per cent of our population" (quoted in Glenfield 53). He viewed Walterdale then as a possible "basis" for professionalizing theatre practice in Edmonton.

In response to the city's traditional fare of shows playing on large stages—particularly the Northern Jubilee Auditorium's mainstage—Theatre Associates gained public and critical recognition in the early years by staging a variety of well-rehearsed popular classics in smaller venues. Plays such as Hazelwood's *Lady Audley's Secret* and McCreath's reworking of Swan's *Out of the Frying Pan* (both in repertory August–September 1958, Jubilee Auditorium Social Room), Knott's *Dial M for Murder* (November 1960, Yardbird Suite), and Christie's *Ten Little Indians* (June 1961, Jubilee Auditorium Social Room) were directed by company founder Jack McCreath or members such as Frank Glenfield, Marjorie Knowler, and Bob Hedley.

Theatre Associates soon began offering edgier fare, including *Epitaph for George Dillon* (November 1961). Within three years the group was able to secure its own building by converting the John Walter School House at Walterdale Flats into a seventy-seat "thrust-style" theatre space (Rivet 6), with *Epitaph* as the opening show. It rented what had been "Edmonton's oldest one room school house" ("New" 1) from the city for \$35 per month (Fritch 1). There, Theatre Associates could offer a full season of plays, the only company in Edmonton outside of the University of Alberta able to do so at the time. Weighty, relevant, and at times acclaimed productions of Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* (March–April 1962), Pinter's *The Caretaker* (October 1963), Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (April 1964), Anouilh's *Waltz of the Toreadors* (March 1966), and Albee's *The Zoo Story* (May 1966) came to characterize the group as one that took theatre production seriously. It even produced its first original works during this time, Mary Baldrige's *Is This a Friendly Visit?* (December 1961) and Jack McCreath's Mexico-inspired play *Barranca* (November 1962). An article in the *Edmonton Journal* called the Theatre Associates "the only people consciously trying to fill the need [for theatre in Edmonton]" while fielding

“some of Edmonton’s best performers” (“Shavian”). Dozens were drawn to the local-minded group as working members, and performances routinely sold out,⁴ but when the city decided to claim the schoolhouse-come-playhouse to build the Kinsmen Field House, Theatre Associates, after having staged over forty plays in eight years, was forced to move. It eventually found and renovated the Legion of Frontiersmen Hall; the ninety-eight-seat venue on Princess Elizabeth Avenue opened to a sold-out house with Gardner’s *A Thousand Clowns* (November 1966).



The Theatre Associates’ first location at the John Walter School House at Walterdale Flats (1961-66). Today, this is the location of the Kinsmen Field House.

Photo: Walterdale Theatre Associates.

The Theatre Associates’ second location at The Legion of Frontiersman Hall (1966-74), today the site of Kingsway Garden Mall.

Photo: Walterdale Theatre Associates.

The move to Legion Hall came precisely twelve months after professional theatre descended upon Edmonton. With lawyer and local theatre enthusiast Joseph Shoctor’s new regional theatre, The Citadel, addressing the demand for professional productions, members of Theatre Associates sought to clarify their niche in the city. Certainly, selections such as Kesselring’s *Arsenic and Old Lace* (February 1967), Molière’s *The Imaginary Invalid* (April 1967), Fry’s *A Sleep of Prisoners* (October 1967), Albee’s *A Delicate Balance* (January 1968), and Coward’s *Hay Fever* (March 1972) were not unlike the fare now being offered at The Citadel. But edgier work continued to appear, such as Odets’s *Awake and Sing* (November 1970) and Williams’s *The Mutilated* (February 1973).

Theatre Associates was now frequently introducing new plays into its programming, premiering five between March 1967 and March 1968. By comparison, during the same Centennial months The Citadel produced no Canadian fare, new or otherwise, other than an “original revue” called *All the Crazy Things that Crazy People Do* (December 1966–January 1967). Works by writers such as George Ryga, Jimmy Richardson, Wilfred Watson, and Warren Graves were produced at the Legion Hall. During this time the theatre also began to make a name for itself with its “Walterdale Melodrama” as part of Edmonton’s Klondike Days Festival.

By the time it held its annual general meeting in 1970, Edmonton Theatre Associates had officially changed its name to Walterdale Theatre Associates because, after all, the name “Walterdale” had stuck since the early years at Walterdale Flats. Its members, now paying their membership separately from ticket prices, grew to over one hundred. But the Legion Hall lease was set to expire in July 1972, and the city was making plans to give the land to a private developer for a shopping centre, what is now Kingsway Garden Mall. Following lengthy and at times heated negotiations with the city, Walterdale, facing homelessness once again, secured its current space at Old Strathcona’s Firehall No. 6. When renovated, the new Walterdale Playhouse would seat 108 (today it seats 145 following a series of further renovations). This third building gave the company a home in a historic landmark in a central, and increasingly culturally vibrant, location. To date, the city’s and the province’s renewed support of the community-minded company has allowed it the freedom to produce relevant and challenging work. Coincidentally, the erstwhile firehall itself celebrates its one hundredth anniversary in the same season that Walterdale celebrates its fiftieth.



LEFT: Walterdale’s third and present location at Old Strathcona’s former Firehall No. 6. The firehall is 100 years old in 2009, following extensive renovations that have included the preservation of its façade. Photo: Walterdale Theatre Associates. RIGHT: Today’s signage for theatres in the Old Strathcona Theatre District. Photo: David DeGagné.

When Orton’s *What the Butler Saw* inaugurated the new building as a playhouse in December 1974, Walterdale boasted a membership of over 300. By 1980 membership topped 400, and it never fell lower than 250 for long. However, the larger building, leased from the city for \$1.00 per year plus the costs of any city-mandated renovations (to be accomplished within historical code), would pose ongoing financial and administrative challenges to a group focused on producing plays and developing theatre practitioners and audiences.

The professionalization of Canadian theatre practice also created challenges for Walterdale in the years leading up to and following the establishment of the Canadian Actors’ Equity Association in 1976.⁵ In Edmonton, the growing number of new professional companies during the 1970s pressed Walterdale to further define its place. Theatre 3 (1970–81), Northern Light Theatre (1975–), Theatre Network (1975–), and Workshop West Theatre (1978–) provided professionalized opportunities for local theatre practice.⁶ In the fall of 1977 Equity made it clear that its members could appear on Walterdale’s stage only if they were paid as guest artists; in response, Walterdale made it clear that it would no longer avail itself of the services of Equity actors, thus asserting its commitment to amateur status (Sprenke 3; Rivet 22). Many

in Edmonton's acting pool were now placed in a difficult position: eager to identify themselves as Equity professionals, they still counted on the exposure and experience that Walterdale provided. Following this hard split between professional and amateur practice, Walterdale was free to focus its energies on attracting the best non-Equity talent of all ages in Edmonton. Since the late 1970s it has contributed immensely to Edmonton's theatre scene while strengthening the city's artistic and social fabric by providing important theatre opportunities to non-Equity artists.

During the 1970s Walterdale further sought to clarify its niche by introducing children's programming and youth artist development with its Young Walterdale initiative and Christmas pantomimes, while furthering its reputation for producing the summer melodrama and original local work. To satisfy internal and public interest, it also turned, in part, to more commercial fare with plays such as Shaffer's *Sleuth* (November 1975), Stoppard's *Enter a Free Man* (October 1976), and Simon's *God's Favorite* (February 1977) and *Barefoot in the Park* (January 1978).

Challenging modern classics have also appeared at Walterdale, particularly since the late 1970s. These include Chekhov's *On the Harmfulness of Tobacco* (April 1979), *The Cherry Orchard* (May 1987), and *Ivanov* (April–May 1999); Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (October 1983), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (November 1986), *The Comedy of Errors* (October 1994), *The Taming of the Shrew* (March 2003), *King Lear* (February 2006), and *Antony and Cleopatra* (April 2007); Ibsen's *Ghosts* (April–May 1985) and *An Enemy of the People* (March 2001); Miller's *The Crucible* (April–May 1986, May 2002); Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (September–October 1987, January 2001); Behn's *The Rover* (April 1989); Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (January–February 1995) and *The Night of the Iguana* (January–February 2003); Molière's *Tartuffe* (April–May 1996); and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (January 2000).

Importantly, along with commercial and classical fare, during the past thirty-four years at the firehall Walterdale has expanded its reputation for introducing provocative works, many of them by Canadian playwrights, to Edmonton audiences. These include French's *Leaving Home* (January–February 1975), Ritter's *The Girl I Left Behind Me* (March 1977), Mitchell's *Davin the Politician* (November 1979), Tremblay's *Les Belles Soeurs* (May 1980 with Théâtre Français d'Edmonton, and February 2005), Walker's *Zastrozzi* (October 1980), Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (March 1990), Brennen's *Tiger's Heart* (March 1998), Clark's *Jehanne of the Witches* (January 1999) and *Saint Frances of Hollywood* (April–May 2001), and Highway's *The Rez Sisters* (October 2005).⁷

For its efforts in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Walterdale garnered a string of Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Awards for Outstanding Amateur Production in each of the first six years the awards were handed out (1988–93).⁸ In 1994, one year after winning the (not-amateur-specific) Sterling Award for Outstanding Costume Design for Jane Barclay's work on Anderson's *Elizabeth the Queen* (April–May 1993), Walterdale received an Outstanding Contribution to Theatre in Edmonton award, which at once rewarded the company for nearly four decades of work in Edmonton and rendered it ineligible for future recognition by the Sterling committee. Commitment to programming diversity is an important strength of Walterdale Theatre. And as this anthology shows, a significant element in this diversity is Walterdale's contribution to new playwriting.

A View of Amateur Theatre Practised in the Professional Era

In the professional world the art sometimes gets lost in the business, which is sad, because no one gets into theatre in order to be more employable. No artist starts out with money as their [*sic*] first and foremost concern.

~ FORMER WALTERDALE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR SAM VARTENIUK

Acts of negotiating the borderlands between professional and amateur practices rank among the Western World's most difficult cultural challenges in the twenty-first century. For most of us, these challenges are unavoidable. In the case of a professionalizing art form, such negotiations frequently meet with impassioned responses. Today, few artists seek to be called "amateur," but few find consistent enough employment, payment, or recognition to be accurately called "professional." As a result, collections of dedicated artists have gathered to form union-styled associations in order to systematically define their art form's "profession" and therefore gain increased respect and security for their work. With a slew of emotional connotations following in the wake of professionalizing definitions, the result can be confusion in the way the art itself is viewed and practised.

In his influential study on public taste and cultural production, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu observes that among the arts, theatre "divides its public and divides itself" both aesthetically and politically (19). In Canada, the effects of distinction in theatre practice are found, for example, in the divisions between regional professional theatres, mid-sized professional houses, co-op and collective productions, Fringe Festivals, and amateur theatres. More or less in this order, organizational bodies such as the Canada Council for the Arts, the Canadian Actors' Equity Association, the Playwrights Guild of Canada, and professional theatre training schools classify and order theatre companies, their practices, and their work, by degrees of "professional" and "amateur." These distinctions, it is important to note, barely predate the organizational bodies and constitutive artists and companies themselves. They are born in large part of the federal public policy document often referred to as the Massey Commission Report (Canada), named after the commission's chair (and future governor general of Canada), Vincent Massey. Today they reinforce the claim as articulated and questioned by theatre scholar Claire Cochrane that "'Professional' now carries with it connotations of ultra-competence. The amateur is non-professional and by implication incompetent" (234). This nominal segregation and superficial denunciation is largely responsible for delegitimizing the work of amateur practitioners (as well as that of a range of professionals). And because such negative views of amateur practice are endemic in and constitutive of the practice and study of theatre, they are rarely questioned.⁹

The sociopolitical location of amateur theatre practice is much ignored and highly misunderstood. This is true even for those theatre practitioners, critics, and scholars who, at one time or another, have worked in amateur contexts as artists, technicians, or administrators. I therefore want to take a moment to suggest a repositioning of amateur theatre practice in order to begin what I think is one of the most

important, if rarely attended, projects on the contemporary theatrical landscape: the re-evaluation of the field of theatre as inclusive not only of those segments that identify as “professional,” but also of those that identify as “amateur.” Among the latter, a wide variety of amateur theatre practices continue to influence Western theatre culture. They operate, by their own choosing, in parallel with and in contrast to professionalizing practices. Many practitioners, such as the writers whose plays are included here, have worked in amateur theatre either as preprofessionals (anticipating future professional work) or as paraprofessionals (simultaneously pursuing professional work at other companies).¹⁰ Still others devoutly remain nonprofessional, show little interest in professionalizing, and remain content with the designation “amateur” even as they produce compelling works for the stage. Importantly, the craft of playwriting, inasmuch as it can be separated from the disciplinary economics of the practice, is comparatively demanding for writers identifying as paraprofessional, preprofessional, or amateur.

The professional asserts allegiance to a set of defined standards. The amateur practises, nominally, outside of the designated profession, drawing from professional standards when circumstances make it possible or appropriate. The borderlands of the post-industrial professions of medicine, law, teaching, nursing, and so forth are delineated by occupational regulations set out by unions or associations whose members deem anyone or any work operating outside of these regulations as “amateur.” In other words, the modern day professions have simplified the definition of “amateur” during the past century in order to bolster the range and effects of their own collective powers for purposes that ostensibly include quality control and job security.

Undoubtedly, the word “amateur” is fraught with negative associations. For some it suggests “unfocused,” “imitative,” “dilettantish,” or “inferior” work. Some have sought to disassociate these connotations from the term by arguing for a distinction between “amateur” and “amateurish,” whereby the former conveys the pioneering spirit of a practice while the latter bears the pejorative meanings (Melville 1; Perry 31). This seems to me to be a productive start. The *Oxford English Dictionary* makes a distinction between the two: the “amateur” is “One who loves or is fond of,” “one who has a taste for anything,” or “one who cultivates anything as a pastime” (the opposite of the “professional”); “amateur” is also used “disparagingly” as an adjective in opposition to “professional.” Conversely, “amateurish” is used only to mean “having the faults or deficiencies of amateur work,” thus allowing for space within amateur work that is not “amateurish.” It is within this skill-based amateur space that nonprofessionalized companies such as Walterdale primarily operate.

Though the act of this sort of occupational designation may seem simple, the interplay of the terms’ various functions is not. A number of factors traditionally separate, by measure, amateurs from professionals. A survey of amateur practices in the United Kingdom published in the early 1990s lists eight such factors: income, training, artistic aspirations, time allocated, experience, general approach, content and style (of the work), and importantly, status of the art form in society (Hutchison and Feist 10). At the amateur end of each factor’s continuum there is a deficiency; at the professional end we might say there is not so much a surplus as a minimum point or borderland defined by the dominant union or association in the field. Professions

tend to *exclude* those who do not meet their minimum qualifications, while amateur practices tend to *include* would-be practitioners, at least in principle, in the interests of both survival and variety. At any given time, practitioners or companies may situate their own positions at different points along each continuum, with the recognition that these positions may change.

As a volunteer-run amateur company, Walterdale produces within a populist context. This populist notion of artistic creation is one that views art not as the sole property of career specialists, but as part of a wider domain in which art is producible and transferable between and across lines of specific training, experience, income, and life focus. Traditions and genres are drawn upon according to the artist's autonomy within his or her own cultural position. While the playwrights represented in this collection may have been writing to (or for) particular constituent audiences ("on their own time," as it were), the theatre at which their plays appeared follows an "open-field" mandate, more or less unencumbered by limiting politicized aesthetic mandates.

It is important to note at this juncture that a critical discussion of amateur practice does not seek to vilify professional theatre work, nor does it seek to be an apologia for unpaid or underpaid theatre work. Quite the contrary: it seeks to reveal the mechanisms by which amateur practices contribute to and benefit from professionalized practices, and vice versa, and it seeks to free the discussion of the production of art, if only temporarily, from the strictures of prescribed regulatory and disciplinary systems.

New Play Production at Amateur Theatres

While the notion of placing contemporary amateur theatre practices within the context of theatre practice generally may be unfamiliar to many, the idea of an amateur theatre producing new plays may seem outright contradictory to the impressions that many hold of amateur theatre programming. The words "contemporary," "relevant," or "original" are not always attached to the programming expected of amateur companies. For some, an "amateur theatre season" brings to mind the production of decades-late off-Broadway productions, or the "feel-good" stock musicals you might find listed in the "Community Rentals" section of the Music Theatre International catalogue. While many amateur groups produce this type of fare with a good deal of popular response, the amateur theatre of which Walterdale is representative cannot be categorized among them.

Amateur companies such as Walterdale worked to find their niche during the state-sponsored influx of Canadian "regional" professional theatres between the late 1950s and the 1970s by producing hundreds of new works by Canadian playwrights. Regionals such as the Manitoba Theatre Centre (1958–), the Vancouver Playhouse (1963–), and Edmonton's Citadel Theatre (1965–) increasingly adopted the position that they could ill afford to take a chance on new play programming for fear that low attendance would trouble business-minded boards of directors and could result in the loss of state-granted public funds. Curiously, even in a mid-twentieth-century context in which efforts to nationalize Canadian theatre abounded, new Canadian play programming became synonymous with experimental theatre, which was viewed as a predictable

“loss” on seasonal budget sheets and was therefore to be avoided (except as tokenism). Canada’s established amateur theatres quickly learned, however, that freedom from government grants (in a democracy that values art but not necessarily *paying* for art) and operating budgets drawn primarily from box office sales and membership fees allowed for a marked freedom in programming. Some amateur theatres, particularly Alumnae in Toronto and Walterdale in Edmonton, ran with this freedom.¹¹

An early catalyst for new play production by amateur theatres was the Dominion Drama Festival (DDF), the longest-running of Canada’s state-initiated theatre events. The DDF was meant to build a national audience for theatre by providing contexts for play production and artistic improvement. For forty years (1932–71) it brought together approved nonprofessional theatre companies to compete at the regional and national levels. From its early years benefitting from private and (some) state patronage—which effectively ended when the Canada Council redirected its funding toward professional practice—to its later years scrounging for corporate funds, the DDF sought to encourage the practice of Canadian theatre in small towns and urban centres from coast to coast. Cultural organizers led by dignitaries such as DDF co-founder Vincent Massey and author Robertson Davies attempted to encourage the submission of new Canadian plays. Initially, companies were reluctant to take the chance on fare with which the festival’s European adjudicators would not be familiar, yet new plays appeared occasionally and in 1967, in celebration of Canada’s Centennial, all sixty-two plays presented at the DDF Finals were Canadian-written, and twenty-nine of these were premieres.

But Walterdale never participated in the DDF competitions. Its focus was not on contributing to a national network of theatre artists, but on building interest in theatre practice locally. Walterdale’s founders were careful to familiarize themselves with their community and their potential audiences. By the early 1960s they were running the only continuously producing theatre in Edmonton (outside of the University of Alberta), a distinction that would last until The Citadel opened. During this time, Walterdale’s members worked to ensure there could be no possibility that the development of theatre in the city would fail. Offering productions of the best quality was a must. A new play, for example, deserved not only a strong first production but also receptive audiences. New plays were included in a season only when they could be assured of an appropriate reception.

Amateur theatres such as Walterdale have proven to be well suited to producing new plays. This is due in part to a number of artistic freedoms inherent in amateur theatre practice. First, unburdened by union obligations that prioritize consistent employment opportunities for mid-career artists, amateur theatres are freer to open new play programming slots to all artists—in all stages of their careers—when the plays are strong enough for production. Second, taking a chance on an unknown playwright is less of a financial gamble, as normally no monetary compensation is involved. Third, amateur theatres can accommodate a wider variety of new plays because they are free from both the need to limit cast sizes (because participants are unpaid) and the need to follow ideological, topical, or political trends in style and theme in order to compete for government grants. Fourth, the overall emphasis on in-the-moment process as opposed to final product can be particularly conducive to staging untried, unsettled new work.

And fifth, by often having less of their operating costs tied to the changing winds of state funding, amateur theatres can, and occasionally do, produce unpredictable and controversial new plays that add cultural capital to the company and its membership. The various production conditions of the plays contained in this anthology illustrate, in combination, all of these freedoms.

Publishing Walterdale's New Plays: Selection and Content

Not since Vincent Massey's two-volume set, *Canadian Plays from Hart House Theatre* (1926–27), has a collection composed solely of plays premiered at an amateur theatre been published. In other words, this collection is the first of its kind in eighty years. Countless important new plays have disappeared from sight over the past half century simply because they were not first produced by a professional theatre. Granted, for many plays this may not be regrettable, but for many others it is undeniably so. On the whole, a Canadian play rarely receives a second production, and a play whose first production occurs at an amateur theatre may already have an unfair stigma attached to it. Regardless of the play's initial strength or success, it is relegated to the writer's drawer.

Like a number of important contemporary play anthologies—for example, *Staging the North* (edited by Grace et al.), *Testifyin' I and II* (edited by Sears), *Staging Coyote's Dream* (edited by Mojica), and *Lesbian Plays* (edited by Kerr)—this collection revisits traditional canonization practices in theatre, with Canadian plays as its focus. But, once again, it differs from other compilations in that each play had its premiere at an amateur theatre company.¹² By setting into print a selection of the many outstanding new plays introduced at one Canadian theatre, we move a step closer to charting the important and continued influence of amateur theatres on the country's cultural landscape. This collection may be the first in a series of studies of several largely ignored constitutive elements of contemporary nonprofessionalized theatre practice, elements that include play programming, production conditions, and audiences.

From the experimental 1960s to a bold resistance to professionalization during the 1970s, from the fruitful years of the early 1980s to the explosion of new one-act plays in the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium, Walterdale has presented what its audiences and its members want while not shying away from challenging popular tastes. For Walterdale's audiences the two phenomena are hardly mutually exclusive, as the company has premiered more than sixty new plays during its first fifty years. The early 1980s were particularly productive years for new play production at Walterdale due to artistic leadership that focused to a great extent on new play programming and also to a one-time national playwriting competition held by Walterdale in 1980. And just as with any theatre company's production history, professional or amateur, there have been "hits" and there have been "misses."

Of Walterdale's "hits," only ten could fit in this anthology—a point that is quite simply cause for regret. Certain omissions may appear striking to the reader. *Is This a Friendly Visit?* (December 1961), written by Mary Baldridge, and *Barranca* (November 1962), written and directed by founding Walterdale member Jack McCreath,

were the first new plays produced by Walterdale. The former won the Alberta Drama League's playwriting competition that year and the latter was lauded in the *Edmonton Journal* as "a smash hit" (Keeping), but both have been omitted because I could not track down a copy of either in time for selection. Seminal western Canadian playwright George Ryga's *Nothing But a Man* (March 1967), a stage adaptation of his teleplay *Man Alive* (1966), does not appear in this collection because it was published recently in *George Ryga: The Other Plays* (edited by Hoffman). Fans of Warren Graves's original melodramas will note that only one appears here, though three premiered at Walterdale. The reason why *Chief Shaking Spear Rides Again* has been chosen should be clear from its localized plot. Perhaps most difficult of all was the selection of new one-act plays from over forty produced at Walterdale between 1988 and 2008. Quite simply, a number of them were not available for examination. Among the plays that were available, I attempted to choose those that would reflect Walterdale's ongoing mandate to offer varied programming year by year. What I believe to be a comprehensive list of new plays produced by Walterdale thus far is included at the back of this anthology as Appendix I; the inquisitive reader should overlook none.

The ten plays herein have been selected in the first place for their quality, readability (on the page), and producibility (in performance). Most are published here for the first time, though three—*The Canadian Fact*, *Chief Shaking Spear Rides Again*, and *Swipe*—received previous, though limited, publication. Plays by relatively "known" writers Brad Fraser, Warren Graves, Gordon Pengilly, Wilfred Watson, and Barbara Sapergia and Geoffrey Ursell balance plays by emerging playwrights Trevor Schmidt, Jonathan Seinen, Scott Sharplin, and Mark Stubbings, and one-time playwright Mary Glenfield.

The selected plays cover most of the company's fifty years in order to illustrate its relevance to changing times. A variety of genres—including realism, historical drama, adaptation, comedy, melodrama, fantasy, and children's theatre—are represented because programming variety has always been characteristic of Walterdale. All favour ingenuity and integrity of craft over formulaic or "issue of the month" dramaturgy, and they are often provocative. No two plays are structured the same, nor do they stage duplicate agendas. Their diversity is attributable to the freedoms listed above and to Walterdale's approach to new play programming in which, normally, yearly open calls are sent out to the membership and the public for new scripts.

But while variety is a Walterdale hallmark, readers will no doubt pick out similar themes in a number of these plays. This is the result of reoccurring commonalities among national, rather than local, playwriting interests. Thus, we have come to recognize themes of identity in Canadian plays, including national coming-of-age mythologies, tensions with American and British cultural domination, the strengths and challenges related to multiculturalisms and authenticities, and the performative power of flags, anthems, and other symbols of nationhood. Many of these plays deal in some degree with Canadian identities, as reconsiderations of the past, comments on the present, or hopes or apprehensions for the future. Some characters celebrate their Canadian identity, while others are deeply troubled by it. (Curiously, almost half of the plays offered here include versions of "O Canada"¹³ and two, produced a year apart,

mention celebrities William Shatner and Céline Dion as iconic/ironic cultural symbols.) A number of characters express decidedly anti-American sentiments in order to address perceived “us/U.S.” power binaries at play between Canada and the United States. It is ironic that in spite of this persistent tradition of producing plays on Canadian topics, the winner of Walterdale’s 1980 national playwriting competition did not deal with Canadian-specific subject matter at all. Gordon Pengilly’s *Swipe* is a utopian no-place/every-place swamp fantasy that evidences Walterdale’s “open field” approach to the selection of new plays. Self-reflexive questions of identity are more generally played out by way of meta-theatrical situations found in the premises of both *Chief Shaking Spear Rides Again* and *The Trial of Salomé*, and to a lesser extent in theatrical conceits found in *The Beaver Effect* and *The Three Sillies*.

This anthology presents not only thematic variety, but also what we might call variety in points of professionalization. The playwrights whose work appears here were all at different stages of their careers when their plays were produced. Watson had already been writing poetry and plays in other contexts simultaneous to his career as an English professor. Graves, having worked as a civil servant, was embarking on what would become a new career, first as a playwright, actor, director, and administrator at Walterdale, then as a paraprofessional working at both amateur and professional theatres in the Edmonton theatre community, and finally as an identifying professional in the field. Fraser, benefitting from both his raw talent at an early age and from happenstance, effectively parlayed the success of *Mutants* into an international play- and screenwriting career. Pengilly, and Sapergia and Ursell, already prolific fiction writers, added the successful outcome of a national playwriting competition (first and second place, respectively) to their accomplishments. Glenfield once again came to the service of Walterdale, this time not with her acting skills but, for one time only, as a playwright. Schmidt—an emerging playwright, director, and actor at Edmonton’s professional theatres—gained a production of his one-woman show before reworking it into part of a larger, award-winning venture. Stubbings and Seinen gained experience at the outset of their theatre careers with the plays included herein, and Sharplin, who had already transferred to Walterdale his leadership skills and aptitude with classical texts, gained a full production of his ambitious historical drama. The variety of career positions and interests here is astonishing. Not all were committed playwrights, not all proved to be long-time dedicated members of Walterdale, and none was forced by the theatre to conform to thematic or stylistic moulds in order to achieve selection or production. That Walterdale has served Edmonton artists in such a variety of ways has helped to define its niche and contribute to its longevity. The plays selected for inclusion here exemplify the great variety that nonprofessionalized practice can enable.

A final point I wish to make regarding selection is that these plays are not “representative.” That is, no play stands in for the theme, content, style, or even production process of other plays produced at Walterdale over the decades. Together, however, they present compelling evidence that as an amateur theatre, Walterdale has a recorded history of staging a wide variety of outstanding new plays, many of which might influence the practice and study of theatre if disseminated more widely.