

The Canadian Fact (1967)

by Wilfred Watson

You can always be safe and predictable in the theatre, but it is best to take risks. If you are going to be a Canadian dramatist you can't win, so you might as well be experimental.

~ WILFRED WATSON QUOTED IN WESTGATE, "ANOTHER WORLD"

He has been called "The most fascinating playwright in the modern Canadian theatre and one of its most controversial" (Peacock, "Wilfred Watson" 9), "Western Canada's reigning absurdist" (Stuart 235), and "as Canadian as The Group of Seven or an inhabitant of Frye's *Bush Garden*" (Peacocke xii). Despite such accolades, the work of Wilfred Watson—playwright, poet, professor, essayist, University of Alberta Studio Theatre collaborator, and Marshall McLuhan co-author—remains, from a national perspective at least, an underground phenomenon. This paradox—representatively Canadian yet relatively unknown in Canadian popular culture—may exemplify Watson's writing career, but it also applies to Walterdale Playhouse, a company that has earned undeniable local recognition yet, as an amateur theatre, has flown under the national radar. Watson's ambitious theatrical events, which juggled with alarming linguistic rigour multimedia happening-style performances and theatre of the absurd sensibilities (what he called "radical absurdity"), were a natural fit with the experimental art of the 1960s.¹⁴

Watson was born in Rochester, England, in 1911 and spent his early years at a grammar school in Essex before immigrating with his family to Duncan, British Columbia, in 1926. He married writer Sheila Martin Doherty in 1941 before earning an honours BA in English literature at the University of British Columbia (1943). After serving in the Canadian navy, he enrolled at the University of Toronto, where he earned an MA (1946) and a PhD (1951). Watson met Marshall McLuhan in 1947 when they attended a play on the same night. Sheila, whose PhD supervisor at the University

of Toronto was McLuhan, reintroduced her husband to the popular media theorist in 1959, initiating a decade of correspondence between them that culminated in their co-authorship of *From Cliché to Archetype* (1970), including the chapters “Theatre” and “The Theatre of the Absurd.”¹⁵ In 1949 Watson began his teaching career as a special lecturer at the University of British Columbia before becoming a professor of English at the University of Alberta, first at the Calgary campus in 1951 and then in Edmonton in 1953, where he remained until his retirement in 1977. In 1955 his first volume of poetry, *Friday’s Child*, earned a Governor General’s Award and accolades from T.S. Eliot (who had accepted it for publication) and Northrop Frye.

While living in Paris between 1955 and 1956 on a Canadian Government Overseas Fellowship, Watson was attracted to the new plays of the theatre of the absurd.¹⁶ In the mid-1960s a number of his works written in the theatre of the absurd style were read and staged by founding Walterdale member Bud D’Amur at Edmonton’s experimental performance venue, the Yardbird Suite.¹⁷ When the Yardbird shut its doors to theatre performance in the fall of 1966, Watson, while continuing to produce at Studio Theatre, presented his less extravagant new plays at Walterdale’s Legion of Frontiersmen Hall venue. But following the Studio Theatre premiere of *Let’s murder Clytemnestra according to the principles of Marshall McLuhan* (November 1969), which received a notably scathing review from the *Edmonton Journal* (Westgate, “Wilfred Watson’s”),¹⁸ Watson opted to curtailed his more ambitious playwriting. In 1980 he and Sheila moved to Nanaimo, B.C. But when his unproduced trilogy *Gramsci x 3*, premiered at Studio Theatre in 1986, *Edmonton Journal* reviewer Liz Nicholls called it “a stunning theatrical experience,” one “unlike any to be had in this burg. Not now. And not for a long time to come.” The Watsons remained in Nanaimo until Sheila, and then Wilfred, passed away in 1998.¹⁹

During the 1960s, his most prolific decade as a dramatist, Watson’s ties to university culture as a professor and playwright helped to shape his political and aesthetic convictions. He worked closely with students at Studio Theatre on his controversial extravaganzas *Cockrow and the Gulls* (March 1962), *O Holy Ghost, DIP YOUR FINGER IN THE BLOOD OF CANADA and write, I LOVE YOU* (December 1967), and *Let’s murder Clytemnestra(...)*. His less ambitious, lyrical one-act plays *Wait for Two Pedestals* (December 1964); *Chez-vous, Comfortable Pew* (May 1965), which includes the “cultural Robin Hood” character “Bud Damur”; and *Tom Jones Meets Fanny Hill* (October 1965) premiered at the Yardbird. If his Studio Theatre plays were multimedia, large-cast performance events, his Yardbird plays were poetic performances played to inquisitive, bohemian audiences who would stay out until six in the morning.

Many of Watson’s plays presented his dictum, as articulated in the prefatory essay “On Radical Absurdity,” that “the central fact in modern civilization [is] its multiplicity of media” (“Poem” 43). Watson’s multimedia events combined a contemporary theatre of the absurd sensibility with a McLuhan-inspired awareness of “multi-media man” (“Poem” 41). After all, was it not absurd that if anything is common among the people of the Western World it is that the majority of the experiences we hold are apprehended from a distance via new media—life as seen on TV? During the 1960s television aided in forming political opinions of far-off lands that resulted in countless demonstrations.

And grander still, the drawing together of so many people through television was ritual. “Theatre,” said Watson, “repeats with increase of intensity—and its best expressions are ritual” (“Towards” 58).

But Watson’s Walterdale plays were something else yet again. Closer to the Yardbird-styled plays in their minimalism, yet more focused in structure, *The Canadian Fact* (May 1967) and *Two Teardrops Frozen on a Rearview Mirror* (March 1968) are clearly inspired by theatre of the absurd.²⁰ Doubtless, *The Canadian Fact* is, in the main, a departure from his ritualistic sci-fi plays at the Studio Theatre or his more lyrical work at the Yardbird. These ventures were fantastical explorations, frequently infused with vocal acrobatics and new-media spectacles, whereas *The Canadian Fact*, while socially astute and rhythmically adroit in its prose, remains grounded in familiar, if persistently ridiculous, human discussion and is notably devoid of Watson’s trademark mixed-media environment and fantastic ritualism. Indeed, *The Canadian Fact* might be seen as Watson’s focused experiment in absurdist dialogue, leaving out the other elements of his dramaturgy in much the same way that Beckett’s plays frequently dispense with certain dramaturgical elements in order to focus on one particular element: words without movement in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, speech without body in *Not I*, and so forth.

Because the first wave of the theatre of the absurd in Europe was a forceful and personal inspiration in Watson’s work, deconstructivist linguistic elements permeate his writings. “What theatre of the absurd is about,” wrote Watson, “is the birth of a new kind of mind, through the labour pangs of the old simple-minded book mind” (“Towards” 58). In his essays Watson called for getting “rid of” what he termed “the freshman essay” type of playwriting in favour of a theatre in which “language is a mode of human behaviour” (“Towards” 55).

By the early 1970s Watson was urging Canadian theatre to take up those language-based intrigues common to Europe’s theatre of the absurd in order to pursue—or was that problematize?—a national character. Thus, when he describes the scene for *The Canadian Fact* in the opening stage directions, he paints his view of the Canadian theatrical landscape, one that alienates and perplexes the very artists it contains:

SCENE ... a Canadian theatre ... any Canadian theatre ... not so much a scene,
as a milieu pervaded by a fascinating but devastating sense of the totally
foreign, of the place furthest removed from home.

When Watson’s university teaching career began at the University of British Columbia in 1949, it was the same year that the Massey Commission began its study of Canadian culture and the arts. The commission’s focus on state-sponsored arts influenced Watson, as it did many of his contemporaries.²¹ Watson viewed as obsolete the commonly held practice of framing Canadian theatre as the late-maturing offspring of “the mother country”—“England or France or both” (“Towards” 59). Instead, he preferred the view that Canadian theatre practises in antithesis to its American counterpart, particularly against the latter’s “doomed” “attempt to avoid words” (“Towards” 58). Theatre, he said, is a national resource, “just like water, oil, coal, our fisheries, etc., etc. our workmen, our students—and our graduate students too”

(“Towards” 58) and it needs state development if it is to thrive: “In further development of Canadian theatre we can make full use of the performed word as an essential element of theatre mimicry. The real problem is, how can we develop theatre as a national human resource?” (“Towards” 59). In answer, Watson singled out universities—not surprisingly, considering his lifelong affiliation with them—and state attention, in the form of “millions” of “tourist-dollars” that would convert “unemployment into leisure-employment [where] theatre will be a key activity” (“Towards” 59). In other words, in order for a sovereign Canada to find its theatrical voice, its theatre must become financially stable, and the best ways to accomplish this would be to generate popular interest internally at academic institutions and externally by generating income from British, French, and American tourists. As absurd as it may seem, Canadian theatre could mature by charging its “parents” and “neighbours” admission. Watson, like Robertson Davies, Vincent Massey, and other commentators of the day, sought to find a Canadian voice in the theatre by advocating for foreign styles of playwriting that would attract foreign audiences. Ultimately, this was an ironic strategy for a radically absurd national theatre.

In *The Canadian Fact*, a Canadian playwright (who no longer writes plays) and a Canadian director (who has never directed a Canadian play) conspire to produce a “Canadian” play about “the American bombardment of a lunatic asylum in Hanoi [Vietnam] while Peter Brook was directing a Canadian telephone directory there.” The dialogue is as absurd as the struggle to find a Canadian theatre seemed to Watson, as it did (and still does) for many. The play is reminiscent of Robertson Davies’s Lovewit and Trueman dialogue, and inasmuch as it considers the place (figurative and literal) of a so-called maturing Canadian theatre and its constitutive writers and directors, it might be read as a response to it. The play deals with themes of nationalism and the theatre while commenting humorously on playwrights who are too literary and directors who ignore the text.

The Canadian Fact ran May 26–28, 1967, at Walterdale Playhouse (the Legion of Frontiersmen Hall) with the following cast and creative team:

THE DIRECTOR	Robbie Newton
THE WRITER	Jim Abrams
DIRECTOR	Peter Montgomery
PROPERTIES	Helen Martin
SOUND	Malcolm Leske
LIGHTS	A.E. Montgomery

The Canadian Fact was published previously in the Canadian literary journal *White Pelican* (2, no. 1, Winter 1972), of which Watson’s wife Sheila was a founding editor. Watson himself edited another issue of the publication.

The Canadian Fact

by Wilfred Watson

Characters WRITER
DIRECTOR

Setting ... a Canadian theatre ... any Canadian theatre ... not so much a scene, as a milieu pervaded by a fascinating but devastating sense of the totally foreign, of the place furthest removed from home.

WRITER But the first thing a Canadian writer feels when he goes into a Canadian theatre is a marked hostility. You shake your head in dismay, but it is so, I assure you. I am a writer, and that is what I feel. (*Director smiles disarmingly*) A Canadian writer is definitely *not*, N,O,T, *not* welcome in a Canadian theatre. (*Insisting*) He feels he's definitely not wanted.

DIRECTOR Oh my dear sir, that's not true.

WRITER But I tell you it is.

DIRECTOR No no no no no, definitely no! —I'm always on the lookout for a Canadian play.

WRITER That's your theme song. It's what Canadian directors sing all the time. (*Shakes head*)

DIRECTOR We're all of us looking for a good Canadian play. Mind you, it must be good.

WRITER (*Turning as if he'd got his companion trapped*) Well! I sent you one the other day!

DIRECTOR Yes you did, now I remember. Yes!

WRITER I don't know whether it was any good or not!

DIRECTOR Ah, yes, I remember, quite distinctly. Well...

WRITER It wasn't much good? No? (*Retreating*) You look dubious.

DIRECTOR Let me see. (*Thinks*) I remember it quite distinctly!

WRITER It didn't make much impact?

DIRECTOR I'm always pleased to get new scripts to read, always. *(Explains)* There are some purportedly new plays which aren't new. *(Pause)* But your play ... yes ... ah, yes! *(Pause)* I liked your play very much ... but...

WRITER You want some changes made?

DIRECTOR I'm just trying to remember...

WRITER I'm afraid I'm an awful bother?

DIRECTOR No bother at all. I remember. It did need some revision.

WRITER But you do think it will work? You think it will produce?

DIRECTOR I'm not making any promises. *(Pause)* But cheer up, man. Peter Brook, the great English director has shown us that a good director can produce anything.

WRITER Anything?

DIRECTOR Anything. *(Pause)* Just about anything.

WRITER Then you will produce it?

DIRECTOR I've seen some Canadian plays that ought not to have been produced. *(Pause)* We all have. *(Pause)* I've seen some Canadian plays which ought not to have been produced, yes. *(Pause)* Not even by Peter Brook. I think it should be produced. It ought to be produced. *(Pause)* Ought to. *(Pause)* Canadian theatre cannot afford to exclude Canadian writers.

WRITER Or the Canadian fact.

DIRECTOR Or the Canadian fact.

WRITER It's a question of relevance?

DIRECTOR You're right. *(Pause)* We ought to be holding the mirror up to life in Canada. *(Pause)* We ought to. *(Pause)* I won't say we always do. *(Pause)* But we ought to. *(Pause)* Don't you agree? *(Pause)* I hope you agree.

WRITER Dull as life in Canada may be...

DIRECTOR That's the trouble. Life in Canada is dull. And no audience will stand for it. They go to the theatre to get away from Canadian life. *(Pause)* They do.

WRITER But there are moments of rapture.

DIRECTOR Dull as it may be, we ought to hold the mirror up to it.

WRITER To show the age its form and pressure, what?

DIRECTOR I wish we could, and believe me, I do think your play ought to be produced.

WRITER We are a shattered people.

DIRECTOR We are.

WRITER A people of shattered identities.

DIRECTOR We are. *(Pause)* But don't despair.

WRITER You are going to produce it then?

DIRECTOR *Your play? (Pause) Produce your play? (Pause)* I'm just wondering whether our available ACTORS could manage some of the scenes.

WRITER You think some of the scenes are over difficult?

DIRECTOR Not for the right actors perhaps ... but that's the problem. We directors have to work with what we've got in the way of actors.

WRITER And that's not much?

DIRECTOR We've got no good actors. *(Pause)* Why? *(Answer)* Because they've all gone to the U.S. where they can get paid.

WRITER Which scenes do you think are going to be difficult? Not the scene where Mary...

DIRECTOR I haven't really got round to reading your script yet old man. I've been frightfully busy ... but, as I said, Peter Brook—

WRITER Can produce anything at all.

DIRECTOR Anything, anything at all. He can make anything work. So I don't suppose the Mary scene will get in the way—though I don't—without reading the play through, mind you—like the name Mary much—not much...

WRITER Not much.

DIRECTOR Not much.

WRITER It grates you, I can see by the look on your face.

DIRECTOR It doesn't send me.

WRITER Perhaps I'd better alter it.

DIRECTOR Don't alter anything. Just wait. I am having your script translated into French. *(Pause)* Just be patient. *(Pause)* It will take a little time, but I think it'll be worth it.

WRITER Into French?

DIRECTOR I'm having it translated into French.

WRITER You're going to attempt a bilingual production?

DIRECTOR My friend, I wish I could. But wherever could I find the actors? *(Pause)* Bilingual production? *(Pause)* Oh no. *(Pause)* You see, *when* it has been translated into French, I'm going to have it translated back into English. *(Pause)* This is my very own gimmick. *(Pause)* It takes time, ah yes!

WRITER But why translate it into French and back into English?

DIRECTOR It's too literary. By getting it translated I'll take down some of the values a notch or two.

WRITER It's too literary.

DIRECTOR Oh yes, much too literary.

WRITER But you haven't read it yet?

DIRECTOR No time, no time. Not a moment. I've been doing Mario Fratti's John Cage...

WRITER You mean, The Cage?

DIRECTOR John Cage is the Cage... After PB...

WRITER Peter Brook?

DIRECTOR John Cage is my chief inspiration he ought to be yours ... oh, those miraculous silences ... those miraculous modules of silence ... I find silence precious *per se* but Cage's silence is like Bach's St. Matthew Passion *sans* choir *sans* orchestra *sans* organ *sans* passion and *sans*...

WRITER St. Matthew?

DIRECTOR Yes, of course.

WRITER It's full of birds...

DIRECTOR Oh it's full of birds ... in fact, I do definitely try to turn the theatre into a cage full of birds ... and then I open the door ... (*Pause*) but it takes time ... I've been doing Ionesco's *The Bulky Soprano* and *Mother Courage* and *Hair*...

WRITER Not the New York *Hair*?

DIRECTOR Horrors no—the Birmingham *Hair* ... ah, yes, and *The Trojan Women* and *Marat/Sade*...

WRITER My play is set in a lunatic asylum.

DIRECTOR Your play is set in a lunatic asylum?—But I know ... without even reading it, your play is much too literary. (*Pause*) Too literary.

WRITER I see.

DIRECTOR You're a writer, aren't you?

WRITER That's what I thought.

DIRECTOR The theatre needs writers.

WRITER You think so?

DIRECTOR I'm sure of it. But writers are always so literary. That's why I think my scheme of a translation into and out of French will make it actable.

WRITER I actually wrote it in French, and translated it back into English.

DIRECTOR Wonderful. But you're still a writer and your translation would be a writer's translation, still too literary.

WRITER Peter Brook could do it.

DIRECTOR Not if it was literary.

WRITER But he does Shakespeare, and Shakespeare I suppose is literary?

DIRECTOR Shakespeare is very literary. *(Pause)* But he isn't literary in quite the same way. *(Pause)* But don't worry. I particularly want to do a play in a lunatic asylum.

WRITER Ah, good, then you will like my speech about all the world's a lunatic asylum.

DIRECTOR I want to do a lunatic asylum, but not a literary man's idea of a lunatic asylum.

WRITER You'll like my play.

DIRECTOR I'll probably have to change it a lot.

WRITER I've set it in a lunatic asylum in Hanoi.

DIRECTOR Peter Brook can make anything out of anything—I am not Peter Brook. —But he is my model, as a director. *(Pause)* Nothing daunts me.

WRITER Nothing daunts you.

DIRECTOR Not even your play.

WRITER Not even my play.

DIRECTOR Wonderful, wonderful Peter Brook. He can make anything out of anything.

WRITER That's just my theme. My play's about Peter Brook. He's gone to Hanoi, to see if...

DIRECTOR Not Hanoi? *(Pause)* The audience will never stand for that ... they've been bombarded too much with Hanoi.

WRITER But that's my theme. Instead of blowing them to bits, I'm going to stick them together.

DIRECTOR In a lunatic asylum in Hanoi?

WRITER Yes.

DIRECTOR I'd very much like to read your play, ever so much.

WRITER Well you've got it.

DIRECTOR That's right I've got it.

WRITER You've just said you'd sent it to be translated.

DIRECTOR I've sent it to be translated.

WRITER (*Dreamily*) It's a lovely play. —I think you will like it.—Especially since you want to do something with a lunatic asylum. (*Rapturously*) There's a brief moment ... a marvelous moment ... which I'm sure will enthrall you ... (*Pause*) It's a scene in which a strip tease dancer takes off all her clothes.

DIRECTOR Visual values.

WRITER She is in the lunatic asylum. (*Pause*) She has been entertaining the troops. But then she's captured by the Viet Cong, raped, and goes mad. (*Pause*) She's thrown into this wretched haven of a lunatic asylum in Hanoi. (*Pause*) And she's visited by a Roman Catholic missionary.

DIRECTOR But could this happen?

WRITER Anything could happen in Hanoi.

DIRECTOR Are you sure Hanoi is available to missionaries.

WRITER Anything could happen in Hanoi. That's why I chose Hanoi for my lunatic asylum.

DIRECTOR It's not a direct satire on American intervention? (*Pause*) I shouldn't want that. (*Pause*) The Canadian government doesn't give a sweet damn if we put on a Canadian play. (*Pause*) But Uncle Sam always is helpful when we put on an American play. (*Pause*) If it weren't for the U.S. we'd be out of business. Uncle Sam doesn't mind us putting on an occasional Canadian play, as long as it doesn't criticize American foreign policy. (*Pause*) This comes as a shock to you? (*Pause*) The ultimate aim of American imperialism is to display its image. (*Pause*) But don't worry. (*Pause*) As long as your play isn't a direct satire on American intervention.

WRITER I leave that to the Americans.

DIRECTOR You'd be wise to.

WRITER Well this lovely scene in which the strip tease dancer from Montana who has been captured by the Viet Cong, raped, tortured, and thrust into a lunatic asylum—is visited by a Roman Catholic father ... (*Emphasis*) She takes off all her clothes (*He starts to divest himself of his clothes*)

DIRECTOR She takes off all her clothes? (*Starts to disrobe too*)

WRITER The Roman Catholic father doesn't know how to behave.

DIRECTOR *C'est son metier.*

WRITER So he takes off all his clothes too. (*Disrobing further*)

DIRECTOR I must read this play.

WRITER There they are completely naked.

DIRECTOR Of course. (*Completes ritual disrobing*)

WRITER And they say nothing. (*Pause*) Nothing.

DIRECTOR Nothing?

WRITER I want to get away from words.

DIRECTOR I like that scene.

WRITER I knew you would. It's one of the best scenes I've ever done.

DIRECTOR I must read your script.

WRITER They take off their clothes together. They say nothing. (*Pause*) And they do nothing.

DIRECTOR I think I would have them say a prayer together.

WRITER I like it better without words.

DIRECTOR I don't think it would work. —Oh, if we had the right sort of actors. (*They put on the clothes they have discarded*)

WRITER Peter Brook could make it work.

DIRECTOR You're right. But I put myself in PB's place and when I do, I think, it needs an emphasis, a verbal emphasis.

WRITER Well the basic idea is a nice one.

DIRECTOR I'm not sure you're not too ambitious—I'm not convinced that you're not doing too much. A writer must be very careful not to upstage his producer. I like a play which leaves a good deal of scope to the director. *(Pause)* Most of the real work should be left to the director. *(Pause)* The ideal playwright is like a university president. *(Pause)* He goes out after the foundations. He gets the play discussed in the press. He makes appearances on TV. *(Pause)* But he leaves all the theatre details to the director. *(Pause)* He need write nothing more than the title. *(Pause)* The title should be a good one.

WRITER The title is the writer's province.

DIRECTOR It shouldn't of course encroach on the play itself. *(Pause)* That's what's wrong with *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. It competes with the play. It makes the play unnecessary.

WRITER The play comes as an anti-climax?

DIRECTOR The play itself should be left to the director. *(Pause)* And if the director is of the calibre of Peter Brook ... even a brilliant title...

WRITER Like *Mrs. Warren's Profession* or *The Importance of Being Earnest*?

DIRECTOR Won't unduly perturb him.

WRITER Well I leave a lot of scope to the director.

DIRECTOR I'm glad of that.

WRITER You see, I imagine Peter Brook in the lunatic asylum in Hanoi.

DIRECTOR I must read your play soon.

WRITER He has gone, let us suppose, to Viet Nam to get some research done for a documentary. And he's been captured by the Viet Cong.

DIRECTOR It doesn't sound very authentic?

WRITER The British government protests weakly—what else could it do under the circumstances.

DIRECTOR I would ask whether the British have any claim to world attention—except Peter Brook.

WRITER There's Shakespeare.

DIRECTOR He's of another time.

WRITER I thought he was of all time.

DIRECTOR Not any more.

WRITER Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paw, *etc., etc* ... Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaw ... (*Sadly*) Alas poor Shakespeare! (*Recovery*) Well there is Peter Brook in the lunatic asylum in Hanoi and in his right senses too!

DIRECTOR Alas poor Peter Brook!

WRITER It was his finest moment! He rises to the occasion.

DIRECTOR Trust Peter.

WRITER One of the inmates accosts him, and says, I am a Canadian dramatist. (*Pause*) And Peter Brook said, very simply, I am Peter Brook, the British play director! (*Pause*) It's a nice recognition scene.

DIRECTOR What happens next?

WRITER I leave a lot of scope to the director. (*Pause*) Anything you like. (*Pause*) Within reason.

DIRECTOR But reason is posthumous.

WRITER So is life. We live it backwards. That's why we need the theatre. In the theatre we live life forwards into the future. This sort of reason is very mad. That's why I locate my play in a lunatic asylum in Hanoi.

DIRECTOR This is all very theoretical.

WRITER Well, to be practical, I suggest that they put on a play. (*Pause*) The bombs are falling all around them.

DIRECTOR They have to do something to distract themselves.

WRITER That's just it. Just simple madness is never distracting enough. *(Pause)* Peter Brook rises to the occasion sublimely.

DIRECTOR I knew he would.

WRITER He does. Let's ask, he decided, the medical superintendent for a budget.

DIRECTOR A sensible beginning.

WRITER That's what the Viet Cong psychiatrist thought.

DIRECTOR I can see the superintendent smiling.

WRITER But he was on the spot. He had been educated in the Harvard Medical School and he'd actually acted in a Brattle Street amateur production of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*. *(Pause)* Well, he stalls for time. *(Pause)* He asks them if they have a suitable play. *(Pause)* He's not opposed to the idea, mind you.

DIRECTOR Only to the budget.

WRITER He was on a budget himself.

DIRECTOR It's so difficult to find a suitable play.

WRITER Peter Brook told the superintendent of the insane asylum at Hanoi, No, I haven't a suitable play but I have got a Canadian playwright.

DIRECTOR This would be a challenge even for Peter Brook.

WRITER Oh it was a challenge to the Canadian playwright. *(Pause)* He had a captive audience. *(Pause)* And a captive director. *(Pause)* Peter Brook. *(Pause)* Unfortunately all his scripts were in a clothes closet in a room in a rooming house in Toronto. *(Pause)* You know the set up. There's a long hat-shelf. He'd piled all his MSS on this hat-shelf.

DIRECTOR Where'd he keep his hats?

WRITER He'd never had a hat—he kept his ear-muffs in his briefcase. In the summer-time he used them to polish his shoes. *(Pause)* But even if they long-distance telephoned for the scripts, there was still some back rent the Canadian playwright owed which would have to be paid before the script could be mailed to Hanoi.

DIRECTOR In the meantime, the bombardment was going on?

WRITER I've got a play about Sir Wilfrid Laurier, the Canadian playwright said. *(Pause)* Good, said Peter Brook. *(Pause)* I've got one about a forest fire in British Columbia. *(Pause)* Fine, said Peter Brook. *(Pause)* And I've got a play about Klondike Days. *(Pause)* Marvelous, said Peter Brook. *(Pause)* And a play about the Alberta Indians. *(Pause)* Great stuff, said Peter Brook. *(Pause)* And a play about the discovery of oil in Alberta. *(Pause)* Very interesting, said Peter Brook.

DIRECTOR Poor Peter Brook!

WRITER Which one shall I telephone for, asked the Canadian dramatist—the only book I have with me, he said is a telephone directory. I always carry an old telephone directory with me, he explained, in case I get stuck with names. *(Pause)* Peter Brook threw his hands in the air, in the wildest excitement. *(Pause)* You've got a Canadian telephone directory, he asked. *(Pause)* Yes, said the Canadian dramatist. *(Pause)* Well don't bother telephoning for any of your plays—I'll direct the telephone directory. It'll be a marvelous production. *(Pause)* Will you give me a part, asked the poor little strip tease dancer from Montana. *(Pause)* We'll all have parts said Peter Brook. Where's the directory. *(Pause)* It'll be difficult to cast, said the playwright handing it over. *(Pause)* There'll be some doubling, of course, said Peter Brook. *(Pause)* Here's our script, he told the superintendent, who, thinking Peter was madder than observation had indicated, authorized a budget.

DIRECTOR Well I get the situation.

WRITER It's a possible one?

DIRECTOR It just might work—Peter Brook directs a telephone directory in a lunatic asylum in Hanoi. *(Pause)* As soon as I get the translation back from the translators, I'll read it very carefully. *(Pause)* It seems to leave a lot to the director. It has an interesting if implausible situation—it doesn't exclude itself by being anti-American. It could even be taken as a satire on the Canadian playwright. *(Pause)* But what about an ending?

WRITER I think that should be left to the director.

DIRECTOR But supposing I do decide to produce your play, I'd like to know how you decided to end it.

WRITER I rather agree with you, that a writer's responsibility stops with the title. *(Pause)* I may even have committed an act of trespass there.

DIRECTOR Well, I'll see how you ended your script when it comes back from the translators.

WRITER I never gave you a script.

DIRECTOR But I'm waiting for your script to come back from the translators. *(Pause)* You said you'd sent me one...

WRITER I prevaricated.

DIRECTOR You lied to me. There's nothing I detest more than a liar. —You told me a bare-faced lie.

WRITER I prevaricated—it comes from my habit of fictionalizing.

DIRECTOR An occupational disease. —It doesn't excuse a downright lie. That is unforgivable.

WRITER Well, you lied to me.

DIRECTOR *(Relenting)* It's sometimes hard to face up to truth.

WRITER We've both prevaricated.

DIRECTOR Shake.

WRITER Gladly *(They shake hands)*. An occupational disease.

DIRECTOR But really you must let me see your script.

WRITER Oh, I never write any more scripts.

DIRECTOR But you are a writer—how ridiculous to say you don't write any scripts.

WRITER Not any more ridiculous than what you do.

DIRECTOR How am I ridiculous?

WRITER Well you're a famous Canadian director and you never direct any Canadian plays.

DIRECTOR You mean, we're a prize pair?

WRITER I never write any plays...

DIRECTOR And I never direct any Canadian plays...

WRITER We're a pair all right.

DIRECTOR Well, I'm going to reform. You really must get this play down on paper.

WRITER But I'm a writer and I'd only get it all too literary. *(Pause)* Why don't we just go ahead and produce it. *(Pause)* Just think of me as the playscript. *(Pause)* An oral playscript.

DIRECTOR I think you have an idea. *(Pause)* You'll stand beside me and create the play at the same time as I direct it?

WRITER Yes.

DIRECTOR You did say the title was your total responsibility.

WRITER I was making an extravagant claim. But we could start with the *American Bombardment of a Lunatic Asylum in Hanoi while Peter Brook was Directing a Canadian Telephone Directory There.*

DIRECTOR I suddenly—for the first time in my career as play director—feel proud I'm a Canadian. *(Pause)* I think I may have discovered my identity. *(Pause)* Do you mind ... would it greatly disturb you ... if we sang "O Canada" together.

WRITER Let's. *(They remain silent)*

DIRECTOR Are you a tenor, baritone or bass?

WRITER My voice wanders between the lower registers of Caruso's tenor voice and the upper registers of Chaliapin's bass. *(They sing, a little shakily, but with great courage)*

DIRECTOR AND WRITER
O CANADA OUR HOME AND GRACIOUS LAND, *etc.*

DIRECTOR In discovering your play, I've discovered my identity. *(Pause)* I've discovered I am a Canadian. *(Pause)* I've always been something else. *(Pause)* I'd never thought that to discover one's true identity was such a touching experience. *(Pause)* Thank you, thank you. *(Pause)* Do you mind if I embrace you, French fashion.

WRITER Please do. (*They embrace*)

DIRECTOR Just once more. (*Pause*) I hope you don't mind. I hope you don't think I'm impossibly sentimental. (*They embrace*) But it's as if I took my own native land in my arms.

WRITER It's an awfully moving situation. (*Pause*) To be near when someone discovers his true identity. (*Pause*) I feel privileged.

DIRECTOR Thank you.

WRITER There is a constriction in my throat.

DIRECTOR But having discovered that I am a Canadian, I find myself beginning to question your script ... (*Pause*) which was the cause of my realizing a true sense of Canadian identity.

WRITER Oneness with the maple leaf, and all that? (*Pause*) Oneness with the French-Canadian separatist and oneness with the white Anglo Saxon protestant? (*Pause*) One foot in the Atlantic Ocean and one foot in the Pacific? (*Pause*) Oneness?

DIRECTOR Yes. (*Pause*) But is your sort of script really a Canadian play? (*Pause*) I'll put it on, mind you, even if it's the last play I ever direct. (*Pause*) But what has a script about Peter Brook in a lunatic asylum in Hanoi to do with myself and my fellow Canadians in Canada?

WRITER My script is still unwritten.

DIRECTOR That's not an answer. —You are your script, isn't that what you said. (*Pause*) It's an oral script? (*Pause*) There's no question of my not putting it on. But ... is it really a Canadian play?

WRITER Well, I am a Canadian. How could I write anything but a Canadian play? (*Pause*) The lunatic asylum is a metaphor for Canada. (*Pause*) Peter Brook is a metaphor for the Canadian theatre. (*Pause*) The Canadian telephone directory is a metaphor for the Canadian people.

DIRECTOR But what about the Canadian playwright, the mad Canadian playwright, who has written plays about Sir Wilfrid Laurier, forest fires in British Columbia, Klondike Days, the Alberta Indian, the discovery of oil in Leduc...

WRITER He is a metaphor for the writer who has never discovered Canada.

DIRECTOR You're right. *(Pause)* I'm feeling a little giddy. *(Pause)* It's like finding a sense of identity in a bottle of Scotch whisky. *(Pause)* Things are a trifle hazy. *(Pause)* The world very uncertain. *(Pause)* I'm not at all sure I haven't identified with something that doesn't exist.

WRITER Perhaps we should sing "O Canada" again?

DIRECTOR Singing "O Canada" wouldn't help at all.

WRITER No I suppose not ... I suppose not.

DIRECTOR It's what you said about life ... we live it posthumously. *(Pause)* Canada is so very much of the future, that we can only really be Canadians in the theatre, where we naturally live in the future. *(Pause)* I'm going to take a deep breath. Would you like to take one with me? *(They breathe a deep breath of air together)* *(Pause)* I feel better now. *(Pause)* I think I would like to sing "O Canada" again if you would join in with me. *(Pause)* You don't mind do you?

DIRECTOR AND WRITER
(Singing) O CANADA, etc.

Curtain.