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RECHERCHES THÉÂTRALES AU CANADA

COMPTE RENDUS / BOOK REVIEWS

ROBIN C. WHITTAKER, ed.

Hot Thespian Action!: 10 Premiere Plays from Walterdale Playhouse

Edmonton, AB: AU Press, 2008. 569 pp.

NICHOLAS HANSON

Robin C. Whittaker has assembled a collection of texts that lives up to its playful title, *Hot Thespian Action!: 10 Premiere Plays from Walterdale Playhouse*. Despite operating continuously since 1958, the Edmonton-based Walterdale Playhouse lacks a national profile—not surprising, given the critical bias facing amateur theatre companies, a fact passionately noted by Whittaker. Readers unfamiliar with the Walterdale might be astonished to discover the scope of productions it has staged, including Edmonton premieres of landmark international works like Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, Pinter's *The Caretaker*, and Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, as well as Canadian icons such as French's *Leaving Home*, Tremblay's *Les Belles Soeurs*, and Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. Moreover, the Walterdale has actively encouraged play development, with productions of over sixty new plays in fifty years.

In addition to the ten scripts, *Hot Thespian Action!* includes a critical introduction about the Walterdale, as well as a contextualizing passage for each play. With succinct prose accessible for a general readership, Whittaker situates the Walterdale's development in the context of Canadian theatre history. In doing so, Whittaker not only traces the progression of one specific company, but also debunks the mythologized notion that all amateur Canadian theatre companies desire to "evolve" into professional ones. For scholars, the richest part of the critical introduction stems from Whittaker's repositioning of the word "amateur." Breaking down the binarized model of amateur versus professional, Whittaker suggests the use of "preprofessionals (anticipating future professional work)," "paraprofessionals (simultaneously pursuing professional work at other companies)," as well as "nonprofessional[s, showing] little interest in professionalizing, and remain[ing] content with the designation 'amateur' even as they produce compelling works for the stage" (9). These insightful distinctions appear useful for discussions of

contemporary Canadian theatre practice, given the number of artists concurrently navigating PACT, Fringe, co-op, and independent theatre environments.

With persuasive rationales, Whittaker describes how, contrary to common stereotypes, amateur theatre companies often program experimental and challenging plays; in the case of Walterdale, seasons have regularly included new works, giving the editor a half-century's worth of options for this anthology. The ten selected plays span a range of eras, genres, and subjects; the playwrights are both emerging and established. Whittaker notes that the plays were chosen "for their quality, readability (on the page), and producibility (in performance)" (13). That said, some of the works provide interesting reflections on their eras, but are hard to imagine on a contemporary stage. For instance, due to the overt didacticism of Wilfred Watson's *The Canadian Fact* (1967) and the geographic and temporal specificity of Warren Graves's melodrama *Chief Shaking Spear Rides Again or the Taming of the Sioux* (1974), these works appear unlikely to find a new life on stage. For fans of Brad Fraser, *Mutants* (1981) is a must-read; its production played a key role in sparking his theatre career and the script's incendiary language and frenetic situations provide a foundation for considering his later works. Gordon Pengilly's *Swipe* (1981) stands out as an elegantly written selection, playable on a contemporary stage and deserving of keen consideration from the reader. Among the most recent plays, Trevor Schmidt's *Just* (1999) includes poetic rhythms and subversive tones in a one-woman form. As well, the bleakness of Jonathan Seinen's [*ice land*] (2003) communicates a passionate playwriting voice.

In addition to the merits of the text edition, *Hot Thespian Action!* earns attention for its accompanying media materials. On AU Press's webpage (www.aupress.ca), an open access digital version of the book appears, along with nearly an hour's worth of video clips that feature Whittaker discussing Walterdale and the collected plays. In a way, the materials on the site resemble the bonus commentaries commonly included with DVDs. In each of the videos, a casual Whittaker coherently elaborates on the background of Walterdale and the plays. Some of the videos repeat ideas from the text, while others share lighthearted reflections. Greater integration of images, sounds, and speech might better exploit this technological add-on; as is, most of the videos feature a seated Whittaker speaking information that could be adequately captured via written text. As a project to test-drive the concept of an electronic book, *Hot Thespian Action!* is well-suited, as the open

access digital version and the web-accessible clips provide a perfect parallel for the populist appeal and structure of *Walterdale*. At this time, electronic book readers have yet to gain traction, though some new devices appear to be capturing consumer interest; in the near future, an integrated source of text, images, and videos could be the most vibrant means to disseminate research.

As a contribution to Canadian theatre, *Hot Thespian Action!* deserves notice, not just for the novelty of the subject, but for the perceptive commentary of the critical materials and the eclectic collection of undiscovered plays.

MONIQUE MOHICA AND RIC KNOWLES, eds.

Staging Coyote's Dream: An Anthology of First Nations Drama in English, Vol. I.

Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2003. 459 pp.

MONIQUE MOHICA AND RIC KNOWLES, eds.

Staging Coyote's Dream: An Anthology of First Nations Drama in English, Vol. II.

Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2008. 367 pp.

ANNIE SMITH

Ric Knowles and Monique Mohica, the editors of both volumes of *Staging Coyote's Dream*, are situated in Ontario. As a collaborator, Mohica brings her history of being nurtured by Spiderwoman Theatre and her experience as an actor and playwright and collaborator with Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble. She is a former artistic director of Native Earth Performing Arts. Knowles is Professor of Theatre Studies at Guelph University and an editor for *Canadian Theatre Review*. His books include *The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning, Shakespeare and Canada*, and *Reading the Material Theatre*; he is general editor of the book series *Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre* from Playwrights Canada Press.

The two volumes of *Staging Coyote's Dream* present a collection of twenty plays by fifteen playwrights, published between 1986 and 2004, Volume I ending in 2000 and Volume II beginning in 1996. The playwrights are Native American writers from both Canada and the US because, as the editors explain in their intro-

duction to Vol. I, "the decision not to restrict the plays to those produced within the geopolitical boundaries of Canada makes two implicit claims. [. . .] he right of First Nations peoples not to be subject to the political or legislative regimes of later-day nations; [and . . .] a history that long precedes contact or colonization, that has not been superseded, and that cannot be circumscribed" (iv).

I make a point of situating the editors in Ontario because I believe this has a bearing on the choices of plays in these two anthologies. The playwrights who are included in these volumes are, for the most part, connected by the fact that they are "a family of theatre artists who share certain aspects of their heritage and certain experiences of the contemporary world" (iv). I understand this quite literally for the artists included seem to constellate around Spiderwoman Theatre in New York (Miguel, Borst, Mohica, Turtle Gals); the Centre for Indigenous Theatre, founded by Favel (Toronto); and Native Earth Performing Arts (Toronto), with which a number of the playwrights have been associated (Moses, Highway, Taylor, Nolan, Mohica, Dandurand). The exceptions to these constellations are Shirley Cheechoo, the founder of De-ba-je-ma-jig Theatre (also Ontario); Margo Kane and Marie Clements, west coasters; and William S. Yellow Robe Jr. from Montana. The "certain experiences of the contemporary world" may also refer to the post-colonial project of Native identity and the weight of experience of colonial oppression which haunts and is, indeed, the subject of many of the plays in these two volumes.

As a teacher and director of works by Native playwrights, I admit to some curiosity as to why these particular plays/playwrights are included in this two-volume anthology. Anthologies, by their nature, suggest an editorial rationale for their contents; Knowles and Mohica, in their introduction to the first volume, tell us that this is "a collection of plays that appeals to us and challenges us as editors" (iii). They take care to explain that they are not attempting a representative collection but an "eclectic selection" of plays and playwrights. This disclaimer notwithstanding, I would appreciate more elucidation of their choices, particularly as the second volume has little to offer by way of introduction and many of the playwrights appear for the second time, in their own right or as members of collectives. The second volume would gain by including the excellent introduction from the first volume which offers readers useful discussions of terminology in a field that is developing in resistance to western forms of theatre, while,