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NO COWPERSONS ON THIS RANGE: THE CULTURAL COMPLEXITY OF ALBERTA THEATRE

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Contemporary theatre in Alberta performs the cultural diversity of the province, playing against the stereotypes of prairie realism and cowboy iconography. Alberta playwrights reflect a wide multicultural spectrum, but their focus is rarely on a reification or validation of specific ethnic communities; they are not compelled to dramatize their distinctiveness, although their family and community histories inform the complex moral and cultural dynamics of their works. Their ethnicity is integral to their consideration of a broad range of subjects: from Canadian immigrant history, to the dialogic structure of Baroque music, to the tragic consequences of the political exploitation of science.

Their work has not been nurtured in ethnic community theatres, but through a network of theatre companies in the province all engaged in the development of new Canadian plays: Workshop West and Theatre Network in Edmonton, Alberta Theatre Projects in Calgary, and the Banff Centre for the Arts. Moreover, Alberta ethnic theatre has played across the country in

the regional and national theatres. Alberta's playwrights create complex and diverse scenarios, performing the wide range of Canadian identity. As Stuart Hall posits in his essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," identity is a performative process, continually being negotiated through a complex historical process of appropriation, compromise, subversion, masking, invention and revival" (401). This essay will consider several works by four Alberta playwrights whose recent plays both subvert and reinvent the cultural identity of their province: *Mom, Dad I'm Living with a White Girl* and *The Forbidden Phoenix* by Marty Chan, *Ribbon* by Pat Darbasie, *The Red Priest* and *The Blue Light* by Mieko Ouchi, and *Einstein's Gift* and *Blowfish* by Vern Thiessen.

Edmonton playwright Marty Chan resists a "Chinese-Canadian" tag. He has written plays in diverse subjects and styles, including a thriller called *The Bone House* (1999) for the Edmonton Fringe Festival, in which a killer stalks the audience; the text for a rock opera for teens entitled *The Seventh Circle* (2001), using Dante's *Inferno* as a metaphor for a high school hell; and a political satire – *The Old Boys Club* (1997), which takes aim at systemic corruption in the Alberta government. The enthusiastic audience response to *The Bone House* proved to him "that writing was an intellectual endeavour, not a cultural one. Race was neither a boon nor a burden." (Chan, "Ethnic" 13); and he wonders why "in Canada we want to practice literary segregation" (14). Yet his plays consistently challenge racial stereotypes, and in two of his major plays, the dynamics of ethnicity play a significant role in deconstructing family relationships and national mythologies.

Mom, Dad, I'm Living with a White Girl, which premiered at the Cahoots Theatre in Toronto in 1994 and has since been produced in a revised form across the country, questions the assumption of a tolerant Canadian multiculturalism by foregrounding implicit racism that can operate in both directions – against the white majority, as well as against a Chinese minority. The protagonist, Mark Gee, is a young second-generation Chinese male living in Vancouver, who resists the traditional expectations of his parents, and decides to live with his white girlfriend. His mother, Li Fen, reacts strongly against his relationship with a "Gwai mui," whom she considers little better than a prostitute, and his father, Kim, wants him to learn acupuncture so that he can take over the family business. Mark's psychological defence is to demonize his parents in terms of the 1930s B-movie characterizations of the "yellow peril" as a sinister dragon lady, "Yellow Claw," and her henchman who are seeking world domination. These Western constructions of personified

evil express the racist stereotypes of the majority culture, but also Mark's denial of his own heritage.

The play works on two intersecting planes – the literal and the imagined. In the imagined world of the B-movie, Mark plays a secret service agent named Agent Banana; his girlfriend, Sally, assumes the identity of his partner, Snow Princess. In these roles, they enact the battle of “good versus evil” in the terms constructed by Western society, although Sally is also the voice of a liberalism that is shown to be disingenuous and naïve in its response to perceived racism. For example, Mark's reaction to a film script of “The Wrath of the Yellow Claw” that Sally is reviewing as part of her job is that “it's got potential,” whereas Sally believes that Asian caricatures and racist jokes are not funny because they “make[s] everyone think Asians are villains and buffoons” (Chan, *Mom, Dad* 126). Mark's response to her assertion that “we've outgrown these kinds of stereotypes,” is to ask her whether she has seen a Jackie Chan flick lately. He thinks that Sally herself is guilty of appropriation of voice in speaking on behalf of the Chinese and that “it's better to have everything in the open” (126). Through such “role reversals,” the playwright holds a mirror up to his audience, so that it will clearly see its own racist assumptions, and the inadequacies of a “politically correct” response. But he also expresses his own right to make ethnic jokes in his plays, and to explore complex issues of ownership. He satirizes entrenched and unacknowledged racism and apathy, but also the tendency to exoticize difference; for example Sally identifies Mark's quest for “independence” in terms of “the right to speak [his] mind [a]nd the apathy to say nothing” as being distinctively Canadian (99). On the other hand, Mark exposes Sally's fascination with Chinese culture as limited to her knowledge of enough Cantonese to order Chinese food.

In *Mom, Dad, I'm Living with a White Girl* the tensions between past and present, between a traditional culture that exacts obedience and a Western culture that assumes a freedom of choice remain unresolved. Mark finally decides to leave his girlfriend, but for a variety of personal and cultural reasons. The “*shuriken*” (throwing star) that he wields in his persona as Agent Banana doing battle with his parents in their personas as forces of evil can cut both ways since, in erasing them from his life, he also destroys something of himself. Although he resists his parents' expectations, he also resists the assimilative pressures of Canadian society. His final three statements, which have the formality of Chinese aphorisms, testify to his “rite of passage”:

Mark: The panda lets go of her cubs.

Mark looks to where Kim left.

Mark: The butterfly climbs out of its cocoon.

Mark finally notices his shadows on the back wall.

He turns around and looks to Li Fen.

Then he looks out.

Mark: The young tree has deep roots (167).

Like Alberta playwright Sharon Pollock, Chan has also disinterred the buried history of exploitation and racism in Canada. *Best Left Buried* explores the reasons for the burning of Chinatown in Nanaimo in 1960 from the point of view of the Chinese who worked in the coalmines. In *The Forbidden Phoenix* (Catalyst Theatre 2003), Chan deconstructs imperialistic “national” symbols, such as the Canadian Pacific Railway, which has functioned as an image of Canadian unity. The route to the west coast was blasted through the mountains by Chinese labourers, many of whom died in the construction of the “National Dream.” *The Forbidden Phoenix* is a political allegory about Chinese immigrant experience in the late nineteenth century. Deluded by the myth of the Gold Mountain – the expectation of riches that awaited them in Canada – Chinese men toiled on the railways and in the mines; they were forbidden to bring their families with them, and were denied citizenship. In Chan’s fable, the hero/protagonist is the Monkey King, the archetypal Chinese trickster figure, who leaves the starving Kingdom of the East and the repressive regime of the Empress Dowager to find a prosperous future for his people in the Western land of plenty. He also leaves behind his beloved adopted son, a starving young peasant. In the West, however, he is co-opted by Tiger (the forces of the establishment and government) to dig a tunnel through Gold Mountain so that Tiger can join his lover, the fearsome Iron Dragon. His only hope for a new life in the West lies in the Phoenix (which symbolizes the immigrants’ dreams), and together they defeat the Tiger and the Iron Dragon. In Chan’s deconstruction of the East/West binary, the forces of the industrialized West are destructive of environment, culture, and social harmony, and defeated only by intellect and imagination. Once this is accomplished, Monkey King can rescue his peasant son from the Empress, and lead his people into the West. As a tamed Tiger explains, “Home is not a place. It is a state of mind. As long as the curtain of water flows, [the Monkey King’s] home is both kingdoms” (74).

The Forbidden Phoenix was performed as a Chinese opera, with some modifications to accommodate the martial arts and singing skills of local

actors, only one of whom was Chinese in the 2003 Edmonton production – actor and playwright Elyne Quan, who played the Monkey King. Chan believed that in order to tell his story of Chinese immigrants it was important to use the conventions of Chinese theatre. His main purpose, however, was to introduce Chinese theatre and stories to Canadian audiences, since they were not in the public consciousness. He inflects the style and the content to tell a Canadian “nation-building” story from the point of view of the Chinese immigrants, but the play does not express Chinese values, according to Chan; it tells a Canadian story to engage Canadian audiences (Chan Interview).¹



In *Ribbon*, Edmonton actor and teacher Pat Darbasie also recreates history as contemporary testimony; she demonstrates the importance of family and community in challenging social marginalization and establishing a sense of belonging and purpose. She believes that “home” is what is familiar; identity is realized through the touchstones that connect people (Darbasie Interview). In telling the story of a Black pioneer family in Alberta, she brings into social consciousness the diverse cultural matrix of the province. The play has an important educational function: Black people in Canada have been represented primarily by immigrants from West India and/or Africa; until recently, the voices of Canadian Black residents of Alberta have not been heard.

Ribbon was written, enacted, and directed as Darbasie’s MFA project at the University of Alberta and produced in September 2005 in collaboration with Ground Zero Productions, “as part of an initiative to reflect the social reality of culturally diverse communities” (Darbasie Program). It enacts the reconnection of a Black woman in her mid-forties with her great-grandmother, whose voice she hears in the family home she has come to dismantle and sell near the town of Athabasca. Darbasie plays both the younger woman, Paula, and older woman, Lilly, whose monologue imagines the experiences of the Black families who migrated from Oklahoma and settled in Pine Creek (Amber Valley) in the early twentieth century. This is not Darbasie’s history, although there are intersections with her own experience as a Black immigrant from Trinidad: despite her origins, like her protagonist, Lilly, she feels “wholly Canadian” (Darbasie Interview). In one scene in *Ribbon*, Lilly is in the land claims office in Athabasca, and is asked by an immigrant where she is from. Her response is, “I’m from here.” For Darbasie, “It’s wonderful to be able to say that” (*Edmonton Journal* 5).

Darbasié integrated stories from two other Alberta plays in *Ribbon*: a monologue by Ground Zero director, Don Bouzek, which she performed in 1999, about a woman who loses her husband in the Hillcrest Mine disaster; and *Beloved Community* by Jane Heather, in which a mother and daughter, the descendants of Black pioneers in Alberta, respond to globalization issues. Darbasié began to speculate on a possible life for a Black woman in Alberta in the early twentieth century. She found the Black community very supportive, in particular the Black Pioneer Society of Alberta, which mounted a front-of-house display for the Studio Theatre premiere. She accessed stories collected over many years, some of which have been published in the two-volume anthology, *The Window of Our Memories*, and incorporated into her play historic details such as the fires near Athabasca that threatened the community, and the Amber Valley baseball team. She also drew on significant socio-political details such as White racial assumptions in respect to miscegenation, the reasons for Black immigration from the United States, and employment and relocation patterns. Through her stories, Lilly recalls her childhood, her first marriage to a miner, her early widowhood, and her remarriage of convenience to a C.N. railway porter. Her stories reveal a strong-willed and courageous woman with a sense of humour.

Paula only begins to understand the importance of the stories of her family when she finds a red ribbon that her great-grandmother tied in her hair when she was a child, and which she believed lost to a gust of wind. She realizes that the “junk” in the home embodies a precious legacy. The line Paula reads from Lilly’s copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* resonates with her own experience: “For as I draw closer and closer to the end, I travel in the circle, nearer and nearer to the beginning” (quoted in *Ribbon 2*). However, although Lilly’s stories are intended for Paula, they are directed at the theatre audience, and Paula only dimly begins to sense Lilly’s presence in the house at the end of the play. The symbolic family detritus functions as a mnemonic for Lilly, not Paula, whose role is that of a convenient link to the present.



Director, actor, filmmaker, playwright Mieko Ouchi began to explore her heritage by making a documentary film based on her grandfather’s life during the 1940s internment of Japanese Canadians. She is fourth-generation Japanese and her mother is Irish/Scottish, and she never thought of herself as Japanese as a child. She spoke no Japanese and attended a French immersion

school in Calgary. However in the process of making the film she discovered that she was representing a collective Japanese-Canadian war experience; the Japanese community “gave [her] back her culture” (Ouchi Interview *Mote*). In effect, she had been part of this community her whole life, but never knew it (Ouchi Interview Nothof). Although Mieko has contacts with other Asian artists across the country, established primarily during her days as a touring actor, she has yet to collaborate with Asian theatres or groups in creating a play. She feels no obligation to speak for the Japanese-Canadian community, members of which have a range of perspectives depending on age and experience; nor that she should limit herself in respect to cultural representation. She believes that a unique cultural perspective may inform other stories than one’s own. According to Ouchi, “a diversity of voices is what makes a community whole” (Interview Nothof). Her plays, *The Red Priest (Eight Ways to Say Goodbye)* (2003) and *The Blue Light* (2005), both distance themselves in time and place from the Canadian scene in order to explore the creative and destructive potential of the imagination – the ways in which art can function as an expression of freedom or a means of indoctrination and political control. In *The Red Priest*, Antonio Vivaldi debates the paradoxical nature of music with a reluctant pupil; in *The Blue Light*, Leni Riefenstahl defends her filmmaking for Hitler’s Third Reich as an apolitical aesthetic enterprise.

The Red Priest is a duologue set in Paris in 1640 – one year before Vivaldi died in Vienna, impoverished and alone, despite his prodigious creative output of hundreds of instrumental and choral works. A French aristocrat has employed him to teach the violin to his wife in six weeks in order to win a bet with the king, Louis XV. Although teacher and pupil appear to be mismatched and out of tune when they first meet, Vivaldi and the “Woman” begin to appreciate their similarities and to work in harmony: both are powerless in terms of their social situation, dependent on the Count for their livelihood, and consequently obliged to be subservient; both speculate on the ways they can say goodbye to the patronage that enslaves them. They express intensely personal feelings indirectly through a conversation about music and gardens. Both have public and private faces and find ways to exercise a degree of imaginative freedom – Vivaldi through the making of music, the Woman through her love of gardens. Baroque music and French gardens are complex formal structures, characterized by repeated motifs, but which allow for elaboration and extemporization. The Woman resists her much older husband’s concept of an ideal garden, “*Le Jardin de la*

Raison,” because it is too controlled; it suggests “man’s triumph over the slippery bits” with trees “twisted and trained into classical columns” (Ouchi, *The Red Priest* 3). She fully understands the beautiful yet ephemeral nature of gardens and of her own life – that “[t]wo hundred years from now, nothing will be left here but bones. The bones of a garden. No flowers. No order. No flesh. Just a skeleton of architectural remains and ruin” (9). Similarly, Vivaldi speculates on the nature of his musical creativity, which is not realized wholly through the extremes of punishing, disciplined effort, or emotional abandonment. It is both a gift and a curse: “Our ability to play a piece perfectly and with such ease unleashes its potential so completely, that our *own* feelings and connection to it are... irrelevant. The injustice of this is as malicious as it is heartbreaking” (8).

Vivaldi and the Woman extend their duet in a debate over the ways in which portraiture and statues can express women as trapped and caged, or as free. Vivaldi sees in a portrait of the Woman as “Flora” a personification of springtime, “Woman’s connection to nature, fertility and the wild and untamed world” (38), but like Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” it is a portrait commissioned and owned by her husband. He compares it to the portrait of Antea by the sixteenth century Italian painter, Parmigianino, whose restrained expression and formal attire are complicated by the pelt of a weasel draped over her shoulder, as an example of ambivalent and subversive art. Art may be used in many different ways, and may accomplish much or accomplish nothing; it may be demanding, even destructive. As Vivaldi explains to the Woman:

Like the mother you describe, a good composition is not simple and one sided. And like the past, it should never be washed with the *colour of sentimental love* either. A piece of music is as multi-faced and dimensional as a ... garden. It takes many viewings to truly appreciate and understand. It is alive and it is changing. (46)

Most importantly, as the Woman concludes in *The Red Priest*, it enables us to “see the world in a different way” (54).

Mieko Ouchi played the Woman in the Alberta Theatre Production’s premiere at the playRites Festival in 2003, not as an exercise in “colour-blind” casting, but because it was impossible to find an actor who was skilled enough to play the violin solo at the end of the play – the symbolic expression of the Woman’s triumph over her personal and social limitations. Ouchi learned the violin as a child, although reluctantly, and has come to appreciate the

formative influences of musical structure, tone, and mood on her playwriting. Although she believes that her Japanese physiognomy should have no bearing on the role, at least one member of the ATP audience connected her performance with a vision of a Geisha in a garden setting. For Ouchi, however, “there are many connections between women who have been put in all kinds of cages all through history” (McLaughlin).

Ouchi’s *The Blue Light*² also considers the role of a frustrated creative woman in a portrait of Leni Riefenstahl. The play celebrates her artistic achievement while questioning her ethical and political compromises. Like *Ribbon*, it is a memory play, cutting back and forth in time and place from a Los Angeles film studio office in 2002 to Leni’s childhood in Berlin in order to focus on seminal scenes from her career as actor, director, and filmmaker. In effect, the play functions as an imaginative documentary: using a “filmic” style, Ouchi records the people and events that informed Leni’s art. The play is unapologetic in its portrait, even as it reveals Leni’s self-delusion. The blue light of the film image has only a partial relationship to reality: it illuminates, but can also be a romantic distortion. As Leni argues in the play, every film has a subliminal propagandist subtext, whether it is recognized or acknowledged.

In her early film, *The Blue Light* (1932), Leni played the heroine, Junta, a solitary woman considered to be a witch by her community, who discovers a cave of crystals in the mountains radiating a blue light. When she confides its location to a young man, he betrays her trust in order to take the crystals for himself. Her ideal world cannot sustain the intrusion of reality. The scenario of Leni’s first film inspired her for the rest of her life, and also prefigures her downfall, as she struggles to realize an ideal in art, but repeatedly finds that a price is exacted – by her mentor, the film director Arnold Frank; and by the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, Josef Goebbels, who solicits her skills as a filmmaker by pointing out that like her, Hitler “is dedicated and keen to make sure our German stories are told and remembered” (Ouchi, *The Blue Light* 39). Even though Hitler promises Leni the complete cooperation and support of the Nazi party, the blue light of her vision is subsumed by political fanaticism, and becomes a symbol of the “sacred shrine of Germany” (Ouchi, *The Blue Light* 53). Riefenstahl sees her 1934 documentary on the Nuremberg rally, *The Triumph of the Will*, as an ecstatic celebration of personified power: “On my knees, in the dirt, I shot [Hitler] against a sky set ablaze with light from the sacred shrine of Germany. Pious. Powerful. Invoking God himself” (53). Leni is driven to make unforgettable

films, regardless of the consequences. She leaves personal and political judgements to others.

Ouchi's *The Blue Light* invokes Riefenstahl's life through the images of her films, and by scripting the infamous historical photographs of her meetings with Hitler and Goebbels. The men in her life function as variant influences and ideologies. Leni's first cameraman and lover initially supports her independent spirit and then disagrees with her decision to work for Hitler; he warns her about being "used" and offers an alternative response to the question of artistic integrity. The "father figures" represent the authorities in Leni's life with whom she negotiates some room to create her own vision, including Hitler and her own father. The "enabling" men, Josef Goebbels and Arnold Frank, have also exacted a personal price. Ouchi casts the same "father-figure" actor as the film icon, Walt Disney, a casting that suggests that American film empire is also heavily invested in political propaganda, although, ironically, its stories may be German: Disney's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, starring Mickey Mouse, is based on a tale by Goethe.

Questions of cultural representation are also raised in *The Blue Light*. The 1920s "Bergfilme," in which Riefenstahl starred as a romantic heroine saved from avalanches and crevasses by ski instructors, were a popular German national and cultural genre. In what sense, then, do Canadian or Albertan films and plays reflect national or local ideology or perspective? Does an artist have a responsibility to interrogate the politics and policies of her own society? In questioning the motives of other artists, is she also interrogating her own?



Vern Thiessen's plays are also engaged in ethical debates on a personal and political level. They range across cultures and histories to consider the possibility of exercising humanist values despite betrayals and compromises, and the possibility of faith and belief in a world bent on self-destruction. His plays also have a wide range of form and style: Theatre of the Absurd (*The Resurrection of John Frum*), domestic contemporary tragedy (*Apple*), an introspective monologue on love and marriage (*Shakespeare's Will*), and historical epic (*Einstein's Gift* and *Vimy*).

Raised in Winnipeg by Mennonite parents, Thiessen graduated from the MFA playwrighting program at the University of Alberta in 1992, and has been based in Alberta for the past fifteen years, working as a playwright, actor, dramaturge, director, and theatre educator. In several of his plays, he

explores the cultural contradictions and “outsider” status of his “German-speaking-Russian-Mennonite-turned-Canadian” heritage (quoted in DyckFehderau iii). His first play, *The Courier* (Theatre Centre, Toronto, 1988) is a monologue spoken by a young Mennonite from the Russian Ukraine as he reconsiders his moral responsibilities as a courier for the Nazi army in the Second World War. In *Back to Berlin* (Solo Collective, Vancouver 2005) a lapsed Mennonite son interrogates his elderly father about his complicity in Nazi atrocities during a trip to Berlin. And like Mieko Ouchi, Thiessen has explored the tragic consequences of a political expropriation of the creative imagination for nationalistic ends in his epic play, *Einstein’s Gift* (2003).

In *Einstein’s Gift*, Thiessen compares the philosophies and beliefs of physicist Albert Einstein and chemist Fritz Haber with respect to their scientific research, and the ironic and tragic consequences of their work. Haber proves to be a complex, paradoxical subject – a German Jew who converted to Christianity in order to retain his university position and advance in his career; a Nobel Prize winner and a war criminal; and an idealist who believes in the practical application of ideals. His life is framed as a memory play, beginning in 1945 with Einstein as narrator recalling his debates with Haber over a period of forty years, from their first meeting in Germany in 1905 to their final meeting in 1934. Both have engaged in scientific research that has resulted in the horrific destruction of human lives: Einstein’s work on nuclear chain reactions fuelled the construction of the atomic bomb; Haber’s work on nitrogen as a fertilizer was put to a more destructive application as chlorine gas in the First World War, and his work on the pesticide Zyklon B was exploited by the Nazis in the manufacture of gas for the death camps. In the play, Einstein extols the primacy of the intellect in research, and strives to be free of nationalistic and religious dogma while retaining his Jewish identity: “what man thinks and how he thinks, and *not* what he does or suffers... we must practice science and leave goodness to God” (46). Haber believes that his research should have a practical application, and serve the “greater good” of the state. Like Ouchi’s *The Blue Light*, the play also underscores the importance of hope, belief, and freedom for imaginative creativity. In the words of Einstein, “[w]e require a new way of thinking if we are to survive” (91).

Einstein’s exhortation is directed towards a contemporary Canadian audience as much as against Germany’s National Socialism in the 1930s. It is also Einstein who poses the final question in the play: Should creativity be stifled or silenced when it can have destructive consequences? Einstein

reaches a similar conclusion to the Woman in Ouchi's *The Red Priest*: science, like art, challenges perception and feeds the soul (13).

Thiessen rigorously researched the life and work of Haber in the Archiv zur Geschichte der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft in Berlin, and accessed previously unpublished material in German (*Einstein* 105). However, he also explains in his postscript to the published play that he is neither an historian nor a scientist, and has extemporized on events and characters in order to construct a story. In Act I, he covers events before and during the First World War. In Act II, he shows how Haber again makes tragic compromises the 1930s. Secondary characters perform functional and humanizing roles: Haber's two wives initially support and then challenge his decisions; and his research assistant is a confidante and friend in Act I, and an adversary aligned with the Nazis in Act II, ironically using Haber's own arguments against him.

The title of the play is ironically appropriate on several levels: the German word, *gift*, means "poison" in English; Einstein's legacy, even more so than Haber's, is a mixed one. His final gifts to Haber are a *kippa* [yarmulka] and a *tallis* [prayer shawl], for his journey to Palestine, where he hopes to find a place to die, having been betrayed by Germany, the nation for which he has sold his soul. According to Thiessen, their "gift" to the audience is their struggle to understand what they believe:

I believe we are all like Einstein and Haber at some level. Even if we are not all brilliant physicists or ambitious chemists, I believe we all have hopes and dreams, and conversely, that we all wrestle with doubt. And if we follow Einstein and Haber's lead, we will see this doubt – and crises of faith – as a gift. (*Einstein* 105)

Like *The Blue Light*, *Einstein's Gift* is an ambitious play that interrogates history in terms of individual moral choices and compromises.

Thiessen's earlier play, *Blowfish* (1996), is also a moral and existential inquiry – a memory play in the form of a monologue with an Alberta setting. It explores the possibility of living humanist values through the philosophical ruminations and family memories of a caterer named Lumiere. He traces his life in Alberta from his experiences in the mortuary where he assisted his father, the death of his twin brother in a car accident, and the deaths of his parents in the Edmonton tornado of 1987. He describes his conversion to a right-wing political agenda, and finally enacts his own death as a ritualistic celebration. Lumiere's life unfolds as a series of disasters that test his beliefs, but which finally inform his beliefs. He formulates a philosophy of dying,

which is integral to his philosophy of living, and he takes his cue from Socrates – whose dying provided the opportunity for one last symposium with his followers. A humanist philosophy that values rationality and self-determination is defined through interrogation and debate, not through fixed systems or ideologies. Thiessen's play employs a Socratic mode of inquiry that activates and energizes doubt and irony, pitting the chaotic, irrational forces of the Edmonton tornado against the positive cohesive elements of family as a microcosm of human society.



Alberta playwrights Marty Chan, Pat Darbasie, Mieko Ouchi, and Vern Thiessen all tell the stories that inform the culture and society of the people who live in the province – whether they are set here or elsewhere, in the past or in the present.³ They also enable their audiences to see the world in different ways; through a wide range of perspectives. They explore the possibility and consequences of making moral, political, and personal choices, outlining the parameters and complexities, but assuming the necessary responsibilities attendant on choice.

NOTES

1. Marty Chan has also explored his Chinese heritage in the CBC radio play, *The Gift*, set in rural China during the Cultural Revolution, at a time when his own grandmother was persecuted by the Red Guard.
2. Vern Thiessen read an early draft of *The Blue Light*, and provided feedback from a German perspective.
3. In this respect, they share the moral imperatives of the plays of Sharon Pollock, who has mentored and encouraged many Alberta playwrights.

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