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CENTRAL EUROPEAN THEATRE AND THE *CANADIAN
THEATRE REVIEW*: THE FIRST DECADE

1. Introduction

The history of the Canadian theatre goes back to 1606 when the first theatrical performance was presented on the shores of Port Royal to celebrate the return of the Governor from his trip. Nevertheless, professional theatre in Canada has a relatively short history; in fact, less than half a century.

With some exaggeration, I might also say that theatre criticism in Canada has existed ever since the regular publication of local and national newspapers. The story of this fascinating genre is very well illustrated and commented upon in *Establishing Our Boundaries* published in 1999. Theatre journals, however, emerged only in the 1960s when various experts—directors, historians, dramaturgs, critics and scholars—wanted to express their views on the state of affairs as well as the development of the theatre arts in Canada. Although the difference between day-to-day criticism of individual performances and a more academic approach to the art of the theatre in any culture may seem evident, it is worth quoting Herbert Whittaker, one of the doyens of Canadian theatre criticism, who was the first national chairman of the Canadian Theatre Critics Association and worked for the *Globe and Mail* for more than thirty years. Concerning the history of Canadian theatre criticism, he wrote that

The academic critic is allowed a more historical perspective, watching for the trends taken by [the current theatrical] expression. While the daily working critic feels part of the daily creativity, clinging precariously to his objectivity, the periodical critics must look for overall

developments, making note of similar trends in time and place. (Wagner, *Contemporary* 340)

Given this fact, it seems natural that academic or half-academic theatre journals would be founded relatively late. In Canada, the first such magazine was *Performing Arts in Canada*, a quarterly founded and published in 1961 in Toronto. From 1964 the journal happened to have strong Hungarian connections because George Hencz became President of the company that published it and he stayed in that position for more than three decades. Editors of the journal included then prominent Hungarian intellectuals such as Rolf Kalman, Stephen Mezei or Billyann Balay. Since 1991 the magazine has become *Performing Arts and Entertainment in Canada* and covered theatre, dance, concert and other cultural events. (As far as I know, the journal ceased to appear after 2002 due to the illness of George Hencz and some other circumstances.)

The first journal devoted solely to the theatre was a short-lived periodical entitled *The Stage in Canada* founded in 1965 and published by the Canadian Theatre Centre. Its editors included Tom Hendry, co-founder of the Manitoba Theatre Centre (with John Hirsch) and Jean Louis Roux, among others. Although I have no concrete information, it seems that the journal was not published after 1968.

2. The Canadian Theatre Review: The Background

The first issue of the still most significant theatre quarterly, the *Canadian Theatre Review*, came out in winter 1974 published by the Faculty of Fine Arts, York University, Toronto. The founding editor was Professor Don Rubin, an American expatriate, who decided to choose Canada as his home during the Vietnam war. For the first few issues he had two associate editors, the already mentioned Stephen Mezei and the noted theatre historian Ross Stuart. Other Canadians of Hungarian descent could also be found on the list of contributors: Peter Hay, the adopted son of Julius Hay a.k.a. Gyula Hay, was on the Advisory Board while articles were written by John Hirsch, one of the most successful and renowned Canadian directors, and Joseph Erdelyi, a free-lance theatre critic living in Toronto at the time. Other parts of East-Central Europe was represented among the contributors by one of Canada's first outstanding playwrights, George Ryga of Ukrainian origin and Polish emigré, Marion André, playwright and director.

One of the reasons why I mention these names is that this short list in itself is a proof of the existing multicultural feature of Canadian culture. The other reason is that in the following pages I would like to provide a brief summary of what the readers of CTR may have learnt about contemporary theatre in Central Europe during the first decade of its publication.

Why Central Europe? On the one hand: because this part of Europe has always produced a great variety of theatre trends, experiments and innovations and it would be interesting to see how much of this information was available for theatre workers in Canada. It is enough to think of the achievements of twentieth-century Russian, Polish, Czech and German theatres. On the other hand: since the 1970s and 80s were the period of alternat(iv)e theatre in North America, its Canadian representatives must have been interested in the artistic endeavours and achievements of some Central European theatres and if there was any authentic source for such information, it was the highly ambitious *Canadian Theatre Review*.

Why only the first decade? Partly because I see this period as the pioneering time of the journal both for the editors and the readers but partly because 1985 was the year when Michail Gorbachev became party head in the Soviet Union and it can be regarded as the first step towards the collapse of the communist block, i.e. during the decade between 1974 and 1984 Central Europe was still treated as an exotic place behind the iron curtain ...

But before going into concrete details, let me start by quoting the first paragraph of the editorial of the first CTR issue, which can be read as a kind of *ars poetica*:

The Canadian Theatre Review is a magazine about Canada today which means, to some extent, that it is also a magazine about Canada as it existed in the past and as it may exist in the years to come. There are, of course, many magazines which, in one way or another, deal with Canada. What makes CTR unique is its perspective: Canada as seen through the eyes of its theatre artists. This is our view, our own way in. But because the perspective is a focussed one, it does not necessarily follow that the potential audience for CTR will be small. There are many thousands of people working today in the Canadian theatre and we hope to reach them all. (Rubin, Mezei, Stuart 4)

No doubt the main purpose of the journal was and has been ever since to provide a forum for the makers of the modern Canadian theatre through

which they can communicate their ideas, desires and problems, descriptively or analytically to each other and anybody else involved or interested in the world of the theatre. Being an academic journal, *CTR* has been open to all aspects of Canadian and world theatre and its editors or contributors could not help reporting major events in Europe and elsewhere.

3. Articles on Central European Theatre

During the period examined there were 21 articles or reviews on various aspects or figures of Central European theatre. The great majority (three-fourth) of them were devoted to Poland (9) and Soviet Russia (7) while the theatre scene in the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia and Hungary was covered on one occasion each. In addition, the East German Bertolt Brecht was the subject of two articles. Statistically speaking, all this means that in the period examined every second issue of *CTR* dealt with this part of Europe. While it would be useless to make judgements as to whether it is enough, too much or too little, the distribution of the articles among the various countries seems to be more or less acceptable. What I find even more interesting is the diversity of the articles in terms of genre or approach to the discussed topic.

3.1 The Soviet Theatre

The very first report from Moscow came from the then young Vancouver director John Juliani (aged 34) who travelled through Europe and Asia for a year on a Canada Council grant and kept a diary of his experiences. In the excerpt published in the second issue (Spring 1974) he relates his contradictory views on the famous director Andrei Lyubimov's two works in the Taganka Theatre: while the "highly acclaimed production of *Hamlet* ... was a distinct disappointment" for Juliani (Juliani 26), he praised the "poetic documentary-spectacle" (29) entitled *A. C. Pushkin* which he saw the following night. The Canadian director also writes about two other plays he saw in Moscow, one at the Mossoviet Theatre (*St. Petersburg Dreams* based on Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*) and another at the Sovremennik Theatre (*Valentine and Valentine* by Roschin). It is particularly interesting how Juliani reflects upon this latter performance. He argued that Roschin's play was "decidedly different from the average socialist education piece. It

provided me with many insights about urban living in Russia, and especially about a recent disturbing and altogether acknowledged social phenomenon—the feminization of Soviet society” (31–32). Juliani had a chance of meeting some officials of the ITI (International Theatre Institute) which forced him to make the following comment:

... I noticed the remarkable way the I.T.I. functions in socialist countries. Unlike the now defunct Canadian Theatre Centre which could never seem to fulfill the needs of our theatrical community, the Soviet I.T.I. is impressive because of the scope of its operations and because it actually seems to accomplish something concrete for its members. It is depressing to think how much remains to be done in Canada by our branch of the I.T.I., or some equivalent organization. Surely our problems, those vaunted considerations of “multiculturalism” and distance, are no more formidable than those of the U.S.S.R., which has to deal with a larger geographical area and with a greater variety of native languages. (30)

This kind of comparison between Canada and the country in question is rather typical of such articles, especially if they are related to personal experiences. For example, Oscar Ryan who reported on “Theatre in Soviet Georgia” in issue 13 (Winter 1977), makes the following comment in connection with an early twentieth-century Georgian historical drama called *Treason*: “There were times during this production that I imagined I was at Stratford—the larger-than-life canvas, the bold statement, the sense of history, the heroism; yet here also is Eastern colour, and here also, the severe simplicity of the ancient Greeks (140).” Otherwise Ryan’s piece is one of the highly informative and descriptive types of writing basically characteristic of those CTR articles which reported on international events or theatre scenes. After a brief but useful historical introduction, Ryan analyses three Tbilisi productions he saw on one weekend but the most interesting comment he makes is related to the study of theatre in Georgia:

Theatre Society people I spoke to, especially those pursuing research and theory, take a broad view of their art; they feel that theatres throughout the world have related problems, that theatres in different regions of the same country share these problems, indeed that all theatre workers share them. You can’t study theatre history in separate, isolated compartments, they stress. You must regard it as a whole. (140)

Similarly to John Juliani, Joyce Doolittle visited the USSR in 1974 as a researcher-lecturer and reported on nine productions she saw in the

Leningrad Theatre of the Young Spectator (TUZ) in issue 10 (Spring 1976). The reader can learn from the article that in the USSR it was quite common for a city to have at least one theatre devoted to the young and that

There are over four dozen such theatres in the Soviet Union, all enjoying large government subsidies and a stability and respect unimaginable in most North American centres. What makes the Leningrad theatre remarkable is its special successful mixture of youth and experience, the loyalty and diversity of its audience and its constant experimentation and research. (Doolittle, *Leningrad TUZ* 41)

It is indeed fascinating that 3 out of the 8 articles deal with theatre for the young. In addition to the above-mentioned report, Joyce Doolittle also wrote a review about a book called *Russian Plays for Young Audiences* published in the US in 1978 and translated and edited by Miriam Morton (Spring 1979) who actually contributed the third writing on Moscow's Music Theatre for Children, the only one of its kind in the whole world (Summer 1980). After evaluating the five plays for young people, Doolittle closes her review with the following conclusion:

When we have more examples of serious playwrights writing full-length plays in many genres, when we have permanent playhouses for young audiences, when budgets for plays for young people permit anything other than "poor theatre" staging, we may also be in a position to publish such a rich collection of plays for young people. (Doolittle, *Russian Plays* 114)

Another review was written by Don Rubin, founding editor of CTR, on V. O. Toporkov's book on *Stanislavski in Rehearsal: The Final Years* written in 1949–1950 but published in New York in 1979. As we learn from the review, some of the material in the book had already been published but most of it was new. What Professor Rubin finds the most interesting in it is Toporkov's very simple insight when he states that

Stanislavski ultimately did not *discover* secrets of acting technique as much as he *explained* them. Those secrets ... *were* possessed by our great artists and teachers, but *they* could not explain them sufficiently to their pupils, although, as [Toporkov] says, 'they strove to do so with all their hearts.' (Rubin 111)

The last article on Russian theatre deals with the training of theatre critics by giving a detailed description of the degree programme in Soviet schools from which the reader is informed about the fact that "the normal

length of professional studies in a Soviet theatre school for actors and directors is four years. For the would-be drama critic, however, the required length of study is five years, a far cry from the casual training (and that even rarely) given in North America (*The Critic* 61).”

3.2 The Polish Theatre

In 1975 three articles focussed on various aspects of the Polish theatre. Readers of issue 6 of *CTR* (Spring 1975) were informed that 1974 might well be said to have been the year of Wyspianski, the famous 19th-century Polish playwright whose plays were revived on a number of stages in the country. Roman Szydowski, the major *CTR* correspondent from Warsaw enlists and analyses a few important productions which “were most effectively presented” (“The Year of Wyspianski” 133). In the next issue (Fall 1975) he continues to report about the theatre scene in Poland stating that while 1974 was “the year of the country’s classical dramatists, above all, the year of Wyspianski,” 1975 “is in a way even more exciting for it seems to be a celebration of Poland’s contemporary dramatists” (“Contemporary Poland” 85). Playwrights mentioned in the article include Mrozek, Gombrowicz and Rozewicz, each one having at least one play produced in some Polish theatre. In summary Szydowski remarks that

Perhaps the most important thing to note ... is that Poland’s artistic directors have always known that a theatre cannot be called “alive” unless it is producing its own contemporary writers. Even when good contemporary plays were few and far between, these directors searched for, produced and promoted such plays with genuine enthusiasm. Because of this support, these writers have developed and today public support for their work is consistent. (87)

It is impossible not to notice an underlying reference to the Canadian situation in which most of the supporters and makers of the alternative theatre were more than convinced that the only way for the modern Canadian theatre is to rely on genuine Canadian drama and performance. If the above remark is an underlying reference to the Canadian theatre, the following introductory paragraph in Robin Endres’s short writing on the amateur tradition is an explicit comparison between Poland and Canada:

Underlying Polish cultural policy in general are some rather basic principles, neglected or under-emphasized in Canada. Perhaps the primary one is that any visible culture must have a broad base, as broad a

base as state subsidies can possibly afford. The Polish amateur theatre movement, a movement of which few in the west are even aware, in addition to providing outlets for the creative use of leisure time, plays a key role in the development not only of this broad base but the development of Polish theatre as a whole. (136)

After providing a very informative and positively objective picture of the training and fate of the amateur theatre workers, Endres concludes by saying “whether or not such a program would have any applicability for Canada is obviously a point for further discussion. The fact is, though, that in Poland, sophistication and mass appeal do co-exist. Obviously, the amateur theatre movement deserves much of the credit for this phenomenon (137).”

1975 was not only the year of contemporary Poland as Szydlowski stated but also the year when Polish director Swinarski died in an airplane crash just after his last production, a Mayakovski piece, opened at the National Theatre in Warsaw.

Death is the topic of Tadeusz Kantor’s manifesto, “The Theatre of Death,” published in the Fall 1977 issue. CTR has no comments on the Manifesto which is rather unusual. This way it is difficult to say what the editors might have wanted to achieve with publishing the world-wide-known director’s thoughts on a new form of theatre. One of the remaining four articles on Polish theatre includes a very brief review by Don Rubin on a book called Polish Theatre Directors which examines the work of ten significant directors including Grotowski, Kantor, Swinarski, Szajna and Wajda (Winter 1981).

The other three writings deal at least partly with the most famous Polish director in the twentieth century, Jerzy Grotowski. In the Winter 1977 issue Michael Macina reported on the New Directions Conference in Hamilton with such notable speakers as André Gregory, Charles Marowitz and Jerzy Grotowsky. As the author of the article remarks “Grotowski’s talk was noteworthy because one detected his moving away from the kind of rhetoric which has, in the past, led some to accuse him of being something of a mystic” (Macina 130). Grotowski had a four-hour lecture in which he tried to explain his new concept concerning theatre direction emphasising a deeper involvement of the audience in his work.

He and his work are mentioned in Don Rubin’s two reports on “one of the more important international gatherings of experimental groups, the Wroclaw Festival in 1974 and 1987. Although in 1974 companies arived from Argentina, England, Portugal, Brazil, the Soviet Union, Poland,

Hungary, Switzerland, Bulgaria, Italy, Denmark and Japan, as Rubin remarks “of this large gathering, only a handful of things seemed of genuine interest,” primarily “an open meeting with Grotowski in which he talked about new directions his work was taking him” (Rubin “Abroad” 130). Taking briefly about the production of his company entitled *Apocalypse*, Rubin concludes that “as a viable theatrical direction ... one has to wonder” (130). While in 1974 he was mostly concerned about the problem of “trying to decide which of our companies are actually working in the area of genuine theatrical experiment and which are simply providing theatrical ‘alternatives’ in the various regions” (128), in 1978 he had to report that “given the chaos of the 1978 version, will there be—should there be—another Wroclaw Festival in the future?” (Rubin “Wroclaw Festival” 140).

3.3 Other Central European Countries

As for the other Central European countries, Czechoslovakia is represented by an interview in 1975 with Josef Svoboda who spent some time in Canada on the occasion of a touring exhibition of his work. The article on “Theatre in the GDR” is a description of the theatrical scene in the country based on the statement that “the theatre of East Germany has come of age” (Tracy 92). The third country in the period examined is Hungary which was reported on by Canadian playwright Henry Beissel who was invited by the Hungarian ITI to visit some theatres and assist in the translation of his play *Inook and the Sun* which was supposed to be produced in Hungarian. Although this project has not yet been realised, Beissel provided a reliable and informative picture of Hungarian theatres and playwriting. The most fascinating part of his report is connected to the peculiarities of the Hungarian language, a curious phenomenon for many people on their first visit to Hungary:

Hungarian is a forbidding but dramatic language. No amount of etymological ingenuity is going to help you identify a building that’s marked *színház* as a theatre. And when I was invited to see Shakespeare’s “Darab”, I racked my brains in vain to guess which of the Bard’s plays might bear that title—it turned out all 38 do, because *darab* simply means “play” or “piece”. Actually, the play on that occasion was *Othello* and the production I saw gave me insight into the sonar qualities of Hungarian whose many open vowels, rich and strong consonants and rather explosive rhythms deriving from the heavy stress that falls on the first syllable of every word—all seemed eminently suited to the

elemental forces that erupt in that play and to dramatic speech generally. (Beissel 141)

Finally, I have to mention Bertolt Brecht who was the subject of a review on the English translation of Klaus Völker's *Brecht Chronicle* and an excerpt of a German paper on "Brecht as Critic" translated for the CTR by Anton Wagner.

4. Conclusion

What can I say in conclusion? Reading through the articles on Central European theatre, I had the impression that the topics, the texts and the issues raised in these writings were quite closely related to the central issues of contemporary Canadian theatre including the avant-garde, youth theatre, international relations as well as state subsidies. Whether these articles had any direct impact on the development of any aspect of Canadian theatre would be impossible to judge but it would also be wrong to ignore the presence and any indirect influence of some of the ideas presented in the above articles.

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