

Foreword

In his novel *Les Têtes à Papineau*, Jacques Godbout recounts the strange history of the Siamese twins, Charles-François Papineau: they have the same body but two heads. One day they decide to consult a surgeon who promises to make them into one 'normal' person. However, he warns them that this procedure will require certain sacrifices: he will only be able to retain a part of each brain, and only one lobe will produce language. When the 'new man' wakes up from the operation, he can only speak English!

This political fable is all the more biting not only because the character's surname refers to Louis-Joseph Papineau, a great French-Canadian patriot whom certain people consider a double agent, but also because the expression, 'tête à Papineau', is used in Quebec to describe a particularly intelligent person. Whereas Hugh MacLennan, in his celebrated novel *Two Solitudes*, urges French- and English-Canadians to stop living in two parallel solitudes, Godbout's allegory serves to confirm the argument of Quebec nationalists that all conversations taking place under Canadian imperialistic authority will inevitably be at the expense of Quebec's status as a distinct francophone society.

The theatre, however, seems to contradict these two writers, especially in the extraordinarily active period since 1969. This issue on 'Canadian' theatre opens with an article on Michel Tremblay because Quebec dramaturgy has played such an influential role in the evolution of theatre not only in Quebec itself but indeed throughout Canada. Inspired, in part, by Tremblay's provocative genius, many young English-Canadian playwrights have taken on the task of developing their own repertoire, setting their plays in recognizably Canadian locales (Vancouver, Edmonton, Toronto, Halifax, etc.), and making the theatre as dynamic an instrument for the authentication of the English language in English Canada as it had already become for the authentication of the French language in Quebec.

Similarly, universities in Quebec and English Canada had joined together in order to develop a

permanent dialogue and to give a solid base to theatre research: Richard Plant, one of the participants in this collaboration, explains (in a personal but academically rigorous essay) many of the historiographic and ideological assumptions which continue to influence this historical process.

Although theatre in Canada has built a number of bridges between these two solitudes, each one has also remained visibly separate while pursuing its own legitimate interests. Jean-Pierre Ronfard's cycle of six plays inspired by Shakespeare, *Vie et mort du Roi Boiteux*, which, as Louise Vigeant explains here, has had an exceptional impact on the evolution of Quebec theatre, has had relatively little influence in English Canada. Paradoxically, however, English Canada has responded enthusiastically to the imagistic theatre of Robert Lepage which comes from a similar aesthetic, especially the large-scale *Trilogie des dragons*; and, Lepage's *Polygraphe* was acclaimed in Toronto even though it left Quebec critics relatively cold.

One can say with some confidence that since 1980, although the influences between the two cultures are more diffuse, there have in fact been more real exchanges than ever before, which have led to the debunking of myths and the enhancement of understanding. In the development of both dramatic literatures, the theme of homosexuality has been enormously important, which explains why the plays of René-Daniel Dubois, Normand Chaurette, and Michel-Marc Bouchard (whose celebrated play, *Les Feluettes*, was a great success under the title *Lilies* in Toronto) have been almost as popular in English Canada as they have been in Quebec. In 1990 *Jeu* (No. 54) published a special issue on theatre and homosexuality, which includes an important analysis by Robert Wallace, a Toronto-based gay critic and academic. In a quite different vein, Dominique Lafon proposes here an original argument about how the presence of homosexuality as a dominant theme in Quebec dramaturgy has effaced the investigation of other kinds of gender politics, and in so doing she

restores to us a political substratum which seemed to have been absent in Quebec since at least 1980 when Quebec plays began to relinquish realistic social analysis.

For a long time it looked as though it were only English Canada that was preoccupied with the dream of a regular interaction with the 'other' culture. But, more recently, this has begun to change, in significant and perhaps permanent ways. Quebec's quiet confidence in its own (singular) achievements means that it is now possible to regard English Canada, not simply as site of cultural appropriation, but rather as a kind of foreign country: different in some ways, similar in others, and just as 'distinctive' as Quebec itself. Both are continuing to develop unique strategies in order to resist not so much each other but an even more worrying threat: hegemonic globalization and assimilation within the U.S. empire. As Robert Nunn's article indicates, marginality—as both dramatic theme and organizational structure—has been a source of anxiety and a source of imaginative strength throughout the history of Canadian theatre. Perhaps this paradox has governed, even more forcefully, the oftentimes endangered development of indigenous theatre in Quebec, and provides yet another point of contact, however tenuous, between the two cultures.

There have been important productions in Montreal over the last few years of Judith Thompson's *I Am Yours* and *Lion in the Streets*, George F. Walker's *Zastrozzi*, and Brad Fraser's *Unidentified Human Remains and the True*

Nature of Love (now being made into a film directed by Denys Arcand). Quebec critics, many of whom tended to think that English-Canadian theatre consisted mostly of naturalistic kitchen-sink dramas written by the three Davids (Freeman, French and Fennario) have been pleasantly surprised by the stylistic daring of these plays. As Richard Paul Knowles's article here suggests, a number of English-Canadian playwrights have been deliberately experimenting over the last decade with a 'dramaturgy of the perverse' not only to liberate themselves from the dead hand of traditional Aristotelian models but so that they can fully examine problematic themes which require a new kind of dramaturgy for their uncensored expression. This historical shift is in fact not so different from what has been happening in Quebec dramaturgy. Does this mean that Quebec theatre will now extend its investigation of the English-Canadian repertoire to the plays of Margaret Hollingsworth, Beverley Simons, John Krizanc, Kent Stetson, Banuta Rubess and others who have constantly mounted challenges to received ideas?

More than ever, near the start of a new millenium, theatre in Canada seeks to extend the meeting points between the two solitudes. But, contrary to Charles-François Papineau, it has two heads: the one speaks French, the other speaks English!

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Notes on Contributors

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PIERRE LAVOIE is managing editor of the *Cahiers de Théâtre Jeu* in which he has published many articles over the past ten years. He has co-edited (with Gilbert David) a book of essays on Michel Tremblay, to be published in 1992.

ROBERT NUNN is Associate Professor in the Department of Film Studies, Dramatic and Visual Arts at Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario. He has

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RICHARD PLANT is Associate Professor at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario and Visiting Professor at the University of Toronto. He has contributed to Canadian theatre studies as a scholar and teacher. He is co-editor with John Ball of *The Bibliography of Theatre History in Canada: The Beginnings to 1985* and co-editor with L. E. Doucette of *Theatre History in Canada/Histoire du Théâtre au Canada*.

LOUISE VIGEANT has written her Ph.D. dissertation on Jean-Pierre Ronfard's *Vie et mort du Roi Boiteux*. She teaches literature at the Collège Edouard-Montpetit in Longueuil, near Montreal, and is currently pursuing research on Québécois dramaturgy of the 1980s.