



Pourquoi Shakespeare?

Why Shakespeare?

THIS WAS THE QUESTION posed by Jean Gascon, founding co-director of Montreal's Théâtre du Nouveau Monde (TMN) and director of the Stratford Festival 1968–74, to his audience in 1962 when the TMN mounted its first play by Shakespeare. Gascon answered by describing the staging of *Richard II* as a rendezvous with destiny: "Because we have dreamed of this meeting with the most important dramatic poet for a long time. He has become necessary to us." For Gascon, Shakespeare was "such a dramatic genius that his singular voice traverses the barrier of language and reaches us with incredible force." But Gascon also felt it was necessary to "jostle" [*bousculer*] Shakespeare: "Without wanting to take liberties with the author, we have wanted to feel ourselves free." The protection of one's own freedom in the face of Shakespeare's apparent hugeness has been a persistent feature of French Canada's encounter with the Bard.

Though there were occasional productions of Shakespeare in French—in December 1923, the Odéon theatre company of Paris presented four plays in French, two of them by Shakespeare—it was largely in English that Shakespeare, brought by British and American touring companies, came to French Canada in the nineteenth century. Indeed Jean Béraud,

in his *350 ans de théâtre au Canada français* [*350 Years of Theatre in French Canada*], cites numerous English language productions of Shakespeare precisely because they were attended by francophones. But the combination of the lure of Shakespeare and the desire for cultural independence expressed by Jean Gascon in 1962 had been present in French Canada since at least the early 1830s. As Leonard Doucette has described in his history of theatre in French Canada, that was when the “Amateurs Canadiens” and the “Amateurs de Montréal,” seeking an alternative to the vaudeville, melodrama, and farce brought by French touring companies, combined to perform *Hamlet* and *Othello* in the adaptations of the French Ducis. Thus 175 years ago, Shakespeare was used in French Canada, along with Molière, Scribe, and others to assert local taste and resist the superficiality of imported culture.

Passing the Shakespeare Test

TWO PHENOMENA IN the 1930s and 1940s contributed to the conspicuous emergence of a Shakespearean presence in French Canada at a time when theatre was suffering from the after-effects of the First World War, the Spanish flu, and the Great Depression, as well as from the competition offered by cinema and commercially motivated popular theatre. The first was the important contribution of the new media of radio and television. Taking seriously its mandate of enriching the cultural life of the people, Radio-Canada and other stations presented versions of “masterpieces of world theatre.” According to Madeleine Greffard in an overview of radio theatre in French Canada from its beginnings to the advent of television, these included *Othello* and *Hamlet* on CHLP (Montreal) in 1938–1939, *Othello* on Radio-Canada in 1940, and in 1945–1946 and 1947–1948 *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Roméo et Juliette*, and *Othello* on Radio-Collège of Radio-Canada. Similarly, Téléthéâtre of Radio-Canada broadcast *La mégère apprivoisée* [*The Taming of the Shrew*] in 1953, and *Roméo et Juliette* in 1958.

In the same period, the appearance of new theatre companies and playwrights contributed to the beginnings of an impressive professional theatre milieu in which Shakespeare found a home. Among the companies seeking alternatives to a theatrical diet of burlesque and revues was L'Équipe, founded by the nineteen-year-old Pierre Dagenais in 1942. His



Songe d'une nuit d'été [*A Midsummer Night's Dream*], produced outdoors in the gardens of the Ermitage, was, by all accounts, magical. Similarly, the Compagnons de Saint-Laurent, founded in 1937 by Father Émile Legault, produced an unforgettable *Soir des rois* [*Twelfth Night*] in 1946.

Production photograph from *Roméo et Juliette* (Radio Canada, 1958)

The Compagnons's production illustrates the audacity and complexity of the Québécois relation to Shakespeare. On one hand, the *mise en scène* of Père Legault, who had spent time in France, showed the influence of important productions of *Twelfth Night* by Harley Granville-Barker at the Savoy in London in 1912 and Jacques Copeau in the opening season of the Vieux Colombier in Paris in 1914. But though the presence of European modernism was unmistakable, it was transformed by the contribution of internationally known Québec artist Alfred Pellán. Pellán's set and costume designs for the Compagnons's *Soir des rois* showed the inventiveness and originality of a great artist untrammelled by preconceptions of what constituted a Shakespearean aesthetic. They may have been executed on a miniscule budget, with their fantastic detail hand-painted on cloth backdrops that sagged when unrolled, but to the critics the experience was of one great artist meeting another. In 1967, Jean-Louis Roux, preparing a Québec contribution to the tenth anniversary celebrations of the Stratford Festival in Ontario, came across Pellán's designs and was enchanted. He consequently



Production photograph from
Richard II (Théâtre du Nouveau
Monde, 1962)

used the designs a second time in his 1968 production for the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde. The music for Roux's production was by Gabriel Charpentier, who has composed music for numerous Shakespeare productions at the TNM and the Stratford Festival. Charpentier's musical creations for the theatre start with a visually striking graphic analysis of each play.

It is the costumes of Orsino and Olivia as recreated in the 1968 *Nuit des rois* that appear in the Shakespeare—Made in Canada exhibition. In them, we see Pellan's playfulness, the brilliance of his palette, and his evocation of the *commedia dell'arte*. Orsino's costume, with its skirted doublet, diagonal stripes, and windowpane checks, combines a sixteenth-century profile with modernist motifs. Decorative elements on the costumes contribute to a reading of the characters. For example, Olivia's black-veiled

headdress, topped by a coffin decorated with crosses, teardrops, and a heart, suggests both a catafalque and a bed, and is a sign of her love for her dead brother; and her pearls (like those of Elizabeth I) are an emblem of her chastity. But, along with the elegance and elaborateness of her dress, the headpiece also suggests her self-indulgence and narcissism.

The first works of Shakespeare to be performed in this period were largely among the most popular and accessible of Shakespeare's plays. Between 1945 and 1969, Gilbert David's teatrography includes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1945, 1965), *Twelfth Night* (1946, 1956, 1968), *Romeo and Juliet* (1950), *The Taming of the Shrew* (1956, 1966), *Richard II* (1962), and *The Merchant of Venice* (1963). Photographs of these and other productions from the private collection of Charles Bolster are included in the Shakespeare—Made in Canada exhibition. It is interesting, however, that when the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, founded in 1951 and committed to performing the *grand répertoire*, entered the Shakespeare fray in 1962, the play they chose to tackle was not a romantic comedy. It

was by taking on the challenge of staging *Richard II*, a play at the centre of English national history, that they chose to demonstrate their ability to “pass the Shakespeare test.”

Shakespeare, Prince of Québec

THE PERIOD OF THE 1960s in Québec is known as the *Révolution tranquille* [Quiet Revolution]. It followed nearly twenty years of government under Québec Premier Maurice Duplessis—years that were marked by a commitment to conservative ideology, traditional values, and resistance to change, accompanied by a secularization of the society and a decline in the birth rate. The election of Premier Jean Lesage (1960–1966) initiated a process of reform that included such things as democratization of the system of education, revision of the labour code, and nationalization of Hydro-Québec. The 1960s also saw, in conjunction with movements of national liberation worldwide, the creation of a movement for the independence of Québec from the rest of Canada. By 1967, the centenary of Canadian Confederation and the year of Expo 67, the movement had found its stride. A landmark moment was the visit to Québec of French Prime Minister Charles de Gaulle whose words “Vive le Québec libre” [Long live a free Québec] resounded from the balcony of Montreal’s City Hall. The “nouveau théâtre québécois” [new Québec theatre], as it was called by Michel Bélair in a 1973 book of that title, was one site of cultural affirmation. In the words of playwright Claude Levac, “When Québec playwrights will have found an armature, a theatrical structure that is our very own and the equal of our collective dorsal spine, we will not only have found an authentic dramaturgy which is our own, but also a country.” And there, in a series of adaptations participating in this impulse towards cultural self-realization, was Shakespeare.

Hamlet, prince du Québec by Robert Gurik (1968) couldn’t have been more explicit. It was a political allegory that used Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to explore the complexities and ambiguities of Québec in Canada. Hamlet, of course, was Québec. He and the Gravediggers, representative of two generations of the Québec people, were the only characters who did not wear masks. King Claudius was L’Anglophonie, the English-speaking world of economic and political control, and Queen Gertrude was his partner in power, l’Église [the Church]. Polonius was Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson; his daughter Ophélie, Québec Premier



Production photograph from
Hamlet, prince du Québec
(Théâtre de L'Escale, 1968)

Jean Lesage; and his son Laerte, Prime Minister-in-Waiting Pierre Elliott Trudeau. Hamlet's friend Horatio, prophetically, was René Lévesque. The Ghost of Hamlet's father was Charles de Gaulle. And so it went. The equivalents were spelled out in the program, the published text, and on masks in the form of political caricatures. The exhibition includes four of the costume designs by Renée Noiseux-Gurik and four of the masks by Guy Monarque, and a spear used at the end of the play, as well as production photos.

Gurik's play was only a beginning. In 1970, Jean-Claude Germain's musical *Rodéo et Juliette*, drawing on the annual "Festival Western" of the Québec village of Saint Tite, created a new version of Shakespeare's love story. His Juliette could only love a man who would follow his dream of creating a different world. In 1977, Jean-Pierre Ronfard, whose love affair with Shakespeare would be carried out in many plays throughout his life, created a travestied Lear whose debased kingdom was a pizza, whose throne was a case of Coca Cola, and whose elder daughters were obsessed with money and sex.

And so: "Why Shakespeare?" Why use the iconic poet of British cultural authority to contest that culture and its authority? Part of the answer is suggested by the presence in Gurik's play of Charles de Gaulle as the paternal ghost. In the 1970s, the French heritage of Québec was experienced as an ambiguous legacy. After the defeat of Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham in 1759, the French were felt by many to have abandoned the *habitants* to Britain. Nevertheless, to the denigration of



Production photograph from *King Lear* (Nouveau Théâtre Experimental, 1977)

Québécois language and culture, French language and culture continued to haunt Québec as a model of desirability and correctness. To use Shakespeare was to turn one's back on the likes of Corneille, Racine, and Molière. To use Shakespeare against the English—to make his work serve one's own nationalist and cultural ends—was to assert one's freedom to do so. The immense liberty with which Shakespeare is both celebrated and defaced in these adaptations makes Shakespeare a partner in the project of an independent Québec.

Shakespeare and the Québec Language

IT WAS IN THIS CONTEXT that Michel Garneau translated *Macbeth de William Shakespeare* into Québécois. Before 1968, when Jean-Louis Roux did his own French translation for the production of *Twelfth Night* he was about to direct, translations of Shakespeare performed in Québec had been made in France. Ten years later in 1978, two years before the referendum on Québec sovereignty, Garneau's translation asserted that Québécois was not a dialect, not a *jargon*, but a language. And language was at the heart of Québécois cultural and national identity.

Based on French as it was still spoken in the Gaspé peninsula of Québec, Garneau's Québécois was closer to the seventeenth-century French spoken in France in Shakespeare's day than to modern French. Garneau brought *Macbeth* closer to his audience by eliminating reminders of its foreignness. As Annie Brisset has pointed out in her study of

theatrical translation in Québec, the drums of “A drum, a drum! / Macbeth doth come” became the *violons* of French Canadian fiddle music; wood and heath became the *forêt* and *brulé* of the Québec landscape; and Scotland became “*not’ paww’ pays,*” our poor country in need of liberation from a tyrannical oppressor. Garneau subsequently translated two other plays by Shakespeare, *The Tempest* in 1982 and *Coriolanus* in 1989. In 1993, internationally known theatre artist Robert Lepage created a *Cycle Shakespeare* for the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, for the Festival de Théâtre des Amériques in Montreal, and for a world tour: a production of all three Garneau translations to represent three genres, three production styles, and “a journey into the evolution of a language.” A video expressly created for the Shakespeare—Made in Canada exhibition, with excerpts from these three productions, illustrates the relationship among the dramatic texts, their language, and their *mise en scène*.

Shakespearean Spring

THE SHAKESPEAREAN PRESENCE in the 1980s contributed to the expansiveness and self-confidence of the Québec theatrical institution with, at one end, Jean-Pierre Ronfard’s monumental six-part *Vie et mort du roi boiteux* [*Life and Death of the Limping King*] in 1981, and at the other, *Printemps Shakespeare* [*Shakespearean Spring*] of 1988. With the question of political independence for the moment laid to rest by the referendum of 1980, Québec theatre artists revelled in the capacity of theatre to create worlds and to cross boundaries. Ronfard’s fanciful epic of rival clans depicted a fictional world that ranged from Abitibi to Azerbaijan and left no continent untouched. His limping king was at once both Shakespeare’s Richard III and King Lear, but also Oedipus, Hamlet, Orestes, and others.

The spring of 1988 saw major productions in Montreal of no fewer than six of Shakespeare’s plays: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* directed by Robert Lepage at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde; *The Tempest* directed by Alice Ronfard at the Espace Go; and *Richard II*, *Henry IV* (Parts One and Two), and *Henry V* as the *Cycle des rois* [*Kings’ Cycle*] directed by Jean Asselin of Théâtre Omnibus at the Espace Libre. Their splendour and variety is seen in the slide sequence in the exhibition in which one can see the spiralling phallic forest of *Songe d’une nuit d’été*, the massive video screens

dominating the square of sand that represented Prospero's island in *La tempête*, and the impossibly steep steps that formed the backdrop to the acrobatic movements of actors in the *Cycle des rois*.

The costumes and props on display in the exhibition give some idea of the contrasting aesthetics of these productions. With the oversized curves and angles of its silhouette, its spiralled breasts, and the layered richness of its fabrics, Meredith Caron's costume for an imperious and disdainful Titania is a hyperreal rendition of a baroque aesthetic. Her costume for Bottom the weaver—a beautiful and witty combination of rich velvet in Elizabethan profile held together by numerous long and heavy metallic zippers—masterfully expresses Bottom as both a “mechanical” and a man of unlimited imagination. In contrast to the scenic lushness of *Songe* is the stripped-down aesthetic of the *Cycle des Rois* by Yvan Gaudin, whose costume for Falstaff is also seen in the exhibition. His award-winning costumes for 135 characters performed by fourteen actors were created by raiding the second-hand shops of the east end of Montreal—much like furs for Charlotte Dean's costumes for a 1995 production of *King Lear* came from Toronto thrift shops. In Gaudin's *Cycle des Rois*, a bird cage became the French king's crown; a film reel, a bishop's mitre; a crutch and length of lead pipe, as seen in the exhibition, a harquebus.

All of these productions celebrated their theatricality and invited spectators to do the same. Puck became an agent of theatrical transformation as (s)he rotated the platform of *Le Songe*. In *La Tempête*, Prospero was played by the actress Françoise Faucher and was occasionally accompanied by an additional character called “The Actor.” The choreographed movements of actors in the *Cycle des rois* were multiplied by reflecting side panels in which spectators also saw themselves as an audience.

Whose Shakespeare?

IN 1996, THE FIVE-EVENING EVENT called 38 implicitly challenged such big budget Shakespeare(s) and questioned the ownership of Shakespeare by generously subsidized companies. Instead, it explored an alternative to expensive productions with large casts that left few crumbs of opportunity for young playwrights. Thirty-eight authors under the age of thirty-eight were invited to write and direct fifteen-minute monologues, each based on a different work by Shakespeare.



Production poster for 38
(Théâtre Urbi and Orbi and
Théâtre d'aujourd'hui, 1996)

Deploying the immensely popular Québécois form of the *conte urbain* [urban tale] against a colourful backdrop of Shakespearean graffiti, the event used the authority of Shakespeare to display the creativity, multiplicity, and variety of new Québec playwriting, and to give stage time to those for whom it was largely inaccessible. In an impressive celebration of youthful talent, 38 staged an encounter with Shakespeare that was variously playful, respectful, satiric, resentful, sardonic, and humorous.

38 merely confirmed the multiplicity of subject positions from which Shakespeare has persistently been addressed in French Canada. In the case of the explicitly political adaptations of the 1960s and 1970s, we have already seen Shakespeare used to further the political aspirations of Québec. Numerous subsequent adaptations have continued to address Shakespeare with other agendas and points of view. In 1980, for example, Jacques Girard and Reynald Robinson created *Roméo et Julien*, a delightful cabaret-style two-hander that explored in personal terms issues of gender and sexuality. By contrast, Tibor Egervari, writing out of his experience as a man of the theatre and a Shoah survivor, wrote *Le Marchand de Venise de Shakespeare à Auschwitz* [Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in Auschwitz] (1977; rev. 1998) in which he imagined a concentration

camp commander directing Jewish, homosexual, and gypsy prisoners in a performance in which he himself played a deliberately anti-Semitic role of Shylock.

Since the 1990s, received readings of Shakespeare, in particular, have been revisited in French Canada. Acadian author Antonine Maillet's *William S* (1991) had Shakespeare's characters questioning the fates he had dealt them, and in *Sauvée des eaux* [Saved from the Waters] (2001), Daphné Thompson tried to save Ophelia from drowning. *Hamlet-le-Malécite* [Hamlet the Malecite] (2004) by Yves Sioui Durand and Jean-Frédéric Messier created a First Nations Hamlet; *Sous l'empire de Iago* [Subject to the Empire of Iago] by Kadar Mansour (2002) offered a postcolonial *Othello*; and *Dave veut jouer Richard III* [Dave Wants to Play Richard III] by Alexis Martin (2001) explored the desire of a handicapped actor to perform Shakespeare's deformed king. Even Michel Garneau's politicized 1978 translation of *Macbeth* into Québécois was resituated into a longer his-



torical context by Robert Lepage in 1993 as can be seen in the video mentioned earlier.

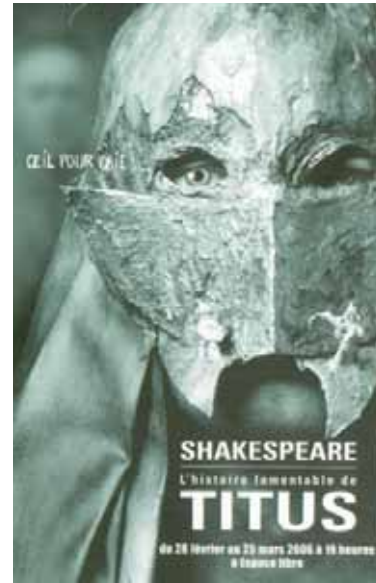
While Shakespeare in French Canada continues to be rich, the definition of French Canada has continued to change. In the play *Le Making of de Macbeth* (1996) by Jean-Frédéric Messier (based on an original idea by Paula de Vasconcelos), the artistically creative act of producing a play is juxtaposed with the biologically creative act of having a child; social classes, languages, and ethnicities bump up against one another.

Production photograph
from *Le Marchand de Venise*
de Shakespeare à Auschwitz
(Théâtre Distinct, Université
D'Ottawa, 1977)

Shakespeare Ongoing

SHAKESPEAREAN ADAPTATIONS are, etymologically speaking, “eccentric”—out (outside) of the “centre” of what is, conventionally, taken to be “Shakespeare.” In addition to the fascinating proliferation of Shakespearean adaptations in French, two phenomena suggest the persistent presence of francophone Shakespeare at its centre, as well as on its margins.

In 1939, Maurice Lebel, former dean of the Faculté des Lettres of Laval University, made clear in his *Suggestions pratiques sur notre enseigne-*



Production poster for *Sauvée des eaux* (Théâtre de l'Esquisse, 2000)

Production poster for *L'histoire lamentable de Titus* (Omnibus at l'Espace Libre, 2006)

ment that Shakespeare, at least at the secondary school level, could not be a priority: “Should one study a play by Shakespeare? I don’t think so. How can one expect students to get something out of studying Shakespeare when, in most of our secondary schools [collèges], teachers don’t even explain a tragedy by Corneille or by Racine, a comedy by Beaumarchais, or a drama by Victor Hugo? For myself, I would never risk putting even a single one of [Shakespeare’s] plays on the syllabus.” Nevertheless, Les Compagnons de Saint-Laurent, the first professional theatre company in Québec, grew out of the collaboration of a group of classical college students with their teacher; it went on to produce *Le soir des rois* in 1946 and *Roméo et Juliette* in 1958. Since then, as the magnificent posters on display suggest, Shakespeare certainly has been present in the work of young performers.

The theatrography of such established companies as the Théâtre du Rideau Vert in Montreal and the Théâtre du Trident at the Grand Théâtre in Québec indicates a number of Shakespeare productions over the years. Most astonishing, as seen in this exhibition, the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde has produced no fewer than twenty productions of Shakespeare since 1968. In addition, a glance at the recently completed 2005–2006 season, reveals in Montreal a musical version of *Antony and Cleopatra* at the TNM and a production of *L'histoire lamentable de Titus* [*The Lamentable Story of Titus*] by Omnibus at L'Espace Libre. There were also

two adaptations in Québec City: *Les mots fantômes* [*Phantom Words*], an adaptation of *Hamlet* by Michel Nadeau created by the Théâtre Niveau Parking; and *Autour du Boiteux* [*On the Subject of the Boiteux*], a reflection on *King Lear* by Pascal Lafond for the Théâtre des Fonds de Tiroirs, which grew out of their earlier celebrated work on Ronfard's *Vie et mort du roi Boiteux*. This sense of a persistent francophone Shakespearean presence is confirmed by the Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project. Of the numerous adaptations of Shakespeare since pre-Confederation identified on its website, about one quarter derive from French Canada.

Le grand Will

THE FRANCOPHONE RELATIONSHIP to Shakespeare is perhaps best expressed in the phrase frequently used to refer to him. Shakespeare is *le grand Will*. He is great, but cut down to size. He is an object of admiration, yet an intimate to whom one can refer by his first name. He is someone with whom one can do battle and still remain friends. He is a stranger who has taken up residence in French Canada and who has changed his hosts as they have changed him.

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