

THE 1961 - 62 ESKIMO ADAPTATION OF KING LEAR

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Shakespeare's poetry belongs to all of us. No one understood what it meant to be human, like Shakespeare, and so the world has appropriated him. Through the multitudinous productions of his plays around the globe we share his insights. Canada is no exception, as the 'Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project' unconsciously proves.

But when we see Macbeth as an American gangster film, or attend an all-female Midsummer Nights' Dream in Toronto, we also realize that Shakespeare can become metaphoric and a medium of expressive comment on our changing times. In Saskatchewan, I remember a recent corporate Lear in business suits, which began with the kingdom being divided around a boardroom table. And in the late 1950s a British designer evoked the culture of Japan with Kabuki costumes. It was nicknamed the 'Swiss Cheese Lear'; John Gielgud's stiff, formal robes slowly becoming more and more pockmarked with holes, as his mind and power diminished.

In 1961, I was asked to direct King Lear for a Canadian Players tour of Canada and the United States. How to tackle it?

I had just come back from a Tyrone-Guthrie-Award tour of Europe, analyzing and comparing the theatre of 14 countries with our own, I wrote articles for The Globe and Mail and sent back recorded talks for CBC Radio. Carrying photographs of the tent and our newly constructed Stratford Theatre with me, I even lectured once on the Canadian theatre in Norway. Returning, I gave a talk at the Crest Theatre on "The Search for a Canadian Identity". I was ripe to attempt a Canadian adaptation of Shakespeare.

I reasoned that only through the historical mirror of our ancient Native Peoples could I approximate the raw, primitive culture that lay behind Shakespeare's masterwork. Slowly the Inuit interpretation began to take shape: a kingdom on top of the world where the division of a kingdom would be as ironic as Cordelia's "Nothing"; France could become the early French settlements in Quebec, and "the vines of France and milk of Burgundy" would be coureurs de bois attired in jackets made from Hudson's Bay blankets; Lear and

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Kent and the Fool should be linked together with a rope during the blinding storm scene; 'Poor Tom' would indeed be cold, but his nakedness (as The Fast Runner proved) would not be fatal ; and convey Gloucester's blindness with those fascinating wooden, slitted, snow goggles; etc., etc., etc. I asked Herbert Whittaker to design it and for weeks we haunted The Royal Ontario Museum together. It all became the 1961-62 production of an "Eskimo Lear ", or "Lear in a Parka" as one magazine described it . The adaptation was controversial but stimulating . We opened a little tentatively in London, Ontario, and Toronto, but as the tour progressed south it gained favour, standing ovations, and even recognition in Life Magazine . Of course my balloon was popped at a post-show party in the United States, when a well-meaning gentleman complimented me on the originality of doing an "Alaskan" production !

But was it too early in 1961 to mount 'a Canadian interpretation' of Shakespeare? Perhaps ! Wendy Michener (the Governor General's daughter) writing in The Toronto Daily Star (25 October 1961) summed up the negative response : "The association of the primitive society imagined by Shakespeare with Eskimo culture seems to me rank nationalism, a longing for glory we haven't earned . Shakespeare does not that easily become a Canadian citizen " .

I wonder if any critic today would still hold that view of nationalism and of adaptation? And , if so, when in our history did we finally mature enough artistically to permit a Canadian adaptation? Or do artists ever really have to apologize for interpreting a work? One thinks of Robert Lepage's mechanization of Hamlet , or Stratford's two cowboy versions of The Taming of the Shrew , and the scores of times a Shakespearean play has been put into a different period .

Nathan Cohen was also writing for the Star at the same time as Ms. Michener, and his Tamarack Review assessment of the Canadian theatre in 1959 poured icy water on the Stratford Festival ; not for appropriating Shakespeare, but for hindering the evolution of a truly indigenous Canadian theatre . Of course he was both right and I think wrong . True, there were still few , if any, Canadian plays being written , but didn't we need Actors' Equity and a fully functioning ,

cross-country , professional theatre first , before we could expect Canadian plays to be written for it in any reasonable quantity?

Before Stratford , we enjoyed an essentially amateur theatre, with guest adjudicators from France and Britain commenting on our achievements once a year , at the Dominion Drama Festival. Suddenly, with the catalytic Stratford experiment , Canadian theatre practitioners were being forced to measure their talents daily against Shakespeare and the classics . Even in the CBC canteen in the 1950s, actors on radio and television spoke with Stratford accents . Overnight , we gained world recognition playing in Tyrone Guthrie's epic production of Christopher Marlowe's Tamburlaine in New York , or peering through Tanya Moiseiwitsch's exquisite masks in Oedipus Rex at the Edinburgh Festival. Even more important for us was Michael Langham's joint francophone and anglophone cast assembled for a Canadian 'take' on Henry V . When has that ever happened again ?

The Canadian theatre grew quickly with the help of the newly-formed Canada Council in 1957 . The 1960s saw a rash of Regional Theatres emerge from coast to coast in anticipation of our centennial birthday in 1967. A second pivotal festival devoted to the works of Bernard Shaw and his contemporaries blossomed, and there was an accompanying theatre-building boom to house these new companies , an "edifice complex" as some wag once described it . And a little later, Lewis Baumander, at the outdoor theatre in Toronto's Earl Bales Park , created an Indian adaptation of The Tempest to carry the Canadian thrust forward . I like to think the Indian Tempest and the Eskimo Lear were stepping-stones towards the indigenous Canadian theatre that finally took root in the 'alternative' movement of the 1970s .

Adaptation is often a preliminary artistic step to new work , or it can be an exercise of the imagination that stimulates thought . And on this point Wendy Michener made a telling comment on adaptation . For her, the Eskimo Lear was "interesting where it should be magic. " We were "led to think about the situation , to analyse it , but rarely to feel it. "

I think the production and the performances gelled subsequently , after its Toronto debut. Certainly this was true of William Hutt's magnificent performance in the central role. But the

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marriage of two visions , Shakespeare's text and any director or designer's adaptation , make special demands upon both an audience, and a writer's vision , that must be acknowledged .