National Theatre and Imagined Authenticities

The proposition that nation is enacted in an imagined theatre implies that the two constituent terms are variable, changeable, and historically contingent. Yet both theatre and nation are real structures in that they exist as social formations in the real world, and they are both formative. In Pierre Bourdieu's celebrated phrase, they are "structuring structures," which he defines as a structure that "organizes practices and the perception of practices" (*Distinction* 170). In this chapter I will explore the implications of this apparent contradiction to suggest how nation and theatre produce each other in what I have already referred to as the elation of spectacle.

I begin with the notion that postcolonial nationhood is founded on fantasies of absent authenticity (commonly described as a crisis of national "identity") and that nationhood is enacted in a theatre culture that similarly refers to a imagined cultural authenticity. The idea of national theatre as an institutionalized theatrical industry that announces and enacts the historical presence of the nation through a canon of performed texts is in this sense an historical artifact originating in nineteenth-century movements of popular nationhood. As such, it presents a particular problem in the postcolonial settler nations of the anglophone world. In my reconsideration of the conjunction of these two unstable terms (theatre and nation) as a metahistorical fantasy that enacts historicized constructions of nation, I paraphrase Benedict Anderson's celebrated argument to suggest that the theatre as it is imagined, formally (through policy, canonization, spectacle, and critical discourse) and informally (through polemics, noncanonical textualities, pageants, literary closet dramas, and failed aspirations), is a legitimizing performance of the imagined community that is the nation.

My argument embraces not only the critical discourses that have framed the material stage. It is also located in changing and historically contingent visions of what the theatre *might* be. By literally destaging

the theatre, I argue that the material theatre has always been the quotation of a more authentic performance that can never be realized. National theatre, in this postcolonial context, refers to performances of desire and surrogation, of lost authenticities reclaimed through spectacle, and the work of making spectacle.

In his influential study of the origins of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that nations are imagined because no one person can know all the subjects they embrace. From that simple observation, he develops a sophisticated argument that analyzes the discursive structures that have legitimized nations as transhistorical narratives. Anderson's work is particularly useful in discussing Canada because he locates nationalism as a construct of colonial empire building. Following that, we can address the problem of postcolonial nationhood as one in which the state artifacts of empire produce informing narratives that seek to assign deep character to historically contingent structures.

Earlier historians of nationalism, such as Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm, have demonstrated that nations justify themselves in originary myths located in immemorial time (or, as Anderson aptly summarizes, national time runs backwards from the present to a receding and mythic origin). In the collapse of the racial ideologies that justified the expansionist empire-building of the nineteenth-century (such as Victorian "Anglo-Saxonism"), postcolonial constructs such as Canada and Australia have been marked by recurrent crises of "identity" in the absence of an enabling transhistorical myth. In these terms, "identity" is a marker of an imagined authenticity. This crisis of imagined authenticity in effect *simulates* — in Jean Baudrillard's sense of a copy without an original — the narrative that enables nationhood. One of the more common tropes of this simulation is the idea of national maturity, which posits some nations as older and mature, and others as younger and adolescent.

The Massey Commission's repeated reminder that we are a "young" culture is worth recalling here. As a state, Canada is no "younger" than Italy or Germany. Like them, it is a product of nine-

teenth-century liberal nationbuilding, but unlike them, Canadians could not legitimize the national state by a mythic invocation of racial unity. This is not just because of the polyglot demographics that have produced modern notions of multiculturalism, but because the very premise of the postcolonial state is, like Lescarbot's masque, an expropriation of aboriginality. This is most vividly evident in Newfoundland, the first overseas colony of the British empire, and the only one where all of the aboriginal inhabitants were killed in a historical act of total genocide. (This claim has on occasion been made of Tasmania as well, but the survival of a small group of indigenous Tasmanians, and their subsequent erasure from the accounts of genocide, subjects them to what can only be called re-genocide.[1]) The particular nationalism that arose and

1. For an account of the traditional assumption that the "last Tasmanian," a woman named Trucanini, died in 1876, see Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), pp. 442-424. Against this, David Day, in his more recent history of Australia, *Claiming a Continent* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1996), writes, "Although it was long believed that Tasmanian Aborigines had disappeared with the death of Trucanini, their heritage lived on with aboriginal women who survived with sealers on the offshore islands and whose descendants today proudly proclaim their Aboriginality" (103-4).

still operates in Newfoundland was predicated on the literal expropriation of aboriginality. The three centuries of genocide leading to the death of the last Beothuk in 1827 were concurrent with three centuries of hard oppression for the island's white settlers. As Chapter Four argues, this now uncontested occupation of the island has given Newfoundlanders a sense of aboriginal "belonging" to the land (or more accurately, the sea) which inflected their response to the seal hunt controversy of the 1970s as an issue of, in effect, aboriginal right. The Australian playwright Louis Nowra has ascribed the anxiety of "identity" in terms that apply with as much pressure to Canada as to Australia when he refers to "a black hole of our history," a void he ascribes to the invasion and erasure of aboriginality (Makeham 31).

NATIONAL THEATRE AND THE NATIONAL IMAGINARY

Tony Wilden, whose 1980 polemic *The Imaginary Canadian* was one of the first efforts to

Aboriginality as exotic masquerade: an "Indian Torchbearer" from George Chapman's 1613 *Memorable Masque*.

maturity suppose, but that the individual subject is produced by the discursive crises of the collectivity. It is the ways in which that collectivity is understood that leads to the proposition of nation as material narrative.

The metaphor of national maturity attributes to the hypothesized somatic nation the physical properties of the organic human body. This was a leap of illogic formulated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by social Darwinists, like Max Nordau, who popularized the concept of degeneration as a principle of moral biology and extended their conclusions to the supposedly organic nation. The most succinct and lethal summation of this can be found in Hans Johst's 1933 play *Schlageter*, in which a Nazi stormtrooper declaims, "the individual is a corpuscle in the bloodstream of his people" (Mosse 117). It was a formula that led directly to the gates of Auschwitz. In another direction, social Darwinist nineteenth-century versions of this trope applied the notion of the organic body to empire, evident in the imperial British fascination with classical Rome, which was narrated as a template of the British Empire and a caution against degeneration and decline. These notions were popularized by a vast library of heroic literature, from Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* to more recent favourites such as Rosemary Sutcliffe (whose *The Eagle of the Ninth* was still required reading in Ontario high schools in the 1960s). They were also monumentalized in the conceptual logic of the British Museum, which organized its exhibition halls as a genealogy of empires leading to its historical moment of construction.

Discorporating the national imaginary enables us to understand the nation as a collective practice rather than an organic body, but that merely opens the field to a host of other metaphors to give shape to the collectivity. The most popular of these in Canada is the idea of the nation as an act of communication, an idea that derives from the formative work of Harold Innes and George Grant and which has found its most celebrated proponent in B.W. Powe, whose book *A Canada of Light* (originally titled *A Tremendous Canada of Light*) is a fascinating manifesto of postmodernist nationalism. Powe argues, in a series of what he terms 'meditations,' that Canada is the sum total of intricate and plural webs of electromagnetic communication but cautions that "the Canada of light ... the flexible con-

theorize Canadian nationhood in psychoanalytic terms, has argued that "Imaginary relationships imposed over real social relations are constructed out of images, imaginings, and fantasies—images of the 'self,' images of the 'other'"(65-66). Consequently, he argues, the psychoanalytic "mirror phase" crisis is a process replicated in the dialectics of colonialism. The connection between colonialism and psychoanalytic formation has been the most famous contribution of Frantz Fanon and has been central to postcolonial studies. For both Fanon and Wilden, the collective experience of the colonized subject is the field in which individual consciousness is formed. The conclusion to be drawn is not that nations generalize the psychical structures of individuals, as metaphors of national

federation with its communication story, becomes vulnerable to a transnational despotism" (63). He envisions Canada as a model of "a state in process rather than a nation-state"(101) (and in this he reiterates in terms of modern technology Lescarbot's presentation of state power as spectacle).

Powe usefully points out that the consequence of electronic communication is that "patterns only become clear in an overview, in that instant when levels of reality stand revealed" (38). "Electricity," he writes, "scatters individual memory, conjuring ghostly simulations. It transmits static, shards of disconnected data, pieces of a riddle that may be in itself part of a greater enigma" (36-7). The sheer volume of cultural information is indeed beyond the comprehension of any individual and the containment of any system of regulatory policy. The nation in that sense is the sum total of the patterns that emerge through cultural noise. Powe observes the volume of "media noise" may drown out authentic voices but makes the important point that

> Inside the same dataflow, there may
> appear another set of messages. This is
> polyphony, the genuine plurality of differ-
> ent approaches and interpretations.
> Pluralism is not relativity. In the polyphony,
> every individual has one voice with which
> to speak, two ears with which to listen.
> Each voice carries a portion of the truth.
> No one person, government, ideology or
> transnational can own and dominate the
> whole. (48)

Powe's dematerialized concept of electromagnetic power is problematic; it could be said in reply that the entire projection of polyphony across the dataflow suspends from a very real and material structure of capitalized industry. Data doesn't just *flow*; it is *sent* through cables placed in the material world by working people and is regulated by complex structures of government policy and economy. Even so, Powe's speculations enable us to deal with the idea of the collective imaginary as a material process rather than a metaphor. And in doing so, he points to a new way of understanding the place of the theatre in the national imaginary. Here Powe is helpful because he identifies the nation as the entire bandwidth of cultural signals.

This bandwidth, however, is dominated by the mass media and the materialized fields of possibility enabled by state policies. On that cultural band, the theatre (however defined) occupies very little amplitude, and its volume is today largely dependent on its affiliation with tourist industries in particular sites. But the significance of that narrow band is disproportionate to its minor place in the cultural system because the theatre has functioned historically as a ceremonial test in which the national imaginary is enacted, codified, scrutinized, and monumentalized. The theatre is not the only site of this process of legitimation; other more popular cultural forms (rock music, film, and video in particular) occupy wider culture amplitudes. Against these, theatre still carries the monumentalizing weight invested in the nineteenth century as the spectacular rehearsal of nationhood. Film, in contrast, emerges as a modernist form that is contained by the expertise of the artisan classes and commodified by systems of distribution and industrial processing.

But if the theatre is only one of a constantly changing number of sites of legitimation, it is arguably the most democratic (although the recent hyperdevelopment of the world wide web challenges this). It is a field wherein dominant and oppositional discourses meet and exchange in a dialectical struggle to command the iconographic representation of the historical moment. These discourses are traceable in the material structures of funding, canonicity, and critical reception, and they command representation when they are picked up by other, concurrent, systems of meaning and reproduction.

THE THEATRICAL IMAGINARY

If nations are popularly understood as organic bodies, even "in process," one of the key links between the national imaginary and the theatre is the fact that performing bodies frequently play as metonyms of the national body. The most attractive and the most chilling images of modern nationalism replay performing bodies as signs of national culture. Olympic gymnasts and marching stormtroopers alike lend their bodies to somatize the national imaginary.

The notion of the theatrical imaginary posits the real as reproduced through enactment, inextri-

cably bound in the national imaginary. My use of the term derives in part from a key concept arising from the field of American theatre studies in the last decade, Rosemarie K. Bank's proposition of "theatre culture." Bank prefaces her study of American theatre in the period between 1825 and 1860 with a "restlessness with the view of cultures primarily as reflections (and so always behind or in front of) the societies producing them." She proposes instead the concept of "theatre culture,"

> the notion that peoples in a culture stage
> themselves and perform multiple roles. In
> this larger sense of performance, of the-
> atre outside of playhouses as well as with-
> in them, culture is not only or even exclu-
> sively metaphoric, a figure standing for
> something else, but is itself constitutive of
> the relationships we find circulating in and
> among the many universes of antebellum
> America. (2)

The idea of theatre culture is critical in Bank's study because she is not only concerned with the developing institution of the theatre and its new cultural tropes, but with the circulation of theatricality in the larger sense through social culture:

> Theatre culture displays historical spaces
> of production, consumption, change, and
> appropriation, but also insists upon class
> as a performance, ideology a creation and
> the "authentic" as the most compelling
> deception of all. (8)

For Bank, theatre is a practice that cannot be separated from the multiplicity of fields in which culture operates. Her analysis enables us to understand theatre as the product of material systems of representation and at the same time a formative principle of those systems. The playhouse is a designated site of representation but is simultaneously enclosed and liminal; in that sense, the stage is not just an invisible wall but a door through which images, forms, and ideology pass both ways. The formal theatre at any given point encloses only that part of theatre culture that is understood as "art" in the imaginary of the moment.

The theatre that remains outside "theatre" and the theatre that is imagined but unrealized are crucial to any understanding of what happens on the stage. The theatrical imaginary begins with the material realities of theatre culture but includes the conceptual structures that legitimize certain practices as "theatre," and, within that, which assign value to particular practices. From the point of view of anthropological performance studies, the half-time show at a football game is as much part of theatre culture as *Hamlet*, but, as envisioned in the theatrical imaginary, *Hamlet* — even if it is not performed — is more authentically "theatre" than the half-time show.

Within this circulation of the theatrical, the materially realized theatre operates both vertically and horizontally. It is vertical in that it establishes hierarchies of value that are regulated by economics, varying degrees of commercialization, and professionalism. This is the hierarchy of distinction rewarded by fame, critical esteem, and public attention. It assigns value to preeminent achievements, but the fields of distinction co-exist and overlap horizontally. We tend to separate these fields into two sectors — the public and the commercial — but within these, the vertical structures of value merge. Theatre artists and audiences move fluidly between these sectors, and so do theatrical productions. In reality, there is no purely commercial theatre sector that is not complicit in state-regulated policies and economics; conversely, there is no sector of completely subsidized theatre that is not dependent on box office. The difference is in the structures of incorporation and ownership that regulate the capacity of the theatre to acquire capital profit and in the compensating forms of social benefit that reward the absence of profit in the public sector.

NATIONAL THEATRE

The interconnection of theatre and nation frames within the theatrical imaginary a corresponding notion of national theatre. This is a notion that has historically sought to contain two very different impulses. On the one hand, as Loren Kruger has shown in her study, *The National Stage*, national theatre can be approached as a problem of "theatrical nationhood" in which national formations "summon" legitimizing audiences to nation-building performances. This is, as Kruger shows, the historical mission of the monumental statist national

theatre projects that arose with mass political movements in the first half of the past century. For the most part, post-war nations have been content to erect flagship arts centres (or "opera houses") that can be programmed as showcases of national prestige (although increasingly this is a state function reassigned to large airports).

In these terms, monumental national theatres have been the exception rather than the rule, and most have been rather short-lived projects appealing to the political vanity of the moment. There is a wider sense, however, in which national theatre is a more complex and problematic concept that in fact exists only in the nostalgic space of its own imagining. In this sense, national theatre is a gesture of desire, like Lescarbot's masque.

The idea of national theatre — of a theatrical industry that announces and enacts the historical presence of the nation through a canon of performed texts — is an historical artifact originating in nineteenth-century movements of popular nationhood. It is no less a totalizing narrative than the other synthesizing movements to which it is related, including the rise of the working class and women's enfranchisement, national armies and literatures (the two are inseparable), and new academic disciplines of social research, of which the most important were ethnology and sociology. At the extremes but no less characteristic of popular nationhood, these narratives included metahistorical fantasies of national and racial origins, familiarly located in nationalist movements and less familiarly in the extremist narratives of secret and lost histories, in which we may include the writing of racists like Houston Stewart Chamberlain, metahistorians like Oswald Spengler, and occultists like Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society.

Late nineteenth-century notions of national theatre enacted the crisis of modernism; they sought to contain disruptive chaos by recruiting the aesthetic revolution of new technologies in professional formations that confirmed the verities of liberal nationalism. Invariably, proposals of national theatre, chiefly in Britain, France, Germany, and Scandinavia, sought to reconcile the rationalist principles of political liberalism with pseudo-scientific theories of racial nationalism. This leads to the unpleasant suggestion that the very idea of national theatre is inextricably linked with the modern history of racism. The national theatre project has been,

time and again, to embody and enact an historical narrative of racial supremacy, coded variously as "British," Germanic, or Aryan, depending on the country in question. It is useful to note here that the idea of the theatre "festival" originates in Bayreuth, where Wagner's disciples (including Adolph Appia) attempted to return the theatrical forms produced by modernist innovation to defend pre-modernist notions of the *Volk*. National theatre has in a similar way expressed attempts to liberate new ideas of popular nationhood from foreign oppression. The case of Poland offers an example of a popular nationhood summoned by a national drama that in its day could not be produced. The argument of a nation enacted in an imagined theatre explains why today, in the spiritual centre of the Polish nation, the statue of Adam Mickiewicz, author of the monumental national drama, *Forefather's Eve*, stands as a symbol of the nation, gesturing across Krakow's Rynek Glowny to the spire of the Mariacki church, dedicated to Mary as Queen of Poland.

National theatre may be considered the imagined, and sometimes institutionalized, enactment of metahistorical nationalist fantasies. The eponym of nation and theatre rests on a set of assumptions that sit somewhat uneasily together. The first is that the theatre is reflective of national character. This was the common nineteenth-century romantic trope that identified national models in dramatic literature. In this scheme, the theatre as the actualizing mechanism of the drama reflected national types as figured in the plays and at the same time exhibited national character in the way the plays were produced. The theatre in that sense was a system of organization and consumption that modeled national behaviour. This is, of course, an assumption that is only sustainable in terms of homogenous, one-dimensional notions of national character. The romantic distillation of this was the idea that the theatre reflected the national will and that "golden ages" of theatre corresponded with the high moments of national will (which is to say, power).

Along with this is the parallel notion that the theatre, again as a system of production and consumption, is a positivist indicator of national disunity, that its failures are the failures of the nation. This is the traditionally Tory view of the theatre as a focal point of the mob, the site of decadence and
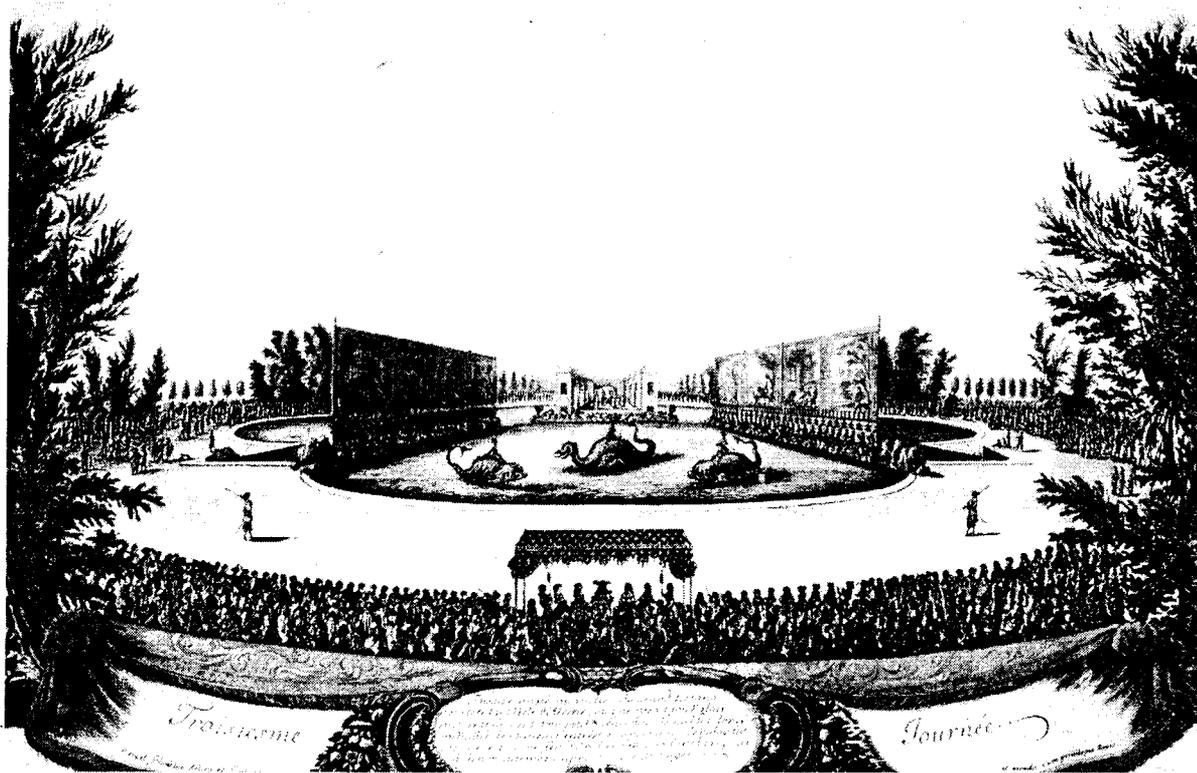
An aquatic fete at Versailles, mid-seventeenth century: the performance is the state.

disruption, a corruptive anti-nation.

In both of these assumptions, the idea of the national dramatic canon is central: in the first place, as the enabling vision of the nation through time; in the second, as the structure that promises to reconcile disunity and division. The cults of Wagner in Germany and Shakespeare in England, both promising national renewal by evoking a mythic past in bucolic festival retreats from urban misery, seemed to prove the talismanic power of a national theatre culture. But as the race-nationalism of the Edwardian era fell into discredit, particularly in the postcolonial world, the equation of nation and theatre became much more problematic.

THE IMAGINED THEATRE

The deep paradox of colonial nationalism is that while nations posit themselves as immemorial principles, colonial nations begin with historically identifiable events that are usually incompatible with transhistorical mythmaking. The exception to this may be the United States, in which the myth of personal liberty has in effect provided a metaphysical prehistory to the revolution. More typical is the

Canadian example, in which nationhood was a legislative act.

In the same way that colonial nations like Canada began with a sense of historical ambivalence (a project whose time had come, but which could just as readily come on another date, or with a different configuration) so did their theatre cultures begin with an absence. The idea of Canadian theatre came into being as an aspiration in the decades after Confederation, principally though the musings of various members of the Canada First movements and the ambitions of a handful of literary dramatists. But in these first expressions of theatrical nationhood, the theatre was understood as its textualities — not as a systemic of production and consumption but as a living literature of national dramas that enact the character of the new nation. The fact that this literature did not in fact exist was a minor deterrent to literary nationalists who sat down to write it into being. If the nation, even the legislated colonial nation, was to be understood as a moment of historical arrival, then the arrival of its literature was an obvious corollary.

The canon of nineteenth-century Canadian

drama is surprisingly large, although it is still difficult to assemble. The several hundred plays that can actually be gathered together offer an odd assortment of verse tragedies, religious melodramas, community polemics, and political burlesques. They are all fascinating, especially as historical artefacts, and some of them read well. But with a few exceptions (particularly the political burlesques like *HMS Parliament*) they were never performed. Canadian playwrights who wanted to see their work on stage knew to go where the market was: they headed south and wrote for the giant producing syndicates that controlled the playhouse circuits across North America. The situation was roughly analogous to the condition for Canadian screenwriters in the twentieth century, who knew that the easiest way to the Canadian cinema screen was via LA. There were certainly playwrights who cranked out work for the domestic market, but their work, potboilers and "farce-comedies," was rarely published.

From the end of the last century, critics have been painfully aware that the achievements of Canadian playwrights have been, until recent decades, fairly slight. And even at the close of the nineteenth century, the failure of Canadian playwriting was attributed to the financial realities of a theatrical system centered in New York. This was an argument that shaped the formation of what became Canadian theatre studies; it recurs throughout the century and was the thesis of Michael Tait's influential 1972 study, "Playwrights in a Vacuum." In this early attempt to explain the obvious derivative qualities of so much of the surviving nineteenth-century Canadian drama, Tait argued that writers like Charles Mair and Sarah Anne Curzon lacked the opportunity to develop their playwriting craft because of the colonized theatre that effectively locked them out.

But, in fact, they weren't locked out, nor were they denied "access" to the stage. Their plays seem so untheatrical and naive today precisely because they were deliberately written against the popular taste; they were written for the imagined theatre that did not exist. The qualities that seem so laughable today, of pompous verse, tendentious speechifying, and bombastic patriotism, were already archaic in post-Confederation Canada; they were consciously retro-chic even at the time. They were published because of their earnest anti-popular contrarianism. The literariness and lack of theatrical

sophistication in these texts were markers of cultural authenticity that announced a refusal to participate in vulgar American theatre culture.

In these texts and the critical discourses that followed them, "Canadian theatre" was originally understood as an absence. The theatre industry had been one of the first sectors in the Canadian economy to be penetrated by American capital, and, during the great rush of monopoly empire building in the 1890s, it became one of the first sites of resistance. The idea of Canadian theatre originally surfaced as a trope of resistance, as the aspiration of national autonomy deferred by American cultural expansion. This produced an overdetermined concept of Canadian theatre, as both a cultural and an economic field of possibility.

The objection to American theatre culture was both practical and ideological. On the practical level, the deep circulation of American popular culture, then as now, presented a powerful argument that Canadians really are Americans and that far from locking Canadians out of their own systems of representation, American theatre was a field in which Canadian artists and audiences were deeply complicit. There is some justification in this when we consider the number of local minstrel shows and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* companies played by Canadian performers to Canadian audiences. The ideological objection that followed from this was that despite affinities of race and history, American theatre culture circulated republican values foreign to monarchist Canadians. The absent Canadian theatre was one that was therefore marked by its "freedom" from American themes and forms. In this, critics tended to agree British models would be useful. As Bernard Sandwell argued time and again in the first decade of the twentieth century,

> There are good reasons why Canadians should familiarize themselves with the social conditions and problems of Great Britain, and there is no better way of doing it than by the serious British drama. Great Britain is the predominant partner in the Empire to which we all belong—a partnership which few of us want to break and which many of us would like to see drawn even closer than it is to-day. It is possible that at no distant date we may have quite a lot to say about the running of the

Vincent Massey, like Sandwell, a prominent
Liberal and later architect of the theatrical system
that dominated Canadian theatre for close to fifty
years, repeatedly made the same point but adding
that the theatres of New York were alien in other
ways—dominated as they were by "gentlemen with
Old Testament names."

The absent Canadian theatre became more real
but no less imagined over the course of the century,
in large part because of the efforts of Vincent
Massey, for whom the theatre was "not only the
most striking symbol of a nation's culture but the
central structure enshrining much that is finest in a
nation's spiritual and artistic greatness" (*Report*
193). Most histories of Canadian theatre agree on a
dominant narrative that remains virtually
unchanged since Don Rubin attempted to synthe-
size it in his 1974 chapbook, "Creeping Towards a
Culture." In this narrative, the cause of Canadian
playwriting was artificially inhibited by the absence
of a professional theatre system until the post-war
years, at which point the introduction of public
funding established a "mainstream" that generated
a radical "alternative" theatre movement where
Canadian playwriting came into its own.

In this pattern, Rubin identified the genealogical
sequence that narrates the maturation of a profes-
sional theatre, in which the drama and the theatri-
cal system function as reciprocating engines of
growth: new dramatic "voices" encourage new
forms of theatrical production; new theatres enable
new drama, and so on through the generations. For
Rubin, public funding was the sign of national cul-
tural maturity that primed the pump. In this posi-
tivist account, the theatre "evolves" in stages that
supersede colonialism; every accomplishment is
step closer to deferred autonomy. Eugene Benson
and L.W. Conolly reiterate this thesis in their
English-Canadian Theatre, when they write that, "It
has been one of the purposes of this study to show
that the factors militating against an indigenous
Canadian theatre were cultural and political, not

climactic, and that Canadians were long denied—
or denied themselves—full imaginative expression
in drama and theatre" (113).

My argument, that Canadian theatre is a history
of absence and that the actual theatre culture of the
moment always refers to the imagined theatre that
defies realization, is an attempt to overturn this
conventionalized narrative. It is also an attempt to
defy the totalizing historical summaries that so con-
fidently identify "mainstreams" and "alternative."
Canadian theatre is a disparate set of practices scat-
tered across a great amount of space It is worth
bearing in mind that just as (Anderson tells us) a
nation is an imagined community because no one
person can know all its members, so too is the the-
atre an imagined medium because relatively few
people see any particular performance. And only a
very few see every show of a run. Even the actors
only see the parts they perform in (and of course
incompletely at that); the director may see only the
first few shows of a run. It is only the "non-creative"
working class of the theatre—the stage managers,
techies and ushers, who see the play most com-
pletely, because they work it. No one sees every-
thing. (And of course, the same might be said of
the nation).

Theatre historians recurrently come up against
the awkward fact that the signal performances
which enable the artistic genealogies, which until
recently have been at the heart of the discipline,
were generally seen by very few people. In many
cases, it was not the performance *per se* but its criti-
cal reception as circulated amongst an influential
elite of engaged peers that mattered. It doesn't mat-
ter to the theatre historian how many people actual-
ly saw Saxe Meinegin on tour. What matters is that
André Antoine did. His presence at a particular per-
formance locates a link in the causal chain. This
holds true of Canadian theatre as well. We can
identify *The Farm Show* as an epochal production,
but again, very few people actually saw it. Like
Woodstock, it activated a deeper set of relationships
that accord it historical status.

This observation has a disconcerting corollary
but one which is very useful because it enables us
to reclaim nineteenth-century closet dramas (for
example) in Canadian theatre culture. *An influen-
tial performance need not have had any audience at
all. It may achieve its meaning in an imagined per-
formance.* Kruger makes a closely related point

9

when she describes the attempts of cultural conservatives like Coleridge "to preserve the poet Shakespeare from the ravages of the stage," a movement she describes as

> a historically specific response by the "cultivated classes" to what they saw as the vulgarity of the stage — the textual bowdlerizations of producers and the habits of performance (virtuoso gesture and ad-lib declamation) that encourage and reflect the noisy participation of the "unlettered audience." (12)

In that sense, Charles Mair's imagined theatre — the theatre that *ought* to do *Tecumseh* — was a theatre from which the social elements that undermine propriety, decorum, and the nation itself have been entirely evacuated. And if that leads to the apparent absurdity that an influential play therefore need not be written, that it may exist only as a imagined text, it may be useful to recall the example of Antonin Artaud, whose powerful arguments for a theatre of cruelty rest on his jotted notes for plays that were never written nor performed but which played feverishly in his mind. The plays he didn't write are among the most important in modern theatre.

The idea of the imagined theatre brings into play the entire realm of theatre culture that is quoted, implied, rejected, or legitimized by the theatre as it is understood at any given historical moment. Rather than defining the accomplishments of the moment as historical proof of cultural evolution, it places them in the wider field of possibilities, and allows us to consider changing meanings of what theatre "is."

Throughout our history, the phrase "Canadian Theatre" has always meant an imagined theatre contained within (and often inhibited by) the material theatre of the day. It is a phrase that has expressed longing for a sense of national community and which has been the site of severe contestation (especially in the 1970s). The idea of a Canadian theatre carries the necessary corollary of a non-Canadian or a not-yet Canadian theatre, the theatre of the moment, which had variously been defined as alien, colonial, foreign, other. Theatre and nation collapse into each other at the point of imagined authenticity: the "real" nation is out there, the "real" theatre is its articulation. How this imagined authenticity has been re-enacted in the imagined theatre at key points in the development of Canadian nationhood is the subject of this book. It begins where Sandwell and Massey began, with the ambivalent place of the English Canadian playwright in an Imperial spectacle pressured by American popular entertainments.