The Theatrical Federalism of Vincent Massey

Toronto has no social classes—
Only the Masseys and the masses.

B.K. Sandwell,
"On the Appointment of Governor-General Vincent Massey, 1952"
(Scott 75)

VINCENT MASSEY ON STAGE

The Right Honourable Vincent Massey was always in costume, even when he wasn’t. His biographer, Claude Bissell, records the story of a group of Junior Fellows of Massey College who drove to Massey’s home in Port Hope in his retirement to pay homage to the distinguished Founder of the College (and in this they replicated an earlier homage, when the young Vincent Massey paid a similar visit to the aged Goldwin Smith) (Bissell, Imperial 309). They were surprised to find Massey dressed casually, in a sports jacket and open-necked shirt. This too was a costume, the studied apparel appropriate to the moment that constructed a relationship of occasion, taste, and propriety with his audience.

Photographs of Massey invariably show him in costume, uniform, regalia, or official dress. A famous photograph, which Robertson Davies tells us Massey kept on his desk throughout his life, depicts the young Vincent in pontifical robes in the role of Pius VII in Claudel’s L’Otrage at Hart House Theatre (Davies, “Massey” 334). There is very little difference in his mien and attitude between that picture and one taken three decades later, in which he wears the somewhat more ornate ceremonial robe of Chancellor of the University of Toronto. And again, that same solemn theatricality is apparent when he appears in a later photo as Governor-General wearing the imperial uniform passed on to him by his predecessor. (Massey was not the last Governor-General to wear this uniform, which resembles an admiral in a Gilbert & Sullivan operetta. That distinction goes to Roland Mitchener.) But Massey may have been the last to wear it with a sense of pomp, to wear it as if it—or the role—really belonged to him.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that despite his puritan family
background and his fastidious adherence to propriety, Massey was something of a dandy who kept one eye on his own reflection. The range of costumes in which he was photographed is astonishing. In the three books that describe his early years, his own autobiography, his brother Raymond's memoir of their childhood, and the first volume of Bissell's magisterial biography, we find a succession of images in which Vincent Massey disappears into costume. These costumes mark the shape of his life and career. He is in a sailor suit at the age of five; in blackface as a minstrel for a family parade at seventeen; in the Highland dress of his cadet corps at St. Andrew's College around the same time; in the uniform of a Lieutenant Colonel in the Canadian Army during WWI; in the costume of a cockney burglar in a comedy at Hart House in 1923; in the robes of Pope Pius VII in 1924; in top hat and morning dress on the steps of the United States Capitol; in a tuxedo at a diplomatic function; in ambassadorial uniform as Minister Plenipotentiary to the United States; in a different but no less ceremonial uniform as High Commissioner to the United Kingdom; in academic regalia as Chancellor of the University of Toronto; in the state uniform of Governor-General; in an aboriginal feather head-dress and again in an Inuit coat while Governor-General. Perhaps the only major role which did not provide him with a uniform was Chairman of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, but even there, in a forum which many observers noted was highly theatricalized, Massey supervised a mise en scène in which he played a role that had been in rehearsal for many years.

The trait that connects these images is his unchanging attitude. The camera rarely finds him smiling. Instead, he assumes an expression of gravitas. He was not a large man, but in his photos he invariably commands attention, by position and by a bearing that he would probably have been pleased...
ing the colonial subject in the role of imperial baronet.

Massey was a man of the theatre in two interconnecting ways: his life was a theatricalized performance of roles and manners, marked by his many uniforms and the ceremonies he loved; and at the same time, he was passionately engaged in the theatre as an actor, a theatre builder, a manager, an anthologist, a critic, an advocate, and, in the end, as the architect of the model of state patronage which established the conditions that professionalized an idea of Canadian theatre.

In his autobiography, Massey elides the origins of his theatricality. He does admit that his love of theatre, a love shared by his brother and cousins, may seem at odds with the family's rigid puritan Methodist background. In his memoir, Raymond Massey claims that their father saw only one play in his lifetime, Jerome K. Jerome's The Passing of the Third Floor Back (86). Vincent Massey mentions a few others, mostly in London on the fateful trip that ended with their mother's unexpected death when Vincent was sixteen. In his account, Vincent Massey recalls their father as austere but affectionate and humorous. Theatre was not part of the family's life, and Massey suggests that his father's power of mimicry and love of charades might explain his own theatrical bent (Massey, Memoirs 5). His own first exposure to live theatre, he claims, came when he was sixteen, when he saw Beerbohm Tree's Richard II in London.

There is something missing in this account, and his brother supplies the clue. In his memoir, Raymond Massey claims that he first saw a play at the age of nine (when Vincent would have been eighteen) at the Chautauqua Institute in upstate New York (18). Chautauqua occupies a legendary place in the shared history of the United States and Canada, because since its founding in 1874 as a Methodist summer educational assembly, it has become a de facto university of popularized high culture. For many North Americans in the early twentieth century, their first exposure to new ideas in the liberal arts and sciences, and, indeed, to Shakespeare, came via travelling Chautauqua tent shows. It is impossible to understand the Massey sense of theatre without considering the cultural training of Chautauqua, but, curiously, Vincent Massey makes no mention of it in his autobiography. That elision cannot have been an accident,
nor was the connection casual. The Chautauqua Institute had in fact been founded by Massey’s uncle and namesake, John Vincent; Massey’s father was a major patron of the Institute; the family owned a house on its grounds and spent a great deal of time there in the summers. It is probable that Vincent would have been exposed to theatricals at Chautauqua. But these theatricals were not “the theatre,” and it is very possible that this distinction between the acceptable acting of moral plays and the unacceptable “theatre” was formative of Massey’s later insistence that a national drama must arise from a professional theatre. It also may explain the curious phrasing of his statement in his autobiography that in his family “the theatre, as an institution, was on the proscribed list” (5).

If on the one hand Chautauqua introduced the young Vincent Massey to the pleasures of theatre, it also modeled theatre in a way he repudiated, indeed, expunged. This repudiation of Chautauqua’s earnest moralizing was likely part of Massey’s larger religious dissent, a life-long process that reversed the family tradition and returned him to the Anglican church. The puritanism of the Chautauqua Institute was not the solemn, suspicious puritanism of Presbyterian Toronto but something more robust. Chautauqua was an odd combination of summer camp, university campus, and tent meeting, and it embraced a religious humanism that allied itself with progressive movements in art and literature. That atmosphere was replicated in small scale, as Bissell observes, in the family farm estate, Dentonia, outside of Toronto (Young 22); Bissell also suggests that Hart House was built in the spirit of a secular Chautauqua (Young 62).

In his later writings on drama and theatre, Massey frequently iterated his belief that theatre must never preach. In his 1922 essay, “The Prospects of a Canadian Drama” (written at the time of his closest engagement with Hart House Theatre), he cautioned against the “peril of the didactic.” He notes that Canadians seem to incline towards morally useful art:

- plays to teach children the value of soap and fresh air; plays to teach farmers the importance of consolidated schools and the evils of scrub bulls; and there are plays to aid home missions, or to stop cigarette smoking, to stimulate patriotism, and to do a number of things, in the interests of health or morals, for which the drama was not intended. (208)

This tendency he ascribes to “our double foundation of Puritanism—drawn from Scotland and New England, and a strength in most respects.” But he is adamant that “A play must not point a moral.”

Eight years later, speaking to the Royal Society of Canada in his capacity as Minister to the United States and as a “simple-minded layman,” he returned to this theme:

Propaganda is the death of art. The Anglo-Saxon with his inherited Puritanism and honest zeal for the reform of his neighbours, has too often misused and degraded the materials of the artists to make them the vehicle of a gospel. (Art LXIV)

Massey’s rebellion against the family tradition took him towards a humanism that was encouraged at the University of Toronto and Oxford, but it was a humanism bounded by formalist structures of thought, class, and practice; these are the structures signified by his many uniforms. In effect, he rebelled not only against the Sunday School utilitarianism of Chautauqua, but also against the Methodist tradition of conservative dissent. In politics, this took him away from the family’s Tory affiliations to the Liberal Party; in culture and religion, it took him to arch anglophilia. Nothing could be further from the shirt-sleeved democratic Methodist than the gold braid and epaulettes of the High Church statesman that Massey became; but the early formation in Chautauqua must have imbued him with an understanding of performance. And perhaps it is this awareness of performativity, and a lingering Methodist guilt, that led Massey to expunge any reference to Chautauqua from his autobiography.

**DOING THE PLAY, DOING THE NATION**

His formation in the Chautauqua tradition may also explain Massey’s particular brand of liberal nationalism with its curious mixture of ethnocentric essentialism and cultural pluralism. As an undergraduate, Massey had flirted with Imperial Federation, a movement that sought to reconstitute the Empire as an equal partnership sustained by liv-
ing tradition. Massey’s liberal nationalism was always contained by the sense of tradition enacted in the monarchy and the entire register of social value that derived from it. He was influenced by the writings of Ernest Renan, the French historian who proposed nations as ideological constructions rather than organic principles. From Renan, Masses took the idea that nationhood is formed by the material determinants of history, geography, and ethnicity (although Masses would have said “race”). He quoted with approval Renan’s famous definition of a nation: “Avoir fait des grandes choses ensemble, vouloir en faire encore, viola la condition essentielle pour être un peuple” (Art LXVI).

For Masses, nation, drama, and race were inseparable, and all three were framed by the fundamental notion of tradition. His repeated argument against American cultural imports was that they represented “alien influences” which, although the United States shared an “Anglo-Saxon” heritage, was coarsened by the vulgarity of American republicanism and the capitalist monopoly of “New York gentlemen with Old Testament names” (“Prospects” 197). This, of course, was the respectable racism that was part of the cultural equipment of the late Victorian gentleman. But Masses’s ethnocentrism did not stand in the way of his liberal humanism. If the nation is the material organization of culture, then it was possible to respect pluralism (“there are several Canadas,” he once wrote [“Prospects” 207]) and at the same time admit the primacy of a formative cultural tradition. This is the cultural logic of imperialism as empires envision themselves—as sustaining structures that contain, and thrive on, interior diversity.

The traditions that enable and sustain pluralism were, for Masses, the domain of culture. His philosophy can be reduced to an aphorism: no nation without art, no art without nation. This offers another reading of his insistence that “If plays are essential to the fortunes of a theatre the converse of the axiom is equally true” (“Prospects” 198). The theatre replicates the methods and structures of production in a society. It is a national metonym in which individuals strive together in productive relationships to create something meaningful that transcends their individuality. Masses’s encouragement of amateur drama in his preface to Canadian Plays from Hart House Theatre can also be read as an exhortation of the nation at large:

Let us welcome therefore every group of men and women who come together “to do a play,” whether they use a theatre, a church, a school or a barn for their purpose. There is no finer form of communal effort than this, in which everyone, whatever his or her calling, can find a place. (vi)
The first proponents of state subsidy, liberal journalists like the young Hector Charlesworth and B.K. Sandwell, saw subsidies as the only effective means of countering the free trade of American popular culture. They were unashamedly elitist, bemoaning the fact that worthy art could not compete in a degraded marketplace against what Sandwell called "the alien drama" from south of the border. Like successive generations of policy-makers in Canada, they were protectionists. Massey's approach to this problem was somewhat more refined, perhaps because as a businessman (however reluctantly) he well understood that producers must obey the market: "The drama—let it never be forgotten—is a popular art, and must make a popular appeal.""Prospects" 201. Nor did Massey share Sandwell's admiration of the United States, remarking parts of it very well, and had numerous American kin. He did, however, condemn the more vulgar aspects of American materialism.

Massey did not just see the idea of state patronage as a cultural corrective, although that principle lingered (it appears in the Massey Commission Report in the idea of "cultural defence"). More importantly, it was the keystone of the linking arch of tradition that explained the relation of drama and nationhood. State patronage was the exercise of enlightened power which intervenes when necessary but which does not rob the artist of autonomy and responsibility.

In the end, patronage is always about the patron, not the patronized. It is the system of giving, rather than the interchangeable recipients, that matters. In the industrialized western world, the modern notion of state patronage developed in the late nineteenth century as an adaptation of the socialist call for democratic culture advanced by the Second International to bring light and joy to the ostensibly bleak working masses. State patronage, enacted in
various schemes for national theatres and arts councils, proposed the idea of the nation as a democratic field that embraces and reconciles class and social differences.

Patronage confirms the relationship of nation and culture because it recognizes that power is only perceived in its application. The noblesse oblige of the monarch who sponsors the artist establishes a relationship of mutual necessity. The monarch enables the artist to retreat momentarily from the pressures of commercialization, and the artist confirms the transformative power of the monarch. Their mutual currency is the distinction of taste.

This sense of aristocratic tradition and elite leadership was the platform for Massey’s vision of a system of state support. In 1948, the year before he was appointed to chair the royal commission, he described the system in his book, *On Being Canadian* (which might be considered a literary audition for the Governor-General’s job). In this description, he carefully delineated in advance the chief recommendation that the royal commission was ostensibly to conclude from its hearings. In his study of the royal commission, *The Muses, the Masses and the Massy Commission*, Paul Litt argues that Massey’s proposal was already a fait accompli when the hearings began:

> From the very beginning of their work the commissioners had considered it probable that they would recommend the establishment of an arts council. They discussed the possible functions and composition of such a council during their first meetings in May 1949. (181)

Such a body, Massey believed, would enable the audience (“the key to our national problem in the arts” [Art LXI]) to see and appreciate great work produced by trained professionals; “a spirit of generous appreciation” would give those artists the time they needed to bring their work up to the standards of tradition (Art LXVI). Only then would they be able to create a truly national art.

For Massey, national art did not mean patriotism; in fact, the opposite of national art was provincialism, a self-conscious performance of local particularity which manifests itself in “the artificial Canadianism that is an offense against art” (Art, LXIV). He insisted that “art ... is not a medium for self-conscious nationalism but rather a natural expression of national character.” The nation, as a community shaped by consensus and bound by tradition, is manifest in its powers to transcend the ordinary work of living, even for a practical people. It is the practice of culture, not the actual content of art, that marks the nation. Content is the domain of criticism, which is subject to the laws of art and taste. But the making of art is a practice of the nation, just as the making of war. National character emerges and is made known through the distinctiveness with which artists work within universally recognized artistic forms. He concluded that “True art probably never consciously conveyed a national message. But it is true that the artist responds to all human emotions and reflects them.”

In true aristocratic fashion, Massey did not seem perplexed that the great art that manifests national feeling was also the great art that had always suited his own taste. This is the reverse current of noblesse oblige; the reward of patronage is arbitration of taste. Massey would have explained this as a function of education. He was not born into good taste and discernment (although his father was an appreciator of painting); he had to acquire it; and having acquired it, saw no reason why his fellow citizens could not as well. Aesthetic appreciation was not an issue of social or class practice for Massey; it was the recognition of deep historical principles. That this recognition brought intense pleasure thus confirmed the absolute authority of tradition.

Massey was too cautious to describe the Canadian national character; that, he made clear, is the function of the artist. The paradox that he had to solve was one that we today understand in terms of post-colonial nation building but which Massey would have seen as less ideological. Simply put, if national character was a given condition of nationhood, and if art reflects national character, what factors had impeded the development of Canadian culture? For some, inclined to a cultural positivism, the lack of a self-sustaining professional arts culture proved that Canada was simply part of a larger American cultural sphere. This was the position advanced by Merrill Denison, whose one-act plays had been the most important contributions made by Hart House to the canon of Canadian drama. In his 1923 essay, “Nationalism and Drama,” Denison insisted that New York was our theatrical capital, and that “Life in Cleveland and Toronto is identi-
cal" (Denison, "Nationalism" 93). In this view, Canadians had as much opportunity to participate in professionalized art as Americans.

From Massey's perspective, this suggestion of cultural free trade must have seemed like an abrogation of nationhood. Yet he was not a simple protectionist who believed that a national culture was a nationalized culture. The solution to this dilemma is one that is repeated throughout his work and which we later see inscribed deeply in the Massey Report. It is the trope of the young country on the brink of maturity.

This notion of the adolescent nation coming into maturity is deep and resilient in Canadian cultural history. It has its origins in the iconography of the imperial family that was repeated constantly through the Victorian age. The romantic visions of volkish masculinity that saturate those images carry over into the modernist ideologies of the twentieth century. So pervasive is the trope of national youth that we barely notice it: generations of Canadians have accepted as historical truth the idea that we are a young country and that our culture is coming of age. This was indeed the great narrative of the 1967 Centennial, as it had been of the 1927 Jubilee, and before that, of the public delirium over Vimy Ridge. Canada is always coming of age.

The deep contradiction in this is the local reiteration of the crisis of the twentieth century, with its recurring conflicts between modernist ideologies and pre-modern tribalisms. Despite Massey's reference to "relative youth" (Art LXIV), Canada is no younger a nation-state than Germany or Italy; like them, it is a product of nineteenth century liberal nationalism. But German and Italian nationhoods express a romantic vision for the imagined, deferred national past which in Canada can only be traced through imperial history. It is the idea of a post-imperial national character that is always already coming of age, the cultural narrative rather than cultural practice.

Vincent Massey accepted the idea of national immaturity (which positioned him as a smarter older brother). That is why "we" had so little experience in theatre, despite three centuries of European theatre practice in Canada, and it is why he had to turn to our "older" cousins for training and advice. That this advice would confirm the centrality of "universal" models (especially Shakespeare) was not a contradiction. National maturity would give Canadians the skill and experience to speak Shakespeare with a Canadian accent. "Familiarity with great works does not suppress originality," Massey pronounced, "it rather stimulates it" (Art LXVIII).

**Performing the Royal Commission**

The need to establish structures to promote that familiarity was the conclusion the Massey Commission was mobilized to reach. The Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences has become mythologized as a transformative moment of cultural emergence, as, in fact, the point of maturity promised in its name. Paul Litt has analyzed the workings of the Massey Commission in depth and has done much to dismantle the official myth. He points out that most of the Commission's recommendations were ignored and that "Only 12 of the report's 146 recommendations were implemented two years after its release" (237). The recommendation that had come to be seen as its chief legacy—the establishment of the Canada Council—very nearly died without issue. Litt concludes that the real significance of the Massey Commission lies less in the fate of its major initiatives than in the general impact it had upon the attitudes of the public and the policies of the government. It helped usher in a new age in which a conscious and coordinated government cultural policy came to be expected. One has to ask, however, how much of this change was due to the commission and how much was attributable to changing times of which the commission itself was a reflection. (247)

Despite this, and despite as well Maria Tippet's historical research into the pre-Massey Commission institutions of professional art and sponsorship in Canada, the myth has survived that the Massey Commission was the watershed of Canadian cultural history. Litt is likely correct when he explains this in terms of "changing times" which legitimized government intervention in many fields of social behaviour and policy. This was also, I suggest, an attitude conditioned by the experience of the Second World War, which was in effect won by
lishing a model for the provincial and municipal arts councils that would come to carry the larger proportion of public funding in the performing arts. But there are problems with this story. The first is the fact that, as a not-yet-radical Tom Hendry (co-founder of the Manitoba Theatre Centre, and later one of the founders of Toronto Free Theatre) noted in 1965, "Significantly, only one of the Commission’s recommendations regarding the theatre ever took root, and that was the idea of national theatre school. Beyond that, massively government intervention in all areas of business and economy and tempered by Cold War paranoia. And yet the fact remains that the Massey Commission, as the herald of the Canada Council, has been imbued with a heroic status. It is, I suspect, a status that has been nourished by successive generations of policy makers and Canada Council bureaucrats. It has become conventional to see in the Massey Commission the seeds of our contemporary public theatre industry. Writing in 1974, Don Rubin stated categorically that

The Massey Commission Report then becomes a key to understanding the rapid rise of Canadian arts and arts organizations in the period following World War II. It is the major precipitating factor in the creation of the Canada Council, which, in its turn, was to become the prime mover of arts organizations. ("Creeping" 320)

In this narrative, the Massey Report legitimizes the principle of intervention, and the Canada Council spreads the seeds of cultural development by enabling infrastructures to be built and by establishing a model for the provincial and municipal arts councils that would come to carry the larger proportion of public funding in the performing arts. But there are problems with this story. The first is the fact that, as a not-yet-radical Tom Hendry (co-founder of the Manitoba Theatre Centre, and later one of the founders of Toronto Free Theatre) noted in 1965, "Significantly, only one of the Commission’s recommendations regarding the theatre ever took root, and that was the idea of national theatre school. Beyond that, massive government intervention in all areas of business and economy and tempered by Cold War paranoia. And yet the fact remains that the Massey Commission, as the herald of the Canada Council, has been imbued with a heroic status. It is, I suspect, a status that has been nourished by successive generations of policy makers and Canada Council bureaucrats. It has become conventional to see in the Massey Commission the seeds of our contemporary public theatre industry. Writing in 1974, Don Rubin stated categorically that

The Massey Commission Report then becomes a key to understanding the rapid rise of Canadian arts and arts organizations in the period following World War II. It is the major precipitating factor in the creation of the Canada Council, which, in its turn, was to become the prime mover of arts organizations. ("Creeping" 320)

In this narrative, the Massey Report legitimizes the principle of intervention, and the Canada Council spreads the seeds of cultural development by enabling infrastructures to be built and by establishing a model for the provincial and municipal arts councils that would come to carry the larger proportion of public funding in the performing arts. But there are problems with this story. The first is the fact that, as a not-yet-radical Tom Hendry (co-founder of the Manitoba Theatre Centre, and later one of the founders of Toronto Free Theatre) noted in 1965, "Significantly, only one of the Commission’s recommendations regarding the theatre ever took root, and that was the idea of national theatre school. Beyond that, massive government intervention in all areas of business and economy and tempered by Cold War paranoia. And yet the fact remains that the Massey Commission, as the herald of the Canada Council, has been imbued with a heroic status. It is, I suspect, a status that has been nourished by successive generations of policy makers and Canada Council bureaucrats. It has become conventional to see in the Massey Commission the seeds of our contemporary public theatre industry. Writing in 1974, Don Rubin stated categorically that

The Massey Commission Report then becomes a key to understanding the rapid rise of Canadian arts and arts organizations in the period following World War II. It is the major precipitating factor in the creation of the Canada Council, which, in its turn, was to become the prime mover of arts organizations. ("Creeping" 320)

In this narrative, the Massey Report legitimizes the principle of intervention, and the Canada Council spreads the seeds of cultural development by enabling infrastructures to be built and by establishing a model for the provincial and municipal arts councils that would come to carry the larger proportion of public funding in the performing arts. But there are problems with this story. The first is the fact that, as a not-yet-radical Tom Hendry (co-founder of the Manitoba Theatre Centre, and later one of the founders of Toronto Free Theatre) noted in 1965, "Significantly, only one of the Commission’s recommendations regarding the theatre ever took root, and that was the idea of national theatre school. Beyond that, massive government intervention in all areas of business and economy and tempered by Cold War paranoia. And yet the fact remains that the Massey Commission, as the herald of the Canada Council, has been imbued with a heroic status. It is, I suspect, a status that has been nourished by successive generations of policy makers and Canada Council bureaucrats. It has become conventional to see in the Massey Commission the seeds of our contemporary public theatre industry. Writing in 1974, Don Rubin stated categorically that

The Massey Commission Report then becomes a key to understanding the rapid rise of Canadian arts and arts organizations in the period following World War II. It is the major precipitating factor in the creation of the Canada Council, which, in its turn, was to become the prime mover of arts organizations. ("Creeping" 320)

In this narrative, the Massey Report legitimizes the principle of intervention, and the Canada Council spreads the seeds of cultural development by enabling infrastructures to be built and by establishing a model for the provincial and municipal arts councils that would come to carry the larger proportion of public funding in the performing arts. But there are problems with this story. The first is the fact that, as a not-yet-radical Tom Hendry (co-founder of the Manitoba Theatre Centre, and later one of the founders of Toronto Free Theatre) noted in 1965, "Significantly, only one of the Commission’s recommendations regarding the theatre ever took root, and that was the idea of national theatre school. Beyond that, massive government intervention in all areas of business and economy and tempered by Cold War paranoia. And yet the fact remains that the Massey Commission, as the herald of the Canada Council, has been imbued with a heroic status. It is, I suspect, a status that has been nourished by successive generations of policy makers and Canada Council bureaucrats. It has become conventional to see in the Massey Commission the seeds of our contemporary public theatre industry. Writing in 1974, Don Rubin stated categorically that

The Massey Commission Report then becomes a key to understanding the rapid rise of Canadian arts and arts organizations in the period following World War II. It is the major precipitating factor in the creation of the Canada Council, which, in its turn, was to become the prime mover of arts organizations. ("Creeping" 320)

In this narrative, the Massey Report legitimizes the principle of intervention, and the Canada Council spreads the seeds of cultural development by enabling infrastructures to be built and by establishing a model for the provincial and municipal arts councils that would come to carry the larger proportion of public funding in the performing arts. But there are problems with this story. The first is the fact that, as a not-yet-radical Tom Hendry (co-founder of the Manitoba Theatre Centre, and later one of the founders of Toronto Free Theatre) noted in 1965, "Significantly, only one of the Commission’s recommendations regarding the theatre ever took root, and that was the idea of national theatre school. Beyond that, massive government intervention in all areas of business and economy and tempered by Cold War paranoia. And yet the fact remains that the Massey Commission, as the herald of the Canada Council, has been imbued with a heroic status. It is, I suspect, a status that has been nourished by successive generations of policy makers and Canada Council bureaucrats. It has become conventional to see in the Massey Commission the seeds of our contemporary public theatre industry. Writing in 1974, Don Rubin stated categorically that

The Massey Commission Report then becomes a key to understanding the rapid rise of Canadian arts and arts organizations in the period following World War II. It is the major precipitating factor in the creation of the Canada Council, which, in its turn, was to become the prime mover of arts organizations. ("Creeping" 320)

In this narrative, the Massey Report legitimizes the principle of intervention, and the Canada Council spreads the seeds of cultural development by enabling infrastructures to be built and by establishing a model for the provincial and municipal arts councils that would come to carry the larger proportion of public funding in the performing arts. But there are problems with this story. The first is the fact that, as a not-yet-radical Tom Hendry (co-founder of the Manitoba Theatre Centre, and later one of the founders of Toronto Free Theatre) noted in 1965, "Significantly, only one of the Commission’s recommendations regarding the theatre ever took root, and that was the idea of national theatre school. Beyond that, massive government intervention in all areas of business and economy and tempered by Cold War paranoia. And yet the fact remains that the Massey Commission, as the herald of the Canada Council, has been imbued with a heroic status. It is, I suspect, a status that has been nourished by successive generations of policy makers and Canada Council bureaucrats. It has become conventional to see in the Massey Commission the seeds of our contemporary public theatre industry. Writing in 1974, Don Rubin stated categorically that

The Massey Commission Report then becomes a key to understanding the rapid rise of Canadian arts and arts organizations in the period following World War II. It is the major precipitating factor in the creation of the Canada Council, which, in its turn, was to become the prime mover of arts organizations. ("Creeping" 320)
effect Massey was eliciting the responses he needed for the conclusions he had already drawn.

This is particularly evident in the session of 12 August 1949, when the commission heard from the delegates of the Dominion Drama Festival (DDF). This hearing can be read as a performance in which Massey reprises his pontifical part and conceals his own instrumental role in the brief under discussion.

The DDF brief is a curious document because it clearly rehearses the section on theatre in the commission’s final report. This was no accident because both Massey and his advisor on theatre, Robertson Davies, were governors of the DDF. Massey had been one of the “small group of theatre enthusiasts” who had been invited by Lord Bessborough to found the DDF in 1932 (Whittaker 144). In fact, he was the architect of the DDF’s structure, and, through the Massey Foundation, its chief benefactor. He had been its first chairman and had presided over its first annual festivals. The ornate pomposity of the DDF’s structure, with its annual “General Court” and its long lists of Patrons, Honorary Directors, Honorary President, and Vice-President—even its choice to call its directors “governors” (a usage that carried on to the Stratford Festival)—resonates with Massey’s fetish for royal ceremony. At the time of the royal commission, Massey was Honorary President of the DDF and a Governor; Robertson Davies and his father, Senator Rupert Davies, were also Governors of the festival.

Robertson Davies is the absent figure in the wings of Massey’s *mise en scène* at the hearings (like the stage manager he had been in his youth), but his contribution is important to the commission’s sessions on theatre. Massey and Davies were more than friends; they were social allies whose compatibility was anchored by two points of connection. They were both artistic, intellectual scions of rich Ontario industrialist families, and they shared an alma mater in Balliol College (albeit a generation apart), which had much to do with their love for Oxford pomp and their reverence for high culture, high church (this despite Massey’s Methodist background), and theatre. Their relationship became literarily collegial in the 1960s when Massey invited Davies to head the new Massey College at the University of Toronto, where in their new parts as The Founder and The Master they strove to replay the Oxford of their youth.

In 1949, Davies had become well-established as a newspaper editor and proprietor in Peterborough but as a playwright and critic was a major proponent of a public theatre in Canada. He was a natural choice for Massey when the commission invited “special studies” on various topics as part of its research. Davies’ study is a remarkable document that with characteristic wit argues the conditions necessary for a professional theatre culture in Canada. It is remarkable, not just for its brilliant and polemical argument for a classical theatre that functions as the expression of the highest values of civilization, but for the form in which it is written: an arch dialogue between Trueman, a man of letters and self-identified Canadian playwright and Lovewit, “an Old Vic man” (153). Their diction is identical: both speak in the round but lively prose that is typical of Davies’ novels.
In his dialogue, Davies argues forcefully that Canadian theatre must develop expertise based in tradition, and that the notion of a centralized National Theatre must be resisted, although he emphasizes the need for "a well-equipped artistically respectable company" that should "travel in a circuit" (166). He admits a need for some measure of government support (particularly the relief of entrance taxes and the implementation of favourable transportation rates for touring theatres), but insists that theatres must learn to do business on their own. His resistance to the idea of a National Theatre stems from a deep mistrust of bureaucratization. For that same reason, he is suspicious of direct government subsidy to theatres:

-Trueman: ... For you may as well know, Lovewit, that I oppose giving artists money from the public purse except under the most unusual circumstances: lessen their burdens but give them no cash.

-Lovewit: For the reason, I suppose, that I spoke of earlier: the artist who gets nothing from the Government is not under his Government's thumb.

-Trueman: Precisely. If the theatre is to have a patron today it must be the Government, for the Government now takes the means of patronage from private persons. But Government patronage, unless it is of the negative, unobtrusive sort which I have mentioned, or unless it operates under special safeguards, can become severely repressive in its influence. Let us suppose that some governmental scheme for a National Theatre were set at work in this country within the next five years: at every election economies are promised and the National Theatre would come under fire. That would beget a spirit of nervous tension and servility among the artists and administrators of the National Theatre which would make first-rate work impossible. (168)

1. Davies was not the first to argue for a decentralized "national theatre." In 1929, Roy Mitchell, having returned to the United States after his stint as director of Hart House Theatre, made a similar point in his visionary Creative Theatre when he wrote that "the national theatre of America will not be of one city but of many cities, each metropolitan to its own territory" (xx). Both Davies and Massey would have been familiar with Mitchell's ideas.

When the delegates of the DDF were summoned to the commission's hearing, they played their well-rehearsed parts on a carefully prepared stage. The DDF's brief anticipates the tone and the structure of the final report, moving from general comments on the place of theatre in society and moving towards specific recommendations. In the final report, the commission prefaces its comments on theatre with the note that

1. We think it appropriate first to pay tribute to the many thoughtful and scholarly briefs on drama which we have received reminding us of the eminent place which the drama has held in the long history of the arts, and of its relation to the sister arts of poetry, music and the dance which not infrequently reach their final perfection when associated in dramatic performances. Indeed, the tragic drama of Fifth Century Athens demanded and concentrated for its needs the full cultural resources of a highly gifted people, in poetry, in music, in the dance, and in philosophic and religious thought; from the tragic theatre and its supernal themes stemmed the arts of the Athenian sculptor, the painter, the architect, in a manner to be repeated only once again at the second flowering of the human spirit in Renaissance Italy. The drama has been in the past, and may be again, 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.

2. The point need not be laboured: many of man's greatest artistic achievements, from Aeschylus to Bach and from Euripides to Wagner, have been cast in a dramatic mould. (193-194)
The DDF brief made the same point, with a more pronounced moralizing tone, in the preface:

The importance of theatre in the cultural and artistic life of a nation has always been a feature of civilized thought and expression in all the history of human society. Ancient civilization had a form of theatre which reached its greatest development in Greece, the effects of which are apparent to the present day. The religious plays of medieval England, the Morality plays, the Commedia dell'Arte in Italy, the Elizabethan Theatre and the Restoration Theatre in England, and the great development of French Theatre beginning in the middle of the 17th century have, in turn, influenced our traditions of the theatre.

Of all means of artistic expression the drama is the one which most closely portrays the mental and spiritual state of the race. Since the production of a play requires an audience, the play must have something to say to an audience which will hold its attention. The arts of any country are what they are, because of what the people of that country are. (DDF 3)

Like the Davies special study, the DDF reiterates Massey’s long-held conviction that the theatre constitutes the nation on, behind, and before the stage. The DDF took this a step further and voiced an implication that Massey himself did not articulate but may have supported.

The theatre, however, is not confined entirely to the production of ideas, and the teaching of cultural values. It is also full of comedy and amusement, and provides entertainment of all kinds. At times, it presents pictures of such sheer beauty of colour or movement or sound as to be exciting and vital without a word being spoken. Thus, the theatre can show us the beauty of life. It allows us to hear our language beautifully spoken, it is a school of manners and it is a sounding board for public opinion, as well as vehicle of practical morality. (3-4)

The DDF provided Massey more than an active tradition of humanist high culture on which theatrical nationhood could be founded. It had also established a model of theatrical federalism in its structure. This model worked to reconcile (or “unify”) regional and social differences both vertically (by legitimating a hierarchy of artistic elitism) and horizontally (by implementing a decentralized regionalism that accommodated bilingualism). These are, of course, the priorities that later determined the structure of the Canada Council.

H. Allan Skinner, an Honorary Governor of the DDF, stressed the festival’s value in the first point, when he described to the commission the value of community theatre: “...there will emerge at the top of the pyramid a small number of talented, trained, experienced personnel, capable of professional performance and suitable for employment in the theatre” (Briefs 325). This logic was imbedded in the commission’s recommendation of a theatrical profession that channels talent up the “pyramid” from local efforts to a standardizing touring company and was later applied to theatre companies themselves in the Canada Council’s policy of hierarchical funding, which placed theatres in a pyramid of value and material support according to their (perceived) importance in the tradition of humanist culture.

The pyramid of excellence stabilizes the second principle of decentered federalism. In its brief, the DDF stressed its importance as a truly national organization that modeled national unity. It carefully delineated the complex structure of regional festivals and committees and noted the percentage of French language plays without suggesting that the minority status of francophone work in an organization largely structured around an anglophone norm was in any way problematic.

In his opening remarks to the commission, the DDF Chairman, D. Park Jamieson, stressed the festival’s role in building a “national Canadian feeling” (Briefs 309). His first example of this focused on the bilingual nature of the festivals:

When the Festival was first inaugurated, French-speaking Canadians competed in separate regional festivals, and, in many cases, with different adjudicators. There was a feeling that they could not compete together and that an adjudicator could not
be found who could adequately place in both the French language and the English language. Now, all Canadians, irrespective of language compete together. (Briefs 309)

The presentation of French language shows in the festivals, he went on, “have done much to increase the knowledge and appreciation of our great bilingual culture and have created friendships in all parts of Canada between French-speaking and English-speaking Canadians” (310). The francophone member of the commission, Fr. Henri Levesque, picked up on the issue of language during the ensuing question period, asking whether the DDF had “experimented” with “French-speaking and English-speaking actors working together in the same play” (335). Jamieson gave the example of the 1939 festival prize winner, Terence Rattigan’s French Without Tears (produced by the Ottawa Little Theatre), which had a colingual cast.

Jamieson’s second example of the DDF’s contribution to national unity raised the spectre of class division. Stating that the theatre “know no class divisions,” he reminded that the commission that

Persons from every creed and from every walk of life come and join together in a common cultural pursuit.... No one who was present will ever forget the thrill and impact of the production of “Waiting for Lefty” (the scene of which is laid in a labour union hall) by Clifford Odets and presented by the Progressive Arts Club of Vancouver at the 1936 final festival in this city [Ottawa] before the then Governor-General, the then Prime Minister and a distinguished and international audience such as only this city can present. The impact of that very leftist anti-capitalist play in the audience of the Little Theatre was something. (311-312)

In both of these examples, the DDF’s federalism functions to contain dissent within a humanist text of tolerance, in which ideological and structural issues are reconciled by “friendship” and “understanding.” For Massey, the issue of francophone equity was important, the issue of class dissent was not. (This is in fact the only place in the Massey commission’s work that even acknowledges the existence of the Workers Theatre Movement in Canada.) But the mention of Waiting for Lefty was useful in that it confirmed the idea of a theatrical institution which allowed access to the pyramid of excellence regardless of ideology (while at the same time confirming the liberalty of the structures of value that contain dissent); in this too the DDF was a model for the later Canada Council.

The DDF’s theatrical federalism stabilized regional and ideological decentralization with a centralizing discourse of value and power. For Massey and Davies, this was a foregone conclusion, for which the DDF provided historical precedent. The remaining problem was that of structure. Unlike the DDF, the emergent, decentralized theatre profession lacked a national infrastructure. It did, however, have a standardizing mechanism in the notion of classical theatre. Massey took care to get into the record the fact that although the DDF had a national structure, it was not in itself capable of fulfilling the federalist notion of a touring national theatre that Davies had identified as necessary in his brief:

THE CHAIRMAN: The phrase “National Theatre” means different things to different people. I take it from what you have said, Mr. Jamieson, you have in mind not a building but a company.

MR. JAMIESON: I don’t believe I mean even a company. It is almost an intangible thing. A great many things would make a National Theatre.

THE CHAIRMAN: I take it what you mean is one of the companies that would travel across Canada.

MR. JAMIESON: That is the primary requisite. (331)

In all, the DDF hearing lasted a little less than ninety minutes. It was not the only hearing that discussed theatre, but it was the most important because it functioned as a dress rehearsal for the commission’s final recommendations. The DDF was Massey’s prima facie case for a federalist profes-
sionsal theatre. It projected a structure and gave Massey the means of achieving it. The commission's final recommendations regarding the theatre repeat the themes that Masses had been rehearsing for three decades and which, via Davies and the DDF, had been entered into the commission's deliberations as historical evidence. Endorsing the need for a national theatre comprised of a touring company and a school, the Report's findings, not surprisingly, restate faithfully the background study Masses had commissioned:

12. Repeatedly at our sessions throughout Canada the question of a National Theatre was discussed. Almost invariably the view was expressed that a National Theatre should consist not in an elaborate structure built in Ottawa or elsewhere, but rather in a company or companies of players who would present the living drama in even the more remote communities of Canada and who would in addition give professional advice to local amateur dramatic societies. . . .

16. We must not, however, give the impression that the views of those Canadians competent to speak on the drama in Canada are unanimously in favour of the immediate establishment by one means or another of a National Theatre. Indeed, the dangers inherent in attempting to establish and to operate an agency for the advancement of national culture directly under government control have been expressed to us wittily and with force in the Special Study on "The Theatre in Canada" which was prepared at our request by a well-known Canadian writer and actor. . . . The point was made to us, in general, that the burdens now pressing upon drama in Canada should be lessened, but that there should be for Canadian drama no direct contribution of public money.

17. The argument went on to suggest that government patronage of the arts, unless it operates under special safeguards, can become severely repressive in its influence; if a governmental scheme for a National Theatre, for example, were set at work in this country within the next five years, at every election when economies are advanced the National Theatre would automatically come under fire. Dependence upon government support, in this view, would give only a precarious existence to a National Theatre in Canada and would make first-rate work impossible.

As a theatrical performance, a modern court masque in which the participants enacted a simulacrum of the state, the Massey Commission was a resounding success, at least when it turned its gaze to the performing arts (other areas, especially broadcasting, were more volatile politically). The conditions of a federalist theatrical profession had been articulated and demonstrated, but the logic of the pyramid was missing one crucial element: the emergent theatrical company that would earn the honorific of "National Theatre" by its uncontested "traditions, its methods of work, its individual style, and its faithful and appreciative public." Massey's argument for thirty years was that the mature nation would be known by its artistic achievement, and the Massey Commission had demonstrated to the nation that the conditions of maturity were upon us. By the same logic, the elements of a "first-rate" theatre were all in place, lacking only leadership. Vincent Massey may have been content to wait for the epiphany, but he wasn't beyond giving it a little nudge.
**Quest for the Nation**

The swans will glide for you
You can even rent a canoe
And at night when the cannons go
You can watch animated Madame Tussaud.

*Cedric Smith, "Stratford People."

On the lawn facing the main entrance to the Stratford Shakespearean Festival Theatre in the small city of Stratford, Ontario, there stands an exceedingly literal sculpture group that commemorates the signal moment of the theatre's founding in 1953. The group recreates a famous photograph that depicts workers pulling on a rope to raise the tent that covered the stage in its first tour seasons. This, rather than the actual opening night, is Stratford's moment of remembered triumph: the raising of the tent was the burying of doubt and discord and the culmination of the great works of the local citizenry who had surmounted immense difficulties to create a place where visiting artists might work their magic.

I use these tropes of great works, triumph, and magic quite deliberately, because narratives of the founding of the Stratford Festival offer a common myth of heroic vision, community alchemy, and national awakening. They are remarkably consistent, a fact which can be taken as an index of accuracy, but which can also be read as a cultural trope that masks the real operation of class and power. History is retold as a mythic quest in which a humble man struck by a vision surmounts great obstacles, summons great and powerful allies to his cause, and builds a magical temple that awakens the spirit of a god, and in so doing transforms his community and his kingdom. There is a wizard and a remote but benevolent monarch, heroic knights from far lands, and most important, simple country folk who are converted to the cause.

The hero, of course, is Tom Patterson, who by his own account first "dreamed" the festival as a teenager in Stratford in the late 1930s: the god is Shakespeare, the wizard is Tyrone Guthrie, aided by his knights, Alec Guinness, Tanya Moisenwitch, and Irene Worth; and the remote monarch, the wise king who gives it his blessing when the cause seems doomed, is Vincent Massey, the Governor-General of Canada. The sturdy citizens who overcome skepticism to do the undoable are the countless people of Stratford, including the band of comrades who formed the festival committee and undertook the fundraising and construction of the theatre. The various accounts of the founding differ and, indeed, dispute many of the details, but the core narrative of the heroic quest remains intact in all of them.

All of these narratives are unashamedly partisan, and they all accept the heroism of the endeavour as a given fact, the point from which narrative recedes. Against this, I suggest a counter narrative, one which does not discredit the remarkable work of the festival's founders, but which resituates that work in the historical intersection of material and ideological interests, and which reassigns some measure of agency to the exercise of power and influence.

*Stratford's moment of remembered triumph: this heroic sculpture group commemorates the raising of the tent in 1953 with a surprisingly literal mise en scène.*

Photo: James Hoffman.
by a politically powerful elite that had a strong interest in the festival’s success. It is the role of the monarch figure that interests me in this counter narrative, in the person of Vincent Massey, by then Governor-General, whose financial support levered Stratford’s success at the most critical point in the crises prior to the opening in 1953. Massey’s role in the founding narrative is relatively incidental and distant but constant, and his presence can be discerned throughout the structure of coincidences that work through the various accounts of the festival’s genesis. He was the common point of overlapping interest blocs in the theatre, in the cultural elite, and in government.

It was not a simple coincidence of timing that Massey was the vice-regent at the time his long-held vision of theatrical nationhood came into being. Massey had already, in his Royal Commission and before that in his years of advocacy of a particular idea of Canadian theatre at Hart House and in the Dominion Drama Festival, established the pre-conditions that made the Stratford Festival possible. He fitted the role of monarch perfectly, not just because of the aristocratic self-performance for which he was famous, but because patronage was his profession. His life was one of political patronage and ceremonial positions and titles: Minister Plenipotentiary to the United States, High Commissioner to Great Britain, Chairman of the British National Gallery, Companion of Honour (an elite order conferred by King George VI), Privy Councilor, Chancellor of the University of Toronto, Chairman and Honorary President of the Dominion Drama Festival. He was the first named Patron of the Festival and, shortly thereafter, the first Patron of the Canada Council. If the coming-into-being of the Stratford Festival was a quest drama, Massey was the dramaturg who arranged the various elements of the text so that they could proceed with the logical inevitability that characterises classical drama, and who intervened in the text when necessary.

The memoir that established the template of the quest narrative and identified Massey as the monarch-saviour was supplied by Tyrone Guthrie in his autobiography, written six years after the festival opened. Guthrie begins with the now-legendary telephone call he received in Ireland from Patterson in 1952, asking him to come to Stratford to advise on the very preliminary plans for the festival. Guthrie describes Patterson as “a small mouse-coloured person” (315), an enthusiast who had been exposed to culture in war service in Italy and London, who browbeat the local community to build a Shakespeare theatre in the provincial boondocks. This fit Guthrie’s own vision of Canada as a young country on the verge of greatness on the world. As he wrote in summation of the project, Canada must not in the councils of the world use the cracked brash accents of millionaire adolescence, but must speak with maturity. To an extraordinary degree this theatrical project in a small provincial town symbolized Canada’s desire for mature, and if possible, distinguished artistic expression. (334)
Several months after the festival opened, Guthrie amplified this point in an article in *Mayfair* magazine in which he made clear the imperial relationship between national “adolescence” and cultural expression. After comparing Canada to an “enormous young boy” who “has so far hardly spoken,” he suggested that the festival “provides an opportunity for some tens of thousands of Canadians to participate in a dignified and adult form of artistic expression” (Pettigrew 15). For Guthrie, Patterson personified this vision of Canada and the qualities of ambition, competence, practicality, and modesty that he admired. He is also frank in admitting that the Stratford proposal accorded with his own frustrated desire to build a theatre that reconstituted the actor-audience relationship of the Elizabethan stage.

Guthrie’s story is one of his own efforts to develop the artistic cadre and “theoretic” principles while watching the operations from a distance. It was clearly an imperial project for him that reiterated one of the recurring themes by which the British empire explained itself, in which the mother country provides value and standards for local efforts, and the colony provides opportunity and respect for an ambition too adventurous (in his case, the building of a thrust stage) for the tradition-stifled home country. He watched the local efforts with admiration and apprehension and describes in detail his frustration as last minute fundraising crises placed the committee in “a ghastly position” (327) four months prior to the opening, when after months of expenditures and preparations, the committee was unable to pay the Chicago firm that was making the tent. This was the final and most desperate crisis commemorated in the triumphant sculpture group. As the clock was ticking and the Stratford committee prepared to vote for a postponement in May, 1953, Guthrie sat by the phone awaiting the final word. At the last minute, the crisis was averted, as Guthrie explains it, by “an exceedingly handsome anonymous subscription. There was a telegram of exhortation and encouragement from the Governor-General of Canada, who had read in the press that the venture was in trouble” (328).

Patterson’s own narrative, published almost thirty years later, corrects some of the facts (he had never served in Italy and had first envisioned the festival as a form of civic boosterism before the war). He also adds another element that is instrumental to the possibility of the festival. Stratford was a town seeped in Shakespearean signifiers as a result of the colonial project of inscribing the cartographic logic of the mother country. But this inscription can only amplify the distance between colony and metropolis; in that sense, the town of Stratford on the river Avon in Ontario mapped both familiarity and subaltern difference. This is a contradiction expressed by James Reaney in his 1962 poem, “To the Avon River above Stratford, Canada”:

What did the Indians call you?  
For you do not flow  
With English accents.  
I hardly know  
What I should call you  
Because before  
I drank coffee or tea  
I drank you  
With my cupped hands  
And you did not taste English to me....  
(Reaney 211)

But Patterson’s Stratford recognized a monumental Shakespeare without any real attachment to the actual body of dramatic work. For the young Patterson, “Shakespeare” was a landscape, a geographic property of the community to be developed rather than a cultural object and, as such, a “given circumstance” in the spectacle of the festival. More immediate was the presence of the town’s riverfront park and public garden, which had been landscaped earlier in the century to emulate the “real” Stratford and which was alleged to contain every flower mentioned in Shakespeare’s plays. From Patterson’s account, the idea of a Shakespeare festival was a logical utilization of these material resources.

Patterson’s account (written with the assistance of a professional freelance writer with a PhD in Canadian theatre) is an engaging memoir that at times reads like a Frank Capra movie. It is rich in anecdotal detail and fulsome in its tributes to the members of the Stratford committee who backed Patterson all the way, even while some of them began to resent his prominence in the media coverage. Patterson’s narrative is structured around the escalating financial and administrative crises that threatened to derail the plans, and, like Guthrie, he builds to the climactic moment of the anonymous
donation from Vincent Massey that rescued the tent and enabled the festival to proceed. Patterson alludes to “top secret negotiations” (129) with Massey that culminated in a phone call from Massey’s son and secretary, Lionel, offering a gift of $10,000 from the Massey Foundation, but with the caution that it must be kept secret because of the foundation’s ostensible fear that it would be deluged with requests for similar grants from other organizations.

That Lionel Massey made the call and pledged the money is beyond dispute, but the events leading to it are clouded by conflicting accounts, as various factions claim the credit for arranging Massey’s intervention. Patterson’s reference to “top secret negotiations” sidesteps the question of who negotiated with whom. Massey himself, in his autobiography, is discreet, merely saying that “I was happy to have close relations with the Stratford Festival from its beginning” (Memoirs 62). Massey’s biographer, Claude Bissell, adds that the Governor-General had provided “encouragement and advice” to Patterson (Imperial 227).

Those close relations worked through several networks through which Massey distributed his influence. In the official history of the Stratford Festival, John Pettigrew adds that in late 1952 Massey had phoned Floyd Chalmers (who had been Patterson’s employer at Maclean Hunter and who had encouraged him to dedicate himself full time on the festival) to inquire whether the festival idea would work out: “The Governor-General’s approval was already apparent; it seemed to him, he said, that little Stratford was pretty determined to provide an answer to the challenge of the Massey Report.” Chalmers was one of the most powerful men in the Canadian magazine industry, and Patterson had already secured his support. In the spring of 1952, a year before the final crisis, he advised Guthrie in a letter that “the Executive vice-president of the companies for which I work, Floyd Chalmers, is acting as an ‘agent’ for us during a visit to England” (Patterson 60).

Massey intervenes in the narrative through one other structure of influence: the professional theatre that existed prior to Stratford and which has been eclipsed in the public “theatre of memory,” which the late British historian Raphael Samuel defines as that vast and unofficial archive of history as a “social form of knowledge,” an “ensemble of activities and practices in which ideas of history are embedded or a dialectic of past-present relations is rehearsed” (8). There is a somewhat resentful narrative buried in the Stratford story concerning the directors and producers who had been struggling to make a go of theatres like the New Play Society in Toronto and the Canadian Repertory Theatre in Ottawa. Guthrie hired actors from both of these companies but did not have any interest in their directors, and both companies—in part perhaps because of this evacuation of talent—diminished thereafter. In her memoir of the call to Stratford, the actress Amelia Hall (Stratford’s first Canadian star) laments the perception that arose that there had been no professional theatre in Canada before 1955 (Rubin 203).
Moore, then head of Drama for the new CBC television network, to whom he had gone for advice in the early stages. Patterson had never heard of Guthrie until Dora Mayor Moore raised his name, and the famous first phone call was made from her house. She was in effect the go-between for the first several encounters, and her company provided Stratford a base of operations and material resources (particularly in regards to wardrobe) in the final stages of preparation. Beyond that, however, Guthrie and Stratford kept Dora Mayor Moore at a distance, and it is not hard to detect a note of resentment in the accounts of her contribution. Here, after all, was a woman who had made a career acting and directing in a country that ostensibly no theatre and who had made the decisive contribution that made the festival possible, but for whom there was no place in the theatre when it opened. There was, however, a place for her son who had made his own contribution: Mayor Moore, in his autobiography, recalls how he took Guthrie to a tent theatre in Toronto, which either gave or confirmed the idea of a canvas theatre for Stratford. Mayor Moore later spent a not very happy season at Stratford under Guthrie in 1954.

In his autobiography, Mayor Moore places his mother in the chain of events that culminated in Massey's cheque in May, 1953, asserting that "in the final pinch it was she who initiated the last minute pledge from an anonymous patron (Vincent Massey) that had allowed the festival to go on...." (216). Dora Mavor Moore’s biographer, Paula Sperdakos, adds more detail to this intervention. In her account, Dora Mavor Moore was apprised of the crisis over the invoice for the tent by Guthrie’s production manager, Cecil Clark, who asked her for help. Dora maintained thereafter that she had offered the anonymous gift the next day. In 1977 she retold the story with the secret intact, when she said in an oral history of the festival,

So I took up the phone and got an old fraternity sister of mine in Ottawa and told her that Cecil Clark was going there.

"Surely to goodness you can prevent this from falling flat on us," I said to her.

Massey had enjoyed close contacts with the emerging theatre scene, having been instrumental in the early days of the Dominion Drama Festival in the 1930s, and at least one line of narrative credits those contacts for his intervention in the tent crisis. The key figure in this is Dora Mavor Moore, who (and on this all accounts agree) first suggested Guthrie to Patterson and who initiated the first contact between the two men. Dora Mavor Moore was the founder and artistic director of the New Play Society, and had briefly worked with Guthrie in the early 1930s when he directed “The Romance of Canada” radio series for the Canadian National Railway network. (The author of that series was Merrill Denison, who had begun his playwriting career at Hart House, the theatre Massey had built at the University of Toronto.)

Patterson had met Dora through her son Mayor Moore, then head of Drama for the new CBC television network, to whom he had gone for advice in the early stages. Patterson had never heard of Guthrie until Dora Mayor Moore raised his name, and the famous first phone call was made from her house. She was in effect the go-between for the first several encounters, and her company provided Stratford a base of operations and material resources (particularly in regards to wardrobe) in the final stages of preparation. Beyond that, however, Guthrie and Stratford kept Dora Mayor Moore at a distance, and it is not hard to detect a note of resentment in the accounts of her contribution. Here, after all, was a woman who had made a career acting and directing in a country that ostensibly no theatre and who had made the decisive contribution that made the festival possible, but for whom there was no place in the theatre when it opened. There was, however, a place for her son who had made his own contribution: Mayor Moore, in his autobiography, recalls how he took Guthrie to a tent theatre in Toronto, which either gave or confirmed the idea of a canvas theatre for Stratford. Mayor Moore later spent a not very happy season at Stratford under Guthrie in 1954.

In his autobiography, Mayor Moore places his mother in the chain of events that culminated in Massey’s cheque in May, 1953, asserting that “in the final pinch it was she who initiated the last minute pledge from an anonymous patron (Vincent Massey) that had allowed the festival to go on....” (216). Dora Mavor Moore’s biographer, Paula Sperdakos, adds more detail to this intervention. In her account, Dora Mavor Moore was apprised of the crisis over the invoice for the tent by Guthrie’s production manager, Cecil Clark, who asked her for help. Dora maintained thereafter that she had asked an old friend in Ottawa to help, and this friend had taken Clark to meet someone who offered the anonymous gift the next day. In 1977 she retold the story with the secret intact, when she said in an oral history of the festival,

So I took up the phone and got an old fraternity sister of mine in Ottawa and told her that Cecil Clark was going there.

"Surely to goodness you can prevent this from falling flat on us," I said to her.
She met Cecil at the airport and drove him somewhere. I don’t know where. I never asked. (Shaw 55)

This was, as Sperdakos documents, a fiction, and she offers the opinion of the unnamed fraternity friend that Dora herself had called Masses and that Masses had sworn her to secrecy (203). Dora Mayor Moore and Vincent Masses had rarely met, but they knew each other in several contexts. Dora’s first professional work, with Ben Greet, had been in Shakespeare at Chautauqua, to which Masses was connected by close family affiliations; they had been undergraduates together at the University of Toronto, and they had both been involved in the early years of the Dominion Drama Festival. They may not have been friends, but their shared history of theatrical and social affiliations make it very feasible that she could have expected the Governor-General to take her call.

Dora Mayor Moore may have indeed contacted Masses, as both her son and her biographer state, but in any case she was just one of several conduits of communication. Masses had an even closer source in his old friend and protégé, Robertson Davies, then editor of the Peterborough Examiner. And to draw the web tighter, Davies was also an old friend of Guthrie. He had worked for Guthrie at the Old Vic as “a kind of resident pedant-cum-small-part-actor,” as Guthrie described him in a letter to Patterson (Patterson 66). Davies’ wife, Brenda, had also worked for Guthrie as a stage manager; Guthrie for his part was godfather to one of their children. On Guthrie’s recommendation, Patterson invited Davies onto the committee. Davies provides a crucial linkage between Masses and Guthrie that Patterson could not have anticipated but which had in one sense been prepared for him. In fact, an apprehension of Guthrie can be read into Davies’ special study on the theatre that Masses had asked him to write for the Royal Commission that had submitted its report the year before Patterson began his quest. In the discussion, Davies raises the question of artistic leadership, arguing that “a well-equipped and artistically respectable company needs ‘a first-rate artistic director.’” This leads to the following exchange:

Lovewit: You would be hard set to find him.

Trueman: Men of capacity are hard to find in all walks of life. He would have to be a man of fine taste, yet with a keen sense of what his audiences could be persuaded to like. He would have to keep not only his actors, but his directors, designers and technical people up to the mark. He would have to listen at all times to his business manager, and he would have to possess a good knowledge of business himself. He would have to provide, like Stanislavsky or Lilian Baylis, inspiration, instruction, succour, rebuke and a focus of faith for all who worked with him, and he would have to provide the public with a figure-head whom they could trust and admire.

Lovewit: You ask for a paragon.

Trueman: No; merely for a man big enough for a big job. Such people are not common, nor are they cast in one mould. Can you think of three people more apparently different than Stanislavsky, W.B. Yeats and Lilian Baylis? And our leader here, whoever he may be, will be like all of them, and yet not like any of them.

Lovewit: Come, Trueman, we agreed to stick to common sense. You are talking as though our Canadian theatre would be the work of some single remarkable figure.

Trueman: Perhaps I am wrong, but I do not think so. Such a leader would collect about him the admirable single talents which exist in our country now, but which have no focus. If I write a play, to whom can I turn for an opinion which will content me? And you, Lovewit, who direct and act with a certain taste and discretion—is there anyone for whom you are ready to give your utmost, and whose banner you would follow through good times and bad? Canada has plenty of theatrical talent.
which is very nearly first-rate, and which would be so if it could find a catalyst—a messiah—call him what you will?

Lovewit: If we sent a memorandum to the Commissioners saying that want a messiah they may take us for madmen—

Tueman: I doubt that. The Chairman of the Commission is a notable patron of the drama, and the other Commissioners, being persons of culture and noble spirit, must love it too. Let us say we need a messiah by all means, and I am sure they would unite in the Song of Simeon if he were to appear. (Rubin 166-67)

It is not a stretch to suggest that Davies had Guthrie in mind, not as a likely candidate for this hypothetical job, but as a model. Guthrie and Massey had in their own ways served as mentors to Davies, and all three were “Oxford men.” They had in common an allegiance to an elite humanist culture organized around the principle of leadership—a principle that subordinates creativity to a clear hierarchy of genius and that replicates the imperial logic of canonicity (which enshrines Shakespeare as the literary summit) in the productive structure of the theatre.

Davies’ vision of a theatrical leader, “for whom you are ready to give your utmost,” equally describes the attributes of a successful general, and it is no accident that Guthrie himself is often described as military in his carriage and sense of command.

There is no question that the encounter of Patterson and Guthrie was a happy coincidence. Mayor Moore says of it:

The New Play Society and groups in other parts of the country had emerged to prove—with plays such as Coulter’s Riel and Gelinas’ Tit-Coq—that Canadian theatre had come of age. Guthrie had been kept informed of these developments by Coulter, by Brenda and Robertson Davies, who had worked for him at the Old Vic, and by his old crony Rupert Caplan in Montreal. So that when Tom Patterson dropped in on Dora Mayor Moore with his home-made bomb, she inevitably made what Arthur Koestler would call a bisociation. Guthrie was not only a possibility; he was the possibility. (213)

At the same time, it was a coincidence that was nudged along every step of the way by vested interest, and it activated a set of relationships already configured by class and power to create a fiction of historical inevitability. At the three points of triangulation that made the festival succeed—in Stratford, in the person of Guthrie, in the Canadian establishment supervised by Massey—there are discernible interests that interconnected. Just over a century earlier, William Lyon Mackenzie had invented the term “Family Compact” to describe the interconnections of affinity and nepotism that controlled business and government in the colony of Upper Canada. In the Stratford narrative we can discern the outlines of a cultural compact that would in subsequent years come under attack in the operations of the Canada Council.

In Stratford, the members of the local community who formed the committee were not just the “gathering of interested citizens” that Guthrie recalls (318). They were rather more than that; in fact the committee’s membership can be read as a map of the city’s local compact of economic, state, and cultural power. It included a judge of the County Court, the owner of a contracting firm, a bank manager, the head of an insurance company, the Archdeacon of the local Anglican church, a dairy manager who doubled as head of the Chamber of Commerce, the owner of a furniture-making firm, a doctor, the president of a machine parts firm, the wife of a leading industrialist, and of course, Harry Showalter, owner of a bottling works and first president of the Stratford board. The committee had its origins in a Chamber of Commerce committee that had been formed to examine the riverside park, and which, having accepted Patterson’s idea, found itself morphed into a festival planning board.

On this committee’s list of priorities, Shakespeare ranked relatively low. More important to them was the possibility of urban renewal promised by cultural tourism. It could not have been a surprise to them that their interests converged with those of the cultural compact, because the Massey Commission had already rehearsed that alliance.
thoroughly. In that sense, there is an unintended truth in the misperception that there was no professional theatre prior to Stratford, because this prototype board—its crises monitored and when necessary solved by its patrons—created the template which from that time on governed the dominant model of professional theatre structures in Canada. In that template, theatre is sustained by the organizational support (or as is more commonly heard today, “partnership”) of the business community which claims for itself the right to speak for the “community” which the theatre serves. The theatre in that way functions to confirm that claim in a reciprocal structure of ideological legitimation.

Robertson Davies inscribes that fiction in his forward to Pettigrew and Portman’s history of the festival when he writes “The story of Stratford is an important part of Canadian history, for it brought about a revolution in Canada’s thinking about itself” (xiii). The revolution was one of cultural practice, not of “thinking,” because Stratford had been shaped to conform to a pre-existing template. But its success required a fiction of local initiative and natural cultural development, and it may have been because that fiction was thinly veiled that Massey’s backstage role was cloaked in secrecy. By various accounts (Patterson, Guthrie, Dora Mavor Moore, Cecil Clark), the entire committee was sworn to secrecy. It was, of course, the worst kept secret in Canadian theatre, but the leakage merely reinforced the narrative of heroic effort and last-minute rescue.

Along with Hart House and the Dominion Drama Festival, Stratford completed the tripod on which Massey constructed his theatrical federalism. These were the keystones of the theatrical system...
that would stabilize under the patronage of the Canada Council. But, as we have seen, Massey’s vision was never completely realized. It took five years before the Liberal government of Louis St. Laurent could be persuaded to enact the Canada Council, and the subsequent history of cultural policy in theatre quickly became one of ad-hoc politics and crisis management. The dream of a national touring company did indeed come to pass briefly when the Canadian Players emerged out of the Stratford Festival from 1954-1966, but its impact was relatively minor, and it never became the standardizing model of excellence that Massey had hoped to see.

Stratford itself began its long slide into cultural irrelevance, and although it won numerous accolades over the decades for its classical work, it contributed little to the overall development of theatre in Canada. In fact, its chief value in the subsequent decades was as the counter-text to the emergent theatre profession, which lampooned Stratford’s occasional attempts to style itself “The Stratford National Theatre of Canada.” Periodically, Stratford would reflect larger cultural crises, with its futile attempt to revive DDF-style federalism under the co-direction of Jean Gascon, and more significantly, with its series of purges and crises in 1981, which exposed the fault-lines in Stratford’s increasingly confused mandate. Stratford had become a symbolic text; it didn’t really matter what the company did; what mattered was who presided over it. Its symbolic value as a remnant of what was by the 1970s perceived as colonialism was most clearly expressed in the first issue of Canadian Theatre Review in 1974, in which Don Rubin attacked the appointment of Robin Philips.

In the end, however, the crisis that destabilized Massey’s theatrical federalism was not a problem of structure and patronage but of larger currents of social change. The Massey Commission envisioned a national culture in which differences would be reconciled by a patriotism secured by tradition, but in the decade following the establishment of the Canada Council, both of those principles would be severely contested, despite the state-programmed orgy of patriotic sentimentality in the centennial year. The ultimate failure of the Massey Commission is that it based its structure of national culture on an understanding of the nation that was already archaic, because it assumed a deference to cultural, historical, and traditional authority. But, as the example of the Mummers Troupe in the following chapter shows, the time of deference was past, and the notion of humanist theatrical federalism could not contend with insurgent movements of regional, ideological, and generational dissent.