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ENGL 431: Canadian Shakespeare

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My Kingdom For a Canadian Alternative Theatre: The *Richard III* That Never Was

Of all the parts she played in her brief time as an actress during the late 1960s, the part my mother remembers most fondly is one she never got to perform – the role of Richard III’s hump in Theatre Passe Muraille’s production of *Richard III*. The production was conceived of more than twenty years before I was born, and I’ve never seen video recordings, photographs, or even a review of the piece. In fact, the play was cancelled for financial reasons before it was ever performed. Despite this, for me, my mother’s role in the 1969 vision of *Richard III* represents a fascinating, and humorous, moment in which Shakespeare and my own Canadian history come together. More than this, the failed production, rehearsed at the Theatre Passe Muraille during the early days of Toronto’s experimental theatre scene, is representative of a significant change in attitude toward Shakespeare, towards Britain, and towards what a “Canadian Shakespeare” or even a “Canadian theatre” meant and could mean.

In 1969, the Theatre Passe Muraille was based in the Church of the Holy Trinity – a traditionally liberal church tucked between the towers of the Eaton centre in the heart of downtown Toronto. Twenty-five years later, when I was eight, I would go to the same church for a summer camp offered by a non-profit arts organization run by my mother, who had long since given up acting. I would play theatre games on the same courtyard stones. In 1969, however, my mother and the forty-odd members of the Theatre Passe

Muraille had just moved in, and the church was just becoming one of the most important centres for alternative theatre in Canada.

The Theatre Passe Muraille was founded by actor and director Jim Garrard in 1968 as part of a drama program at Rochdale, the experimental college and centre of alternative culture in downtown Toronto. Garrard had received theatre training in England, and while in Europe had been greatly influenced by the experimental work of the New York theatre troupe the La Mama Experimental Theatre Club. In a report outlining his plans for a drama program at Rochdale Garrard described his company as, “a theatre free of distinctions between actor and spectator, between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the theatre, between drama as one art form, music as another and dancing as yet another” (qtd. in Johnston, 35). The description is very much in keeping with the alternative theatre being developed in America and other countries. However, as much as Garrard wanted to make his company an experimental one in the tradition of La Mama and other foreign troupes, the Theatre Passe Muraille had another important goal: to produce work that was distinctly Canadian.

By 1969 and the attempted production of *Richard III*, two other young Canadian talents, Martin Kinch and John Palmer, were leading the company along with Garrard. John Palmer, a young playwright who had had previous work performed by the theatre, wrote the adaptation of *Richard III*, and Martin Kinch directed it. Both men had participated in a program called Directors Training in Britain that was designed to provide expert training to Ontario’s amateur directors. Applicants were sent to Britain, taught “real” theatre, and then brought back to Ontario where they would be employed in Ontario’s community theatres for two years. Both Kinch and Palmer returned with some

new skills, but also a hunger to create real Canadian theatre that wasn't merely an imitation of "legitimate" British work. Palmer in particular was something of a theatrical iconoclast. He took his small experimental theatre company to Stratford to go head to head with the festival, performing in a small coffee house; he expressed outrageous statements about Canadian theatre in the media; he barred British star Alan Bates from a performance when he arrived late; and he agreed to perform one of his plays on a Shaw Festival off-day on the set of *Major Barbara*, but only after all of the furniture had been piled in front of the doors and hung up on the walls. He was a gifted young writer and director who had offered his services to a number of Canadian professional companies and was ignored. He blamed his nationality: "The reason I couldn't get a job was that I was Canadian. The theatres were run by Brits, and they were bringing over more Brits... I thought, well, this has got to change. To a certain extent, that was fundamental to my whole career up to 1979" (Johnston 58). *Richard III*, then, was not intended to merely restage the bard's work in imitation of British productions, as Kinch and Palmer felt was done at Stratford. It was to be something new.

The production of *Richard III* was to be highly experimental and featured my mother in a prominent role – she was Richard's hump. My mother is a tiny Asian woman. She claims to be five feet, but I remain skeptical. Clinging to the back of actor Don Steinhouse (who would later go on to play the role of the farmer in *The Farm Show*), my mother's part was to be toted across the stage, a human lump between Richard's shoulders, the physical manifestation of his consciousness. During particularly intense monologues, my mother would climb down from her perch and act out Richard's inner thoughts, expressively miming out the bitterness and vitriol of Richard's soul. When

Richard wakes from the dream, then, and says, “O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!” my mother was to be by his bedside, dressed in black and glowering menacingly (V.iv, 158). The effect was, by all accounts, quite memorable. Indeed, this aspect of play is the only thing mentioned in the two sentences given to the failed production in Denis Johnston’s history of Toronto’s alternative theatres. Johnston writes: “These rehearsals are still remembered by people who saw them for the stunning theatrical effect of actress Bernice Gai Hune’s clinging to Richard’s shoulder to portray his hump” (65).

The rest of the production was equally experimental. Theatre Passe Muraille’s press release describes the play as an “evolutionary melodrama.” It goes on to say that, “Mr. Palmer has pared the classical embellishments and rebuilt with power, an evening of sustained emotional impact. Through the hands of Director Martin Kinch, the Company brings to life in a primaevael ritualistic form, the tale of a man driven to destruction by his desire for conquest and power.” The production was clearly partly in reaction to the political events of the time. An examination of “conquest and power,” in 1969 in the Toronto alternative community, was also an obvious examination of American actions in Vietnam. The experimental aspects of the production were also an attempt to distance this new, Canadian adaptation from the “classical embellishments” of classical Shakespeare.

In the end, however, the production itself never happened. After rehearsing for three weeks, the Theatre Passe Muraille, which was always in financial trouble, hit a particularly difficult time. They were in danger of going bankrupt, and *Richard III*, with its 12-person cast, was immediately replaced by a pair of two-person plays, *Sweet Eros* and *In his Own Write*, designed to make money quickly. The venture worked, and the

other members of the cast, and the Theatre Passe Muraille itself, went on to become incredibly important players in building a home-grown alternative theatre in Canada. For my mother – who has moved on to be an artist, a storyteller, and, of course, a parent – *Richard III* was the last play she was ever a part of.

However, despite the fact that it was never performed, the 1969 version of *Richard III* is representative of an important movement in Canadian attitudes towards Shakespeare. As Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier write, adaptation of Shakespeare is a “form of expression that leads to authoritative national self-expression” (11). Artists claim Shakespeare as their own, incorporating his work in their own way into a national tradition. This version of *Richard III* was produced at an important moment in Canadian theatre history. No longer were young directors merely attempting to use Shakespeare as a marker of cultural significance, essentially defining their own national value against an idea of “The Bard” as the ultimate symbol of British, and therefore legitimate, culture. As my mother said, “you want to free yourself from your colonial roots, and the way to do that is to do contemporary, immediate theatre.” The Theatre Passe Muraille adaptation was not an attempt to embrace the canonic Shakespeare as a symbol of imperial culture, but an attempt to express something immediate and Canadian using England’s greatest writer.

Works Cited

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