As I write this, the Olympic torch is winding serpentinely across Canada, beginning in Vancouver, then heading up north, then heading to the east, and then back out to the west again. (Today the torch travelled from Fredericton to Bathurst, New Brunswick.) Looking at the assembled contributions in this issue of the Views and Reviews section, the journey of the torch seems an apt connective metaphor. Passed from hand to hand, the Olympic torch relay physically links thousands of individuals in a long chain spanning the country. This theme of the vast scale of the country rendered as experience by the combined mosaic fragments of individual participants is reflected first in two productions reviewed here which both assemble artists—writers, performers, and creative teams—from St. John’s to Vancouver and everywhere in between.

_Fear of Flight_ created by Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland is in fact set aboard a transnational flight. The play features a series of monologues commissioned from eight contemporary Canadian playwrights. Travelling from voice to voice, the play questions not only our fear of flying, but fear in general—our reluctance to take chances, and the faith required to break free and take flight. Reviewers Barry Freeman and Robin C. Whittaker examine the effects generated by the juxtaposition of these diverse voices in this work of “choral theatre” structured by director Jillian Kelley’s signature style of “kaleidography.” And like the torch, _Fear of Flight_ is destined for the Cultural Olympiad in Vancouver.

The second play reviewed, _City of Wine_ written by Ned Dickens and produced by Nightswimming, is also epic in scale—crossing decades of time as well as thousands of kilometres in space. A seven-play cycle, _City of Wine_ recounts the great tales of Thebes over the seven generations from its inception, to growth, and then decline. To mount such a mammoth undertaking, individual plays were parcelled out to post-secondary theatre programs across the country. The productions then converged in Toronto for a four-day festival when all seven plays were staged in sequence. In his review, Alex Fallis considers not only the merits of the production, but also the pedagogical implications of such collaborations for the youthful theatre practitioners who participated in this unique endeavour.

Next up, Katherine McLeod reviews a recent production of the jazz opera _Québecité_ by George Elliot Clarke and D.D. Jackson. Previously produced in Guelph and Vancouver, _Québecité_ had its international debut in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in February 2009. A story of two multicultural couples who fall in love, the piece employs an accessible jazz idiom and provides many opportunities for improvisation (McNeil). For a work that has still...
not yet been produced in Quebec, the significance of the geographical situation of this performance carries some weight. Concentrating on the effects of hearing the jazz opera live, McLeod speculates on how this deeply self-reflexive political work might communicate in a foreign acoustic environment. The specificity of the environment is also central to Vers solitaire—an MP3 audio walk through the streets and underground walkways of Montreal. In this ambulatory piece created by Olivier Choinière and the company L’Activité, the motif of the journey is shrunk to a very intimate scale, as a solitary audience member follows a mute solo performer. Reviewer and solo audience member Richard Simas carefully documents the strangeness and intrigue of this urban theatrical encounter.

Finally to wrap up the section, Jennette White reviews a new biography of Sharon Pollock written by Sherrill Grace, Making Theatre: A Life of Sharon Pollock. Presented with the Ann Saddlemeyer Award in June 2009, this book makes an important contribution to Canadian theatre history, but also to the field of biography studies. Grace is a personable guide throughout this work. She does not vanish into the pose of an anonymous narrator; rather she is careful to delineate her own subject position. She opens her process to the reader, allowing us to share her curiosity. Her questions become our questions. Reaching beyond the individual, Grace interweaves episodes and insights from the life of her subject into the theatrical environment both on a local and national scope, the specificity of the environment is also central. The theatrical environment is shrunk to a very intimate scale, as a solitary audience member follows a mute solo performer. Reviewer and solo audience member Richard Simas carefully documents the strangeness and intrigue of this urban theatrical encounter.

We habitually take for granted machine-aided human flight. We trust, or believe, that an array of phenomena—natural and man-made—can vault us into the sky, fly, and land us back down, though most of us understand little about how any of it works. Flying (under someone else’s control) is an act of near-spiritual faith.

That act of faith is the theme of Fear of Flight, the latest category-defying spectacle from Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland. We attended its Toronto incarnation in the spring of 2009 at Factory Theatre (as part of the “Performance Spring Festival”). Set aboard a plane en route from St. John’s to Vancouver, Fear of Flight’s cast of fourteen—twelve passengers and two attendants—slowly unfold their stories as the fear of flying dredges up a range of other private fears. For some, the fear is malignant, for others it is barely perceptible, and for others it is paralyzing. Over the course of the flight, acrophobia develops into a metaphor for our reluctance to take chances even when our feet are firmly planted on the ground.

Regular readers of CTR will be familiar with the core collaboration at the heart of Artistic Fraud—the collaboration between director Jillian Keiley and playwright Robert Chafe—and familiar also with “kaleidography,” the method by which Keiley choreographs stage gesture and movement with the mathematical precision of a musical score (see Lynde; Keiley and Chafe; Keiley). In Fear of Flight (as in several of the company’s previous productions), the kaleidography is structured around an actual musical score forming a complex choral soundscape created here by collaborating actor-musician Jonathan Monro. Adding another dimension to the collaboration, the company based Fear of Flight on monologues solicited from eight of Canada’s most acclaimed contemporary playwrights. According to its YouTube promotional video, the company invited each playwright “to muse on fear of flying and fear of life” (1:31). The eight monologues they solicited from eight of Canada’s most acclaimed contemporary playwrights. According to its YouTube promotional video, the company invited each playwright “to muse on fear of flying and fear of life” (1:31). The eight monologues they solicited from eight of Canada’s most acclaimed contemporary playwrights. According to its YouTube promotional video, the company invited each playwright “to muse on fear of flying and fear of life” (1:31). The eight monologues they solicited from eight of Canada’s most acclaimed contemporary playwrights. According to its YouTube promotional video, the company invited each playwright “to muse on fear of flying and fear of life” (1:31). The eight monologues they solicited from eight of Canada’s most acclaimed contemporary playwrights. According to its YouTube promotional video, the company invited each playwright “to muse on fear of flying and fear of life” (1:31). 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“People afraid of these things? It’s a waste. They’re wasting their precious reprieve from the really scary stuff. The stuff they left behind when they boarded. The stuff waiting for them at baggage claim.” Yet the situation of disparate characters breathing, sleeping, reading and typing in such close quarters creates symbiotic relationships. There is the need to stand, to shift a leg over, or to recline, just as when, say, one is sitting in a theatre audience. These are the physical needs of the quiet, trapped spectator. But belief and fear are considerably stronger when one is being moved above the clouds where there are psychological needs too, such as the need to stifle blurting out your deepest fears to the passenger beside you. Shared needs create harmony between the chorus of passengers and attendants on board.

Keiley describes what she does as “choral theatre,” (99) and indeed the tensions and harmonies among the passengers are well realized in Monro’s music. Where Fear of Flight impresses most is in the degree to which dialogue, gesture, and movement are integrated with the a capella choral score performed by the cast throughout most of the piece. The music provides a rhythmic baseline that both lends a common atmosphere to the scene and allows each of the diverse characters a differently beating pulse. In Fear of Flight, as in other Artistic Fraud productions such as After Image and Icycle, “kaleidography” enables Keiley and her collaborators to fully integrate the set and the props into the soundscape. Here, shifting in seats, flipping the pages of a newspaper, closing laptops and unfolding menu cards are components of the piece’s music, timed precisely to punctuate, or sometimes to act in counterpoint to, the monologues.

Too often, one sees productions in which theatrical elements such as acting, lighting, and music appear to have been created in parallel, if not in isolation. With each production, Artistic Fraud demonstrates the value of developing these elements simultaneously, and of placing the actor squarely in the centre.

Choral music has a close relationship to the church, not least of all in Artistic Fraud’s home city of St. John’s where the vitality and popularity of church-affiliated music today is the continuation of a tradition that stretches back to the early-nineteenth century. The company has been the beneficiary of this tradition and in past productions, notably Burial Practices of the Early European Settlers Through to Today (2004), it has specifically explored the spiritual potency of music. The choral music of Fear of Flight also lends a spiritual atmosphere to the piece such that the characters’ self-examinations, especially when they are isolated in tightly shuttered boxes of light, take on the feel of a series of confessions. The tone of those confessions alternate between comic and tragic, and accordingly the music pulls in two directions: the ominous and ethereal melodies evoke the gravitas of a Catholic mass while the thematic vocal rhythm of “dun dun dun’s” and “do do do’s” maintain an uneasy, or even absurd, feeling. The music combines with the “heavenly” simplicity of Carl Nelson’s off-white costumes and the symmetrical rows of seats to give the impression of a congregation looking for answers to the troubles of their lives. Cumulatively, these effects telegraph the play’s point from the opening single-file entrance: are they flying to heaven, and the audience with them? For Daniel MacIvor’s character Glynis (played by Mia Mansfield), her journey is a literal Ascension in that she is flying to Vancouver to carry out a mission for Jesus. Glynis’s mission is pathetic, however, in that her Jesus is a seductive stranger who seems to have manipulated the naïve woman into conducting some shady business on his behalf. Glynis’s story does what the music’s “do do do’s” accomplish: it reminds us that it is contrived and absurd to have the act of flying bring us to the brink of spiritual crisis.

Part of the joy of Fear of Flight lies in its juxtaposition of the distinct voices of the playwrights—and those voices come through the piece clearly. Theatregoers who know the work of these writers will not have to look in the program to ascertain which writer corresponds to which character. On the one hand, the variety of syntax and tone is refreshing, but...
on the other hand it is sometimes difficult to adjust between, say, the jarring scansion of Judith Thompson’s thirteen-year-old whining Blandy (Sandy Gow) and the ultra-paced, compassionate business-tones of Guillermo Verdecchia’s Will (Jovanni Sy). The transitions between the monologues are often unprovoked, and about forty minutes into the eighty-minute piece the predictable spotlight / monologue / switch pattern begins to grate.

Still, Artistic Fraud has, for the most part, succeeded in its aim “to make something big, beautiful and truly trans-Canadian in scope.”(“Fear of Flight” 1:20). It is certainly big: even after the inaugural 2005 Sir Wilfred Grenfell student cast of thirty was pared down to fourteen for the touring production, the cast was still larger than one usually sees at venues like Factory. (A cast of more than six on a Canadian stage is normally the work of a Mirvish production, a post-Broadway touring show or a non-professionalized theatre company.) There is beauty as well: the pinpoint choreography, the smoothly executed rhythms and harmonies, and the unique portraits of a cast of eccentric, anxious characters all leap to the aid of the patchwork script. It is trans-Canadian on a meta level: the passengers animate dramatic voices from across the country and the fictional east-to-west coast journey is reflected in the route travelled by the production itself (it premiered in St. John’s and is destined for the Cultural Olympiad at the 2010 Olympics, 9–13 February). Fear of Flight is admirably ambitious, and if the voices within sometimes seem uncomfortable in the same dramatic world, the play’s thematic and musical richness more often than not soars.

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Barry Freeman has just finished his doctoral studies at the University of Toronto’s Drama Centre. He has recently published in *Canadian Theatre Review*, *Theatre Research in Canada*, alt.theatre and has taught at Brock University and The University of Toronto.

Robin C. Whittaker has recently completed doctoral studies at the Graduate Drama Centre at the University of Toronto. He has taught Canadian Theatre, Modern Theatre, and Theory and Critical Writing at universities across Canada and has published in *Canadian Theatre Review* and *Theatre Research in Canada*. His recent play anthology, *Hot Thespian Action!* (Athabasca UP) draws from his ongoing research on non-professionalized theatre practices.

“Without our past, we are just any town, no town at all”: *City of Wine*

by Alex Fallis


*City of Wine Festival*, produced by Nightswimming and presented at Theatre Passe Muraillle, was a unique event. Seven of Canada’s professional and university theatre training programs came together to perform a seven-play series that collectively dramatized the history of the city of Thebes. The festival was an unqualified success on numerous levels. It provided a snapshot of the variety of training available in Canada, filled the theatre for the run, created an energy that spilled into numerous celebratory parties, and brought national media attention to a previously unproduced group of plays. Robert Cushman, in *The National Post*, called it “a dizzying achievement” (Cushman, Review). Many of the schools hired outside professionals to work in senior positions, so the students were working with leading directors and designers. Eda Holmes, Craig Hall, and
Jillian Keiley were among the directors, and Vikki Anderson, Rebecca Picherack, Kimberley Purtell, and Mara Gottler among the designers.

Home to Tiresias, Oedipus, Jocasta, and Antigone, as well as lesser-known figures such as Cadmus and Harmonia, Thebes provides the setting for many significant stories in Greek mythology and drama. Any writer who uses these source stories is following a path trod by some of the greatest dramatic writers of the Western tradition, from the Athenians to the twentieth-century plays of Anouilh and Brecht. And this does not take into consideration the enormous impact the stories have had in non-dramatic literature and psychology. As Ned Dickens stated at a discussion of the cycle and festival hosted by the Canadian Stage Company, these are “saturated stories,” both as myth and literature (Dickens, Panel Discussion). City of Wine is a dramatization of the full history of Thebes, from founding and growth, through power and “greatness,” to decay and disappearance. Through fifteen years of development, Dickens’ interest in Thebes grew from one play on Oedipus to three plays, adding a deeper exploration of Jocasta and Laius, and finally, to seven plays—one for each generation of the city. Dickens has maintained his own point of view on the source material, and though in some cases they dramatize the exact episodes other writers have also chosen, none of the plays can be considered adaptations. Dickens develops his interests through the full cycle, and it is really only in light of all seven plays performed together that these themes fully emerge. Through the series, an audience is continually asked to assess the uses of history and tradition. There is a powerful motif of prophecy and forgetfulness, which is developed through an extra-mythological imagining of the life of Tiresias. Perhaps the strongest theme Dickens develops is the interplay of individual action with the community at large. This interest is woven into the basic construction of the cycle. As well as the Named characters we recognize, such as Oedipus, Pentheus, and Antigone, he has created an intricate weaving of other characters through the generations of the city whom he calls “The UnNamed.” Each play has seven characters that are only identified by seven objects: Bowl, Cloth, Firewood, Blood, Glass, Water, and Bread (a number of the plays have additional UnNamed as well). These figures recur in different forms through the plays, sometimes male, sometimes female, sometimes young, sometimes older. After the first two plays—Harmonia and Pentheus—the gods disappear, and the Named become central (through Laius, Jocasta, and Oedipus). In these middle plays of the cycle, the interplay with the UnNamed can be characterized as the relationship of the powerful to the less powerful. However, the Named eventually give up their centrality as well. In the last two plays (Creon and Seven), only the UnNamed appear, reflecting on the “great names” and the history they have been a part of. Dickens has an equation for this, which has served as a kind of mantra over the years of development and writing: “The Named are those who live once and are remembered, and the UnNamed are those who live forever and are forgotten.” Put another way, among the UnNamed “generations come and go but the basic social matrix remains” (Dickens, Re: City of Wine). From a theatrical perspective, this structure gives the first two plays a fantastical and irrational quality (through the presence and actions of the gods), the central plays are more realistic and character-driven in design, and the final plays move into the realm of metatheatre, as the UnNamed continually rehearse and replay the stories they have heard and witnessed.

The plays are written in a somewhat heightened style of speech. In performance, the language has an easy flow that carries the story forward with only a slight hint that it is different than everyday speech. This hint of “otherness” is achieved by the rigorous application of an iambic rhythm, using no contractions and no colloquialisms, such as “yeah.” Dickens has a fine sense of word play, and often reverses sentences to give a different meaning, as in this exchange from Creon:

**STRANGER:** I trade in wine wherever boat or beast can bring it.
**WATER:** Sometimes the wine can bring the beast.

The author’s love of wordplay often creates puns and double entendres. He enjoys both the lighter and darker shades of language and that gives the heightened diction a welcome, earthier quality:

**BREAD:** Where are you leading me?
**BOWL:** Astray, I hope.
**BREAD:** Oh good.
I have enough of these.
**BOWL:** We will play adults soon enough.
*(Pentheus 16)*

The earthiness and wit can also give way to pure linguistic strength that gives the diction enormous poetic weight. Manto’s description of Oedipus’ self-mutilation is an excellent example:

For one eternal instant all was still.
Then, with a shriek like birth,
his neck convulsed, his arms drove up,
and from behind his face the ragged roots of
sight tore full away.
He balanced there, offering the wreckage to the sky,
and begged the mercy of the gods to rain on
Thebes.
Another narrow blade of time sunk deep into
my memory and then the blood.
The blood. *(Oedipus 84)*

At the festival, the seven plays were performed without a single, consistent style. Each production had its own aesthetic based on the resources and attitude of the originating school and the process of development. The productions of Creon, Laius and Seven were primarily actor and text based with...
naturalistic settings and costuming. As noted above, Creon and Seven have a highly metatheatrical tone, as history is replayed and the boundary of character and “role” is often blurred. Certain productions moved slightly away from realistic setting and action to what might be described as a preliminary level of experimentation. For example, the production of Jocasta used many pieces of honeycomb cardboard as the set, and found multiple ways to explore space, mood and power through them. A more experimental and interdisciplinary exploration occurred in Harmonia and Oedipus. In Harmonia, the company accompanied themselves on musical instruments that had been designed and constructed as a part of the development process, and gave Mount Olympus a suitably otherworldly and unfamiliar quality. Oedipus seemed to try out a wide variety of techniques including a live band, live video projection, and anachronistic settings. The production never quite decided which were most useful, though the exploration of the presentation of extreme emotional states was often compelling. One production, Pentheus, made full use of contemporary theatrical technology and vocabulary. It had a full soundscape (by Richard Feren), a strong mood component from the lighting (designed by Stephan Droege), a clear and progressive sense of movement (choreographed by Sharon Moore) and non-realistic choices made in the costuming (by Anna Romanovska). The strong interpretive choices added to Dickens’ words and the result was a production that felt more finished. As directed by Tatiana Jennings for Humber College, this was a fully immersive experience, nearly hallucinogenic at times, and very dense and rich. Dickens’ writing allows for a great deal of interpretive space (often the gender of characters is non-specific, settings are not defined or impossible to realize in the traditional, realistic theatre) and this production confirmed that the City of Wine plays are ready for bold production choices and are deepened by a strong, interpretive vision.

Throughout the festival, the quality of the acting was very high. It was wonderful to see the ways that different productions approached the same character at different parts of their lives—the nymph Thebe had a very ethereal, dance-like quality in two incarnations (in Harmonia and Pentheus) and then changed to a spoiled party girl when she became a queen in Laius. The life journey of Jocasta was very well delineated through three plays and three actresses—growing from a hopeful young woman to a mature queen in love, and finally, to a supportive wife and mother whose end is despair. The same can be said about the UnNamed—though their life journeys are less specific, their different qualities grew and shifted through the different performances. As an ensemble, the cast of Seven stood out for their cohesiveness and clarity.

The success of the festival leaves a variety of questions unanswered. From a training standpoint, how was the project integrated into students’ training and did it have a lasting effect on their development as artists? From a dramaturgical point of view, was this festival and mode of production (using student actors) useful in the dramaturgy, development, and marketing of the plays themselves?

As a dramaturgical process, the festival was approximately three years long. The Nightswimming team (especially Brian Quirt, who served as dramaturge for all the plays, producer Naomi Campbell, and Dickens) conducted script workshops at each of the schools. These had the dual purpose of developing the plays and allowing the students to engage in the process of development. As with production, each school had their own approach to these workshops. One used the play (and the cycle) as the core material for a number of courses, from dramaturgy to interdisciplinary performance creation. Another engaged in a process of creation using the same stories (but not Dickens’ words), facilitated by the same artist who then directed Dickens’ play. According to Diana Belshaw, the director of the program, this was intended to both “introduce . . . the stories” and create “a common performance vocabulary with which to attack the play” when rehearsals began. Yet another school took an approach closer to a professional production process: the students workedshopped a number of the plays (mostly around a table) through their training, but this work wasn’t specifically integrated with the rest of the curriculum. There, a director was hired who had not been a part of the workshop process. Judging by the performances at the festival, none of these approaches was demonstrably better than another, as the students from every school

Thebe (Lacey Creighton) comforts Tiresias (Ben Muir) after he is blinded, while the company creates the forest. From the performance of Pentheus produced by Humber Theatre.

Photo by Andrew Oxenham
demonstrated a level of commitment and understanding that served the ongoing desire to fully develop the plays.

From Brian Quirt’s dramaturgical perspective, he found the festival to be a great help in the development of the plays. “It was designed to give us perspective on the storytelling of the cycle as a whole, after many years of looking in detail at the seven ‘chapters.’ And it did so. The next round of revision will, largely, focus on themes and motifs and characters that cross over multiple plays.” From a practical point of view, the festival showed that it is indeed possible to present an event at this scale and, according to Quirt, “the Festival generated such momentum that bringing individual or multiple plays to theatres and artistic directors has been much easier than ever before,” though at this time, there have been no further productions planned.

From the students’ perspective, there is an overwhelming sense that this was a particularly powerful learning experience. One of the most repeated comments is about being part of a long-term project. The opportunity to use one subject as a touchstone throughout a training process, and have a major culminating project seems invaluable. Natalie Schneck reports the project “was the summation of four years of theatre work at SFU Contemporary Arts. It was a step into a bigger collaborative process and a liaison into the professional theatre world.” On a related note, students had the experience of touring, allowing for a revisiting of character and production. Leora Morris stated in a blog, “leaving this script for days and weeks at a time to enter other characters, examine other issues, and experience other eras has actually sharpened the clarity of the Theban world for me. I have a keener sensorial understanding of what that world feels like, where its moral compass lies, and how its tragedies resonate specifically for the characters” (Morris). Significantly, all the students (and educators) look forward to future collaborations among artists from the different schools.

The major problem with the festival was, perhaps, its brevity. The compressed nature of the festival meant that there was not the full opportunity to meet and discuss the various productions and how they interconnected. As many students reported, the week passed in a flash. With more time, there would be opportunities to assess the different imperatives of high quality production, student training, and dramaturgical exploration and how each could be strengthened in this kind of context. Looking forward, one hopes that this kind of experience will be repeated. However, it seems that there really isn’t a mechanism to make that possible.

Nightswimming is primarily a development company, and this project, requiring a significant commitment of time and money over many years, stretched their resources to the limit. The next logical source would be the schools, but each has its own local concerns. DD Kugler, a professor at Simon Fraser, states, “successively diminished budgets reinforce an already myopic focus on our [own] endangered programs … it’s unlikely that such an adventurous initiative will come from any of the training institutions.” This is bluntly confirmed by Diana Belshaw: “a central organizing body is needed for something like this.” The hope that another (larger) cultural institution might pick up the idea is just that—a hope.

One is left with the possibility that this was a singular, unique event. If so, it has left a legacy of positive energy and potential. The mountain of conceiving, creating, and producing a festival like this has been successfully climbed by Nightswimming. The training programs can see the benefits in finding ways to interact and showcase their work. The student actors had an experience outside their usual curriculum that connected them to the professional world and to other students. And the future offshoots of the City of Wine Festival are yet to materialize. DD Kugler suggests “the real pay-off may come decades later as performers discover that they all participated in this seminal event in Canadian theatre history.”

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Alex Fallis has a great interest in creation and dramaturgy in the drama school environment, and has created shows at George Brown College, Humber College, and University of Toronto. He presently teaches theatre history at Humber College and George Brown College, and has previously taught at numerous other schools.

**Canadian Jazz Opera in America**

By Katherine McLeod

_I’d love to hear your fingers minuet, Colette.
Alight by me, dove; let’s debut a duet._

—From Québécité libretto (28)

On the snowy night of 18 February 2009, the scintillating sounds of a Canadian jazz opera Québécité—written by George Elliott Clarke and composed by D.D. Jackson—filled Foy Hall in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Sponsored by the Moravian College Music Institute, along with the Moravian College Office of Institutional Diversity and Multicultural Affairs and Moravian College of Arts and Letters, Québécité had its American debut in this quiet city, a three-hour drive west of New York City. The proximity is important both in terms of Moravian College’s decision to produce the performance (as Jackson had previously performed at the Music Institute) and the fact that Jackson, the singers, and the musicians are all performers based in New York City (a few of whom [Jackson and Choi] are New York-Canadians). Thus, while Québécité has yet to have a New York City debut, or a Quebec City debut for that matter (which only highlights the significance of geographical location in the politics of this piece), one might consider this Bethlehem performance to be, indeed, a New York performance on an interpretive level. At the very least one must take into account that all performers are immersed in the New York jazz scene when listening to the already complex adaptive politics taking place within this Canadian jazz opera that is about multicultural sound.

 Québécité premiered at the tenth anniversary of the Guelph Jazz Festival on 5 September 2003. Commissioned by Ajay Heble, the performance was directed by Colin Taylor and featured a full cast of musicians, singers, and dancers. It was performed again in Vancouver (October 2003) with a scaled-down production but with the same cast of singers (Dean Bowman as Malcolm States, Yoon Choi as Colette Chan, Kiran Ahluwalia as Laxmi Bharati, and Haydain Neale as Ovide Rimbaud) and many of the same musicians (D.D. Jackson himself on piano, John Geggie on bass, Peggy Lee on cello, Jean Martin on drums, and Brad Turner on trumpet; with one change being Mark Dresser on bass in Vancouver). In the same year, Clarke published the libretto, Québécité: A Jazz Fantasia in Three Cantos, which reads as a poetic performance attentive to its own musicality through language. From the opening duet, Ovide exclaims, “I could scat sing my ballad valentine!” and Laxmi later critiques Ovide for speaking in “[s]uch symphonic speech”; these examples only gesture towards the richness of Clarke’s poetry as it overflows the textual space of the libretto. The libretto has been delivered as a dramatic reading under the direction of Jessica Ruano and performed by Greg Frankson, Supinder Kaur, Emmanuel Jean-Simon, and Candace Cheung (Ottawa Fringe Festival 2006). (An early draft of the libretto was published in Canadian Theatre Review Fall 2002 and it has been anthologized by Djanet Sears in Testifyin’: Contemporary African Canadian Drama Vol. II.) In October 2003, the Guelph performance was broadcasted on CBC Radio Two’s In Performance, which included a pre-performance interview with Clarke and Jackson; however, there has not yet been a commercial recording of the music that would allow it to reach a wider audience. Significantly, not only is there no commercial recording, but, until Bethlehem, there had not been a full musical performance since Guelph and Vancouver in 2003. Therefore, the Bethlehem performance provided an important re-interpretation of the piece both on its own and in relation to the ‘original’ productions.

In the article, “This Ain’t No Time for Innocence: Québécité, a Jazz Opera by George Elliott Clarke and D.D. Jackson,” Kevin McNeilly offers astute comparisons between the Guelph and Vancouver performances, along with an excellent overview of the personal background and political concerns of the jazz opera. In making these comparisons, McNeilly observes that “[t]he Guelph staging emphasized contrivance and artifice […] This excess created the impression, not of plurality, but of clutter, and usually interfered with the drama and the music” (118). In many ways this elaborate staging (including “numerous dancers and extras” [McNeilly 118]) responds to the spirit of excess conveyed in Clarke’s stage directions in the libretto; for instance, stage directions in the final scene call for “May 68: Trudeau in Canada, Pre-Raphaelite Marxism in Czechoslovakia, and classy, sexy revolt in France,” (91). Nevertheless, the Vancouver production, with its smaller venue of the Vancouver East Cultural Centre, created a more intimate staging, pared down to only the singers and musicians onstage, along with wooden chairs and a table. Audiences could hear the effect of this change: as McNeilly observes, “[t]he energy and dynamism of the text and the music became more immediate and deeply engaging” (118). The Bethlehem production resembled the Vancouver staging by placing the singers at microphones across the front of the stage and encircling them with the musicians. (This minimal staging also resembled the 2007 premiere of another musical collaboration between Jackson and Clarke: Trudeau: Long March / Shining Path at Harbourfront, Toronto, a reminder...
that the Bethlehem performance of Québecité is a return to an earlier collaboration after another musical foray into Canadian politics.) The plot of Québecité can be sung without staging as the story unfolds through song, set on the streets of Quebec City (further recognizable through references to its urban landscape, specifically Le Chateau Frontenac). As two multicultural couples (Laxmi and Ovide; Colette and Malcolm) fall in love, they must overcome the prejudices of their parents; and, when the couples reunite in the final scene, the words, “Vive notre québecité” express their soaring hopes of an inclusive cultural practice. In the “Postlude” to the libretto, director of the Guelph Jazz Festival and literary and jazz scholar Ajay Heble frames this political message in terms of what the hybrid genre of jazz opera offers as a model for new cultural performances: “Offering an alternative to the doggedly Eurological operatic tradition, Québecité marks an unprecedented opportunity on the Canadian operatic stage to generate bold new stagings of identity” (100).

As in the Guelph and Vancouver performances, the Bethlehem performance featured Jackson conducting from the piano while playing riveting solos that further reveal his graceful artistry as an exceptionally talented pianist as well as composer. Moreover, there were two singers from the original performances: Dean Bowman and Yoon Choi, whose musical experience was then combined with the newness of Martin Sola as Ovide and Meetu Chilana as Laxmi singing these roles for the first time. Bowman’s and Choi’s familiarity with the material beautifully emerges in their duet, “Lushly a dewed light falls,” sung with careening voices as though longing to touch through sound. (A version of this song appears on Jackson’s 2006 recording “Serenity Song” and the song can be listened to on Jackson’s website, along with a selection of songs from Trudeau: Long March / Shining Path [www.ddjackson.com].) Another example of musical experience was Bowman’s singing of a climactic solo that concludes Canto 2. The repetition in the final words, “Away, away, away” powerfully conveyed his character’s angry disbelief at the intolerance of Colette’s parents (as they threaten to disown her for choosing to love an Africadian man and not one of Chinese heritage); furthermore, like Colette’s fervent improvisations that musically negotiate her own response to her parents’ prejudices, these words hover on the edge of voice as instrument of visceral sound and of language. This improvised solo of Colette’s in Canto 3 was a greatly anticipated moment, as McNeilly frames it as a “duto” between Choi and bassist Mark Dresser in the Vancouver performance that “occurred in a musical space on the verge of score or script—[and] was one of the highpoints of an exceptional evening” (122). In contrast to the Vancouver performance, Choi’s scat singing was even more guttural, at one moment nearly veering into throat singing; then, as her improvisations continued, the entire band joined in, producing what could be called a multi-directional, improvised conversation. While the dialogue still sounded like the one described by McNeilly, the instrumentation was more carefully crafted in order to accompany Choi’s voice as it moved freely over the bars of music. The call-and-response among musicians foregrounded the words of the song that emerges from these improvisations: “Finally, I’m called to the bar of prosecution, the bars of ripped up music, the bar of persecution.” Bars of music, law, and language informed the performance even as they were ripped up.

Conversely, the ‘new’ singers, Meetu Chilana and Martin Sole, confronted musical roles that were written for singers with different musical backgrounds. Although Chilana did not have the same experience in Indian folk songs as Ahluwalia, Chilana’s singing of Laxmi brought an emphatically jazzy texture to her lines: for example, in the opening duet, she responds to Ovide’s flirtatious overtures by stating: “To breathe Occidental oxygen, / Say my parents, is to go rotten.” In these lines that foreground the cultural politics of the piece, Chilana’s near-growl in her utterance of rotten acoustically signalled that she would be interpreting the music with her own flair and, indeed, she often nuanced words with a cutting, soulful flourish. In fact, Chilana spoke after the performance about her desire “to make the music her own” while acknowledging that Ahluwalia’s rendering of it was her only musical guide as to how the songs should sound. Thus, the Vancouver and Guelph performances were very much in the minds of the singers, even though they took place over five years ago. In
the same position as Chilana and Sole, encountering musical roles written for different musicians, the ‘new’ musicians also provided an important level of adaptation. During Bowman’s singing of Malcolm’s solo “I cry,” drummer Reggie Nicholson brought out the rhythmic pulse beneath an otherwise lyrical solo that accentuated Bowman’s phenomenal singing of this piece. Throughout the score, examples such as this one showed a musical precision and attention to detail, ranging from Dana Leong’s improvised accompaniments on electric cello to Shane Endsley’s layering of trumpet over Laxmi’s solo, “Foggy tubercular chill,” that echoes the syncopated rhythm of Laxmi’s reiterated lyrics that provocatively critique Ovide: “He thought that I should represent une lascivité proprement asiatique.” The interplay between the trumpet and Chilana as Laxmi in this song brought a further complexity to the musical accompaniment that recurs throughout the jazz opera, revealing the immense benefit of returning to the score again.

Due to the minimal staging, music is the primary medium through which to compare performances and, for myself as a listener, I would argue that sound is precisely what conveys the complexity of the jazz opera’s politics. (I pursue a more detailed discussion of this argument in an article on the jazz opera’s improvised cultural sounds: “Oui, let’s scat: Listening to Multi-Vocality in George Elliott Clarke’s Jazz Opera, Québécticité;” another extensive discussion of the politics of sound in this jazz opera can be found in Julia Obert’s article, “The Cultural Capital of Sound: Québécticité’s Acoustic Hybridity.”) As voices overlap and interweave with instrumentation in the song, “As a kite misses the wind” (the very scene in which the lovers reunite), the audience heard a performance of multicultural sound that foregrounded its difference as productive. The listener is asked to attend to the sound of this performance, whether in language written on the pages of the libretto or in the music performed. Yet, as an audience member who has seen this jazz opera performed in Canada, I could not help but speculate as to how a work infused with Canadian (and specifically Québécois) multicultural politics would be received by the audience of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Press for the performance in local papers included an article with the title “Jazz-Opera Québécticité grew from an interracial love story” and describes it as both “a multi-cultural jazz opera with a libretto by Afro-Canadian poet George Elliot Clarke and music by Canadian-born, New York-based D.D. Jackson” and “a jazzy, contemporary ‘Romeo and Juliet’ with a happy ending” (The Morning Call); however, this article includes an unfortunate error in geography: “The work, which premiered in 2003 at the Guelph Jazz Festival in Montreal, will be performed in a concert version Wednesday at Moravian College.” Confusing Guelph for Montreal could be dismissed as a careless error if it were not for the fact that Québécticité has not been performed in any city in Quebec. The politics of Québécticité are argued in the final chorus, “Vive notre québécité,” or, as Clarke articulates in a comment on the CBC broadcast: that the jazz opera presents the possibility for “people from different cultural, linguistic, religious, and racial backgrounds being able to collectively identify, without any irony, themselves as Canadian. To seize that label for everybody and not just a select group.” An important image, reiterating this point of Clarke’s, was left out of the final scene in the Bethlehem performance: a projected image of the Quebec flag, which, in the libretto, is described as having a multi-coloured fleurs-de-lis. This projection was one of the many visuals designed by artist Magda Wojtyra that accompanied each scene in the Vancouver and Guelph performances. Yet they were not used at all in the Bethlehem performance, resulting in a loss of a rich visual subtext, such as in the projected image...
for La Revolution Tranquille that includes many of the musical and political figures referred to in Clarke’s stage directions for the decorations of this jazz bar.

Yet, even without costumes, staging, or knowledge of the story other than the short Canto synopses printed in the program, the audience at the Bethlehem performance responded with thunderous applause. As well as responding to the music itself, audiences may have heard resonances of their own city’s cultural politics, or recognized elements of the iconic Chateau Frontenac in the historic Hotel Bethlehem, a stately stone edifice, directly across from Moravian College, or whether they noticed that this grand hotel’s jazz lounge, decorated with portraits of past presidents, could be compared to Clarke’s politically decorated jazz bar La Revolution Tranquille. Whether or not they heard these echoes, they would have heard many Canadianisms, ranging from the linguistic (“In Frangais—as in joual—my name’s Colette”) to the political (“sounding like fissile, fractious Canada”) and to the comedic (“Canadians don’t like to wield guns […] They don’t have to: they have drivers’ licenses”). Bringing this self-reflexively Canadian jazz opera to an American acoustic space, the Bethlehem performance challenged audiences to not only respond to the music but also to consider how issues of multiculturalism transfer across cultural soundscapes. Not only respond to the music but also to consider how issues of multiculturalism transfer across cultural soundscapes.

Notes

1 In the Q&A session with D.D. Jackson and George Elliott Clarke that preceded the Bethlehem performance, Jackson explains how he wrote much of the music for Québecité with each singer in mind. The press for Québecité includes a quotation from Jackson in which he compares his compositional practice to that of Duke Ellington, who “composed by fashioning his pieces with particular members of his band in mind […] I tried to do the same things by taking into account the specific qualities of the singers. There is a great allowance for improvisation and that’s one aspect that makes Québecité a jazz opera” (Duckett).

2 The digital art projected during the Vancouver and Guelph performances can be found on Magda Wojtyra’s website, http://www.rna.ca/digital_art/quebecite/index.shtml.

Works Cited


Katherine McLeod is completing her PhD at the University of Toronto, Department of English. Her dissertation examines performances of Canadian poetry, with a specific focus on adaptations of poetry by The Four Horsemen, Michael Ondaatje, George Elliott Clarke, and Robert Bringhurst.

Vers solitaire (OUT)

By Richard Simas

Created by Olivier Choinière and the company L’Activité. Presented by Théâtre La Chapelle within its interdisciplinary event, VASISTAS. April 24–28, 2008

When I buy my ticket to see Olivier Choinière’s Tapeworm (Out) (Vers solitaire) at Montreal’s Théâtre La Chapelle, the only human presence at the venue is the woman in the box office who takes my money and hands me a pair of headphones and an MP3 player. She directs me to start the show by stepping into the men’s washroom. I’m not surprised, as I’m aware that one of the things Choinière creates is ambulatory performance pieces—and this is exactly why I came. For the next couple of hours on a Saturday afternoon in April, Montreal’s cityscape, a stranger I’m supposed to meet out on the street, and the soundtrack on the MP3 player will be my dramaturgy. What I don’t know is where we’ll go or what will happen on our trek.

It’s not the young Quebec artist’s debut experience with such innovation. An earlier show called Welcome to…a city where you are the tourist, also a walk, played at Ottawa’s National Art Centre in the Québec Scenes event and elsewhere. One of a new generation of performance-makers upending black-box conventions, Choinière uses theatre like an anthropologist employs a pick—as a tool to unearth and examine our quirky society in its ongoing spectacle where there is no “off-stage.”

Alone in my washroom cubicle, a note in the toilet bowl tells me to turn on the MP3 player from which I receive basic operating instructions and directions to walk out to the street and follow the person waiting there for me. Voilà! Outside, a young man wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and a dark,
narrow tie, eyes me briefly with no particular interest. He resembles more a young Jehovah’s Witness skipping out on his mission than an avant-gardist performing subtle theatrics in the street. As I follow him down St. Lawrence Street listening to surrealist commentary on top of a montage of city noise in my earphones, I feel like Faust following Mephistopheles into the underworld.

As if perceptions have been sharpened by the situation, I begin wondering if everything I see has been set up for me, or if the banality of a Saturday afternoon near the Place des Arts Metro station just seems particularly potent: the man sprinting up the stairs, past me, and out the front door, could be a malfaiteur. Are they actors, the couple in the midst of a domestic quarrel, threatening to abandon one another by boarding trains in opposite directions then kissing passionately?

“Boom,” tones the voice on my MP3 player. “I want to blow this city up after I eat some food in its underground concessions. I am so hungry.” As though someone guides the wireless control on me, just then I am walking in front of the pastry and sandwich counters in Montreal’s subterranean maze of corridors. “Jesus, look at the chocolate cake. Boom!” All of a sudden, I am hungry too. Screeching metal and other ambient urban sounds provide cover for the mocking, garbled voice on the recording. “I need some money,” my audio companion murmurs.

Ambling on, my partner and I mutually respect a “theatrical” distance of about fifteen feet. Like so many complicit urbanites, we are obediently connected yet distant. He stops to examine a poster and glances furtively. I do the same then look around to see if this is just our duo (a trio with underground labyrinth, my legs tire. I am lost and wondering if an intermission is planned somewhere in the show. Then we turn a corner, walk through a door, and suddenly he and I are alone in a long corridor beneath the city. I fear him for the first time, and can easily imagine that this is where the crime happens. I am also struck by how much I have become attached to this wandering figure ahead of me. So far we have not said a word to one another. It occurs to me to abandon him and his performance. Any ticket holder has the right to walk out of a show, right? A line from Samuel Beckett’s Molloy comes to mind: “From things about to disappear I turn away in time. To watch them out of sight. No, I can’t do it.” As he pivots to move further down the corridor, I realize that it is me who will be abandoned, so I follow.

I’ve seen professional shows through mirrors, peepholes, and windows. Cemeteries, diners, apartments, a city dump, a mortuary, and a hilltop at dawn have all served as stages for performances I’ve attended. From a lakeshore in rural Italy I watched performers sink into the water atop a flaming vehicle. Possibilities for spectacle are limitless, but a strange setting is no guarantee for a great show. I am anticipating the spectacular in Choinière’s Tapeworm, an event or dénouement prepared in an alley or behind a door that will tie together the strings of scattered language on my recording, and our ordinary wandering, into some complete notion. By the time it finishes, Tapeworm is a singular, dramatic, and enigmatic experience.

Sitting in a performance hall with a crowd is irritating if you prefer the liberty of tracking your own sensations to a show. You feel you have to clap or stand for the ovation.
Someone sits on part of your coat or steps on your feet. You have to abide with the “coughers” and “program shakers,” and juggle a collective with an individual experience. I’ve heard people say they go to shows just to feel what everybody else is feeling. With Tapeworm, this is not an issue. It “sold out,” but audience members never applauded together as the walks were staggered and spread over four days. I have no idea what it was like for anyone else, and that’s fine.

The voice on the MP3 player tells me to turn it off and remove my headphones. I am standing at one end of a brick tunnel that leads to the Metro line at the Place Bonaventure station. He stands at the other end, close to the platform. We remove the headphones simultaneously then he begins to advance slowly towards me. Instead of watching a show through a mirror, I am the mirror of a stranger, a theatre, and everything is the stage. He reaches for my MP3 player and headphones, and then hands me a subway ticket.

This is as much an end to the show as there will be, though I am not quite ready for it to be over or to clap. No bows, nothing to mark a real difference. We exchange a wordless, face-to-face moment. I am searching for something to say when he turns and paces back down the tunnel. I watch his figure diminish. He pauses, boards a train. A moment later, I do the same.

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Uncovering the Playwright “in the Round”

By Jennette White


In her essay, “Playwright: Parasite or Symbiont,” Sharon Pollock describes biography “as an attempt to capture the essence of a life and personality and to place it in context in as interesting a way as possible” (297). One could posit that the key word in this sentence is attempt. It is impossible for a single book to reveal unequivocally the core of any individual, let alone one of Canada’s most politically outspoken, prolific and thought-provoking playwrights. In the opening chapter of Grace’s book, an analogy is drawn between Pollock’s life and the lives of Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, and Virginia Woolf. These are strong women who forged their careers despite a nay-saying, male-dominated oligarchy who would have been happier had they remained silent. Grace quotes Woolf’s belief that “biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have a thousand” (22). Each play Pollock crafts, like a Russian matryoshka doll, unlocks yet another aspect of her life. The challenge then for the person chronicling her life is to disinter the truth from the fiction of her invented scripts.

Two years before the publication of Making Theatre, in response to a lecture she attended by her biographer on “auto/biography,” Pollock declared that Grace “would never know her, that even her children did not know her” (374). A less judicious and more ego driven biographer might have been insulted by such a statement. Grace could have easily responded by writing a biased work, appealing to her readers’ baser instincts. Instead this author, in her preface, makes it clear that as Pollock’s “literary biographer” she will report no gossip and that those searching for that kind of story will be sorely disappointed (11). Time and again the reader is offered well-founded insights into the psyche of a playwright who is at once fiercely private and yet, quite contradictorily, unrelentingly candid. “She [Pollock] is aware of the many sides to any position or argument as well as the complex nature of human experience […] she refuses to have her work limited by a label or slotted into one category or another” (375). In a business where artists are constantly compartmentalized according to others’ subjective assessments of their talent, is it any wonder that this Canadian theatrical icon is protective of her personal reality? In response to her subject’s sensibilities, Grace has chosen to respectfully excavate the facts of Pollock’s life. She gently brushes her way through layer after layer of anecdotal and factual information, revealing only what is necessary to the historical narrative in relation to Pollock’s overall artistic creativity. The result is not only a well-crafted and interesting chronicle of “a life” in the arts, but also a Canadian theatre history primer accessible to anyone interested in the inner
of new theatre companies whose mandate was to present home-grown plays from “sea to shining sea” was de rigueur and Pollock was at the center of this artistic reformation.

A consummate scholar and a gifted storyteller, Grace discloses that Pollock’s concepts for plays always begin with a unique story, a political injustice, or something that captivates her imagination. “It seems that I do not so much choose the play to be written as it chooses me,” declares Pollock (310). Grace admiringly describes Pollock’s meticulous research. She dissects each play in order to contextualize it in regards to the playwright’s own experience. Each dramatic piece has a unique story line; however, Pollock freely states that she repeatedly re-writes the same play with different scenarios (133). Grace deconstructs Pollock’s creative process and one begins to recognize the recurring themes of “enforced silence” (216), isolation, and betrayal. In the playwright’s notes for Angel’s Trumpet, Pollock confesses that most “important for me is the question, where does the truth lie”? (322). Her own truth may lie in forgiving her mother for deserting her. She also had to pardon herself for hating the woman who gave her life. Indeed she owed a lot to Eloise, who “showed Sharon what not to be: a self-destructive victim” (377). Once she worked through these “truths,” Pollock was able to visualize women as strong, self-sufficient characters like those revealed in her opus, Blood Relations.

Pollock is a playwright, a director and an actor. She is also a loving mother and friend. But first and foremost Pollock is a courageous storyteller whose worth is seriously underrated in her own country. While Grace has maintained her objectivity as an academic pointing out that “[Pollock] can be overbearing and intimidating,” she also appreciates that “she can be painfully shy and insecure […] and at times awkward, anxious and vulnerable” (380). Grace has expressed Pollock’s life story in “as interesting a way as possible.” She has accurately captured the essence of Pollock “in the round”: an achievement for which we should all be grateful.

Note
1 “To see Sharon in the round however, is to look beyond the playwright to the actor, director, artistic director, mentor, and friend to many” (Grace 380).

Works Cited

Jennette White was Director of Education and The Young Company at Neptune Theatre from 1987–2005. An actor and director, White has also written nine plays for children and youth, which have toured extensively throughout Nova Scotia. White is currently attending Dalhousie University with the goal of pursuing graduate studies.