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CANADA

Abstract: While English Canada prides itself on its young and racially diverse society, its theatre audience remains firmly old and predominately white. Drawing on my experience as a national theatre critic for over a decade and focusing on Toronto, I first paint a picture of a stage culture in English Canada that's divided along age and racial demographics and predict dire consequences for the very survival of theatre without some far-reaching attempts at new audience development and diversification. I will then argue that international festivals do in fact share the same old and white audiences but manage a slightly better job of reaching out to wider demographics. Can festivals point to a better future of audience development in Canada? I'm afraid the answer is not as clear cut as all that. Please note that by constantly referring to English Canada in the text of this paper, I'm acknowledging that the picture may be different in Quebec and other parts of French Canada – parts of the country that I'm not qualified to address.

I

We – the general public, the theatre audience, the bourgeois cultural commentators – like to think of Canada as a *young* society with some of the best, most-cohesive examples of *multicultural* living arrangements in the world. Our people are young, racially and economically diverse and, relative to the United States and parts of Europe, coexist peacefully. Our young and diverse population has done well for our economy, even in the midst of the most turbulent and financial crisis the world has seen since the Great Depression. Canada is touted by economists and business journalists as the best performing country of all G7 nations.

But what gives English Canada pride of place among nations also puts it on the wall of shame when it comes to developing new audiences for its vibrant but struggling theatre culture in general. I'm not being overdramatic in predicting dire consequences for theatre in English Canada *unless* issues of audience demographics and development are analyzed and addressed in the coming few years. The crisis (and I do believe it is a crisis) affects the day-to-day life of theatres big and small as well as international theatre festivals: among them, The World Stage

Festival, now well into its second decade in Toronto, and Luminato, which is about to enter its third year as a Toronto-based celebration of performing arts from around the globe. I will focus on World Stage in this paper.

Some context about Canada and its English theatre, I believe, is in order. Canada's face is changing: it's getting darker in complexion, free from wrinkles and its mouth speaks many other tongues than French and English. Yet its theatre audiences, by and large, remains white, old and monolingual – and in real danger of extinction.

Let me illustrate the point. As some of you may already know I worked as a professional theatre critic in Toronto, the cultural capital of English Canada, for ten years. I remember the exact night I knew English-Canadian theatre was taking its last gasp. The time: November 2007, just weeks after I made up my mind to leave the daily grind of journalism and move to the academy. The place: the Young Centre for the Performing Arts, an architecturally cutting-edge theatre in a gentrified (read: expensive) part of Toronto. The production: Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*, a story of two dead wives coming back to haunt their easily flummoxed husband.

Death was everywhere. Onstage, the aisles, and especially the lobby which looked more like the setting for an organized activity at a seniors' home than the inner sanctum of a flagship theatre. The competing wafts of perfumes, hair gels and Bengay couldn't hide the stench of decay. Old people, old plays, old actors.

Old and exclusively white, I must add. I searched for signs of brown or moderately sun-tanned skin. None was found. At 43 and with my swarthy complexion, I was the youngest by at least 20 years and the darkest by almost as many shades. Where did all the different ethnicities that Toronto trumpets as a mark of its world-class, cosmopolitan identity go? I had just seen and heard many of them on the streetcar, a wondering Babel on electric cable. Perhaps they got off at the wrong stop? Or maybe they know better than to show up to a party to which they have not been invited or welcomed. How can we expect theatre to survive if its main audience is literally dying off and the other half of the Canadian population seems unaware of its existence? Why did we in English Canada let our theatre settle into old age and allowed it to be marked along racial lines. When did our theatre become the Old South?

You're probably thinking that by choosing a Noel Coward play by a blue-chip classical company just weeks before Christmas, I've manipulated evidence to stack the odds against theatre in Canada. I'm not above such manipulation, but that one November night is, in my experience, sufficiently representative. Variations of the same scene of white and old audiences play in my head at almost every mainstream theatre I've attended in Canada, from Vancouver to Montreal (sorry but I've never ventured farther east than that) since 1997. It's become one of my standard jokes whenever I had to meet up with a theatre professional for the first time at a performance to say I'll be the brown-skinned guy in the lobby. It never fails – particularly in such classical theatre festivals as Shaw or Stratford where a combination of overpriced tickets and old repertoire has created a funereal atmosphere where only the rich and old can afford to go.

II

For the moment, theatre in English Canada can still coast on the Last Great Generation—the middle-class early baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1959) who show up night after night out of national pride, loyalty, curiosity, or just habit. But what happens next? Can we expect Canadian theatre to survive when its major patrons are dying off and the other half of the population is disconnected from the art form as we practice it? Obama may have made the words “Yes, we can” his mantra. Mine is “No, we can't.” Nor should we be surprised, since the issue of audience development cannot be divorced from the overall theatrical culture in English Canada. What I'm about to say is broad in strokes and there are always exceptions, but, I strongly believe, reflects the situation accurately.

For decades now Canadian theatre has been a private party. I'd say exclusive party, but that has racial overtones that, even for a pessimist like myself, would be an exaggeration. Few of our playwrights bother to write for an audience, and fewer artistic directors program with one in mind. The audience is an elusive entity, not just in a postmodern, playful sense of the word. What matters to most playwrights and artistic directors is the next grant application and whatever buzzwords jurors and corporate sponsors are looking for: hybridity, experimental, multimedia, and, ironically enough, multicultural.

Ten years as a theatre critic in Canada taught me that differences between Canadian and American theatre are not about size or money but attitude: Americans write to be heard and to

talk to fellow Americans; Canadians write to impress jurors and each other. We in Canada race to win the hearts and minds of like-minded peers. Strangers can wait. It's not a phenomenon that's exclusive to theatre. Traces of the same mentality can be found in our films, television and radio dramas. It's an attitude that can be explained – and usually justified by – our need to distinguish ourselves and our cultural products from the behemoth we call the United States of America. As if any attempt to engage an audience is a commercial and sentimental strategy that's best left for Hollywood and American popular culture.

This is where international theatre festivals can perhaps make a difference as they take the American comparison out of the picture, even if temporarily.

Canada loves festivals, in part because the nature of arts financing on governmental level tends to give preference to large enterprises like international festivals that promise to “put Canada on the world's map.” It's a sign – and some say a curse – of cultural insecurity in a country whose identity is still being (re)defined by the influx of immigrants it accepts every year (240,000 annually on average). While every major city in Canada has performing-arts festival of different sizes and international components, Toronto hosts the country's oldest and most critically watched.

The World Stage is hosted and organized by Harbourfront Centre, a 30-year-old arts complex overlooking Lake Ontario (hence its name). As a publicly funded organization (public trust), Harbourfront Centre has to adhere to strict guidelines in order to receive its operating and programming grants. One of these guidelines is racial and cultural diversity – in its employees, audiences and programming. The following statement greets visitors to its web site's Who We Are page: *“Diversity has always been at the heart of Harbourfront Centre. In the lakeside places and spaces it encompasses. In the multitude of cultures and backgrounds it celebrates. In the eclectic programming, engagement and entertainment it provides. And in the broad range of people it attracts.”*

It also hosts a number of ethnic festivals throughout the year where the focus is not exclusively on theatrical performance. See <http://www.harbourfrontcentre.com/worldroutes/index.cfm>.

The World Stage Festival is also another way of achieving the diversity mandate – at least partially. Looking at the accumulative programming of the festival over several years, there's an

abundance of European/Western (German, French, British, Australian, Danish, American, Polish) touring productions, many of which reinterpreting classics by -- as the still-relevant battle cry of the academic left used to call it -- dead, white males. In its early years (1990s to 2003) the festival was largely programmed by Don Shipley, a Canadian with ancestral and cultural connections to Ireland and, by extension, Europe. Still, the diversity mandate has forced Shipley and fellow programmers to look for theatrical representations from other cultures – cultures that already have a significant diasporic population in Toronto. This includes, for example, India, Mexico, the Arab world in general, China, Korean, Vietnam, etc.

But if you're thinking that a South Asian production largely attracts a South Asian audience, you'd be wrong. While the ratio of audience members who may identify as Indian, Pakistani or Sri Lankan is larger in productions from the subcontinent, the majority of festival goers are the same old white crowd. But I see hope and potential for audience diversification in that larger-than-usual (but relatively still small) portion of the audience from South Asia. That hope does not only hinge on race as indicator of diversity but age as well, since that community is relatively new to Canada and – in large demographic terms – younger.

Younger audiences can also be seen at World Stage in larger numbers. Why? Because, at least in recent years, there has been a shift in the programming sensibility. A younger woman, Tina Rasmussen, has been appointed as artistic director in 2005, and her choices emphasize a link between theatre and performance and visual art. Rasmussen actively cultivated relationships with Toronto's alternative art scene, which, by definition, is made up of younger artists, performers and audiences. Partly out of a need to change the culture of World Stage and partly out of budget constraints, Rasmussen decided to focus on performance art, and productions that straddle the low-budget of a Fringe festival with the high-brow approbation of international theatre festivals – all while also keeping ethnic diversity in mind. One of the highlights of the 2009 season was a performance by Lebanese artist Rabih Mroue: *Please Make Me Stop Smoking: A Presentation of Ideas Under Study*. At the performance I caught, I was struck by the largely young Arab audience in the theatre – an audience I hadn't seen before and, to be perfectly honest, haven't seen since.

Festivals therefore have a pattern of attracting a non-white and a younger audience that, in my opinion, is essential to maintaining theatre as a vital and relevant art form in English Canada.

But there's a catch. A big catch.

The "trickle-down" effect of a more diverse festival is still too small to measure effectively, particularly in terms of ethnic audience development. The thinking, forwarded by World Stage PR and advocates of multicultural festivals, goes something like this: If ethnic audiences go to festival and touring productions from their own home culture, then they'll be curious enough about the mainstream theatre culture to buy tickets or simply show up in larger numbers. Not so fast.

Speaking from my experience as a critic and as someone from an ethnic community myself (Arab), I have never seen any evidence of this trickle-down theory. My experience is that ethnic communities simply wait for the next show about their culture. Canadian theatres shouldn't count on post-festival ethnic marketing to boost their subscription base. There is also hardly any cross-cultural trafficking between audiences. A Chinese audience would rarely go and see a black play and vice versa. In fact, ethnic marketing tends to segregate and fragment audiences further. Because it's not based on a repeat-business model, ethnic marketing in theatre can exhaust its target -- not the best strategy for long-running shows but perfect for limited-run festivals.

So do festivals help draw new audiences to their programs? The answer has to be yes. Do these audiences in turn trickle down to theatres in Toronto, ushering in the beginning of a much-needed new and diverse audience? I wish I could say so. It'll be great for me speaking in the context of an international symposium to confirm the status of Audience Generator on theatre festivals. They are certainly a step in the right direction – but just that, a step. If theatre is to survive in English Canada, it'll need institutions and artistic directors who won't settle for anything less than giant leaps.

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