

Authenticity and Legitimacy in Minority Theatre

Authenticity and Legitimacy
in Minority Theatre:
Constructing Identity

Edited by

Madelena Gonzalez and Patrice Brasseur

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN MINORITY THEATRE

Contemporary theatre is one of the best ways for ethno-cultural minorities to express themselves, whether they be of indigenous origin or immigrants. It is often used to denounce social injustice and discrimination and, more generally, it helps to air questions debated in the wider community. It may also express itself thanks to the staging of collective memory, for it constitutes a privileged space for the exploration of the trauma of the past (colonial, for example), as well as providing a means of effecting the reconfiguration of a new identity, or of articulating an uneasiness about that identity.

Should minority theatre increase its visibility in relation to the mainstream, or, on the contrary, remain on the margins and assert its specificity? This question is at the centre of French-Canadian experience, for example, but also applies to other postcolonial societies, in Europe and elsewhere. In order to maintain its cultural authenticity, should this type of theatre distinguish itself from a multiculturalism that runs the risk of political and social recuperation? If it is unable to resist the model proposed by globalization and widespread cultural dissemination, will it lose its legitimacy? Can, and should there be, a form of popular art at the service of the community?

The term “minority” raises questions that will be examined by the articles collected in this volume. What is the definition of a minority? Does this term refer to experimental and avant-garde art forms as well as to ethno-cultural drama? Contemporary theatre is characterized by an aesthetics of hybridity—in what measure is this the case for theatre outside the mainstream? The exploration of this kind of theatre necessitates an examination of the very concept of theatre per se. Since the development of the electronic media as the privileged vector of culture, has not the theatrical genre itself become a minority art form? These are some of the pressing questions that this volume will try to address, thanks to a cross-

cultural, multidisciplinary approach that aims to reveal the rich diversity of the field under study.

I

The theatre constitutes a privileged arena for the airing of social problems and concerns within the community, enabling ethnic and cultural minorities to construct visible responses to their marginalization. However, a clear definition of minority community theatre is difficult to find. For Hélène Alfaro, who examines the first experiments in this type of theatre that took place in the strongly sectarian climate of Belfast in the 80s, it is a democratic art form, based on people's personal experience. Thus its main focus is non-institutional, which means that it chooses to work close to the grass roots of the community, setting up a collective creative process, distinct from any commercial designs and involving collaboration between both professionals and amateurs.

With radical influences such as Paolo Freire and Augusto Boal, and an emancipatory and participatory agenda, community theatre was at first confined mostly to Catholic areas and considered subversive by Unionists. However, the Anglo-Irish agreement of 1985 tried to emphasise the specific identity, rights and culture of the two communities, fostering an interest in both single-identity work and cross community projects, using the "contact hypothesis", or the premise that the collective experience of theatre tends to bring people together rather than exacerbate tension (as do sporting events), and that it can thus provide a way of coming to terms with ethnic stereotypes and unfamiliar cultural traditions.

From its foundation in 1990, the Community Relations Council went out of its way to support minority community theatre and the 1994 cease-fire meant that more funding became available. A good example of a successful intercommunity project was the experience of *The Mourning Ring* in 1994 which saw the inhabitants of the Protestant Ballybeen area working together with a Catholic director. Martin Lynch's *The Wedding Community Play* was another collaborative project, dealing with the issue of mixed marriages. The play was performed during the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreements and, according to its director, constituted a whole peace process in itself. Thus, for Alfaro, 1999 was the year that marked the high point of community theatre's success and popularity. More recently, however, in a very changed political climate, the CRC has been increasingly focusing on the need to break away from the traditional binary reading of Northern Irish society in order to facilitate the expression of more fluid and plural identities.

The question of the plurality of identity is at the heart of Acadian theatre, as Cecilia Camoin illustrates in her discussion of French-speaking drama in Louisiana. The “Nous autres” (“We Others”) troupe founded in 1977 after a long period of Anglophone domination, is a collective community project, promoting a regional variant of the French language. Providing a bridge between the written and the oral part of the great tradition of Louisiana, one of its aims is to reproduce exactly the idiom of French-Acadian speech. During its tours around French-speaking towns and villages, it organizes round-table discussions between spectators, actors and dramatists on the subject of minority identity. Theatre becomes a cultural instrument, at the frontier between different genres, but also has a political agenda, involving the spectator in a form of catharsis, thanks to the reactivation of the community’s collective identity crisis that is depicted through the use of stock characters portraying the victims and perpetrators of assimilation. The polyphonic experience of Cajun drama is thus a means of reinventing and re-asserting the identity of a hitherto invisible community and contributing to an Acadian renaissance. It provides a symbolic platform from which to denounce the politics of assimilation, but also constitutes a site of social reconciliation for both communities, organized around a linguistic manifesto.

Elena Barthouil examines another popular, oral, amateur form of community entertainment in her study of Yiddish theatre from its early beginnings in Roumania to its transformation into a literary form, thanks to such central figures as Avram Goldfaden, the father of Jewish theatre, and its subsequent exportation to the United States. Its hybrid theatrical form originally blended together words, dance and music in a revue-type format, to which Goldfaden, later dubbed “the Yiddish Shakespeare”, wished to add a more serious, didactic and literary purpose. The persecution of the Jewish community in Russia and central Europe at the end of the 19th century, meant that Goldfaden and others transported Yiddish theatre to New York. After the Shoah, only Eastern European countries founded institutional Yiddish theatre companies under state control, while the new state of Israel integrated Yiddish theatre into Hebrew culture.

Due to the more or less continuous exodus of Jews to the States from the late 19th century onwards, theatre became known as the most dynamic aspect of Yiddish art in America. If Yiddish is little spoken these days, it lives on thanks to Jewish theatre, not only across the Atlantic, but also in Roumania where the National Jewish State Theatre is still active today and indeed gained international renown after its powerful production of the Holocaust drama, *An Die Musik*, at the Avignon Theatre festival in 2000.

Such international and institutional success is rare in community theatre, which tends to be a provisional art form, linked to specific social conditions in a specific time and place. Stéphanie Clerc adopts a linguistic approach to theatre produced by ethno-cultural minorities in the south of France and shows how it can propose alternative constructions of group identity. She chooses to concentrate on the work of Mouloud Bélaïdi and three of his plays written between 2000 and 2004, in order to examine how minority theatre exists on the margins of the dominant social norm. Bélaïdi tries to speak up for those who are deprived of a voice in contemporary French society and encourages spectators to review their socially-constructed perceptions of difference by staging the deviations from the linguistic norm that are characteristic of the everyday language of the minority communities whose lives he depicts, whether they be gypsies or North African immigrants. These deviations take the form of borrowings and imaginative coinages, influenced by the mother tongue as well as by regional dialects. Such linguistic heterogeneity on the stage is a way of fostering a new perception of hybridity, of integrating plural identities and refusing the norms of standard language and culture and the role they may play in oppressing people.

This approach to theatre raises important questions about the function of contemporary dramatic art in a society undergoing social and economic crisis. It is a platform from which to observe society, as well as a tool for raising consciousness that links together different cultures and sheds light on the difficulties of intercultural exchange, enabling minorities to be rehabilitated, thanks to the way they are represented on stage. In asking why this type of theatre is considered to be outside the mainstream, when, in fact, it speaks for the ordinary people who make up the rich cultural fabric of France, Clerc invites us to question the very label of “minority theatre”.

II

The issue of labelling and the question of the visibility of the minority is at the heart of the tension inherent in the cultural traffic between underground art and mainstream culture and the legitimization of the former, thanks to its recuperation by the latter, a process that is not without its dangers, as Magali Dumousseau illustrates in her study of New Wave art in post-Franco Spain. During the 80s the city of Madrid literally became a stage, hosting the socio-cultural phenomenon known as the *Movida*, a compulsive and unconventional aesthetics of self-staging in a social scene undergoing reconstruction after the end of dictatorship. The

transition from the underground to the mainstream manifested itself in an obsessive theatricalization of daily life that was an answer to a long-standing identity crisis, in a desire to publicly represent all the hidden forms of creative existence that had been denied by the censorship that had lasted until 1977 and forbidden all spontaneous public gatherings.

The Malasana area in the centre of the capital rapidly became a carnivalesque stage space, given by the municipality to *New Wave* artists who proceeded to use it as an arena for public experiments in unconventional artistic creation. The *Movida* became one large disorganized spectacle, improvised by amateur performers making their daily lives into works of art, and staging their own bodies. The *Movida* artists tended to express themselves in non-institutionalized forms of culture such as fashion, the decorative arts, songs, and to avoid classical theatrical genres. It is interesting to note that in 1985, the first real play about the *Movida*, “The Decadence and Death of Madrid”, written by Jorge Berlanga, a former underground artist, announced the official death of the movement, as if any form of institutionalization of its art necessarily compromised its authenticity.

Xavier Lemoine’s discussion of radical theatre in New York would seem to confirm that minority art has an important role to play in questioning the legitimacy of the mainstream and its fixed identities. Indeed, he suggests that by moving to the margins, the performing arts are able to explore critically a society characterized by the increasing importance of technology and make possible a universal, if not to say total, artistic ambition, such as that which is at the heart of the multimedia performances of the New York-based troupe, The Big Art Group. In the case of their *Cinema Fury: The Imitation*, a production that combines theatre, dance, music, cinema, video and song, the Big Art Group’s “total” art is decentred by the performance of the minority as a collection of fragmented identities and cybernetic intensities, created by technological experiments and personal imagery. Its exploration of different genres and genders, including queer sexuality, fragments the hegemonic subject and proposes a polyphonic vision of identity.

The troupe seeks to give an account of the way images proliferate in contemporary American culture and to situate itself at the margins of the society of hypercommunication, in order to avoid the fabricated consensus of an all-encompassing, image-obsessed postmodernism. In fact it contests the system from within by showing how images are manufactured and by pointing to the artificial nature of mediated reality. However, as Lemoine points out, there are some limits to its effectiveness. By choosing to adopt a stance that is resolutely “post-identity”, its message risks dissolving into a

phantasmagorical lack of differentiation, divorced from the very real social and political problems that continue to oppress the subject. One can only hope that the sound and the fury of Big Art Group's performances may offer sufficient resistance to the incessant recuperation by postmodern society of minorities and all that lies outside the mainstream.

The emergence of a national Scottish theatre also needs to be put into the context of the margins versus the periphery and dominant versus minority culture. Jean-Pierre Simard explains how, for many years, the press and the media tended to give priority to London-based theatre, for obvious financial and structural reasons. Authors from all nations of the British Isles trying to produce a dynamic social and political theatre, were lumped together under the heading "English", illustrating the phenomenon of cultural centralization and overshadowing Scottish specificity. Scottish theatre has only been able to free itself very gradually from its minority status within British culture, affirming its difference by drawing on its own history and local traditions and giving central importance to the audience as the source of social and cultural memory, thanks to the dedication of itinerant theatre companies touring the Highlands, as well as underprivileged urban zones.

The resurgence of Scottish theatre has been accompanied by an aesthetic renewal, integrating cabaret and the social-club type formats of popular indigenous culture as well as different Scottish dialects, whether they be Highland Gaelic or urban Scots. The exportation of specifically Scottish culture, via successful plays such as *Trainspotting*, has been accompanied by the seemingly paradoxical creation of the National Theatre of Scotland with administrative and political freedom from London, but tending to reproduce the dominant attitudes that are so prejudicial to secondary minorities, such as immigrants or homosexuals, the only exception being the space accorded to women, almost unique in international theatre.

Simard takes the example of Christopher Deans to be doubly representative of minority status, thanks to his ethnic origin, but also to his homosexuality. Gay status is a recurrent preoccupation in contemporary Scottish theatre, projected onto a background of social concerns, as, for example, in his play *The Sauna Lads*. Other plays, such as the recent *Free Fall*, are more politically interventionist and alive to the social problems of ordinary people, seen within the context of the Scottish family, for example.

If Scottish theatre can henceforth affirm its identity with impunity, the work of Deans reminds us how important it is for it to conserve its originality, as it moves gradually from militant minority theatre to

showcase for an officially recognized national culture, integrated within the repertory of the National Theatre of Scotland. There is a danger that such institutionalization may normalize and reify the work of local artists such as Deans, which is why Simard feels that it is important to encourage cross-fertilization between institutionalized and marginal art so that the latter may benefit from the financial possibilities and opportunities this brings, while the former will find itself culturally enriched by the creative input of minorities. Young people, the gay community and the urban poor, all of whom are still confined to the periphery, should be allowed the opportunity to come together in a collective creative experience, he argues.

The claims of the periphery are the focus for Eleanor Stewart's analysis of Suffragette theatre, founded on a politics of accessibility and the principle of collective organization that underline its egalitarian ideology. In the commercial, male-dominated theatrical climate of the beginning of the 20th century, the Suffragette movement sparked off a new spate of playwriting and staging in an attempt to gain wider visibility and question the patriarchal centre from the militant feminist margins. Born out of a desire for emancipation, this type of theatre was either implicitly or explicitly propagandist after the foundation of the The Actresses' Franchise League in 1908. In order to further the cause, the new members, who included such figures as Ellen Terry and Cicely Hamilton, started producing plays based on monologues, sketches, tableaux, allegories and historical cavalcades, written and directed by women, and aimed at a female public. Their objective was undeniably ideological, denouncing gender inequality and redefining female identity.

Hamilton's *A Pageant of Great Women* was a militant play which eschewed avant-gardism for historical, popular and medieval references in order to gain wide appeal, while at the same time subverting these references for political reasons, thus moving back and forth between the centre and the margins. Above all, the aim was to combat a phallogentric vision of history and give women a real role to play, as well as to change society's perception of women and their sexuality. Though an alternative form of drama, its agenda was maximum visibility and a democratization of the theatrical process, bringing the theatre nearer to the community in order to foster interaction between playwrights, actors and spectators, and thus create the empathy necessary for activism. Both didactic and entertaining, *Pageant* turns the minority-majority dialectic on its head, for, by giving voice and visibility to Suffragette claims, it throws into question patriarchal discourse. For Stewart, this constitutes the victory of women coming in from the sidelines of history to take centre stage, an apt metaphor to illustrate their journey from obscurity to the limelight.

III

Such strong ideological commitment is often a central component of minority theatre, especially in situations in which it can be used as a tool for combating oppression or expressing repressed identities. A good example of the militant possibilities of theatre can be found in the plays put on once a year by the inmates of the Volterra prison in Tuscany. Since 1989, actor-director, Armando Punzo, has staged freely adapted versions of classical and modern texts, from Shakespeare to Brecht and Genet. According to Edoardo Esposito, his aim is not so much to try and humanize the prison system, as to involve prisoners, artistically and existentially, in an ongoing experiment in dramatic activity. Inspired by similar projects elsewhere, such as that in the San Quentin prison in the United States, which works towards the reintegration of prisoners into civil society, Punzo's theatre tries to be therapeutic. He hopes to heal the ills of incarceration by staging different and varied forms of marginalization and oppression, such as the story of a disciplinary prison for marines to be found in K.H. Brown's *The Brig*, and thus to create dramatic distance from trauma. His idea is to make available a space for artistic and imaginary freedom within an oppressive environment, both by referring to the confinement that compromises the humanity of the prisoners, separated, as they are, from the public by a high wire fence, and trying to move beyond it, thanks to daring and original staging which transfigures an unpleasant reality.

In Punzo's eyes, the exclusion of which the prisoners, most of whom hail from the under-privileged south of Italy, are victims, is representative of other forms of exclusion and the oppression of minorities everywhere. His theatre of provocation aims to disturb the spectator with its grotesque and obscene elements, as well as its use of non-standard language, in order to denounce the dehumanization and the injustice visited on minorities of all kinds. For Esposito, the challenge of creating a theatre company in an environment that represents the negation of freedom per se, and thus necessarily compromises artistic freedom, constitutes an important aesthetic and moral step. Thanks to the liberating potentialities inherent in the theatrical experience, it substitutes expression for repression and contributes to emancipation both within and without the prison walls.

It is precisely theatre's potential for free expression which makes it a useful tool in periods of political oppression. Hélène Finet explains how, during Pinochet's dictatorship, theatrical creation was the province of a cultural and political minority (women, workers, the unemployed) who tried to re-open a dialogue with the general public thanks to original

artistic expression which defied official discourse. The work of Raúl Osorio's "Workshop of Theatrical Creation" (*TIT*) was to show the daily life of the shanty towns on the outskirts of Santiago. Inspired by Grotowski's "poor theatre", as well as Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed", the *TIT* tended to favour an impressionistic, rather than a literary approach, and based its performances on interaction between audience and public, aiming to create a certain complicity and thus to reconstitute social ties, as well as to verbalize and exteriorize collective suffering. In its early days, the *TIT* also transgressed cultural and geographical space by transporting its plays to the shanty towns of Santiago, before adopting a more polyclassist approach as the political situation in Chile became easier. When public discontent with the regime increased in the 1980s, Chilean theatre became more openly oppositional, but since the return of democracy, it has tended to focus on memory and the task of re-appropriating and updating past history for the post-dictatorship generation.

Virginie Grandhomme continues the examination of militant forms of theatre, but in a less extreme context. She adopts an ethno-sociological approach to the "Theatre of the Oppressed" and the way it can provide an alternative arena for political activism. Inspired by Boal, the protagonists and devotees of this form of drama share a performative belief in the political efficacy of this particular type of militant theatre in raising the general population's political consciousness. The "TO" is a participative form of drama which is based on the notion of the "theatre forum" and the concept of "spect-actor", allowing the protagonists to express in public the oppressive situations which they experience in daily life.

Originally a political and aesthetic response to dictatorship, Grandhomme shows how it has been exported geographically and socially. While Boal called for revolutionary uprising, French theatre companies have developed an anti-establishment focus, based on empowerment through participation. The NAJE ("We Will Never Abandon Hope") company, based in Nantes, works to order for groups such as unions, political parties and associations who commission them to focus on a particular question in order to restore, symbolically, the identity and personal capabilities of those suffering from oppression. This was the case for the employees of the recently privatized company, France Telecom, who, by witnessing professional actors re-enact the oppressive reality of their situation, were then able to overcome it by intervening directly on stage to change their circumstances and restore a balance between oppressors and oppressed. The idea is that action and reaction in the theatre will give rise to a reaction in real life and thus act as instruments of political socialization. However, Grandhomme wonders whether the "TO"

provides merely a temporary transgressive space or whether it can serve as an efficient relay for encouraging individuals to get involved in larger political organizations that may be a force for change.

Aimé Césaire's first play also deals with the necessity for change through art. It is situated between political revolt and poetical rebellion and uses drama to explore colonized identity. Published in 1946, the tragedy, *And the Dogs were Silent*, raises the question of minorities on two fronts, first of all because of its colonial theme and, secondly, because of its form, since it was a theatrical text inserted into a book of poems. The central question addressed by Hélène Laplace-Claverie is whether theatre can be both aesthetically and politically committed at the same time. Césaire's answer is a resounding yes, but his work seems doubly marginal in relation to both the classical tradition of literary theatre and militant theatre with a political message. It is true that Césaire uses the theatre as a political platform and the theatrical text as a means of protest, but at the same time, the omnipresence of poetic language tends to override the theatrical aspect, creating an ambiguity of genre and a hybrid text which harks back to classical Western tragedy, but also plays down theatricality. Both tale and pamphlet, the play's stylistic ambiguity is also a cultural one.

Although he relied on the cultural heritage of the West and, above all, on a specific French model of high culture, thanks to the oral medium of theatre, he also hoped to reach a wider audience of those who had no access to print or who were simply illiterate. Césaire's play mixes high and low registers and juxtaposes different forms of expression, as if he were trying to create a new language, made up of a multitude of contradictory voices, in order to reinforce the audience's consciousness of what being part of a minority means. For Laplace-Claverie, Césaire is a postcolonial poet who speaks in a language that tries to be both unique and universal at the same time and is condemned to oscillate between different voices, continents, civilizations and identities because of the unavoidable inheritance of colonial oppression.

Using a similar dynamic of militant cultural re-appropriation, the Italian playwright, Marco Martinelli, turns on its head the traditional hierarchy of established theatre and minority theatre by showing how a Western theatrical tradition like the *Commedia dell'arte* can be used as means of self-expression for minorities, such as the Senegalese community, who have recently emigrated to Italy. Martinelli's theatre possesses a new and explosive power which critics have diversely labelled as "the theatre of difference", "the theatre of the body", or "popular exploratory theatre". However, the most recurrent definition is that of "polittttttical theatre"

with seven t's, each standing for a different interpretation of the word political. Paola Ranzini explains how the question of the minority or subculture in relation to the dominant culture is treated both politically and poetically through the interaction between a group of Italian actors from the Romagna region and a group of Senegalese immigrants.

By refusing to situate itself within the dominant culture that seeks to homogenize difference, this type of experiment implies a questioning of the very notion of the minority. The eight plays in the "Romagna Africa" cycle mix the classic with the contemporary and the multicultural. By doing so, they destroy the idea of tradition as an exclusive reference for identity and reinvent a theatre based on the expression of a community through a double cultural perspective, united by a unique theatrical experience. The most important symbol of this new perspective is the black harlequin figure of *Moor Harlequin's 22 Misfortunes* who plays out the daily pitfalls attendant on immigrant existence.

Another example of reverse cultural appropriation is *Ubu buur*. By accentuating the carnivalesque aspects of Jarry's *Ubu* and its popular and subversive qualities and adapting them to an African context of incessant political power struggles, the double perspective of a dominant culture and an inferior one is replaced by the minority's assimilation of the majority. The confrontation between two languages, Wolof and the Romagna dialect, and between two cultures, Senegalese and Italian, creates a vibrant communal experience which, according to Ranzini, helps to make Africa the metaphor for a new theatrical beginning, moving the periphery to the centre and obliging us to rethink the concept of the minority.

IV

The constant rethinking of the status of the minority is a daily necessity in the Canadian context, where the problematic reality of bilingualism raises important questions as to legitimacy. For Louise Ladouceur, theatre constitutes a privileged space for cultural resistance and affirmation because it can give a public voice to languages that are threatened with extinction. Within Canada, Quebec occupies a dominant position in relation to other Francophone communities and it is the literary and theatrical institutions of this part of the country that possess the greatest power of legitimization, thanks to their control over the circulation of French-Canadian literature in the national and international marketplace. However, outside Quebec, there exists a Francophone theatre that relies on an audacious linguistic aesthetic whose originality stems from its specific context of production. One of its particularities is its

heterolingualism, due to its origin in cultures where Francophones are in a minority and have to be bilingual, since nearly all aspects of public life take place exclusively in English. The type of French spoken is different depending on the community from which it stems, although there has been some crossing over in the adoption of a vernacular language in order to establish a specifically Franco-Ontarian, Franco-Manitoban and Franco-Albertan repertory. According to Ladouceur, the use of a popular French vernacular allows minorities to reaffirm their specificity in relation to both English and the Quebec French norm.

As one travels further and further westwards from Quebec, the vernacular becomes more and more permeable to English and expresses the different regional variants that are specific to each language community, as the plays that go to make up the French-speaking repertory show. In Ontario, for instance, Jean Marc Dalpé only uses minimal heterolingualism and thus his work remains accessible to a wide audience as far as Montreal. However, moving further west, the plays of Roger Auger, Marc Prescott and Kenneth Brown use the alternating codes of French and English in such a pronounced manner that they are difficult to understand for an audience that is not bilingual. This relegates them to the periphery of Canadian theatre space, far from the important commercial and intellectual centres of Montreal and Toronto. Thus, linguistically hybrid plays are caught in a vicious circle and suffer from discrimination on the market of cultural exchange.

The linguistic problem is further compounded by a component of ideological opposition since bilingualism is viewed as a very real threat to the survival of the French language in Canada. If the use of English is any more than minimal in a play and has a central diegetic role, the text will be seen by the Quebecois as a dangerous symbol of assimilation. Ladouceur explains how, in actual fact, for the authors concerned, their bilingualism is a way of asserting their identity in an English-dominated context, indeed the only viable way of remaining Francophone, for refusing bilingualism would mean giving up French altogether and letting English take over. If Ladouceur is to be believed, there is perhaps a glimmer of hope, however, for bilingualism is acquiring a new value thanks to globalization, as it testifies to a capacity to operate in both languages, giving access to the global market where English is the *lingua franca*. Thus, instead of a symbol of destruction of linguistic purity, it can be seen as a way of legitimizing bilingual identity.

In common with Ladouceur and other authors in this volume, Sandrine Hallion Bres sees theatre as the ideal artistic medium for enabling minorities to express themselves, for a text which is said aloud in

public contains a potential weight and force that can contribute to the affirmation of identity. When this takes place in a Canadian context, in front of a culturally oppressive and numerically superior minority, consisting of the French speakers of Quebec, it makes of the playwright a politically committed artist, according to Hallion Bres. The work of the Franco-Manitoban playwright, Marc Prescott, is a good example of the bastardization of the French language when it comes into contact with English, reflecting the condition of North-American Francophones living between two languages. French-speaking writers like Prescott possess a highly developed linguistic consciousness in a context in which the way things are said is as important as what is said.

Hallion Bres explains how in the Quebec of the 60s, language was a way of laying claim to and legitimizing a specific identity. Today, the choice of language is still a socio-political gesture, obliging the writer to explain and justify his linguistic choices. The linguistic hybridity displayed in the works of Prescott may be shocking to the cultured elite and the guardians of the linguistic norm, but may also exert over an audience a picturesque and exotic fascination. On the one hand, Prescott has been the subject of harsh criticism for the obscenity of his language and his bastardization of standard French; on the other, he has been fêted, awarded prizes and obtained commissions to produce the kind of "minority" theatre he started writing ten years ago. His plays are anchored in the specific social and geographical context of Manitoba with, on one side, the legitimate and dominant Anglophone majority and, on the other, the stigmatized and dominated Francophone minority, but they also deal with the wider problem of conflicted identity. The linguistic mixing which is his hallmark is a way of coming to terms with a fragmented identity through the expression of that identity on stage.

However, as Hallion Bres points out, for Prescott, linguistic hybridity is revealing itself to be an obstacle to the wider diffusion of his work since it has not yet gained crossover status. As is the case with Belgian varieties of French, Prescott's vernacular lacks collective legitimacy, for linguistic centralism is still the norm and encourages Francophone authors to distance themselves from a composite form of language, perceived as too marginal to be universal. Prescott's most recent play, *Encore*, is written in more standard French and foregoes too many local references in the hope of reaching a wider audience. Despite its potential for creative freedom, Hallion Bres points out that a hybrid language can dangerously narrow the commercial scope of a writer who is part of a linguistic minority.

The case of Marco Micone seems both to confirm and to contest this statement, as Paola Puccini suggests. Marco Micone is a bilingual author,

writing in Italian and French who dramatizes his childhood as an emigrant to Canada. His plays, originally composed in French, were adapted into Italian by the author himself and then translated back into French. The subject of his work is language and its relation to migratory experience. Paola Puccini examines how the author, thanks to self-translation, is able to recuperate the language of his origins in the present in order to rethink his identity as an immigrant and to find correspondences between past and present, the “there” of “before” and the “here” of “now”.

The rewriting of his plays over the last twenty years, moving between one language and another, constitutes part of a search for identity from a constantly evolving linguistic position. Micone’s work is a means of speaking up on behalf of others like him, immigrants who have no voice, but also a fertile terrain for working on language itself. In fact, his writing follows a three-fold movement, travelling from appropriation and mastery of the host language of the majority from his minority position, via a nostalgic return to the cultural roots of his homeland, before finally embarking on the search for a new language to express the double, conflicted identity which lies between two cultures and languages. Thus his work is a hybrid, constituted of different versions and translations of the same plays, as he tries to create links between the multiple places and spaces of immigrant identity when they collide with the host culture. According to Puccini, it is the staging of this struggle for identity in the context of Francophone Quebec that makes Micone’s theatre a space for the crisscrossing currents of multiple belonging, holding in tension conflicting identities, rather than integrating them into a non-problematic whole.

Iga Wygnańska examines another example of linguistic and cultural in-betweenness and the problems of translation that its exportation abroad entails. Deeply rooted in the ethno-cultural context of Quebec from the end of the 60s onwards, Michel Tremblay’s work can be seen as the assertion and the recognition of the autonomous culture and identity of a Francophone minority, thanks mostly to his use of the crude, popular *joual* dialect that reflects a harsh, but touching reality, common to both the working-class and the elite. However, when his plays are adapted for a foreign audience, the difficulty is to find a corresponding minority idiom: any translation into a foreign language necessitates the making explicit of unfamiliar cultural elements, such as the religious swear words, so common in Quebec French.

Wygnańska concentrates on three of Tremblay’s plays which have either been translated or adapted for foreign audiences, in order to illustrate some of the pitfalls of cultural translation and the difficulty of

representing otherness faithfully, while at the same time, making it acceptable and understandable for the target audience, whether it be in the form of a Polish translation or of a French or Belgian adaptation. As language is the main vehicle for the assertion of this minority identity, the biggest difficulty is finding the most appropriate linguistic solution in the target language. The best way to maintain the specificity and individuality of Tremblay's language seems to be through lexical interaction and exchange between standard French and Quebec dialect in the case of the French adaptations and, more generally, for both adaptations and translations, through the explanation of unfamiliar cultural elements, and, lastly, the use of vulgarisms and clumsy colloquialisms in order to remain true to the plays' distinctive oral character. According to Wygnańska, only the scrupulous respect of such linguistic differences and specificities can provide a reliable guarantee of a successful cultural transfer.

V

The question of authenticity in cultural transfers is at the heart of indigenous forms of minority theatre that seek to reassert lost identities. Roger Parent provides a framework for an analysis of the way native cultures circulate within the paradigm of the majority. Minority theatre defends those cultures that are invisible, forgotten, reduced to silence, of which the most tragic and extreme example is the fate imposed on Native minorities. Parent's aim is to document the organizational strategies used by these groups in order to confront the question of identity, while remaining outside the conventional culture industry.

Minority theatre generally falls within the province of non-culture, in other words, culture which has no official status or which majority culture tends to ignore, marginalize or control and, if Bourdieusian criteria are applied, the marginal situation of minorities conditions the symbolic value of their culture. In this context, theatre can serve as a special vehicle to enable communities to represent themselves to themselves in their own cultural spheres, but also to act upon the formal sphere of dominant culture in order to enrich the system as a whole. The re-discovery of authenticity through the staging of minority experience may confer a sense of identity on certain cultural products, creating a dramatic narrative that runs parallel to the mainstream. Thus, in Parent's view, it is essential for such artists to use their social and artistic capital in order to develop partnerships with the dominant forms of economic and political capital. Where social organization by the dominant majority is allowed sole control of the access of marginal artists to the conditions necessary for the pursuit of their

professional careers, the culture industry acquiesces by its silence, its elitism and the absence of any infrastructure suitable for the legitimization of forgotten cultures. If this state of affairs is allowed to prevail, minority theatre is in danger of becoming a theatre of the oppressed, Parent feels.

This complex interaction between majority and minority in the cultural arena is the subject of Martin Pšenička's analysis of The Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company (SNTC). Founded in January 1999 in Saskatoon, the SNTC promotes itself as a community development tool, predominantly dedicated to Aboriginal youth and emerging artists. Operating both locally and nationally, the SNTC's mandate is to educate and foster cultural understanding between Native and non-Native communities by means of artistic presentations and stage performances, created, developed and produced exclusively by Canadian Native artists. The theatre's mission is to transmit positive images of Aboriginal cultural identity and life, as well as to enrich the Canadian performing arts scene. Helping Aboriginal youth to discover and appreciate their culture and identity and showing them an alternative path to a better way of living, the SNTC has served as a community centre within which arts have become a key vehicle for healing wounds such as drug addiction, alcoholism, or violence. Collaborating with various Native and non-Native professional artists, mentors, cultural leaders, and Elders, the participants are immersed in and educated about the creative theatrical process, as well as the cultural heritage to which they belong. Each workshop results in a collectively created script and its subsequent staging, dealing with important issues and topics familiar to Native youth, which include universal themes of cultural identity, intergenerational conflict, relationships, or family matters. The pivotal goal of such programmes is to enable Aboriginal artists to gain the skills to be able to perform in the diverse conditions of the theatre industry.

However, Pšenička raises some valid questions regarding the relevance of the generalizing term "minority theatre" in connection with the SNTC's activities. The SNTC is independent and unique, rooted in a particular cultural and linguistic context, comparable to multicultural, Black, or Asian, theatre. However, despite this fact, he argues, Native Americans could be seen as a spiritual majority, the founding peoples whose position is reflected in the term "first people" or First Nations, major knowledge keepers, who are both physically and spiritually connected with the land they once owned. This would make the term "minority theatre" merely a scholarly category that resonates with a lack of power, implying oppression and victimization, whereas Pšenička argues that the SNTC's mandate is to celebrate Native culture and provide the

Native, as well as the wider community, with vibrant entertainment and spiritual energy. Moreover, as he points out, the SNTC is a recognized, award-winning institution, supported by federal and provincial grant agencies. Co-operating with Native communities and public institutions such as universities, the SNTC has attained a unique place within its local and national milieu.

However inclusive it may sound, the SNTC's dedication to its own community, without subordinating its position to the so-called majority, paradoxically underlines and strengthens its non-minor character. A non-Native audience, or, rather, multicultural audience, is invited to share and participate in a cross-cultural dialogue, which offers alternative and parallel stories and perspectives. These stories, sometimes partly articulated in Aboriginal languages, provide the audience with specifically Native topics which, nevertheless, reflect Canadian society as a whole. From the formal perspective, the shows are traditional, text-based productions delivered in a classical theatre space. Whether or not they do indeed conform to the label "minority theatre", in Pšenička's opinion they certainly provide a stage on which crucial stories and painful issues can be addressed, presented and cured from within the Aboriginal community, a necessary social vehicle helping many individuals, whether Native or not, to learn about their own personal stories.

An equally pertinent example of the ongoing struggle to assert indigenous identity within the dominant cultural model is provided by Klára Kolinská in her examination of Inuit theatre. Thanks to the lasting fascination that the Aboriginal people of Canada's North have held for the majority of Canadians, Inuit culture serves as one of the country's authentic trademarks, confirming a positive image of Canada at home and abroad. From the perspective of mainstream culture, Canada as a whole has typically been identified with the North, or a certain idea of the North, which has emerged as the result of Canada's wishful thinking about its own identity. However, until very recently, the North has been considered structurally "anti-dramatic", for the extremity of the Northern experience, and the wild, inhuman nature of the Northern landscape, seem to resist dramatic representation. This view, nonetheless, seems to stem exclusively from a southern perspective on the North, which has tended to overlook the tenacious tradition of dramatic, or, rather, performative, production by Northerners themselves, especially by the indigenous people for whom the North is not only an artistic theme or a stage, but, above all, a genuinely understood home.

Anchored in an exclusively oral tradition and a non-verbal sensibility, based on song and the performative capacity of the human body, Inuit

theatre belies the stereotypical image of the Inuit as a people without a real culture. The principal purpose of performance among the Inuit is education in its most basic, as well as most general, sense, and this is represented through the indigenous tradition of storytelling. However, experiential education is also the extra-aesthetic objective, aiming for the emotional, as well as rational, aspects of the audience's receptive potential.

Kolinská shows how the simple structure of the Tunooniq Theatre's play, *Changes*, consists of a series of situations or "moments of existence" that are considered expository of the essence of Inuit life from both historical and contemporary perspectives. By drawing upon the traditional Inuit performative practices of shamanism, storytelling, dance and chant, the play addresses in its thematic pattern a number of grievous social concerns faced by the Inuit today. By reconciling the mythological sources of their imaginary with the Western theatrical format, the Tunooniq Theatre has succeeded in representing indigenous culture on the larger, international stage. For Kolinská, the Inuit have used this opportunity as a way of returning the colonizing gaze of mainstream society and expressing their discomfort with the image imposed on them. Also, thanks to the Tunooniq theatre, non-Inuit were able to witness a living Inuit culture use its own myths and traditional wisdom to heal itself.

The possibility of rediscovering indigenous authenticity and its healing function, thanks to the staging of minority identity, is the focus of Elise Saincotille's discussion of Native American theatre. Yves Sioui Durand is one of the main figures in the renaissance of Native artists currently attempting to re-appropriate their culture after a long period of suffering and confusion. His aim is not to reconstitute tradition but to reinvent it in a contemporary form. He sees theatre as the creation of an imaginary ancestral territory that has been lost and that enables him to re-examine Native American identity and reconnect it with current reality. Elise Saincotille analyses the different traces of Native American mythology and Asian narratives to be found in his plays through direct and indirect quotation and references. In *Kmùkamch l'Asierindien*, for example, by linking together myths from three different Native American peoples, Durand is able to return to the prehistory of Native Americanness across the whole continent and thus to restore a common Native identity in dramatic form. His theatre becomes a new imaginary territory, enabling ancestral myths to gain relevance in the present and to pose important questions about the power of the artist to reunite humanity around collective memory.

Saincotille shows how the playwright returns to the most ancient roots of the North American continent. Mingling Mongol chronicles with Native

American myths through both narrative and structure, he makes them echo one another in order to throw up new readings of both. By opening up these foundational myths to contemporary issues and confronting them with other minority cultures, he is able to imbue them with modern significance. Thus his recourse to intertextuality is a way of creating a new circuit of meaning for ancient texts. Also by mixing sources from distant geographical zones, Durand is able to transgress the boundaries established by Europeans and invent his own personal geography organized around different and original solidarities. For Saincotille, his play becomes an imaginary homeland with a mythological dimension, where multiple transformations of identity seem to guard against both “ab-original” chaos and the standardization that threatens artistic creation in contemporary society.

The transformative process of becoming that characterizes minority art, according to Gilles Deleuze, is the starting point for Katia Légeret’s discussion of the way traditional Indian theatre is adapting to contemporary realities. Since Independence in 1947 about ten major styles of traditional theatre have been recognized. However, they are difficult to categorize because of the number of different languages and dialects used, the recourse to several performance arts and the fact that the performers themselves belong to different styles and traditions. Many actors prefer to claim local status, linked to the practice of a form of total art that weaves together theatre, music and dance. While preserving and renewing an art form that is multiple, they avoid the exaggeratedly academic quality of the major styles. One of the challenges for these artists is how to preserve the immense diversity of Indian art forms which have gained their inspiration from local traditions and which circulate between texts, epochs, languages and the countries of the Indian diaspora.

Using two examples, Kalarippayatt, a form of martial art used in Kathakali, and Kuchipudi, traditional dance theatre, Katia Légeret shows how a new freedom of movement at home and abroad throws into question the status of the actors and their art. Each of the traditional styles they practise is a complete art form in itself, for they are actors, musicians and dancers who can also recite a large number of poems and literary texts off by heart. In the French context where these genres are separate, such hybridity tends to suggest minority status. The division of the indigenous population into a vast number of sub casts helps us to understand why Indian theatre is necessarily a minority art form, characterized by oral transmission from master to disciple. The progressive disappearance of this tradition and its fragmented presentation on the Western stage blurs the boundaries between different arts and cultures, but, according to

Légeret, also paradoxically preserves the originality and the cultural identity of these artists. By cultivating the Indian idea of the minority and linking it with a transcultural practice that focuses on physical, corporeal performance, they present spectators with the idea of a body that is capable of reinventing itself incessantly and reconfiguring multiple forms of authentic identity.

The body as a vehicle for the authentic expression of minority identity is at the centre of the adaptation of traditional Maori performance culture to the modern stage, as Francine Tolron explains. Like other colonized peoples, Maoris have had their culture, their language, and their history denied. However, they have managed to preserve a fusional relationship with their traditions and beliefs, keeping them alive and vibrant. Despite colonial repression in the middle of the 19th century, they managed to breathe new life into their culture by renovating the *haka paka* (group singing and dancing), which they used to raise money for community projects. The *haka* has always possessed an historical function as a substitute for written texts, staging founding myths and historic moments in the life of different tribes, but today, more than ever, the *haka* acts as a cultural ambassador and is a key element in the unwritten Maori legacy. It is no longer the exclusive preserve of rural and tribal Maoris, but also belongs to the new urban Maoris who now outnumber them. Numerous *haka paka groups* have been formed and now constitute powerful political instruments at the service of the community, as can be seen in the way they form part of the systematic accompaniment to the struggle for the reparation of colonial wrongs. Far from belonging to an outdated form of folklore, they have become a contemporary means of expression used to reinforce economic, cultural and land-ownership claims.

Since the Maori renaissance in 1972, a traditional annual art festival has gained international renown as a major indigenous cultural event, attracting more than 60,000 spectators. Although adaptation to the tourist market means that traditional practices are modified by their staging, and, for some, this constitutes an unfortunate opportunism, it also represents a concrete social, political and economic response to a difficult context, allowing them to preserve and produce their native cultural expression within a hostile environment and to adapt their specific practices to a wider cultural community. This may sometimes give rise to tension between so-called “authentic” practitioners and those known as “plastic Maoris”, who willingly adapt themselves to the market. Tolron asks whether this historical and mythological art form can, and should be, considered as performative, and thus be inserted into a common frame of reference. Admittedly, it possesses a formal structure similar to that of

traditional theatre, but it differs in the sense that it also contains a metaphysical dimension that makes it more than a simple spectacle and elevates it to the level of the sacred.

It is clear from this and the other examples examined in this volume that theatre provides a crucial space and opportunity for minorities to interrogate the fixed identities imposed on them, whether by history, the market, the social or cultural system, or indeed, colonization. The staging of so-called marginal identity can be a means to reaffirm authenticity and legitimize difference publicly, while, at the same time, retaining cultural specificity. As the authors here show, minority theatre illustrates, above all, the process of active and complex becoming which is at the root of the constructions of identity analysed in this volume.

—Madelena GONZALEZ

