

Richard Paul Knowles

Replaying History: Canadian Historiographic Metadrama

Historiographers and literary theorists in recent years have concerned themselves with the writing of history less as the uncovering of an objective body of material actually existing in the past than as the invention of a narrative that exists as a function of the society and culture that produces it in the present.¹ Post-modern historiography recognizes that the past, insofar as it is external and objective, can only exist as fragments, “facts” and documents that are, in their own cultural terms, impenetrable. Historiography, then, becomes the ongoing process of *remaking* history, of “making it new,” as fiction and myth.

At the same time as historiographers have concentrated on the instability of *history*, literary theorists and writers of fiction have been exploring the instability of literary — and by extension historiographic — *texts*. Post-modern literary theorists have discussed the role of the individual reader in the creation of text, asserting that the meaning of a text locates itself in the act of reading rather than in the text as objective and stable artefact. Post-modern writers of historical fiction have foregrounded within their work the acts of writing and reading, using metafictional self-consciousness to highlight the reader’s active role in the interpretative recreation of history.

For many Canadian writers of “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon) theories about the instability of history and of text have been particularly appealing and liberating, and their critics have responded to the new self-consciousness with equally self-conscious sympathy. Interestingly, however, while Canadian playwrights and theatre collectives have for years been making use of self-reflexive, metadramatic forms to highlight the instability both of history and of dramatic texts, most Canadian drama and theatre critics, intent on purely thematic issues and on the supposed *construction* of national myths through drama (cf. Carson and Rubin), have been slow to respond to decon-

structionist Canadian plays on historical subjects as historiographic metadrama.

But theatre practitioners have always been aware of the instability of the theatrical event where the re-creation *is* the text, and of the need to "make it new" with and for each new audience each night; and ever since Shakespeare and his colleagues invented the chronicle history play in the late 16th century the re-creation of history on the stage has frequently represented the past metadramatically, in plays that function as dialogues between present enactments and the documentary "facts", acts and artefacts on which they are based. These plays, moreover, have often included explorations of the concept of the historical persona as one whose historical "acts" and whose "role" in history gain their significance from their audiences and from their self-conscious theatricality. Shakespeare in his history plays explores such things as ritual, role-playing, the gap between the word and the thing, and the relationship between the historical act and theatrical enactment, by focusing in metadramatic ways on the tension between the "role" and the man who performs it (cf. Barton, Calderwood, Van Laan). In our own century political theatre collectives since Brecht and Piscator have employed presentational, audience-centred forms of documentary drama to deconstruct traditional "authoritative" views of history and replace them with self-consciously revisionist and populist re-presentations of history as performance and process (cf. Nunn, "Performing Fact").

Canadian plays on historical subjects have come under the direct influence of the Elizabethan-style presentational staging of Shakespeare by way of the Stratford Festival stage; of the essentially presentational style of radio drama and documentary on the CBC, which for many years was Canada's national theatre (cf. Miller, "Radio's Children"); and of the European tradition of presentational political theatre as transmitted through Joan Littlewood and Roger Planchon to the Canadian pioneers George Luscombe and Paul Thompson (cf. Usmani 18, 45; Vogt, Arnott). Finally, in a country in which the mainstream of theatre has long been dominated by imported plays and foreign directors, Canadian drama has been shaped by the fact that it has always occupied alternative spaces and played an alternative role culturally: for reasons of size and budget its treatment of historical subjects has *required* non-illusionistic devices such as the use of doubling, of modern dress, and of rudimentary props as stage metaphors; moreover its tendency has under the circumstances quite naturally been toward both politically alternative deconstructions of main-

stream national myths, and metatheatrical questionings of mainstream dramatic forms that it views as oppressive or colonial in impact.

It is not surprising, then, that so many Canadian plays on historical subjects have eschewed any attempt to canonize official history or establish a stable national mythology; they prefer instead to make use of the metadramatic possibilities of non-illusionistic, presentational theatre to re-present the making and re-making of history as a necessarily ongoing process. I would like here to look at the work of three Canadian playwrights, Rick Salutin, James Reaney, and Sharon Pollock, who have used the techniques of metadrama in related but very different ways that can very loosely be described as Marxist, mythopoeic, and feminist, respectively, to initiate replays and re-enactments of history.

I

Rick Salutin is a self-professed cultural nationalist and one of Canada's few avowedly socialist playwrights; as such he is essentially concerned with historiography and with theatre as social processes rather than cultural products: "I know cultural nationalism often seems like a kind of archeological activity," he says in an interview, "unearthing, trying to discover,... but I think it should be a project of the future rather than the past. You're trying to create something, and you just grab anything you can do it with for the sake of building something for the future.... As long as it doesn't get metaphysicalized, so that you're trying to discover your soul as if it really existed out there, and all you have to do is scrape away the layers." (Salutin, Copeman, 192). His plays, then, make no attempt to transport their audiences back in time through an "authentic" reconstruction of an authoritative myth of the past. Rather Salutin produces his scripts through a collective process that subverts the very concept of historical or dramatic "authority"; and he avoids illusionistic naturalism and period costumes in favour of a presentational metatheatricality that similarly subverts traditional Aristotelian concepts of empathy and catharsis in drama.

In creating *1837: The Farmers' Revolt*, Salutin worked with Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille in 1972-3 to research, produce, and write (in that order) a play about what official history calls the Mackenzie rebellion in Upper Canada. (The title change to *The Farmers' Revolt* is significant.) The collective method was, as Salutin's published rehearsal diary makes clear, a self-conscious rejection of the hierarchical

structure of the traditional theatre, a version of theatrical revolt that deliberately paralleled the play's historical subject; similarly the presentational style of the production, which engaged the audience imaginatively in the process of "creating" history through play, was designed to highlight the parallels between the rebellion of 1837 and what Salutin calls a widespread "determination to throw off colonial submissiveness in all areas" of cultural and economic life in 1973. As he says, "1837 was a theatrical expression of that [determination], making [the production] more of a political event, and not just, or even primarily, a theatrical one." (Preface to *1837*, 202).

The play was researched and created by acting: Salutin's diary entry for December 15th, 1972 records the actors' discovery, walking through the Old Toronto sites where the events of the rebellion took place, that "December is a hell of a time to make a revolution here" (189). But more significantly, they discovered the revolutionary impulse through the connections between their own lot as "the proletariat of the theatre" (Preface, 187) in a colonized culture and the lot of the farmers in 1837. Their method is echoed within the play through the use of metadrama: in an early scene the farmers help one of their number to tell the story of his confrontation with the authorities in Toronto by "acting out" the story, assuming roles and "discovering" what happened and what it felt like. Placed in his situation, as the actors of 1837 placed themselves in the situation of the farmers, they find the story, or make it, in response to the story-teller's question, "what would you do?" (213). As the reviewer for the *Canadian Historical Review* pointed out of the method, "drama was the vehicle to carry the group from their own frustration with the present back to a new past. Drama led to history, history did not lead to drama." (Westfall, 72).

The play was mounted using only five actors, who doubled all the roles and who constructed with Salutin and director Paul Thompson a series of vignettes and sketches based on historical documents, that drew attention to their own theatricality, deconstructing the myth of 1837 as presented by established history and establishment historians. As Robert C. Nunn says, the play "treats its historical figures quite legitimately as actors on the stage of history, who invested their gestures with a larger-than-life histrionic quality acting both as agents and actors in the assumption that their deeds would shape the destiny of a nation"; and as Nunn goes on to say, it then "dismantles" their stage ("Performing Fact," 57). But scene after scene of *1837* also presents history as peoples' theatre, and peoples' theatre as political

agitation. In a ventriloquism scene, for example, the colonial "dummy" on the lap of John Bull finally finds his own voice, in which he urges his audience, onstage and off, to rebel against colonial oppression (231-3). In another scene a provocatively paternalistic speech by Lieutenant Governor Sir Francis Bond Head is transformed and trivialized by being delivered verbatim from its documentary source by a larger-than-life theatrical "Head" pieced together by the bodies and limbs of four actors (224-5). Not incidentally, and unlike the opaque narratives of traditional historiography, the metadramatic devices, here and elsewhere in the play, *insist* on the instability of the documentary source. As metadrama, then, the play deconstructs the histrionic gestures of the colonial leaders while celebrating a peoples' theatre that serves, as Nunn says, "not as a reflection of what might have been done in the past but as a model of what needs to be done now, and in fact is being done at any moment of the performance of 1837." ("Performing Fact," 59). Far from providing a cathartic release of potentially revolutionary impulses, the play attempts to serve as what Brazilian writer-director Augusto Boal calls in his work a "rehearsal for the revolution" to come. It ends with an exchange between the defeated rebels Lount and Matthews on the gallows: when Matthews laments that, "Sam, we lost," Lount, as the voice of the play, replies "No! We haven't won yet" (264), and the play opens outward from theatrical to political action.

The shift from theatre, myth and history to direct political action is the central structural principle of Salutin's 1977 play, *Les Canadiens*, which exploits the theatricality of hockey, the popular ritual of "Hockey Night in Canada," and the myth of the Montreal Canadiens to examine the nature and role of national myths of identity. The play's first half sets the history of Quebec, told as a series of defeats in the theatre of *war* and in the *political* arena, against the story of *Les Canadiens*, represented as a series of triumphant victories in the *popular* theatre of the *hockey* arena, complete with announcer, scoreboard, and organist. Salutin here disposes quickly of the histrionics of the leading actors in traditional Canadian historiography: General Wolfe is represented as self-consciously composing, to the accompaniment of a recitation of Grey's "Elegy," a tableau of his own death in battle as Benjamin West's "The Death of General Wolfe"; but the bulk of the first act concerns itself with what the playwright has come to view as a more dangerous use of popular theatre and popular mythology. Acknowledging and even celebrating the need for myths and heroes in the construction of a national sense of identity, Salutin ultimately *exposes* the cathartic capacity of myth, art, history and sport to sap the

popular will to effective political action. The self-conscious theatricality of the play's stage metaphors — the gun with which Wolfe is shot at the play's opening, for example, is a hockey stick that is passed down the years through the play's first act as the "torch" of Quebecois resistance — insists on the audience's recognition of theatre and history as representations, effective as models but debilitating as substitutes for action within the political arena itself. The second act focuses on the evening of November 15th, 1976, when the on-ice battle between the Canadiens and the St. Louis Blues at the appropriately-named Forum is ignored by a crowd that responds ecstatically to scoreboard reports from the Paul Sauve Arena, of election results leading to the victory of the Parti Quebecois. The hockey stick is no longer gun or torch, hockey reverts to being "just a game," and the Canadiens, relinquishing their role as standardbearers of the Quebec spirit, are demythologized to become "just a hockey team" (197). Whatever the future of the Parti Quebecois, the play suggests that neither a hockey team nor a political party can ever again serve as escapist symbol or myth. (*The recent post-mortem mythologizing of Rene Levesque*, however, suggests that Salutin may have been too sanguine.)

In the end, like *1837*, *Les Canadiens* resists closure and opens out into the world and the future. As critic Mary Jane Miller describes it,

In a wonderfully appropriate ending we see a play within a play, a fragment of a game of shinny, narrated as if on television by a bunch of kids who suddenly collide with the play's reality, an actual instantly recognizable hockey star. In this scene, the past, the present, and the future meet. ("Two Versions...." 68)

The play, then, metadramatically analyses the roles of myth, history, and popular theatre, deconstructing cathartic empathy with legendary heroes as with characters in traditional "well-made" plays, as "bread and circuses" come to be replaced by political action in the "real world."

II

While Salutin sees the re-creation of history as recreation — analogous to popular theatre, sports, and game playing, useful primarily as exercise, model, or "rehearsal for the revolution" — James Reaney sees the process of the theatrical creation and re-creation of history and myth as necessary and valuable in its own right, though he too uses metadramatic devices to deconstruct any attempt at a stable or ob-

jectifiable historiography. For Reaney, however, it is the need for a constant and ongoing re-imagining of history by each new audience as a communal invention of self in the shared process of creation that calls for metadramatic self-consciousness, and for him ritual and game-playing are the central activities of a theatre in which engagement with *process* is paramount. Consequently, while Reaney attempts like Salutin to re-establish contact between drama and its ritual roots, he does so by analogy with *sacred* ritual — in *The Donnellys* the Roman Catholic liturgy is invoked — rather than with the populist rituals of sports or of popular entertainment forms. But for both there is a self-conscious need to invoke and employ ritual forms in which the actors act for, on behalf of, and in concert with an audience as a community (cf. Knowles, 69-71).

Reaney, like Salutin, is conscious of the theatricality of history, and like him (cf. Wallace and Zimmerman, 58) he invokes Shakespeare while metadramatically deconstructing that theatricality. As Reaney says in an interview, “when you see a portrait of a General at a battle, they’re very heroic looking, even god-like. They’re not realistic. They quite often dress up. Like kings dressed up for battle, — like Henry the Fifth” (Goffin, 13). As most critics of Reaney’s work have pointed out, he explodes such theatrical myths; part of the function of the famous “medicine-show” play-within-the-play in *Sticks and Stones*, the first part of the Donnelly trilogy, is to subvert the received myth of the Donnellys, replacing it with Reaney’s own “corrective” version in which his *own* created character, the “real” James Donnelly, stands outside of time to mock the medicine-show parody of Thomas P. Kelly’s popular history, *The Black Donnellys*. One critic praises the theatrical impact of Reaney’s juxtaposition of the “real” with the “false” Donnelly but nevertheless labels the device “spurious”:

For by presenting the traditional view of the Donnellys in caricature, the dramatist discredits earlier versions of the story and implies that what he presents is the truth. In the theatre, however, the nature of ‘truth’ is shadowy. It is less relevant to ask which of the two interpretations of the violent conflict between the Donnellys and their neighbours is accurate than to speculate about why Reaney thinks his own version of the story is more “real” than the one he denigrates (Carson, 223).

But surely the shadowy nature of “truth” in the theatre is part of Reaney’s point, here and elsewhere when he has his James Donnelly remind us that “I’m not in hell for I’m in a play” (*Donnellys*, 24), or when he compares the brevity of life to that of “actors’ words” (42).

Few critics, in fact, have acknowledged that the questioning of theatrical verity within the context of a play implicitly calls into question *any* claim to absolute truth on the stage, including its own; indeed, most critics have concerned themselves with Reaney as a *builder* of myths, who, in the words of one, “demythologizes in order to mythologize anew” (Bessai, 201). But it is the *process* of mythologizing and re-mythologizing that is important in Reaney’s work, and the degree to which that process requires audience or community assent, lifting traditional suspension of disbelief to the level of imaginative participation in the artistic process. Early in his career as a dramatist, in the children’s play *about* putting on a play, *Listen to the Wind*, Reaney explodes the concept of theatre as a place where an illusion of reality is created, explicitly in order “to draw the audience into the creative process,” forcing it “to provide lighting and production and sets and even ending” (Bessai, 188). In his masterpiece, *The Donnellys*, which was mounted using a modified, author-centred version of collective creation, Reaney engages the audience in the play of history *as* play, and in the act of piecing together fragments and documents from the past as a creative “exercise,” valuable in itself and never complete or conclusive. Gerald Parker places Reaney’s work in the context of Paul Klee’s insight that the artist comes “more and more to see that the essential image of creation is genesis.” “The important thing about genesis,” Parker comments, “is that it, as a process, is never finished. ‘The artist hazards the bold thought that the process of creation can scarcely be over and done with as yet, and so he extends the universal creative process both backward and forward, thus conferring duration upon genesis’ ” (Parker, 151, quoting Klee, 87). Reaney’s interest in historical subject matter, then, has to do with continuing the universal process of creation by transforming history dramatically into pure story, extending that process by involving the audience in it. He has drawn attention to the entanglement of “pure story” with “all the history we have to deal with” in the making of *The Donnellys*, remarking that the plays result from the combination of “our STORY STYLE and the past swamp of fact” (Parker 152). He uses a theatrical style that asks the audience on one level to engage its imagination with the transformation of simple stage props — sticks, stones, ladders, and so on, into fiddles, swords, roads, and fences — and on another level to contribute similarly to the piecing together of meaningful “history” from the raw materials of historical fragments and documents. The method suggests that the play’s metatheatrical self-consciousness, in which characters stand outside of the play to comment on their own

roles, is designed to contribute to the elevation of audience engagement above empathy with character and plot to the level of imaginative engagement with the artist, and with the creative act of inventing the past.

The process with which the audience engages its imagination, of course, is explicitly that of *becoming*. Reaney's concern with how "the Donnellys decided to be Donnellys" (Preface, 11); with christenings and confirmations as theatrical rituals; and with how one chooses and earns one's name, identity, and role; is reflected in the metadramatic ritual structure of a trilogy that is ultimately about the audience as a community in the process of continually re-inventing its history and sense of self. As Mary Jane Miller has observed:

The trilogy itself is just as much about how the Donnellys came to be that particular family, narrated and re-educated by initiates, as any Kwakiutl or Haida dance-drama which shows how Hamatsa Raven accepted the initiate into the high ranks of the Cannibal Hamatsa society. The right to the song or story is earned and the right to sing and dance it is a proud possession which must be validated by the consent of the whole community. ("The Use of Stage Metaphor," 35)

Like Shakespeare in his second "Henriad," however, where the stability of song, story, and community — that is, of history — cannot after the murder of Richard II be assured (cf. Calderwood, 10-29), Reaney attempts through theatrical ritual to *restore* and *re-create* in a post-lapsarian world the sacramental bond between word and thing, history and story. In both Shakespeare and Reaney this bond is presumed to have existed before the Fall of language, but can now exist only temporarily and only in the realm of the imagination, where it must be continually recreated and, in Miller's terms, revalidated. The act of communal re-creation of self, finally, *is* the play, and its function is the profound yet essentially simple one of insisting that we accept that our perception of reality and of self in a community, like our understanding of history, is an imaginative construct. As Reaney says, "maybe if we get used to seeing our society as being based on story, we'll wake up and realize that we can get a better story" (quoted in Dragland, "Afterword," 222). The function of metadrama in *The Donnellys*, then, is to engage the audience in the process of imagining history not only in order to "make it new," but continually to *realize* it, and in the process continually to re-invent and realize our selves.

III

In contrast with Rick Salutin and James Reaney, Sharon Pollock makes use of period costumes and settings in her history plays, and she does not employ a collective method. She does, however, consistently employ metadramatic framing devices to foreground the role of the audience in the "realization" of the past. In the Preface to the published script of her play, *The Komagata Maru Incident*, Pollock asserts that, as a nation, "until we recognize our past, we cannot change our future," and throughout her career as a playwright, from her early plays of social activism to her more recent explorations of a more personal past, she has developed an increasingly complex dramatic mode of "re-cognition" through a style of theatre that presents itself as "acting out."

In an early play, *Walsh* (1973), Pollock deals with the relationship between Major James Walsh, NWMP, and Sitting Bull, living in exile in Canada after the Custer massacre at Little Big Horn. The play opens with a brief vignette through which Pollock forestalls empathy and identification with the charismatic Walsh by showing him in his later years as a broken and embittered man. This metadramatic induction scene ends with Walsh's hitting and shoving to the floor a Prospector collecting money for a boy whose father has frozen to death; the action anticipates Walsh's precisely parallel humiliation of Sitting Bull, who is played by the same actor as the Prospector, at the climax of the main body of the play. The effect of the device is to present the play as a demonstration, acted out in the manner of an Elizabethan history play (appropriately the play was produced at the Stratford Festival in 1974), of Walsh's failure to reconcile his individual humanity, including his friendship with Sitting Bull, with the role he is forced to play in history when he dons his costume, the tunic of a Major in the Northwest Mounted Police.

Walsh tries throughout the play to differentiate between "Major Walsh," in uniform, the representative of "the Queen and the Canadian Government" (54) and "White Forehead," Sitting Bull's friend. The effectual split between man and role disarms and emasculates Sitting Bull: "In the past," he says, "I have risen, tomahawk in hand. I have done all the hurt to the whites that I could... Now you are here. My arms hang to the ground as if dead" (54). But Walsh's failure to reconcile himself with his role ultimately destroys not only Sitting Bull, but Walsh himself, who pleads movingly to a superior officer for the integration of the two aspects of himself:

What do you think happens when I take off this tunic? At night, in my quarters, what do you think happens to me...? Do you think McCutcheon hangs me up from some god damn wooden peg with all my strings dangling? Is that what you think happens? Do you think I'm a puppet? Manipulate me right and anything is possible. I'm a person, I exist. I think and feel! And I will not allow you to do this to me. (86)

But ultimately the man who had proudly boasted, "when have my actions betrayed my words?" (51) is reduced to the evasive language of the bureaucrat: "I shall give your proposition every consideration" (106). The man who had been able to say, "White Forehead does not say this; Major Walsh says this" (49) is reduced to doing up his tunic and assuming his role as a defense before his final interview with his former friend (98). The method and metaphor are familiar from Shakespeare's explorations of the "player king" (cf. Righter, 102-124) in his history plays and tragedies. At the end of the play, after Walsh has tacitly consented to the extradition of Sitting Bull to the United States, we see the Major "quite willing," as Robert Nunn notes, "to substitute the myth of the savage Indian for the reality he knew first hand, to substitute 'style' and 'image' for substance; he illustrates his plan to stage a mock attack, Indian style, on Eastern dignitaries." When the news arrives that Sitting Bull has, inevitably, been murdered on his arrival in America, Walsh's final action in the play is to remove his gun and tunic, and with them the role that he has earlier told us has been his life. As Nunn says, then, "*Walsh* set[s] the myth of "Openin' the West" side by side with its dreadful acting out" ("*Sharon Pollock's Plays*," 74-5), and the method is typical of Pollock.

In 1976 Pollock again experimented with the metadramatic representation of an inglorious incident from Canada's past, in which pleasant myths of Canadian generosity and freedom from prejudice are deconstructed by direct confrontation with a less pleasant enactment of history. In this case, the play deals with an incident in 1914 in which Canadian Immigration refused to admit a boatload of Sikhs, in spite of the fact that, as British subjects, they were legally entitled to entry. Pollock's dramatic strategy is to present the play's acting out of its audience's "repressed" past as parallel to the story of Inspector Hopkins, who, "acting" on behalf of the Immigration Department, brutally represses his own part-Indian past by "acting out" the racist attitudes of his white Canadian compatriots and superiors. But the central subject of the play is its predominantly white audience, for whose benefit both Hopkinson and the theatre company act, and this is made clear by the metadramatic presentation of the play as a carnival side

show by "T.S.," an ubiquitous Master of Ceremonies who, as Pollock indicates suggestively in the cast list, "plays many roles." At one point he insists that the audience confront racist attitudes within Canada by acknowledging its own complacent use of such attitudes:

Ladies and Gentlemen! It walks! It talks! It reproduces! It provides cheap labour for your factories, and a market for your goods! All this, plus a handy scapegoat! Who's responsible for unemployment! The coloured immigrant! Who brings about a drop in take-home pay? The coloured immigrant! Who is it creates slum housing, racial tension, high interest rates, and violence in our streets? The coloured immigrant! Can we afford to be without it? I say "No!" It makes good sense to keep a few around — when the dogs begin to bay, throw them a coloured immigrant! It may sound simple, but it works. Remember though — the operative word's "a few." (36-7)

Elsewhere, we are confronted with our ability to detach ourselves from action that "doesn't concern us," but for which we are necessarily passive accomplices:

Ladies and gentlemen, can you truly afford to bypass this splendid spectacle? Run, my good friends, you mustn't walk, you must run! Cotton candy, taffy apples, popcorn and balloons! All this and a possible plus, the opportunity to view your very own navy in action with no threat to you! (62)

As Robert Nunn comments, "as an audience we are alienated from an automatic acceptance of the predominance of 'the White Race' [in the audience and] in our country: it didn't just happen; choices were made and continue to be made to maintain it. The play forces us to either criticize or justify the state of affairs: we cannot take it for granted" ("Performing Fact," 56). The final effect, then, far from being cathartic, is to insist that we realize our history as part of our present by engaging our imaginations with its acting out, and by acknowledging our responsibility for what has been performed *for* us.

A more complex use of a metadramatic framework is central to Pollock's 1980 drama, *Blood Relations*, in which she turns to the more private history of Lizzie Borden for her subject matter. A history play only in that it is set in the past, and Canadian only in that the story inhabits the Canadian imagination, *Blood Relations* nevertheless represents a significant extension of the approach Pollock developed in her earlier plays on Canadian history. The play's present tense is 1902, ten years after Lizzie was acquitted on charges of murdering her father and step-mother. Plagued with questions from her friend, an actress from Boston, about whether she was indeed innocent, Lizzie

has the friend “act out” events leading up to the murders, and it is this enactment that forms the body of the play. As the Actress pieces together her play-within-the-play, rejecting the roles imposed upon her by a patriarchal society that insists on telling her how to “act” like a lady, she imaginatively constructs a past and a play (much the way Salutin’s actors in *1837* constructed *their* history) that would allow her the cathartic release of identification with a murder that, insofar as she empathizes with the murderer, has been acted *for* her. But after she has taken the audience with her towards a murder to which she and the audience give imaginative consent, she raises the axe over “her” sleeping father and the lights go to black. When they come back up, the Actress turns to Lizzie, who, playing the role of the maid, has been an onstage audience throughout, and says, “Lizzie, you did.” Lizzie responds, “I didn’t,” and, turning out to face the audience for the play’s final line, adds “*You* did” (70), insisting that the actress and the audience take responsibility for the action to which they have consented, the past that they have imagined and thereby created. The impact of this, and the seriousness of Pollock’s purpose here, is underscored by a parallel action that occurs in the brief moment between the blackout and the play’s final lines, quoted above. When the lights have come up, and before the Actress addresses Lizzie, Lizzie’s sister Emma asks, once more, “Lizzie, did you?” Lizzie replies, echoing Walsh:

Did you ever stop and think that if I did, then you were guilty too...? It was you who brought me up, like a mother to me. Almost like a mother. Did you ever stop and think that I was like a puppet, your puppet. My hand your hand, yes, your hand working my mouth, me saying all the things you felt like saying, me doing all the things you felt like doing... (69-70)

Ultimately, then, for Pollock the “facts” — that Emma “wasn’t even here that day” (70), or even whether Lizzie “did” or not — are less important than the imaginative truth, the past that we must allow ourselves to imagine and therefore to bring into being as part of our present. We are, for Pollock, both nationally and individually (as her highly personal exploration of her own and her family’s past in her most recent play, *Doc*, suggests), responsible for what we are and for what we have become. It is incumbent upon us to rethink our comfortable myths of identity if we are to “re-cognize” ourselves and take responsibility for our future. Pollock’s metadramatic recreations of the past, then, serve as a kind of social psychotherapy, as an “acting out” that insists that we write our own “true” stories, act out our own

plays, and refuse to evade responsibility, and therefore identity, by defining ourselves, in feminist terminology that applies equally well to Canadian nationhood, as “the other in somebody else’s perceptions.” (Nunn, “Sharon Pollock’s Plays,” 70).

IV

Salutin, Reaney, and Pollock, together with a host of other contemporary Canadian dramatists, work within a dramatic tradition of presentational theatre that derives from the Elizabethans, and that in our century includes the epic theatre of Brecht, Piscator, and their successors; and they make effective use of metadramatic devices to explore the re-creation of history. They all use the techniques of self-reflexive theatricality, moreover, to deflect cathartic engagement with character and plot, in order to produce a more active and ongoing engagement associated with the imagination and the will, and to open their dramas outward to the world as they lay open their documentary sources, for re-construction. Different as their artistic visions certainly are, Salutin, Reaney, and Pollock share an awareness of their history plays as enterprises of the present and the future: Salutin, as a socialist playwright, constructs documentary plays that he sees as themselves documents within a developmental historical process, plays that work ultimately to deconstruct their own significance and relevance by helping to effect change; Pollock, constructing non-linear metadramas that reverse the expected release of traditional dramatic empathy and catharsis, works ultimately toward an exhortation to social responsibility through historical self-knowledge; and even Reaney — whose plays, as Stan Dragland suggests, move toward self-sufficiency as “real objects in the real world” (“Afterword,” 222), and for whom, “in a sense, form is *the* question” (“James Reaney’s Pulsating Dance...,” 113) — even he sees his enterprise as a playwright to be the active one of having a direct impact on the fallen, or “real” world by releasing into it the continual potential for imagining, and thereby realizing, a “‘better story.’.. of what could and should be” (“Afterword,” 222).

Canadian historiographic metadrama, then, at least as practiced by these writers, is as vital, provocative, and flexible a form as its fictional counterpart, accommodating Marxist, mythopoeic, feminist, and other perspectives on theatre and the world, and promising to be a ripe and rewarding object of critical inquiry.

NOTES

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