ARTS

Playwrights: Alberta's Forgotten Wordsmiths?

Six Playwrights at Home in an Essentially Collaborative Art

Harry Vandervlist

Photo courtesy of the Calgary Herald

Brad Fraser's *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love.*

"For much too long," writes John Murrell in his introduction to Vern Thiessen's 1996 play *Blowfish*, "the playwright has been regarded as inhabiting a sort of neutral (and neutered) zone between "real literature" and "the theatre scene." Isn't it true that even in a time of increasing media celebrity for authors, contemporary playwrights remain our forgotten wordsmiths?

After all, even when a play has the luck to find its way to the stage, our appreciation of the playwright's mere words can be eclipsed by what Murrell calls the "genuinely fabulous event" of the production itself. And the machinery of literary celebrity—the book tours, writers' festivals and talk shows—may help novelists and short story writers make a living, but rarely bring dramatists onto centre stage. Reading a print version of a current play may not offer an easy route to appreciating the author's craft, either. Your local bookstore probably doesn't grant many feet of shelf space to play scripts, a notoriously dire enterprise for most publishers. (When Eugene Stickland's play *Some Assembly Required* sold out of its first printing of 750 copies, his bewildered publisher told him "this has never happened before.")

Dazzled by the "glorious hybrid" (Murrell's words) that plays offer us by combining written craft with live performance, we may be neglecting theatre's less glamourous foundation—the solitary toil of the writer for the stage. When I recently spoke to a selection of Alberta playwrights on these matters, I frankly

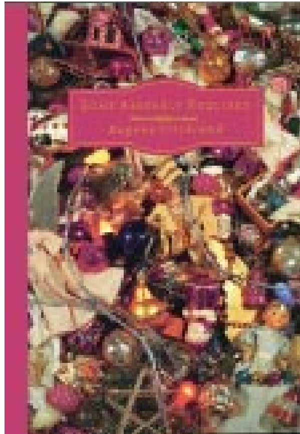


Photo courtesy of ATP

Eugene Stickland's *Some Assembly Required.*

anticipated a chorus of confirmations that, yes, the play text truly is an under-appreciated form. Instead the response from Brad Fraser, Ron Chambers, Sharon Pollock, and Eugene Stickland, along with playwrighting team Cheryl Foggo and Clem Martini, showed an impressive degree of perspective and a deep appreciation of theatre's essentially collaborative nature. A moment's thought makes it plain that, however important and demanding the playwright's contribution may be, the total creative act that leads to a theatrical event demands an exceptionally generous attitude from its writers. They have no choice but to recognize the necessity of perfecting their scripts, while at the same time accepting that directors, actors, audiences and even the evening news will ultimately serve as co-creators.

Brad Fraser certainly doesn't buy the notion that a script ever stands on its own. "I don't believe in the play text," declares the Edmonton-born writer. Yet perhaps no one is more aware of the enormous unseen labour that must underpin each line of dialogue. "For me it's all about icebergs," he says. "It's about taking everything out, getting rid of all the good writing and leaving characters who speak the way people in our society speak." Once he's pared his plays to a core of real, contemporary speech, he seeks to leave only "that tiny point that for a person of any intelligence speaks of the depth behind it."

At the same time, Fraser strives to "director-proof and actor-proof" his plays by ensuring that the voices he crafts will "provoke the desired emotional response in the audience" no matter what. Despite the writer's lack of control over every detail of production, there are techniques to ensure an appropriate reaction. "I write with voices in mind," he explains. "It's like creating a symphony, this voice against that voice." In this kind of writing, a very public workshop process is crucial: "but that's never confused with the writing of the play."

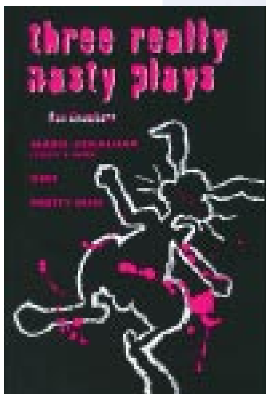
Though he has four play scripts in print, Fraser argues that the printed word alone simply isn't adequate to capture the experience of today's theatre.

Emphasizing the importance of gestures and silences, Fraser insists that "what Robert Lepage or Blake Brooker do can't be understood from a play text." Does this mean that a play, living as it does in the breath and gesture of a moment witnessed by an audience rather than on the page, can never hope to be preserved? In one sense, yes: though "these productions should be recorded so they can be learned from artistically." A production like One Yellow Rabbit's *Permission*, for instance, relies so heavily on gesture that only a recording or some form of notation like that used for dance performance could preserve it.

Since the immediate theatrical moment is everything, Fraser strives to compel more active engagement from his audiences. "We have so many voyeuristic experiences where we're sitting in the dark, watching

Photo credit, Ian Jackson, courtesy of Theatre Network

Ron Chambers' *Dirt.*



something," he observes. It can be too easy to become detached and "go for a pee in your mind." Television, film and the internet are important ways to communicate and Fraser wants to theatricalize them. "What's different in the theatre is the immediacy," he argues. "Technological media are very cold, and theatre is very hot. Mixing the two can be dangerous." With a technique like the projected "comic-book" captions in *Poor Superman*, Fraser sought to "force the audience to read and draw them into the play."

Snake in Fridge, Fraser's new play opening in Manchester for the 1999/2000 season, offers audiences yet another way to connect with the play. All the references to setting in the Manchester production will be to local streets, with local figures. While the play's central drama remains the same, all of this will change when the production moves to, say, Saskatoon.

In the light of Fraser's comments on the shared voyeuristic experience of movie-watching and much theatre-going, it's interesting that Sharon Pollock's new play *Moving Pictures* (at Calgary's Theatre Junction) takes up the story of Victoria-born pioneering Canadian film actress and film-maker Helen (Nell) Shipman. While researching the actress's life, Pollock hit upon a line from a biography of Thomas Edison in which the inventor of moving pictures described the phenomenon as "the illusion of continuous movement through persistence of vision." For Pollock the phrase attached itself to Shipman's story of struggle and failure: "it was her persistence of vision that gave her the illusion of movement. I began to think of the older Shipman looking back at her life and using the definition of the invention she chose to work in as the description of failure, for herself." Pollock says the stories we tell—our own life-histories, for example—become more real and meaningful than the actual events they narrate. Perhaps "we only experience living and gain any insight into it when we tell stories about it," she speculated. In that case the imaginative creation that a play, or indeed a film offers, may take on a deeper kind of reality than "real life."

Though she's one of Canada's more widely published (and honoured) playwrights, Sharon Pollock shares—with qualifications—Fraser's rejection of play texts as self-sufficient. "I've had arguments where I've refused to say there's any such thing as dramatic literature," she admits. Like Fraser, she sees any written text as a poor shadow of the fuller theatrical event. Theatre is "a living thing that's happening, and that's why I find it so engaging. That particular evening's performance is gone forever. It's something that happened between the group of people who were in the theatre that night." The quality of the moment hinges on intangible factors like "what the weather was like, whether parking was good, what the headlines in the paper were."

Pollock recalls a memorable experience of just such an intersection of a performance and current events, when her play *Generations* opened on the night of Peter Lougheed's famous speech against the newly announced National Energy Program. The audience brought the evening's sense of drama and conflict with them into the theatre. It's not hard to imagine shared smiles at passages like Young Eddy's description of "those silly government bastards! Everyone's firin' questions at them, and all they can talk about's the next election."

Even without such an external charge to heighten the experience, Pollock points out, a play lives through far more than its well-crafted words. “I don’t like those plays where you go to the theatre, you sit down, and you say ‘oh it’s so beautifully written, oh it’s so boring.’ Something has to be happening, and it isn’t enough to have the text, no matter how beautifully it’s written, because it is only a vehicle. The communication of whatever’s happening comes from marrying that with the performance on stage.” A look passing between two actors, a moment of silence—none of that can be experienced by a reader.

That said, Pollock would love to have more published play texts available, if only to give more people access to plays that are rarely produced.

Herself active in the development of a wide range of theatre, including community theatre in rural centres, Pollock believes in making plays available—in any form—to those who might see their own stories reflected there, or be inspired to create something meaningful to their own community. In a healthy society, she feels, there would be support for “a broad range of kinds of plays just as in visual art there’s a broad range of paintings.” To that end, she has worked to offer support (through organizations like the Alberta Playwrights Network, and also through personal connections with writers) to playwrights outside the urban, big-theatre milieu. “I want to be able to see that a person who is writing a play out in Three Hills for their community theatre has some resources they can go to. Unless we have that foundation, it’s very difficult to have playwrights spring up; they’re all going to come from universities, and people who come from universities represent a very narrow segment of our diverse community.”

Clem Martini echoes Pollock’s emphasis on theatre as the focus for a kind of public turning-over of important issues. “It really is about what a culture is,” he affirms. “It really is about what a people are, and how people exist or communicate.” Martini likens the experience of theatre to a “huge family conversation.” That doesn’t mean reducing theatre to some kind of social-realist topicality, however. A play like Martini and Foggo’s *Turnaround* may touch on issues that pop up in newspaper stories, such as the anger of children towards neglectful or exploitive parents. But as Cheryl Foggo points out, the playwright’s ultimate concern is whether the piece works as a story. “Does it work as a connection between human beings?” she asks, recognizing that “issue-based pieces” often don’t. The workshop process was very important in the development of *Turnaround*, for the very reason that it allowed the authors to see whether it succeeded as a piece of theatre. Martini says, “ultimately the play has to exist on the basis of its story values, on whether or not it works from beginning to end to grip and move—and educate perhaps—an audience.”

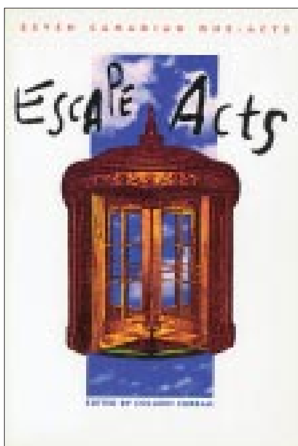
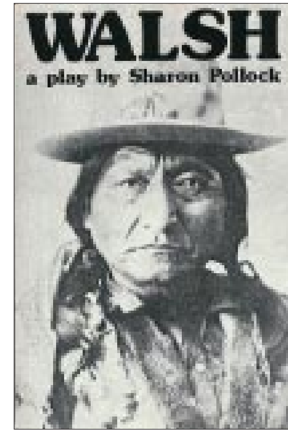


Photo courtesy of Lunchbox Theatre

Clem Martini’s *Nobody of Consequence.*

Photo credit Tom Walker, courtesy of the Calgary Herald



Sharon Pollock's *Walsh.*

Martini suggests that audiences may discover a surprisingly direct connection with the present moment: "these issues are simmering somewhere just below consciousness with people, and they erupt. I think that there is a sense when people go to the theatre that these thoughts, these things that have emerged in contemporary culture get a chance to be examined in a public way, and people get a chance to go away saying 'OK, I've thought about that, that's interesting and perhaps that furthers the discussion and provokes thought.' "

Does Eugene Stickland's newest play *The Dinner Party: A Paranoid Fantasy* address a "topical issue"? Perhaps. It explores the author's idea that table manners and dining rituals may be the final remnant of the long history of civilized decorum. The author of *A Guide to Mourning* and *Some Assembly Required* agrees that theatre can play a social role—not by lecturing audiences but by presenting for public consideration something previously shrouded in silence. He found the Calgary production of *Angels in America*, for instance, "an amazing experience" for himself and for many Calgarians. Still, he would never presume to teach an audience anything through a play: if people learn something "I'm glad it happens, but I don't think it's my place to aim for that." He believes that his own work began to "come from the heart" when he truly learned that the playwright's first job is to entertain, never to instruct or showcase the author's own intelligence or sophistication. "What I think is harder to do is to actually engage an audience for two hours and entertain them, in the best sense of the word. There's nothing cheap about it. I think it's a lofty goal. And I think that's really the future of the theatre."

The success of his play *Some Assembly Required*, he feels, comes from the audience members' shared recognition that the play's dysfunctional family Christmas "was closer to their experience than the Anne Murray family Christmas special. There's that sense of shared relief that this is normal."

The most important rule of writing for theatre, Stickland teaches his own playwrighting students, is "show us, don't tell us." Describing himself as highly sympathetic to paranoia and "fluent in the language of the affliction," Stickland allows *The Dinner Party* to show paranoia at work without ever naming the idea, partly by literalizing paranoid fantasies. "My character Sam goes for a meal and gets killed. It's not as if these people just want to kill him, they do kill him."

Waiting for a beat, the author reflects that "there's so much pressure, I find, on meals. As one of the characters says, 'Once you start going to the houses of strangers and eating with them, you've really taken those first tentative steps down a very slippery slope.' "

Stickland dreamed in younger years of becoming a novelist, and vividly recalls the "rush" he felt when he saw the published text of his work in a bookstore for the first time. Yet he recognizes that "the reality is that that book is such a tiny percentage of what my career is about. My playwright's career is really about being in the theatre and getting the work done." While studying literature naturally offered the best preparation for writing, he picks out actor training as the single most crucial aspect of his preparation. Total immersion in the theatre through acting, and helping to

found an alternative theatre company in Toronto (and accepting the necessity to draw an audience every night) all shaped Stickland's understanding of the playwright's role.

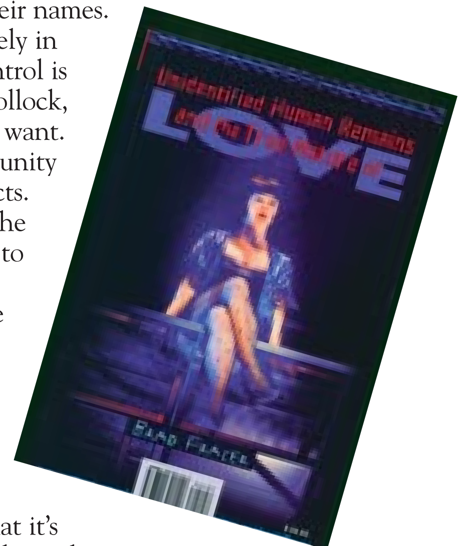
Without his own experience as an actor and director, Lethbridge playwright Ron Chambers would have found it much more difficult to place a script with Edmonton's Theatre Network, where Connie Massing read his unsolicited submission of the script for Marg Szkaluba (*Pissy's Wife*). Chambers' was one of the few such submissions to yield a "producible play." The author of *Pretty Blue* and *Dirt* tends to write about characters without much social power, authority, or attractiveness—an abused rural wife, a homeless man, or a so-called "good-for-nothing piece of shit" accused of brutally murdering his wife. His acting and directing studies at the Universities of Lethbridge and Calgary have helped him create playable scripts based on these high-intensity characters and situations.

Plays aren't simply written, Chambers underlines; they're crafted or "wrought," and that's why playwrights are not called play writers: "it's a very highly structured, crafted thing, because it has to engage people and get to the point and resolve it within a two-hour period, and can only rely on dialogue to do that." These limits demand "a fairly substantial knowledge of the art and craft of the theatre." One result is that novelists who turn to the theatre may find themselves frustrated by the form's limitations.

Chambers finds that the process of writing often uncovers a focus of anger. "I think that's what motivates me to write about things. It's not that I set out deliberately to do that but inevitably anger creeps in." Perhaps this happens because he sees no shortage of things to be angry about. For instance: short-term political thinking, greed, and the kind of fear-mongering favoured by the springtime spate of mutual-fund promotions: "There's so much emphasis now on taking care of yourself: get what you can from wherever you can and stash it away, now." At a certain point, he feels "that whole philosophy is antithetical to the idea of society and culture."

Chambers isn't alone in being angry. Brad Fraser feels there may not in fact be enough anger onstage. "There should be more angry theatre," he says. "I'd like to see more angry Albertans, too." Plenty of other strong voices could be heard from in the province besides "the loud-mouthed redneck homophobic racist minority." Theatre ought to take advantage of the fact that it's far better suited to convey such anger than film, for instance, argues Fraser. "By the time you finish the long process of making a film, you've lost any anger there might once have been." Again, it's the immediacy of theatre that's paramount for Fraser.

Finally, none of the writers I spoke to claimed an entirely self-sufficient status for the text of a play. At the same time the play text is a crucial determinant of creation for the theatre, and must have its own integrity (before being offered for workshops, for instance). All of the writers represented here seem in agreement with John Murrell's contention that hybrid forms like plays "are strongest when their individual components are extremely strong before they are combined." What's most striking, in the end, is the passionate artistic professionalism of all six authors. Their chosen form demands selflessness, a devotion to theatrical results that forbids any narcissistic clinging to one's own precious words. Dramatists take risks in offering up their work and their names. They are never entirely in control. Yet total control is something Sharon Pollock, for one, would never want. "Everything is community in theatre," she reflects. "Playwrights source the community for what to say, they give it their own voice and create entertainment, but the source is something that matters to the people in that place. Community and social cohesion is what it's about—whether it's the audience laughing at the same time or looking at their program at the same time and wondering when it's gonna be over."



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