



Summer 2013

Published by the  
**Canadian Theatre Critics Association**  
*canadiantheatrecritics.ca*

## **Critically Speaking**

The CTCA E-Bulletin

A National Centre of the  
**International Association of Theatre Critics**  
*aict-iatc.org*

### **Contents:**

#### **President's Corner**

by Don Rubin

#### **September AGM in Toronto Featuring Rubin's Bard Bared**

**Who Wrote Shakespeare** (Once More With Feeling)

#### **Artists & Boards Take Note: Time to Factor(y) in the Fine Print**

by Robin Breon

#### **Magnetic North Report: Michel Tremblay Still at the Centre**

by Alvina Ruprecht

#### **A Student View: Ottawa Critics Critiqued**

by Brianna McFarlane

#### **International News and Views: Sweden, Excom and CS**

#### **From the IATC Website: London**

by Ian Herbert

#### **Letter from Spain**

by Robin Breon

#### **CS 8 Now Online - Wanted: Theatre Readers (and Writers)**

#### **Dues now (Over) Due**

### **National Board:**

Don Rubin, President

Jeniva Berger (ex-officio)

Robin Breon

Robert Cushman

Byron Laviolette

Martin Morrow

Alvina Ruprecht

Anton Wagner

*Founded in 1986 by Herbert  
Whittaker (Chair) and Jeniva  
Berger (President)*

### **President's Corner**

by Don Rubin

Stop the presses. We have a name.

Just in time for the summer edition, the CTCA e-Bulletin finally has a real name. Maybe not the greatest name in the world. Maybe not the most imaginative name in the world. But at least and at last we are called something.

You may have actually noticed it at the top of this page. From now on we are *Critically Speaking*: the CTCA E-Bulletin. So like our international cousin, the webjournal of the International Association of Theatre Critics, we too are CS in miniature, they being *Critical Stages*, a journal offering international criticism opportunities to CTCA writers, one of the important benefits of CTCA membership.

And like CS Sr., CS Jr. (for the record, a name we used early on in CTCA's history) is obviously also open to articles, essays, opinions, reviews from our members. Indeed, we wouldn't exist without your contributions and involvement. And pieces that appear



Don Rubin

in *Critically Speaking* can also be entered into competition for our own Nathan Cohen Awards for short and long pieces. So take advantage of both these valuable free-lance opportunities to write and get published. At a time when opportunities to get criticism published by something other than a personal blog, we're offering new opportunities and real space.

For the record, there were numerous entries in our Name the Bulletin contest. Among some of those not chosen by our board were *Perspectives*, *Critical Perspectives*, *Prospectives*, *Bull Sheet*, *Critinews*, *Critics Corner*, *Critical Observer*, *Critical Mass* and *The Critical Spectator*.

The winning entry was submitted by long-time member, Robin Breon who wins a free lunch at our next luncheon meeting. Many thanks to Robin and everyone else who submitted an entry. Much appreciated.

\* \* \*

And speaking of luncheon meetings, several of our regional groupings have begun arranging such events on a regular basis. It's a good way to keep critical conversation going. So organize one wherever you are. Choose a subject to talk about or invite a guest. Bring your group together.

The old Toronto Drama Bench, the predecessor of CTCA and the first critics association in Canada (founded in 1971) by Herb Whittaker, Urjo Kareda and me, always found it useful to have the lunches with guests as "off the record" so guests felt they could open up a bit more. I am sure that some of our veteran members like Jeniva Berger, Robin Breon and Patricia Keeney among others recall a few of those gatherings with guests like John Gielgud, John Hirsch, Robert Morley, Ed Mirvish, all of whom shared stories that they probably shouldn't have shared with journalists and theatre writers, critics and scholars. Was great fun.



Ed Mirvish

The Toronto branch, which contains a lot of the national CTCA board members at the moment, has had a number of just such lunches in the last year or two, all of them open to members and guests. One was used to give out our Cohen and Whittaker Awards and featured Judith Thompson; another hosted Michael Billington, long-time theatre critic of *The Guardian*. The group has another scheduled for September 21st to which all members across the country are invited (see separate story later in this issue).

After that September 21 lunch, a one hour Annual General Meeting will also be held at which time legally required items (like financial reports and elections) will occur. If you are interested in being a member of the national Board, do please volunteer. Send me a note. We are exploring the possibility of having fewer in-person meetings and more conference call meetings in future. We can genuinely use people from outside Toronto

The Toronto top-heaviness of the current national Board has occurred simply because those are the people willing to put in the time to support our work which is, in case you hadn't noticed, to support the rapidly fading idea of theatre criticism. Some new young Ottawa colleagues are getting active as well. How about some voices from other parts of the country? Volunteer. Now. You'll probably be official by September.

\* \* \*

On another subject, has anyone noticed how our so-called national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, has been shrinking its arts coverage across the board. Now called "Life and Arts," its daily section should probably more appropriately be called "Chit and Chat". Taking the July 11 paper as an example, the "Life and Arts" section's eight pages boasted the following stories:

- The re-emergence of city shopping malls (two full pages)
- How to decorate a living room with rope and yellow lilies (one full page)

- A full page on health
- A page combining horoscopes, notes on playing bridge and a photo from Caracas
- A page combining an essay on cooking dandelions (by a reader) and notes on making babies in May and tattooing toddlers.

In case you aren't counting, that's six pages. The remaining two pages contain:

- A feature on the Barenaked Ladies
- Four paragraphs of Canadian culture notes (two grafs on art and two on the cancellation of a Toronto Fringe performance because of rain)
- A story of an American photographer
- A column on American cable television programming by *Globe* writer John Doyle
- A column by Russell Smith on sex and ballet



*The Globe and Mail* sign outside their head office in Toronto

And that's it. Two pages on the arts and that's only if you count some heavy American subject matter. Combine the Barenaked Ladies and the four grafs of notes, and you have maybe a page of Canadian arts content. Is the *Globe's* approach unique? Not really. It's depressingly similar in many of the country's other newspapers. The arts no longer seem to count for much on a daily basis. Arts and culture writers are genuinely ignored by most of the dailies most of the time. And that means our theatres tend to be ignored across the board unless they are heavy advertisers. And forget the whole notion of genuine critical content.

Then subdivide what we do have in criticism into all of the arts and theatre again comes up pretty low on the attention charts. Is this really the end of all but blockbuster theatre? The end of public criticism?

Can we as critics help to fight back? Restore the arts and restore the critical voice within the arts? How about criticism on radio and television (when was the last critical discussion of theatre you heard on television?)

We all understand that social media and the internet have changed the rules of the publicity and prestige games. But even on the net, serious criticism is hard to find. There are a handful of locations, some by our own members but they are still relatively rare. It would be interesting to hear from some of the bloggers and net voices about who they think they are reaching and how they know that. Sure we all get hits but how many of those are real readers seeking real writers?

\* \* \*



Festival Transamerique

Hope as well you can find some time next May, during Montreal's Festival Transamerique, to join CTCA members in a national discussion of many of these same issues with some of our Quebec colleagues. If we can pull this gathering off – with the Festival's help – it will be the first time in decades that the two theatre critics' organisations have gotten together to talk face to face about national issues. Some years back, the Quebec Association hosted an international congress for IATC but that primarily offered a look at Quebec theatre. The rest of the country was a discussion throw-in. The meetings we are currently planning will look at what is happening from one end of Canada to the other. Stay tuned for details.

## September AGM in Toronto Featuring Rubin's Bard Bared

The Annual General Meeting of CTCA will take place this year in Toronto on September 21 and will be preceded by lunch and an informal talk by Don Rubin called "The Bard Bared."

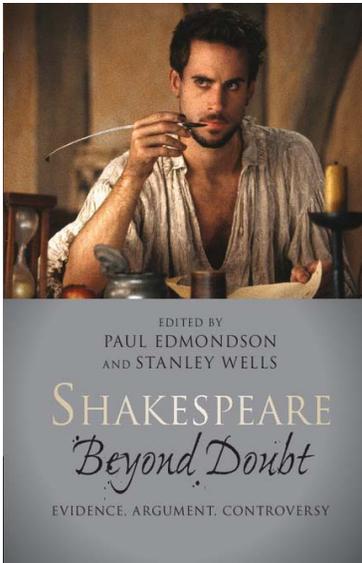
"I've gotten drawn into the Shakespeare Authorship Question in the last few years," said Rubin, CTCA President, a Professor and a former Chair of the Theatre Department at York University. 'Of course Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare. No one is debating that. But was the person writing under the name Shake-Speare (many of the works appeared hyphenated, a sign at that time of a pseudonym) the man we know as William of Stratford (whose family name was Shaksper and who

never spelled his name any differently) or was Shaksper the front-man for someone who wanted to keep his or her name out of the public view.

“The fact is, Shaksper never claimed to have written the plays and there is nothing at all that shows he led the life of a writer. What the record shows is that he was a shrewd businessman who made a huge amount of money by bringing these plays to the Globe. Did he write them or was he given them?”

“I am not planning to argue who might have actually written the plays,” said Rubin, “but I am interested in showing that there is huge evidence to indicate that William of Stratford was not actually the writer. The debate has been going on for 200 years and the evidence against William is quite extraordinary.

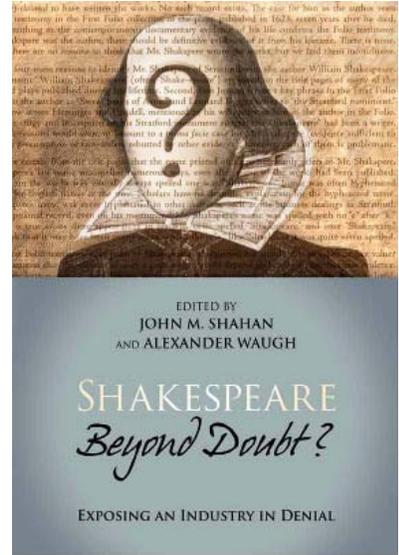
“What you have on the pro-Stratford side, is the word of the Stratford Birthplace Trust which generates most of its funding from tourism to Stratford-Upon-Avon and which subsidizes publication of articles by scholars, most of whom are not the least bit interested in the question.



Cambridge University Press

“But in recent years, the question has gained an academic foothold and its now evidence versus eminence on the whole thing. This summer, no less a publishing company than Cambridge University Press came out with a book called *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* trying to answer the doubters and close academic debate down. At the same time, something called the Shakespeare Authorship Coalition in the US published its own book called *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt? Exposing An Industry in Denial* countering with evidence almost everything the Cambridge book was saying.

“I think as theatre critics, as thinking people who care about the theatre, we should at least understand the arguments on this issue. Between now and 2016 (the 400th anniversary of William of Stratford’s death) the arguments will get louder and louder and we should know what’s going on.



Shakespeare Authorship Coalition

“Does it ultimately matter? Would it ultimately matter if we learned that Franklin Roosevelt was really the author of *Death of a Salesman*? Or that Barack Obama really wrote *Angels in America*? Of course it would matter. It wouldn’t change the plays but it would certainly affect our reading of them and their history. In the end, it’s truth that matters.

“I don’t think I’ll change anyone’s mind with my CTCA talk. Or with the conference I am organizing in Toronto in October (17 to 20). My interest is to simply let people understand what’s really out there and decide for themselves.”

No less important, the AGM itself will take place after the lunch and is open to all paid-up members of CTCA. An AGM agenda will be sent to members in early September.

Lunch will be \$20 all-in.

Anyone planning to attend should let Robin Breon know as soon as possible at [rhbreon3@hotmail.com](mailto:rhbreon3@hotmail.com).

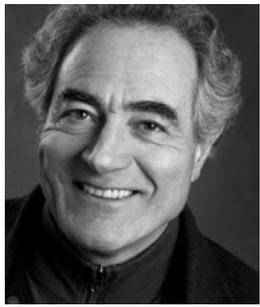
## Who Wrote Shakespeare (Once More With Feeling)

Several years ago, the Montreal-based Secretary-General of the International Association of Theatre Critics, Michel Vais (known to many of us as the founding editor of the Quebec theatre journal *Jeu* and as a theatre critic for CBC Radio) came across a book about a little-known 16th century Italian scholar named John Florio. That was the beginning of an ongoing fascination for him with the question of who actually wrote the plays of Shakespeare.

The book that he was reading was by an Italian-born magazine editor and cultural journalist named Lamberto Tassinari who was now living in Montreal. Tassinari’s book was called *John Florio: The Man Who Was Shakespeare*. Tassinari’s son

had even created a Youtube video using rap to promote the book and Florio's candidacy.

Hard to resist such stuff.



Michel Vais

The book was well-argued and Michel was drawn in. He met with Tassinari on a number of occasions. He wrote about the issue for *Jeu* and arranged panel discussions at some of Montreal's French-language universities and colleges. The students too were fascinated by the arguments over Shakespeare's obsession with Italy. Given that William of Stratford supposedly never left England, it seemed exceedingly odd to Tassinari that a third of the Bard's plays are set there and many of them make the kind of specific references to places and styles and books and things that hadn't yet been seen in England.

What if Shakespeare was actually a pen name for the Italian scholar and writer John Florio who spent the early part of his life in England as the son of an Italian churchman, the mid-part back in Italy studying and working, and the rest of his life in England assembling an Italian-English dictionary and inventing many of the words that later showed up in the plays of Shakespeare?



John Florio

Vais helped Tassinari push the question and answer the question. Tassinari began presenting at various academic conferences. This past year, Vais and Tassinari put together a scripted debate on the subject which they have now played in Montreal on several occasions. As far as we know, no one has reviewed it which is probably appropriate for a scholarly debate, even one so deeply connected to the theatre.

\* \* \*

In case you haven't had enough of this Shakespeare stuff yet, be aware that Prof. Stanley Wells, the world's leading authority on things Shakespearean and one of the heads of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust will be giving a lecture on the Bard at Stratford on August 15 at 5 p.m.

Wells also just co-authored a volume on the authorship question called *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*, now available from Cambridge.

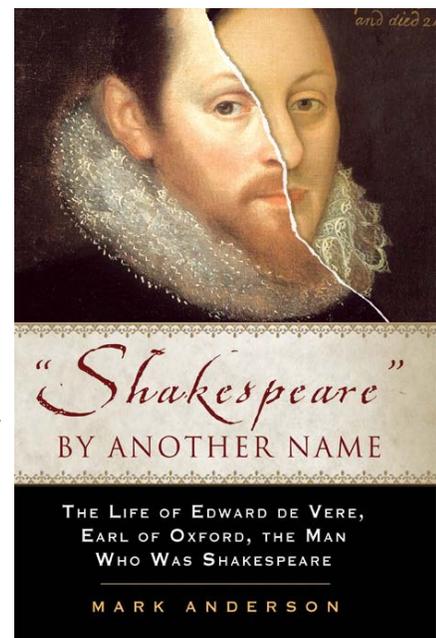
\* \* \*

And finally on this stuff, some of the world's leading authorities on the authorship question will be in Toronto Oct. 17 to 20 for a scholarly conference on the general subject of "Shakespeare and the Living Theatre."

Co-sponsored by the Shakespeare Fellowship and the Shakespeare Oxford Society, the conference is being hosted locally by York University and the University of Guelph. A major public debate is scheduled on Saturday morning, October 19th pitting the candidacy of the current titleholder William of Stratford against the challenge of Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford and the current favourite among what are called reasonable doubters.

Among the numerous presenters at the conference will be John Shahan, head of the Shakespeare Authorship Coalition which has an international "Reasonable Doubt" campaign going that has attracted the signatures of people like Mark Rylance, Derek Jacobi and Michael York; Alexander Waugh from the U.K., co-author of a pro-Oxford book just released; Canadian playwright-director-activist and scholar Sky Gilbert and Mark Anderson, author of a riveting biography of Oxford called *Shakespeare By Another Name*.

Press coverage is available on request to [drubin@yorku.ca](mailto:drubin@yorku.ca).



Biography of Edward de Vere  
17th Earl of Oxford

## Artists & Boards Take Note: Time to Factor(y) in the Fine Print

by Robin Breon

In March of this year a media advisory release from the Stratford Festival attracted little attention when it was sent out announcing that the Festival's AGM would be held on Saturday, March 9th at 11 a.m. in the lobby of the Festival Theatre.

Far gone were the days when a 37-year old actor named Richard Monette would risk his career by taking the floor at an AGM and denounce the President of the Board as "a pig" for his alleged mishandling of managerial responsibilities, a mishandling that ultimately led to the resignation of the Artistic Director Robin Phillips back in 1981. It was then that Monette exercised his right as a member of the Festival voting community and spoke out.

Recently I asked Ann Swerdfager, Stratford's Director of Communications, if members of the Festival today would have the same rights and privileges at an AGM.



Robin Breon

"In theory absolutely", she said, "anyone who has a hundred dollars and wants to buy a membership has the right to attend the Annual General Meeting as a voting member".

It was a decade later that another Board of Directors, this time at the Canadian Stage Company in Toronto, fired its Artistic Director Guy Sprung in what some observers at the time called an orchestrated coup d'etat. In resigning from the Board, the late labour activist Julius Deutsch proclaimed that his board colleagues had "blood on their hands."

And just last year, all eyes and ears in the theatre community were tuned to l'affaire Gass, as the board of the Factory Theatre in Toronto unceremoniously fired the founder and long-time Artistic Director of the company, Ken Gass, without, as many saw it, just cause.

In responding to the Gass firing, Jini Stolk, the Executive Director of Creative Trust and a long time Toronto arts administrator wrote: "Board and staff relationships are always complicated... But when communications break down and a board member is no longer in accord with or able to support the company's goals or artistic vision, they should fire themselves (emphasis my own) for the good of the company."

All of the above might be considered moot were it not for another bit of little noticed legislation that will be coming in January 2014. The implementation of the Not-for-Profit Corporations Act (ONCA) has the absolute potential to change how all not-for-profit arts organizations are governed and regulated in the province of Ontario. Most striking is a provision within the act that empowers individual members – not just board members – of these organizations, even allowing them to go so far as overruling actions taken by boards of directors.



Jini Stolk

Within the current operating protocols of non-profit arts organizations, the role of the individual membership is a major unknown. Although mandatory that every organization hold an Annual General Meeting at some point during their fiscal operating year,

AGMs really tend to be very low key affairs. Various legal motions are voted on and include such things as approving the minutes of the previous year's AGM, receiving the Treasurer's report, accepting the year end audited statement, nominating new members to serve on the organization's board, and any other bits of business that may need tending to. Eventually, the board members doff their director's hats and don their membership caps to affirm that all the business they have just conducted as directors is approved.

The possibility that this Standard Operating Procedure might actually be threatened by the new legislation prompted the Ontario Non-Profit Network (a political advocacy group) to mount a campaign last year to change provisions within the law because it actually offered greater voting privileges to individual members.

The form letter sent by the ONP Network to MPPs warns that with the new legislation, "Directors will have to engage in time consuming and divisive proxy battles with members to defeat proposals. Proxy battles over binding member proposals are not the way we want to address conflict and difference in our community." The letter goes on to warn that

“non-voting members will have a deciding vote on any significant financial and organizational issues dealt with by our organizations.”

In other words, the members could challenge any board, and, in a case like Factory Theatre, have the power to nominate a new slate and elect a whole new board. I thought that was called democracy. Yup, it's scary sometimes.



Tracy MacCharles  
Minister of Consumer Services

In reaction to the ONP campaign, the Minister for Consumer Services, Tracy MacCharles, sent a letter to Jini Stolk and Cathy Taylor (chair and executive director of the ONP respectively) on March 27 indicating that the Ontario Not-for-Profit Corporations Act will “not be brought in any earlier than January 2014.” The Minister states further that “I understand that enhancements to members’ voting rights are of particular concern, and I have asked my Ministry to put a priority on reviewing these provisions. With respect to the ONCA’s extension of limited voting rights to non-voting members, I will be recommending that these provisions not come into force for at least three years following proclamation of the Act. I intend to undertake a thorough consultation across the sector to assess how this issue should be addressed to serve the interests of corporations, their boards and their members.”

Three years is a long time in politics but clearly this democratic genie is out of the bottle.

What would it have done in the Gass case? The online petition campaign mounted through change.org listed over 4,000 people wanting to reinstate Ken Gass as Artistic Director at Factory. That would have been one big pocketful of proxies should Gass have decided to show up at the Factory AGM (not to mention a boost to the organization’s operating budget if only half of the signatures plopped down a \$100 to become voting members. That’s right, it’s an additional \$200,000 dollars in the operating budget).

In 1991, I published an article in Canadian Theatre Review entitled “Roles and Responsibilities: The Artist and the Board of Directors.” In it I quoted Walter Pitman, then director of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Higher Education and a former director of the Ontario Arts Council who said “I see the board basically as a group of people who are a reflection of the community, who have a watchdog function and provide public scrutiny. They should be aware of the artistic choices being made that will affect the company and they should be aware of their responsibility to search out resources financial and otherwise, but above all they should be there to allow the artists to do their work.”

Protecting the fragile environment so that artists can do their work really should be something that applies to everyone. In the area of theatre work, the actors probably have the clearest job descriptions because they are generally members of a professional union (Equity) that provides a collective agreement outlining the terms and conditions of their working environment. But there are numerous positions that are not so clearly defined, such as general manager, publicist (if there is one), dramaturge and others.

For example, at Factory the position of dramaturge (a rarefied position in many theatres even in the best of times) is currently held by Iris Turcott. Turcott knows how vulnerable the position can be when she herself was abruptly terminated by Martin Bragg at Canadian Stage when he embarked on a fiscal re-organization that saw her duties reassigned. Given the nature of the work it could have been a career ender had not Gass stepped in and given her a home at Factory.

Today’s creators in the theatre would do well to pay heed to the changing particulars of their working environment and be exceedingly aware of the fine print in their contractual agreements. And this includes reading the by-laws of the organizations they actually work for.

Factory Board: take note.



Iris Turcott



# Magnetic North Report: Michel Tremblay Still at the Centre

by Alvina Ruprecht

The annual Magnetic North theatre festival, which alternates each year between its home base in Ottawa and other Canadian cities, was back in the capital last month with performances at the National Arts Centre and the University of Ottawa. According to Magnetic North Artistic Director Brenda Leadlay, the festival is a “smorgasbord of the best in Canadian theatre,” and no doubt its main interest is the fact that it is a de facto showcase of performances from across the country. That too is the mandate of the NAC: to bring work to the capital from other cities in Canada.

At a panel discussion held during the Festival, it was clear that the play that held the greatest expectations for most was the new production of Michel Tremblay’s *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again*. Having seen the original production in French (*Encore une fois si vous me permettez* at the Théâtre du Rideau vert, directed by André Brassard and starring one of Tremblay’s preferred actresses Rita Lafontaine,) as well as the striking portrayal by Nicola Cavendish in English (based on the translation by Linda Gaboriau) when it was created at the Centaur theatre the same year, I had difficulty imagining that anything could go beyond what Cavendish had shown us. This new version, a co-production between Western Canada Theatre Company from Kamloops, BC, the Magnetic North Festival and the National Arts Centre, certainly tried.



Brenda Leadlay

In Ottawa, it became clear that even after so many years, this is still an important play because of its relation to the whole body of Tremblay’s work. It is not only about his mother, whom he conjures up in this part-autobiographical, part auto-fictional memory of a son trying to rectify feelings of guilt but it is also a manifesto of Tremblay’s theatrical poetics, a document that gives us, in an oblique way, all the strategies that Tremblay uses to construct his plays as he pays tribute to contemporary writers who have left their mark on his work.

Through the voice of a woman who barely has any education, who spends her time cleaning and baking and caring for neighbours and family, we learn about the theatre and specifically about his plays. She is the voice of the “people” who have an essential role in Tremblay’s theatrical world. In the prologue, the son/author who is also a narrator reminding us of the narrator/ son in Tennessee William’s *The Glass Menagerie*, makes a collage of references to many of the great works of French theatre, even bringing Shakespeare and Lorca into the mix.

He himself steps into the image of his mother’s house as Pam Johnson’s beautiful set lights up. The mother then starts a monologue addressed to her son sitting in an armchair. This is her play and she carries it the entire two hours, a most difficult feat for any actor.

We hear of all his theatre through the mother’s non-stop chatter: the importance of certain actresses in his work; the confusion between characters and actors which the mother tries to understand but which sends us back to the way that Tremblay always worked with his own parallel family of actors for his own shows; the way his theatre is built on a network of complex relations.



Production Shot from Michel Tremblay’s *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again*

She also touches on the differences between storytelling and the confessional monologue that Tremblay uses in all his works, bringing up special memories of *Les Belles Soeurs* as each woman steps out of the crowded kitchen into that famous spotlight to tell the audience her worries, her fears, and the terrible secrets ruining her life. And too there is the famous Duchess of Langeais monologue, when this legendary transvestite takes us into the near tragic underworld of those “strange friends” whom the mother is starting to notice.

There is, of course, much more. But the main thing is that this play speaks about Tremblay’s theatre as it examines his relationship with his mother. As such it could be compared to other manifestos such as Moliere’s *Impromptu de Versailles*, Giraudoux’s *Impromptu de Paris*, and one of Tremblay’s other works, *L’Impromptu d’Outremont*, which is also a reflection on theatrical style and bourgeois culture in Montreal.

Even the ending is a grand gesture to French theatre with its *deus ex machina*, a heightened moment of classical theatricality used by Molière, who always celebrated King Louis XIV at the end of his Opera Ballets by sending him up into the clouds in a gilded carriage. Here, it is Tremblay's mother going to heaven in a gilded canoe, the perfect theatrical ending for his dying mother who had us laughing when we might very well have been crying.

In this production, Lorne Cardinal was perfect as the young writer who grows from seven to twenty in an hour. On the other hand, Margo Kane, who has to carry the performance, was not always effective. I liked the unsentimental way the director and actress dealt with her suffering at the end and the way she related her niece's Cinderella dance performance was delightful. However, Ms. Kane had trouble sustaining the greater part of her text.

In her hands, the play too often slowed down and sounded repetitious. As well, she was not always able to capture the variations of tone, rhythm and vocal intensity, the non-linguistic strategies in her performance that would have given the play a lot more interest as a spoken text. I felt that the director did not work closely enough with her on the details of her vocal performance to keep her from sliding too quickly over all the verbal cues that were important in the text. As a result, many moments appeared repetitious, near lifeless, even monotonous with a voice that was at times on a single plane, sometimes too high, but at the same time lacking the spark of real life. Her yelling certainly did not solve that problem.



Production Shot from Michel Tremblay's  
*For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again*



Alvina Ruprecht

The point with Tremblay's plays is that he has a very fine musical ear being a great fan of opera and classical music. He writes his scripts almost as though they were musical scores, often introducing duets, trios, quartets and quintets of spoken voices. This one is a great operatic solo, but I had the definite feeling that neither Kane's ear nor the ear of director Glynis Leyson were always properly tuned to the nuances of Tremblay's "score" that would have given more variety and life to the mother's performance. *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again* was certainly a fine tribute to Tremblay from the NAC and the west, but it was also not the anticipated hit that Magnetic North was probably counting on.

For the record, the general panel discussion on the festival referred to earlier in this piece was chaired by Kathryn Prince from the University of Ottawa, and included critics Yana Meerzon, Patrick Langston (from *The Ottawa Citizen*), myself and Karen Fricker, a professor from Brock University.

This is an edited version of a piece published in [www.scenechanges.com](http://www.scenechanges.com) and on the website of the CCC [www.capitalcriticscircle.com](http://www.capitalcriticscircle.com).

Photo: Brenda Leadlay of Magnetic North (Photo by Andrew Alexander)

## A Student View: Ottawa Critics Critiqued

by Brianna McFarlane

*This past academic year, Yana Meerzon, an Ottawa theatre critic and Professor of Theatre at the University of Ottawa offered a course in theatre criticism. Over the course of the year, a number of working critics stopped in to speak with them including Patrick Langston, Alvina Ruprecht, Patricia Keeney and CTCA President Don Rubin. At the end of the course, a think piece was*

required of the students. One of them, Brianna MacFarlane, decided to use the space to critique the local critics. We offer the following piece as the thoughts of a young would-be critic looking at the critical world she sees around her. As with all our pieces in *Critically Speaking*, it is offered as a personal statement and in no way reflects any official position of CTCA on the people mentioned.

\* \* \*

The Ottawa theatre community is sick. Not in the sense that we find ourselves lacking for theatre. On the contrary, we have plenty of theatre to go around. Rather, our community has so few strong theatre writers that it has caused us to gorge ourselves on unsubstantiated reviews and empty praise. There's hardly anyone trying to uphold any kind of standards and in turn our theatres, more specifically our professional stages, have become infected by mediocrity.

One of the major problems is writers identifying themselves as theatre "critics" when they do nothing of the sort. This paper seeks to analyze the different types of theatre "criticism" happening currently in the Ottawa community by looking at the reviews of five writers (Patrick Langston, Allan Mackey, Alvina Ruprecht, Kevin Reid, and Jamie Portman) and using one production, Seven Thirty Productions' *Absurd Person Singular*, as a point of reference.



Patrick Langston

Patrick Langston is the Ottawa Citizen's primary theatre critic, though I should also mention that he is a freelance writer who writes about a variety of topics. He has been writing for them for a number of years and writes what I feel to be a commercial review. His take on *Absurd Person Singular* (APS) is well written and to the point. He is neither overly critical nor celebratory and displays a good understanding of Ayckbourn's text.

He takes issue with the set and praises the direction, but never really describes either. The fact that he doesn't go into too much detail about anything is what makes it a commercial review. It provides a general overview of the production and doesn't really give us enough information or research to be considered archival or academic nor does it have a strong promotional or blogging tone. This type of writing doesn't look to set any kind of standards and is geared more towards entertaining the *Ottawa Citizen* reader ultimately in hopes of encouraging them to see theatre.

Second, we have Allan Mackey whose reviews aim to help readers decide whether or not they should see a production. Mackey is the Editor-in-chief of Production Ottawa, a website that "provides the most in-depth movie and theatre coverage on Ottawa's production scene" (Production Ottawa). He is their major writer on theatre. The tone in his review for APS is definitely more personal than it is professional or academic. For example, when it comes to summarizing Ayckbourn's script, he very nearly trivializes it: "Absurd Person Singular is the story of three couples as they get together to celebrate Christmas over three years. Each couple comes from different social classes and each couple's fortunes change in the time between the three Christmases we're treated to. It's more or less straightforward" (Mackey). This personal tone is definitely that of a blogger.



Allan Mackey

At 562 words the review is full of pictures and like Langston, provides a more general overview of the production, though without Langston's understanding of the text. Mackey dismisses the third act because of a "much more languid pace and much less laughter" not realizing this is the point of Ayckbourn's dark comedy: the last act represents the fall of the old money Brewster-Wrights and the rise of the lower class Hopcrofts. The circus scene at the end is a clear allegory to this takeover though Mackey describes it as "physical humiliation silliness." He mentions a "few directorial puzzlements" but only goes into detail about one and dedicates only one line to the set, despite how important it is to the concept, and says hardly anything about the actual staging itself.

In my opinion, I cannot define this as proper criticism. The writing is based too much on personal feeling and there's not enough research or understanding to substantiate it. For this reason it must be qualified only as a blog, at least until the

terms “review” and “critique” become more clearly defined. However, it must be noted that Allan Mackey and Production Ottawa is the only one of the five in this paper who encourages discourse with every blog post: “But that’s just my opinion, and I want to know what you think?” This discourse is essential to evolving theatre communities.

The next writer I analyze is certainly prolific. Alvina Ruprecht hardly needs an introduction as she is such a pillar in the Ottawa theatre community. Having served as CBC radio’s prime theatre critic for 30 years and being one of the ringleaders of the Ottawa Capital Critics Circle, this woman takes her criticism seriously. One of the few strong writers and true critics this city has, Ruprecht reviews just about everything in both English and French. Her knowledge is vast and she provides much research and evidence for her readers in order to formulate some sort of context for her criticism.

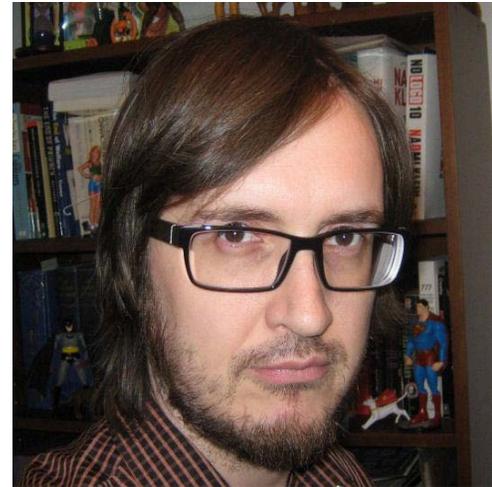
Simply put, her reviews are an archive for Ottawa theatre. The amount of detail she goes into about all aspects of the production is fantastic. In her review for *APS* she defines and notes the difference between French and English farce and she expertly explains the key aspects of Ayckbourn’s comedy: “As privileged voyeurs, we observe the slow disintegration of the upper class and the rise of the working class in a narrative that has decidedly revolutionary undertones.” She spends quite a bit of time analyzing and describing both the staging and the acting and it’s very clear that she is not just writing for the readers of today, but for readers in the future.

*Ronald’s wife Marion pretends to be charmed by the new Hopcroft kitchen, but the falseness of her words rings clearly through her paternalistically sing-song intonation, betraying her deep seated disdain for this boring kitchen[...]The sounds of language became an extremely important way of creating meaning in this production and they mostly got it!*

- Alvina Ruprecht

At 1300 words this review is not meant for the casual reader. It is aimed at a well-read theatre going audience who could pick up this piece of writing 50 years from now and still get a strong impression of this particular production. It is this transcendent quality that makes Ruprecht’s writing archival.

We then move on to Kevin Reid, webmaster and sole reviewer of the Visitorium, who is on his way to being as prolific as Ruprecht, though perhaps for the wrong reasons. Though he labels himself an amateur reviewer his website receives a fair amount of hits from the Ottawa theatre community and his thoughts have been known to hold a bit of sway amongst theatre creators. Incredibly dedicated to his hobby, the amount of writing that Reid produces is impressive. However, having read through a number of his reviews, it’s hard to consider this style of writing to be criticism and I would pose that he is really a promotional reviewer instead.



Kevin Reid

In his piece on *APS* specifically, the tone is personal and Reid dedicates quite a few lines to detailing the actors’ and directors’ resumes: “Melanie Karin, who totally wants to be your next Much Music VJ so go and vote,” Similar to Mackey, this review belies a lack of research by glazing over just about everything in the production. Whether it’s the script, “Things have gone from bad to worse in everyone’s personal lives...almost. And it’s kind of impossible to talk about the scene without giving too much away, so hooray, I won’t!” or the acting, “But it’s the middle couple of the show, the Jacksons who really seem to have the most character growth of the bunch, and David Whitely and Michelle LeBlanc handle it like bosses, Reid tells his readers things are good or effective, but never explains why. The last paragraph of his review is spent trying to convince his readers to get out and see the show by mentioning his desire to see it a second time and the fast selling tickets.

There are three reasons why I call this style of writing that Reid has adopted promotional reviewing. The first is that his writing carries a personable and positive (and decidedly uncritical) tone throughout. Second, is the constant reference to the production teams’ past successes, such as John Kelly and his “packed houses at the Gladstone and the GCTC” or “Prix Rideau Award nominee” Michelle LeBlanc. And third, is the successful combination of these first two tactics into a style of writing that sells the production and attempts to get readers out to the theatre. It is safe to say that Reid has found his niche.

Finally the last writer on this list and, in my opinion, the most important to the Ottawa theatre community: Jamie Portman, a freelance writer for the Capital Critics Circle. Portman writes what I feel should be the standard for any serious up and coming theatre writers. His writing is truly professional grade quality and is a style that I, myself, try to strive for in my own writing. Portman's writing is honest and well-informed and his passion for wanting to improve Ottawa theatre and push boundaries is clear in his criticism: "Despite one regrettable error in judgement, it's rewarding to see the way in which that canny ringmaster, director John P. Kelly, responds to the demands posed by *Absurd Person Singular*."

Portman displays a strong understanding of the script and genre, though he doesn't go into nearly as much detail as his colleague Alvina Ruprecht. Portman is the only one of the five writers who notes how important the set is to Ayckbourn's entire concept. This is where he decides to go into more detail about why David Whitely's set was ineffective and how things could be improved for future productions. His tone is not of a condescending nature and Portman chooses to back up his criticism, and even his praise, with references to other productions in similar circumstances. For example, he points out that a rural theatre troupe, the Mississippi Mudds, had similar stage demands for their production of *Noises Off*, but with a little "thought and effort" they turned their set into an "award winning concept."

Portman's writing is so important to this community because he is one of the few who looks to really set some sort of standard, "Both play and production deserve better than this" and challenges Ottawa theatre creators to go above and beyond their limits. I think the difference between him and Ruprecht, though there are many similarities, is that Portman writes more for the artists and Ruprecht's style is more geared towards the academics.



Production Photo from  
*Absurd Person Singular*

In conclusion, after coming to the end of a semester long course in theatre criticism at Ottawa U, there were two questions that the majority of the students couldn't seem to answer: Why is theatre in Ottawa so mediocre? And who, exactly, is to blame?

I have some bad news: It's our fault. We're all to blame. There is no solid forum in this community for serious theatre criticism and it's starting to affect our stages. Ottawa desperately needs more writers who are educated in theatre arts and dedicated to encouraging and continuing discourse. We can't keep complaining about the lack of standards in this city if we don't step up and say something about it and we certainly can't keep relying on the few theatre "critics" we do have to set these standards for us.

There's so much theatre that does happen in this city it is truly shocking that there isn't more writing being done about it. We need to step up as a community and be more impassioned about what's happening on our stages. Theatre is not just a hobby, it's a form of art and should be respected as such. Without strong criticism we only condemn our theatre to a future of mediocrity.

---

## International News and Views: Sweden, Excom and CS

Jonkoping is a tiny town in south-central Sweden which boasts a super modern multi-theatre venue. This past May, Jonkoping (pronounced Yon-Shope-ing) was home to Sweden's biennial festival of theatre and performing arts, the Scenkonst Biennalen, a festival rather similar in intent to Canada's Magnetic North festival. The Biennalen is a showcase of the country's top theatre performances (including dance and performance art) from the previous year and much of the country's theatre community stopped in to take a look.

Also in Jonkoping for the festival was the IATC's international Executive Board for a day of business meetings, the Editorial Board of the IATC's Critical Stages webjournal and a number of international guests to participate in a one day symposium on the general notion of criticism and "the performing arts" as opposed to criticism and "theatre" per se.

Both the Executive Committee and the CS editorial board spent time discussing funding for the journal. Funding from

South Korea expires at the end of 2013 and a search has been on for a new source of financial support for close to a year. The Chinese had indicated an interest in taking it on for the immediate future but the initiative failed when national censorship laws became an issue.

In Jonköping, the American section offered to support the journal for 2014 with a possibility of renewing its support in future. That offer, made by Jeffrey Jenkins and Southern Illinois University, received general acceptance with details to be worked out. It is clear that financial issues need to be solved long-term.

It was also pointed out at the meeting that Yun-Cheol KIM of South Korea would be concluding his third and final term as President at the IATC's next world congress in 2014 which makes the new presidency a major issue at the upcoming congress which is being held in Beijing with the support of the Central Academy of Drama. The congress is to take place in October that year. Representatives from both Canadian sections are expected to attend (the CTCA and the Quebec centre). Anyone else interested in attending should contact the CTCA President.



At the *Critical Stages* meeting, much discussion also revolved around the appointment of a new editor (Yun-Cheol Kim indicated he also wished to step down from that position after the 2014 congress) as well as the theme for *CS*'s tenth issue due out also in 2014. A number of Canadians have been writing fairly regularly for *CS* which is growing in quality and stature and, perhaps most importantly, in the number of hits it gets each issue.

---

## From the IATC Website: London

by Ian Herbert

### 100 Years of the UK Critics' Circle

For a notably sedentary organization, the UK Critics' Circle (whose Drama Section is the UK section of IATC) is being surprisingly busy in 2013, its centenary year. As well as the Circle's five sections handing out their own annual awards earlier in the year, on 7 May a starry gathering at London's Barbican Centre saw them conferring not the usual annual single lifetime achievement award (2012's went to Stephen Sondheim) but five, to leaders in each section's field.

The ceremony was hosted by the celebrated actress Janet Suzman, the Drama award going to Max Stafford-Clark. Specially commissioned statuettes were presented, while a large group of equally distinguished guests received copies of the Circle's handsomely illustrated centenary book, *A Critical Century*, compiled from the Circle's archive and edited by the current Secretary and Treasurer respectively, William Russell and Peter Cargin.



London's Barbican Centre

The UK theatre critics section are organising a day-long public conference on theatre criticism past, present and future at the end of September, with the collaboration of the Royal Central School of Dramatic Art.

In April the critics met their public in a series of panels at the Victoria and Albert Museum, on *The Art of Criticism*. In the morning a series of separate art-form panels, featuring leading critics from the various disciplines including Michael Billington,

Barry Norman, Libby Purves and Marina Vaizey, talked about their ways of working, which have changed radically since the early days of handwritten notices, or copy dictated in from chilly public phone boxes. Almost all were completely against the present star system of rating the arts, though Michael Billington tellingly admitted that he would choose a restaurant from its stars.

The afternoon session brought representatives of the five sections together to look a little at the future of criticism. Much of the talk was not optimistic for the craft – or indeed the arts as a whole in this time of crisis. Speakers dwelt on the decline of the printed newspaper, but the role of the newspaper critic still seems to remain a valuable one, not least to the new audience created by their added on-line presence: Sarah Crompton, Arts Editor for the *Daily Telegraph*, mentioned that Charles Spencer's theatre reviews appeared regularly in their website's 'most read' listing. She also reaffirmed that the arts were much more profitable to newspapers than sport. Blogs will expand the critical horizon, all agreed, but the distinction has to be made between established reviewers filing on respected sites and ephemeral amateurs with no track record. Film critic David Gritten was adamant that there will always be a need for reputable, well written criticism that gives the arts a context.

Time ran out before all the members of the audience could have their say in what proved a very lively debate. Most of the critics giving their views at the V & A were highly experienced – and in consequence not in the first bloom of youth. It may take a whole new generation of young critics to carry the Circle's torch further, across the present boundaries.

---

## Letter from Spain

by Robin Breon

Spain is more than just flamenco dancers and tapas bars. I've been writing about the theatre for over 30 years and it never ceases to amaze me how when one travels to a foreign country, the local theatre there continues to inspire and inform. Sometimes a completely unplanned theme emerges and one city links to another and then another. This was exactly the case on a recent visit.



Teatro Español - Madrid, Spain

the fact that Lope de Vega's homestead was just around the corner from our hotel, and I knew that the gods of the theatre had preordained this trip to be a blessed one.

It was not by design that we arrived in Madrid on the eve of World Theatre Day on March 26th. In fact, the significance of the timing of our trip had slipped my mind completely and it was not until strolling past the venerable Teatro Español located in the bustling Plaza Santa Ana and finding a theatre bookstore down one of the many cobbled streets off the Plaza that I saw a poster announcing *Cincuenta Sombras de Brecht* (Fifty Shades of Brecht) listing events around the city that would dedicate a poem, song or short skit by Brecht as part of their contribution to WTD.

This, along with many more organized events, made for a much more robust recognition of the day than we afford it here in Canada. Add to this

On the following day, we toured the house that Lope purchased in 1610 and where he wrote many of his plays during Spain's "Golden Age". Interestingly, it is just down the street from the house of Miguel Cervantes. Apparently the two contemporaries did not get along. Lope thought Don Quixote sucked. Oh well, critics take heed. At the conclusion of the tour (which was conducted bilingually) our guide asked how many countries were represented in the house and had ).

anyone recently seen a play by Lope de Vega?

I was pleased to report to the assembly of nations that several seasons ago our own Stratford Festival had presented *Fuenteovejuna* to great acclaim and then repeated the play in Suchitoto, El Salvador, as part of an international cultural project with which the Festival was involved. In the spirit of WTD, an official proclamation -- this year written by Italian playwright and Nobel Laureate, Dario Fo -- was formally announced by one of the docents while first person interpreters dressed in period costume circulated throughout the crowd.

That evening we saw the first of two Madrid shows. Emilio Arrieta's 1855 opera, *Marina*, was playing at the Teatro de la Zarzuela. The opera comes down more on the Italian side of the house than it does Zarzuela (at least in this version) but it was great fun to hear it done with an excellent ensemble in this magnificent house that originally opened its doors in 1856. The next night saw us up the street in the smaller studio space of Teatro Español to see an interesting cantata entitled *Donde Mira El Ruisenor Cuando Cruje Una Rama*, a post-modernist mash up in the style of a medieval morality play (incorporating folk elements of jácara and sarabande) about the Mother of Jesus. This production was a transfer from the previous season's equivalent of Madrid's fringe festival and it was receiving a sold out run with enthusiastic standing ovations.



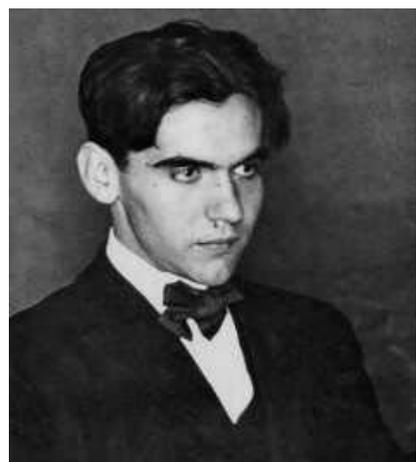
Teatro de la Zarzuela.

I hesitate to call the ancient religious processions of Seville during Easter week a kind of street theatre but to land in in this storied city at this time of year is to experience something of a theatrical atmosphere for the religiously minded. Kind of a cross between attending mass followed by bacchanalian partying late into the night.

After Seville we made a brief stop in Córdoba to see the Mezquita, the ancient religious site, before proceeding on with our pilgrimage to Grenada. For me the sacred nature of this journey was not so much the Alhambra, although I was anxious to see it, but rather to the summer home of Federico Garcia Lorca.

It was here in the cool relief of summer that Lorca worked on some of his most important plays. And it was from this house that General Francisco Franco's troops grabbed him in on August 19th, 1936, threw him onto the back of a truck and transported the gentle poet eight kilometers out of town where they shot him along with several other political prisoners. Their bodies were dumped into a common grave that remains unidentified to this day. General Franco's Falangist regime placed a ban on the presentation of Lorca's plays that was not lifted until 1953.

His summer home in Grenada, known as Huerta de San Vicente, was only declared a national historic site of importance in 1995. Such is the long lasting emotional, social and political trauma of the Spanish Civil War that plagues the country still.



Federico García Lorca

Lorca is enjoying a bit of a resurgence of late. Although dead by the age of 38, his fame was such that his poems, plays and dramaturgical work had already entered the international repertoire. His visionary love letter, *Poet in New York*, was published posthumously in 1940 but was written during a visit to Columbia University in 1929-'30. It has just been re-released by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in an appended and expanded bilingual edition. And New York this summer, various events and performance pieces were being planned including a Patti Smith concert at the Bowery Ballroom to celebrate Lorca's birthday on June 5th and a New York Public Library exhibition that featured various pieces of memorabilia and ephemera that contextualizes *Poet in New York* which ran during July.

Our final stop before returning to Madrid and then back to Toronto was in the town of Almagro, about an hours' drive south of Madrid. The Museo Nacional del Teatro is located here in the heart of Spain's wine country and it is a very good choice of venue to house and display the set designs, costumes, drawings, prints, paintings and sculpture that comprises the nation's theatrical patrimony.

The museum is divided into three sections with exhibition space on three floors. Think of it as modeled after a theatre with orchestra seats on the first floor, a mezzanine and a balcony.

Almagro is also the site of a major international classical theatre festival (now in its 36th season) that runs each July. This year, the festival was presenting 47 companies from Europe and Latin American presenting 52 different productions in a total of 98 performances in several venues around the town including Almagro's historic Teatro Municipal (see [www.festivaldealmagro.com](http://www.festivaldealmagro.com))

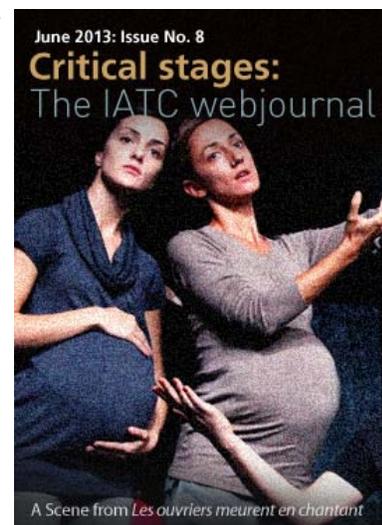
---

## CS 8 Now Online - Wanted: Theatre Readers (and Writers)

Freelance writers are always wanted for IATC's webjournal *Critical Stages*. Reviews of major new productions of potential international interest, reviews of new books on theatre of potential international interest and features/interviews on important current subjects should be sent in to the appropriate sections editor.

The current issue, just posted online (see [criticalstages.org](http://criticalstages.org)) includes several pieces from around the world on theatre during times of economic recession (the section was edited by Savas Patsalidis of Greece), a major new essay by theatre semiotics scholar Patrice Pavis of Paris, an essay on continuing censorship issues in the former Soviet republic of Georgia, reviews of new productions worldwide (including two from Canada by CTCA members Alvina Ruprecht and Patricia Keeney) and a review by Ian Herbert of Benedict Nightingale's recently published volume of collected theatre criticism.

It's a good issue and part of your CTCA membership. Do look. Do contribute.



Issue No. 8 Now Online

---

## Dues now (Over) Due

This will be the last dues call for the current calendar year. If you don't send your dues in by 1 September, we have to take you off our mailing list and drop you from the membership rolls (used by numerous theatres to see who you are). Then we have to charge you next year's dues plus \$10 to rejoin. So please send in your dues if you haven't already. (And special thanks to those who have actually made a contribution to CTCA over and above the normal dues. It is much appreciated.) As we have said time and time again, the only funding this organization has is the dues (and financial gifts) you contribute.

### Why should you pay dues?

Because your dues help pay for special activities like the Nathan Cohen and Herbert Whittaker Awards. It helps pay our share of Canada's international dues and makes you a member of the International Association of Theatre Critics. They pay for your IATC membership card which gets you big discounts in many parts of the world (unfortunately not much in North America).

It helps with costs of things like this issue of Critically Speaking and our Annual General Meeting and our annual tax filings and all sorts of really interesting stuff like that. Our dues are also about the lowest in the country for a professional organization. And they are completely tax deductible. Cheap at half the price. With big discounts for students and those over 65. For most, it's \$45 a year. For student critics, even cheaper.

Please send in your dues. Now.

Please send to Anton Wagner ([awagner@yorku.ca](mailto:awagner@yorku.ca)). His address is Apt. 2106, 201 Sherbourne, Toronto, ON., M5A 3X2.