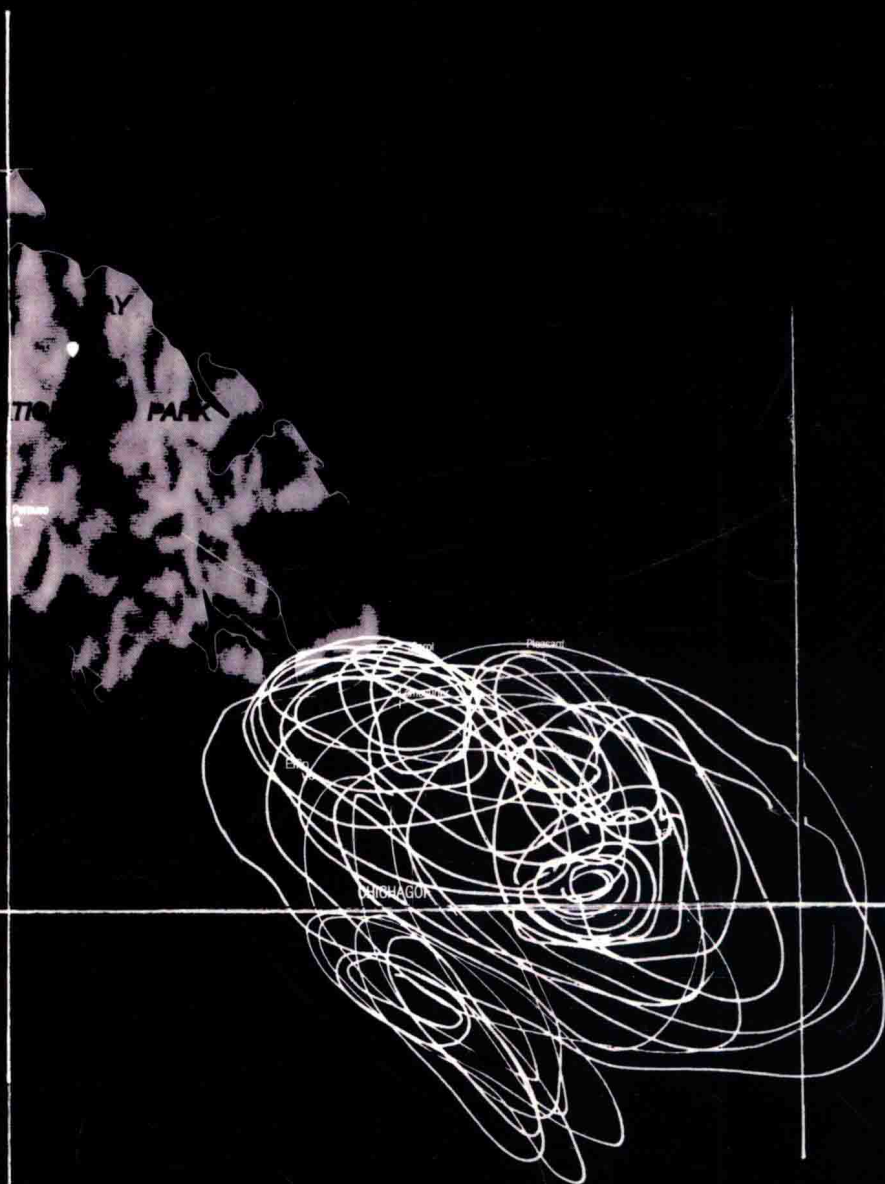


# new canadian realisms

eight plays

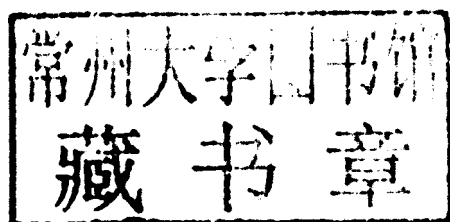
EDITED BY ROBERTA BARKER

AND KIM SOLGA



**New Canadian Realisms  
Eight Plays**

edited by Roberta Barker and Kim Solga



Playwrights Canada Press  
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## New Canadian Realisms

For our students, in all their wisdom and fearlessness.

## Introduction: Reclaiming Canadian Realisms

Roberta Barker and Kim Solga

*New Canadian Realisms: Eight Plays* collects one historical and seven contemporary works from the Canadian stage in order to examine, critically but also exuberantly, the legacy of stage realism in Canada. The stage realist tradition as many Canadians know it began in nineteenth-century Europe with the social melodramas of post-revolutionary France, gained prominence via the writings of Émile Zola, and reached the pinnacle of the avant-garde with the work of playwrights such as Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov on the continent, Synge and Shaw in Britain and Ireland, and Eugene O'Neill and his contemporaries in the United States. Grounded in the belief that the concrete social realities of the working and middle classes deserved open, truthful treatment on the stage, and often buttressed by the empiricist claims of nineteenth-century genetics and biology—which argued that all human relations could be explained via scientific fact—realism and its sub-genre, naturalism, aimed to make visible those unsightly things (poverty, sexual “deviance,” women’s social and sexual discontentment) that post-Enlightenment cultural mores had taught should never be discussed in polite company. Many of the means by which it strove to achieve this end have since achieved normative status in Western theatre. In classical realist plays, the “well-made” play structure with its linear chain of causality often leads toward final revelations; the box set invites audiences to peer through an imaginary fourth wall at the private interiors of the bourgeois household; characterization and acting style emphasize depth psychology and “subtext”; and beneath the tight-laced clothing of polite society the audience glimpses animal bodies disordered by mental agony, physical decay, and illicit desire.

The radical heyday of *The Seagull*, *A Doll’s House*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, and their cohort has now long passed, and yet the popularity of these plays seems stronger than ever in Canada and beyond. As we prepare this introduction, the acclaimed Canadian writer and director Morris Panych is opening his new

adaptation of Ibsen's *Ghosts* at Toronto's Soulpepper Theatre. Meanwhile, the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, stands firm in its commitment to the work of G.B. Shaw, his contemporaries, and his twentieth and twenty-first century inheritors. Across the country regional theatres routinely program realist and naturalist stalwarts; simultaneously, new Canadian avant-garde performers (many of whom appear in this anthology) mine realist text and technique for their own, often very diverse, purposes. With both traditional and adaptive stagings of classical realist plays constantly produced in Canada, the United States, and Europe, the continuing potency of stage realism seems beyond doubt.

This popular zest for realism, however, has long coexisted with biting critiques of the mode. Detractors have judged both the dramaturgical assumptions of realist playtexts and the realist techniques for acting and *mise en scène* developed by Constantin Stanislavsky and his followers in Europe and America at best outmoded, and at worst dangerously conservative. One of the earliest, and most influential, anti-realist critiques comes, ironically, from another realist: Bertolt Brecht. Brecht's extensive theoretical writings distinguish sharply between the "culinary" theatre he associates with traditional realism, a theatre made for easy emotional identification and pleasurable consumption by the well-off middle classes, and his own model of "epic" theatre. Unlike the mimetic realism of the great realists and naturalists, which tends to hide its own conventions and contrivances under its claim to reproduce the world "as it is," Brecht's epic realism blows down the fourth wall, shows how its illusions are made, and invites audiences to read its narratives as a series of politicized choices with clearly marked alternatives. Brecht's insistence that realism need *not* be "well-made" and seamless in its representations developed hand in hand with a set of techniques—gathered under the umbrella of what he calls the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or "estrangement" effect—which he created in order to render his brand of realism overtly political (in fact, overtly Marxist). Rejuvenated in the 1980s by some of the most important feminist performance scholars of the later twentieth century, including Janelle Reinelt and Elin Diamond, Brecht's "gestic" realist theatre theory becomes the basis for what is now the standard argument against Ibsenite stage realism: that it naturalizes the social order as it is understood by that order's dominant groups, and hence remains stifflingly closed off to the possibility of alternative ways of being "real"—especially for women and for racial and sexual minorities.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977); Elin Diamond, "Brechtian Theory: Feminist Theory: Toward a

The result of such critiques has been, over the last half-century or more, a tendency for radical, left-wing, or avant-garde artists and scholars to establish their political bona fides by rejecting realism as well as the audiences that prefer it. Yet realism at its inception was propelled by class and gender politics, by the urgent need to “show the codes” of a *fin-de-siècle* culture that had become extremely good at turning a blind eye to rampant economic inequality during a time of extraordinary political and social upheaval. The Europe of stage realism was struggling to become “modern.” Exposing the perils of modernization’s progress narrative—the wealth and opportunity it creates for some, and the doors it summarily closes for others—is very much a shaping goal of classic realist plays from Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* to Shaw’s *Major Barbara*. Brecht’s work is in sympathy with these social goals, of course, but the legacy of his refusal of realism’s *technique* as too consumerist, coddling its audiences when it ought to be challenging them, has had enormous staying power. When butch lesbian Stanley in the hilarious *Belle Reprise*, a satire on Tennessee Williams’s American realist classic *A Streetcar Named Desire* by the pioneering queer company Split Britches, declares that he and his fellow performers have “agreed” that realism is “bad for” them,<sup>2</sup> he voices—to a great deal of laughter—what had by the late twentieth century become standard thinking among many members of the theatrical avant-garde.

Even so, decidedly avant-garde artists such as Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, and Deb Margolin of the aforementioned Split Britches openly acknowledge the crucial role played by realist (specifically, American Method) acting techniques in the production of their apparently anti-realist work.<sup>3</sup> Such acknowledgements lead to fresh questions, now debated among scholars and artists formerly dismissive of the genre. In what ways is stage realism’s legacy paradoxically yet powerfully tied to work we might otherwise think of as *nothing like* realism at all? Is this mode of theatrical performance, long imagined to be too uniform and conservative to contain the true complexities of modern life, in fact expansive enough to stage our world as a world of paradox, a miasma of linked contradictions in

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Gestic Feminist Criticism,” *The Drama Review* 32 (1988), 82–94.

2 The play is available in *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (London: Routledge, 1996), 149–84.

3 Deb Margolin, “Mining My Own Business,” in *Method Acting Reconsidered: Theory, Practice, Future*, ed. David Krasner (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000), 132. Note that Margolin is no longer part of Split Britches.



which opposites must uneasily coexist? Brecht believed that the “not-but”—the coexistence of mutually contradictory possibilities—needed to be represented on stage in order to activate his audience, spur spectators to choice and debate. The more scholars investigate the complexities of what Brecht called “culinary” realist forms, however, the more they begin to discover that irresolvable contradictions—the power and the curse of a world bursting into modernity—and their political and social implications lie at the heart of all the best realist dramaturgy.<sup>4</sup>

In this anthology, we present one foundational realist text and seven fresh voices from the Canadian theatre in order to test this theory in the charged context of a once (and arguably still) colonial nation state. We offer here several works that look nothing like the well-made plays of Ibsen et al., and yet each bears the hallmarks of a realism grappling with the world as it is, as it is *not*, as it could be, and as it *might have been*. These works refuse to discard realism in their push toward more plural theatrical vocabularies and a more just life for all. Instead, they adopt and adapt its technical and critical legacies for entirely Canadian moments in time and space. In that labour, they also invite us to wonder how realism, as both a nineteenth-century Anglo-European and a twentieth-century American fascination, has translated to Canadian soil, and how and why Canada, as a neo-colonial settler nation, has so particularly valued this theatrical form’s ability to set the paradoxes of the “real” into motion on the stage.

## Stage Realism in Canada: A Brief History

Realism on the European model appears first to have arrived in Canada with European and American companies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

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4 One of the most exceptional early essays on the contradictory potential of stage realism remains Diamond’s “Realism’s Hysteria” in *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1–32. Like Diamond, Gay Gibson Cima, in her landmark *Performing Women: Female Characters, Male Playwrights, and the Modern Stage* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1993), shapes her reading of realism’s political power around its complex rendering of the women (characters and actresses) with which it was obsessed. On paradox as one of the political strengths of stage naturalism, see Kirk Williams, “Anti-Theatricality and the Limits of Naturalism,” in *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*, ed. Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 95–111. For a terrific rereading of the feminist critique of stage realism, complete with excellent references, see J. Ellen Gainor, “Rethinking Feminism, Stanislavsky, and Performance,” *Theatre Topics* 12 (2002): 163–75.

during the heyday of the colonial touring circuit affectionately known as “the Road.” The theatrical form most closely associated with these companies was melodrama, constructed by theatrical theorists such as Émile Zola as inimical to realism’s values. In fact, realism’s way into the hearts of Canadian audiences was largely paved by the vogue of melodramas with contemporary settings. These perennially popular works treated current social problems and featured detailed reproductions of specific locations, fashions, and lifestyles. Prominent examples include the classic anti-slavery drama *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (complete with Southern American interiors and carefully rendered ice floes) and Aléxandre Dumas Fil’s indestructible warhorse *The Lady of the Camellias* (*Camille*), with its simultaneous indictment and confirmation of the hypocrisies of bourgeois sexual morality. Innumerable American companies toured the former play, while actresses from the English phenomenon Jean Margaret Davenport to the great Frenchwoman Sarah Bernhardt to the young Canadian-born star Margaret Anglin played Dumas Fil’s dying courtesan Marguerite Gautier in Canadian runs of *Camille*.

By the 1890s, the European realist movement proper had gained visibility in Canada, and a decade later Ibsen’s problem dramas were being toured across the country. Actresses such as the English Constance Crawley, the American Minnie Maddern Fiske, and the Russian Alla Nazimova all appeared to celebrated effect (and some squeals of scandalized dismay) in *A Doll’s House* and *Hedda Gabler* in cities from Halifax to Winnipeg.<sup>5</sup> In *Curtain Time*, her memoir of her parents’ years running the Walker Theatre in Winnipeg, Ruth Harvey recalls entertainingly the impact of Nazimova’s Ibsen seasons, which inspired the city’s amateur playwrights to bombard her long-suffering actress-manager mother with reams of scripts marked by a dour sub-Ibsenesque version of realism.<sup>6</sup> Such scripts rarely reached publication or performance, yet their very existence suggests that the plays of Ibsen and his contemporaries had opened new doors for Canada’s aspiring playwrights.

By the late 1920s, the days of “the Road” were all but over, and such aspiring theatre artists sought their opportunities largely in the amateur Little Theatre movement, which strove to keep the dramatic flame alive in Canada by encouraging local theatre societies to stage established works and to create new ones.

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5 See, for example, the review of Crawley’s *Hedda* in *The Acadian Recorder*, 30 September 1911.

6 Ruth Harvey, *Curtain Time* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 292.

Realism rapidly became one of the key stylistic tools of Canadian Little Theatre, to the extent that its leading visionary, Herman Voaden, complained of its dominance, decrying “the dull literalism that so often characterizes the treatment of realistic plays.”<sup>7</sup> Yet even Voaden admired the realist acting style of the Moscow Art Theatre.<sup>8</sup> During the years of the Little Theatres’ heyday, that style began to seep into Canada via Stanislavsky’s disciples in Europe and the United States, and by mid-century it had gained a prominent place among the various forms of training available to the actors in the fledgling Canadian professional theatre.<sup>9</sup>

In playwriting, meanwhile, the realist model continued to gain ascendancy. Realist well-made dramas repeatedly attracted the coveted prize for best production at the country’s leading amateur theatrical competition, the Dominion Drama Festival. Among these plays, Gwen Pharis Ringwood’s one-act prairie tragedy *Still Stands the House* (1938), which appears in this collection, retains its popularity to this day. Another of the leading Canadian playwrights of the Little Theatre years, the transplanted Irishman John Coulter, pointed to the realist plays of his contemporary, Merrill Denison, as examples for Canadian dramatists and urged his peers to follow realist practice by grounding their work in their own lived experiences. The first major flowering of professional Canadian playwriting saw young writers take up Coulter’s challenge. In many cases, their goals were political as well as artistic and the results defiant of the status quo. Gratien Gélinas’s hugely successful *Tit-Coq* (1948) and *Bousille et les justes* (1959) pioneered the use of colloquial Québécois French onstage; their realist settings and engagement with such social issues as illegitimacy, alcoholism, and sexual violence worked alongside the familiar sounds of local dialect to lambast the hypocrisies of small-town French-Catholic society. Based on the author’s own experiences in the Ontario Reformatory–Guelph after he was accused of soliciting, John Herbert’s *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* (1967) used its naturalism to even more topical

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7 Herman Voaden, “What is Wrong with the Canadian Theatre?” *The Globe* (Toronto), 22 June 1929.

8 Anton Wagner, “‘A Phase in the Development of a Big Idea’: The Maturation of Symphonic Expressionism 1934–1938,” *Herman Voaden’s Symphonic Expressionism* (Ph.D. Diss., University of Toronto, 1984), *The Worlds of Herman Voaden*, accessed 10 October 2011, <http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/Theatre/voaden/chapter10.htm>.

9 See Anna Migliarisi, “The Hidden History of Stanislavsky in Canada,” *New Canadian Realisms: New Essays on Canadian Theatre Vol. 2*, ed. Roberta Barker and Kim Solga (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2012), 16–31.

ends, staging a critique of the Canadian penal system's unjust treatment of homosexuals months before Pierre Trudeau's famous assertion that "there's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation."<sup>10</sup> David Freeman's *Creeps* (1971), set in a "sheltered workshop" for disabled adults, similarly employed realist dramaturgy savagely to criticize the abuse and neglect with which a supposedly civilized society treated its most abject citizens. Bill Glassco's production of the play at Factory Theatre Lab not only made a profound impact on its spectators, but also cemented the centrality of Glassco and of Factory to the emerging Canadian Alternate Theatre movement.

Despite the challenging nature of such dramas, the well-made play structure associated with Ibsen's brand of realism had by now become a symbol of traditionalism, and held an equivocal place in the hearts of the Alternate Theatre community. Some of that community's most prominent artists, including the founders of Theatre Passe Muraille, rejected it as old-fashioned. Yet even Passe Muraille's collectively created works of the 1970s, which feature exuberantly anti-illusionist stagecraft as well as unconventional forms, share certain key imperatives with realism: *The Farm Show* (1972) was based upon direct observation of and interviews with farmers in Southern Ontario, while *1837: The Farmers' Revolt* (1974) was founded in documentary records of a key Canadian historical event. Meanwhile, many other leading lights of the Alternate movement continued to find inspiration in the formal models Passe Muraille had jettisoned. David French's *Leaving Home* (1972), the first of his Mercer plays, explored the dynamics of a troubled Newfoundland family displaced to Toronto in classically realist style. In an introduction recalling the play's hugely successful premiere, Urjo Kareda asserts that although "old-fashioned, naturalistic drama" is now "unaccountably considered archaic and unworkable," French handles the form "with great maturity, confidence, and honesty; nothing is generalized, everything is specific, and yet from a personal reminiscence comes a universal—dare I say national?—experience."<sup>11</sup> On many levels, the Alternates' search for a truly "Canadian" theatre was tangled up with the structures and strictures of realism.

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10 See "Trudeau's Omnibus Bill: Challenging Canadian Taboos," *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Digital Archives*, accessed 16 October 2011, [http://archives.cbc.ca/politics/rights\\_freedoms/topics/538/](http://archives.cbc.ca/politics/rights_freedoms/topics/538/).

11 Urjo Kareda, introduction to *Leaving Home*, by David French (1972; Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2001), ix.

The same tension between the critique and the continued exploration of realism has marked the development of Canadian theatre in the ensuing years. Many artists, especially those who write from or about socially marginalized communities, have rejected realism with disdain. For example, in works such as *Suzie Goo: Private Secretary* (1991) and *Drag Queens on Trial* (1994), the groundbreaking queer theatre artist Sky Gilbert eschews realism; in its stead he embraces melodrama as a mode more suitable to a queer aesthetic and politics. Important early works of Canadian feminist theatre similarly departed from realist models. In Québec, Denise Boucher's *Les fées ont soif* (*The Fairies are Thirsty*, 1978) depicted female archetypes of Virgin, Mother, and Whore in place of realism's carefully individualized characters, while in Toronto the Anna Project's *This is for You, Anna* (1983) abandoned the realist equivalence between actor and character and instead cast multiple performers in the role of its protagonist in order to "highlight notions of gender performance... in a Brechtian way."<sup>12</sup> In the same era, however, playwright Judith Thompson was using realism to stage powerful critiques of class and gender-based oppression in works such as *The Crackwalker* (1980), and even engaging directly with a European realist classic in her adaptation of *Hedda Gabler* (1991). Major queer playwrights such as Michel Marc Bouchard and Daniel MacIvor, while experimenting extensively with expressionism and metatheatricity, have also powerfully engaged with realist family drama in plays like *Les Muses orphelines* (*The Orphan Muses*, 1988) and *Marion Bridge* (1999).

Canada's non-white communities have had a similarly productive, if often agonistic, relationship with realism. Early works depicting the immigrant experience, such as Uma Parameswaran's *Rootless But Green Are the Boulevard Trees* (1987), embrace both realist dramaturgy and performance technique, and have been followed in style and subject matter by plays as varied as Sunil Kuruvilla's *Rice Boy* (2003), Marty Chan's *Mom, Dad, I'm Living With a White Girl* (1995), and Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1998). In fact, "multicultural" theatre's dance with realism had, by 2004, become ubiquitous enough to be parodied to hilarious effect in Camyar Chai, Guillermo Verdecchia, and Marcus Youssef's *The Adventures of Ali & Ali and the aXes of Evil*. By contrast, Canada's Indigenous artists have frequently preferred dramaturgical modes firmly rooted in First Nations rather than European models; creators such as Monique Mojica, for example, have underlined the latter's

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12 Shelley Scott, *The Violent Woman as a New Theatrical Character Type: Cases from Canadian Drama* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), 63–64.

inability to represent the multiple levels of being that mark Aboriginal realities. Still, Euro-realism's family conflicts in living-room settings have played out to political effect in such major Native plays as Drew Hayden Taylor's *Someday* (1993), *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth* (1998), and *400 Kilometres* (2005). The complex weave between European and Indigenous realist modes emerges vividly in Tomson Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989), in which the magical worlds of Nanabush, the play's trickster spirit, appear and disappear throughout the play on an upper stage, while the world of European realism soldiers on below. The two come together in a brutal rape scene that is as chilling in its gender politics as it is in its staging of the violation of Indigenous experience by Western forms of representation.

## New Canadian Realisms

Like that searing scene, each play in this collection inspires its readers and viewers to think in fresh ways about the multi-faceted dynamics of stage realism and its ongoing aesthetic and political potential for Canadian performance. In the spirit of the mode at its inception, many of these texts come from the new Canadian avant-garde—and many of them depart significantly from what might be dubbed “your grandmother’s realism.” The plays are ordered chronologically, beginning with Ringwood’s *Still Stands the House* (1938) and ending with Madeleine Blais-Dahlem’s Franco-Saskatchewanian reply to its legacy, *s’Tain/La maculée* (2011). In between, we hope readers will discover multiple nodes of connection among even the most apparently divergent pieces here—shared threads so numerous we found it impossible to group these plays by theme.

One of the most performed and anthologized plays in Canadian theatre history, *Still Stands the House* helped to establish many of the tropes and figures most closely connected with the Canadian realist tradition in the popular imagination. It also raised many of the questions and contradictions that weave their way through the plays that follow it in this volume. Immediately after *Still Stands*, for example, Hillar Liitoja’s *The Last Supper* (1993) uses a detailed realist setting, much as Ringwood’s play does, to defamiliarize an apparently cozy everyday interior and to expose the physical and mental sufferings that haunt it. The play adapts the strict naturalist style of early August Strindberg in a work that pushes the latter’s pseudo-scientific eugenicism (evident in celebrated works such as *Miss Julie* and *The Father*) to ends the old master may never have imagined. Liitoja

envisioning a time when euthanasia is a legal right, and places that right at the service of an artist dying of a wasting disease at the peak of the HIV/AIDS crisis in North America. As art tames death while artist dies, Liitoja presses European naturalism to the edges of one of its most profound internal paradoxes: its struggle to reconcile the pleasures of art with the growing power of science.

From tragedy, perchance, follows comedy, and here Liitoja is followed by Trey Anthony's *'da Kink in my hair* (2001), a mash-up of mysticism, monologue, dub poetry, and potent bodily charms, wrapped in a realism adapted for Canada's black community—specifically its *female* black community. Weaving black women's stories—the stuff rarely shared, and never shared in public—through the semi-private space of a West Indian hair salon, *'da Kink* talks b(l)ack both to realism's long legacy as a site for working through (white) women's problems, and to its conventional kitchen or drawing-room setting. What it means to be a *black* woman, both in private *and* in public, in contemporary Canada is Anthony's hysterically serious subject.

*'da Kink* both is and is not strictly realist in its form, and two even more formally unconventional works follow it: Theatre Replacement's *BIOBOXES* and Zuppa Theatre's *Penny Dreadful* (both 2007). Like Zuppa's work, Theatre Replacement's *BIOBOXES* reworks form while maintaining a realist spirit: in this show, realism's "box set" is transformed literally into six photo-booth-sized boxes, and each contains an immigration story, initially told to the performer-creator of each box through interviews with first-generation Canadians in Vancouver. Borrowing the techniques of documentary performance and channelling them through the very Canadian logic of the summer heritage fair (with its carefully dressed "ethnic" settings), *BIOBOXES* invites audience members into an intimate, often uncomfortable, one-on-one encounter with cultural difference. Like Anthony's *'da Kink*, it thus chafes against another Canadian realist tradition: the familiar multicultural narrative of struggle, love, loss, and—finally—happy conquest of a harsh new environment. *Penny Dreadful*, meanwhile, re-imagines realism's central "problem" bodies—the poor; the sick; the unstable woman—while adapting specific elements of its technical legacy. This intensively intertextual, devised piece reworks Ibsen's *Ghosts* from the viewpoint of nineteenth-century Halifax and draws on the playful energies of physical theatre and live music to paint a world at once romantic, musical, melodramatic, and brutally realist. Simultaneously Anglo-European and colonial-Canadian, *Penny Dreadful* queries the fixity of the borders between ostensibly alien genres and places.

Tara Beagan's *Miss Julie: Sheh'mah* (2008) follows *Penny Dreadful*, and like it adapts an infamous text from the European realist tradition: Strindberg's *Miss Julie*. Here, though, the titular character is "white trash," and her servants are Jonny and Christie Ann from the Shuswap and Salish First Nations. Like Anthony, Liitoja, and Theatre Replacement, Beagan turns the realist heritage around on itself in the name of those who have been too easily rendered invisible by Canada's straight and white dominant cultures, querying the socio-scientific logic that keeps entire groups of people beneath the floorboards and away from their human rights. But the white Julie herself is not just a foil here: like Blais-Dahlem, like Anthony, and like the artists of Zuppa Theatre, Beagan returns realism's famed and troubled "new" woman to the contemporary Canadian stage. Her Julie is trapped inside her own desiring body, unable to unleash the force of her dreaming and still be legitimate, "real," in the eyes of her world.

Our final two pieces could not be more different, and yet together they represent the best of new Canadian work on and with the legacy of stage realism. We aim in this book to balance text-based plays shaped by traditional realist dramaturgical models (Ringwood, Beagan, Anthony) with more experimental, devised work that is nevertheless inspired by realism (*Penny Dreadful*, *BIOBOXES*). Into the latter category tumbles our penultimate piece, *Depression Shaped Like a Hill* (2009), part of the *Impromptu Splendor* series by Toronto's National Theatre of the World. The transcription of an hour-long improvisation based on the work of Anton Chekhov, *Depression Shaped Like a Hill* breaks every realist rule there is—it's improv!—and yet somehow, uncannily, manages to be Chekhovian all the same. Here is stage realism at its most basic, its most raw, its most powerfully contradictory: clichéd yet immediate and fresh, serious and depressing yet utterly charming and gut-grabbingly funny, populist (for "serious" theatre people) yet elitist (for many of those into improv), thoroughly artful yet catastrophically error-prone. This is realism as a new "real" world every night: collaborative, democratic, smart, skilled, and totally fun.

We end our collection with Madeleine Blais-Dahlem's brand-new, award-winning, bilingual play, *sTain/La maculée* (2011). At its centre, Françoise, in her rage, pain, and resistance, channels so many of the women who have come before her in this book, and so many of the other female characters whose powerfully rendered struggles mark realism's legacy as profoundly feminist in its potential. Françoise's time and place return us to *Still Stands the House*, but the originality of Blais-Dahlem's construction—in two languages and several stylistic modes at



once—maps out a contemporary Canadian realism that is shifting, dynamic, and expansive enough to make space for all bodies, voices, and struggles among us. One of Canadian realism's most threadbare tropes is the prairie play, revolutionary in Ringwood's time but often reduced to cliché in our own. Yet with *sTain* Blais-Dahlem reveals a dimension of that trope previously unseen and declares its continuing theatrical power. Her play offers an ideal end to what we hope is a collection that can help us to re-imagine—and in the process to reclaim the multivalent possibilities of—Canadian theatrical realism.