Transporting Canadian Plays to German Theatres

Canadian plays are first and foremost written for productions and audiences in Canadian theatres, but while they are ‘Canadian,’ they also deal with cultural issues relevant to audiences everywhere. Over the past few decades, Canadian theatre has developed into something far away from a monolith. It has become protean, i.e., it has the ability to continually change its appearance. The term ‘theatre of diversity’ is based on the fact that there is not just one single Canadian theatre. There are plays by Native Canadian, Afro-Canadian, East Indian, Chinese and Korean authors who are all living in Canada. ‘Voice’ is a plural term in contemporary Canadian Theatre. It includes forms from various cultural traditions which, by accepting diverse approaches to theatrical practice, create images and sounds that defy easy categorisation. Many Canadian plays surprise by their freshness, their thematically wide variety and their unfeigned originality. The polyphony of Canada is mirrored in its theatre culture, especially in plays which tell of the ability to even out differences in a multicultural society. What is more, Canadian plays increasingly deal with subjects and problems of interest to, and directly affecting, people wherever they may be. They raise new questions about old issues which are articulated in new and exciting ways. Canadian plays no longer feel restricted by the bonds of any kind of canon.

Since the 1990s, Canadian stage plays have slowly but steadily found their way into European theatres. In this process of transatlantic transfers, productions on British stages have played a prominent role, as the plays can be produced in their original language. Canadian plays in German theatres, however, are still exceptions to the rule. For a long time, their promotion in our country has been left to chance and individual activities. For example, a German theatre agent may have seen a production in Toronto, Montréal or Vancouver which instilled into him or her the wish to see a particular play staged in one of our German theatres. These days, the overall questions are how the transfer of Canadian plays can be successful and how the profile of German theatres can profit from the potential of contemporary Canadian plays. There are two Canadian organisations instrumental in the dissemination of Canadian voices for the stage: the Playwrights Guild of Canada (PGC) and its publishing imprint, Playwrights Canada Press. These provide printed editions and play scripts of new plays.

Playscripts can make for interesting reading and lend themselves to textual analysis. But plays, in contrast to novels, are not primarily written for individual readers. Playscripts are but blueprints for stage plays. They are written for directors, designers, stage managers and actors who are to develop concepts for productions from the “modelling clay.”

Producing articles on the written or published text of the play is one thing, reading the play in the light of a potential theatrical production is another. Many questions will crop up in the minds of theatre people: Will the story of the (in this case Canadian) play meet with a(n) (German) audience? Can we find actors who can convincingly slip into
the roles of the characters? Has the translation of the English text into German achieved "equivalence in difference"? Or, do we have to make slight changes in the German text?

In this article, I try to assume the roles of German theatre people and think of a director and his/her "train of thoughts" when preparing the production of a play. For he/she is the central collaborator without being the primary creator.

Some years ago, I interviewed a number of theatre directors, dramaturges and other experts in German theatres and asked them questions such as: "According to your knowledge of public demand and your own ideas, what kind of Canadian plays would stand a chance of being positively received by our audiences? What are the most important demands on the plays as regards topics, issues and problems?" Discussions with them became a launching pad, as it were, for putting together a handbook, which was published in both English and German, in which some thirty Canadian plays are recommended for production in German theatres (Glaap 1997, 2003). Time does fly – also in the world of theatre – and it goes without saying not all the plays suggested for production in the 1990s would live up to expectations of today’s audiences. In this day and age, questions like the following are waiting to be answered:

- Does the topic of the play mean anything to a German audience?
- Is its topic in any way, shape or form, relevant to the lives of German theatregoers in our time?
- Is the play based on a gripping dramaturgical concept that can set new directions for theatrical activities?
- Does it make a valuable contribution – not so much because it is a Canadian play, but because it appears to be uninhibited by tradition, using this freedom to develop new structures and formats?

In the central part of this article, some contemporary Canadian plays for German productions and research will be recommended and briefly commented on. They can be divided into three different categories:

1) Plays that give an insight into facets of Canada as a multicultural society, into Canadian life and culture.
2) Plays that deal with subjects of general human interest (seen from a Canadian point of view).
3) Plays based on dramaturgical concepts that can help to set new directions in the production of plays in our theatres.

Category 1: Plays on Specifically Canadian Issues

_The Immigrant Experience_

Immigration programmes in Canada have had a great impact on the social, political and economic fabric of the country, and Canada’s immigration policy has been marked by constant changes to meet the challenges of the day. It is thus no surprise that for a long time, Canadians have been responding to stage plays about the immigrant experience and especially about making room for immigrants in contemporary Canadian society. Only a few years ago, one of the big stories in Canadian media was transferred to the stage by Factory Theatre in Toronto. They called it their ‘naked’ season, as they stripped
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Transporting "classic" Canadian plays, like Judith Thompson's *Crackwalker* and *Salt Water Moon* by the late David French, for new diverse audiences. Regardless of the motives for emigration, those who move away from their country of origin find themselves caught between the pull of two worlds; they have the choice of either adopting the new lifestyle or running the risk of being isolated. Canadian plays on the immigrant experience deal with different facets of those problems: making a choice, feeling out of context, finding a new perspective, exploring barriers of communication and trying to cope with a new language.

In the 1990s, the Canadian author Dennis Foon wrote a play with a transcultural dimension, titled *New Canadian Kid*, which turns the immigrant experience on its head by having a young arrival from an imaginary country called "Homeland" speak fluent English while the locally born youth can only produce a kind of gibberish. Foon hoped that his play would increase the audience's sympathy towards those who, for the first time, come to a foreign country where they will subsequently have to live. The young immigrant is struggling with his feelings, the insecurity brought about by the unfamiliar culture and language. The audience shares in the thoughts of this 'new' Canadian while being bombarded with the barely comprehensible language spoken by the others. Its 'message' recommends the play for performance outside of Canada. Indeed, right from the start, it was not written for an exclusively Canadian audience. (In a later version, it was retitled *New Kid*.) If it were imported into Germany, Nick, the boy in the play, might be a Turkish boy or a young man from a country in the Arabian world, who has learned standard German in a relatively short time while his classmates converse with each other in a strong regional dialect (Bavarian, perhaps) which the audience finds difficult to understand.

**Intercultural Encounters**

Contemporary Canadian plays are often collages of memories, aspirations, hopes and images. They are not portraits or documents, but rather ask questions about the 'other' in Canada as a multicultural society. Life as a Canadian and the heritage of native culture; the differences between first and second generations; conflicts between loyalty to one's respective community and one's integration into 'the big new world': these are some of the topics dealt with in 'multicultural' stage plays. There is a theatre project which not only highlights the differences between cultures but the links that bind humanity together; its title is *Ubuntu*. It is a truly international effort, a 'collective creation' in the sense that each of the people involved in the production contributed to the work. ('Collective Creation' in Canada was initially an alternative to established theatre practice.) The title *Ubuntu* originates in the Bantu language and means "a person is a person through other people;" in other words: all humanity is a single community. When a person has 'ubuntu,' he or she is generous, loving and caring. The play is a product of the cooperation of two theatres – Baxter Theatre in Cape Town and Theatrefront in Toronto, whose joint plan was "to develop a common theatrical language, to find the meeting point between cultures, to learn about ourselves while learning about people from the other end of the world" (Daryl Cloran, Artistic Director of Theatrefront, in: Theatrefront 2010, n.p.). In the play, the South African Jabba and the Canadian Libby are united by personal journeys to find out what has happened to
his father and her mother. The young man travels from South Africa to Canada to search for his father who abandoned him when he was a boy of three. In Toronto, he meets Libby who is mourning her mother's recent death. Later, he comes to understand that he cannot hide from his ancestors; they will always find him. Libby experiences the symbiosis of both African and Canadian cultures. Jabba and Libby try to understand the enigma of their father and mother. They learn what it means to fully live Ubuntu. *Ubuntu*, the play, thematises "the universality of our struggles and the responsibility we all hold to reach out to each other – whether we live next door or across the ocean," writes Daryl Cloran (*Theatrefront* 2010, n.p.). *Ubuntu* consists of some thirty scenes, in which an African and a Canadian story are woven together. The language of the play is English with a smattering of Xhosa, the language of the second-largest group in South Africa after Zulu.¹ The term 'Ubuntu' received a very special mention in former President Obama's remarks at the memorial service for Nelson Mandela on 10 December 2013:

Mandela understood the ties that bind the human spirit. There is a word in South Africa – UBUNTU – a word that captures Mandela's greatest gift, his recognition that we are all bound together in ways that are invisible to the eye: that there is oneness to humanity; that we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others, and caring for those around us. (Obama 2013)

*Stripping the Environment*

*Bone Cage* is the title of a forceful and well-written play, for which Catherine Banks won the 2008 Governor General’s Literary Award for Drama. It takes us to a rural Nova Scotian logging town, "where stripping the environment means stripping your soul," as we read on the back cover of the printed edition (Banks 2007), and: "Jamie is twenty-two years old and works twelve-hour shifts operating a tree processor, clear-cutting for pulps." The tree-processing machine destroys everything on and in the tree. At the end of his shift, Jamie wants to rescue injured birds and animals he comes across. He becomes aware of the destruction he has 'created' and wants to get away from this world but is frustrated in his attempts as he needs his job, not least because he is soon getting married. *Bone Cage* is the story of a group of people and family members, mostly in their late teens to mid-twenties. It takes us to people whose lives consist of destroying the environment that sustains them. The title *Bone Cage* thus picks up the notion of the body as a death trap for the soul.

*Category 2: Plays on Generally Relevant Human Topics*

The plays referenced so far focus on specifically Canadian topics which give insights into facets of Canadian life and cultures. Other plays reflect the fact that Canadian drama has shifted from purely Canadian topics to subjects of general concern and as such lend themselves to discussions of generally relevant issues.

¹ For a detailed analysis of *Ubuntu*, see Glaap (2015a).
Sequence

*Sequence* is a play by Arun Lakra about choice, probability and fate, which has occasionally been called a 'brainy' play, and an 'exercise in ideas' that gives the audience copious food for thought. The play's title refers to the genetic da Vinci code. It boils down to the questions of where we come from and if our fate is woven into our DNA. The author is an ophthalmologist who has only recently turned to writing plays. *Sequence* has no real plot. Rather, there are two stories which are being developed throughout the play. One story is about a professor "studying the same disease that makes her legally blind," writes theatre critic Stephen Hunt in his review, "while the second thread concerns the connection between a pregnant woman and a guy with an uncanny ability to predict who will win the coin toss at the Super Bowl" (Hunt 2013). The structure of the play winds the two stories together, which poses the question as to whether or not sequential events can happen at the same time. Arun Lakra thereby meditates on the roots of coincidence. Rebecca Burton at Playwrights Guild of Canada, Toronto, in a letter to me, dated 7 August, 2014, expresses her questions about and her view of Lakra's play: "Which came first, the chicken or the egg, and what dreamed them up in the first place? What is luck? Did God need to exist for life to begin? Can a mathematical sequence reveal the secret of the universe, or at least the Super Bowl? *Sequence* is a mind-blowing, award-winning drama." The two story lines of this play end in an unexpected way. The audience realises that for one of the stories to happen the other must already have taken place. Some Canadian theatre critics have compared this 'double-weave play' to the questions in some of the British playwright Tom Stoppard's work.

Watching Glory Die

Judith Thompson, a professor at the University of Guelph, is also well-known as a playwright who stands out from the other contemporary women playwrights in Canada. She has shaped modern Canadian theatre and drama by dealing with aspects of society not generally seen on stage. The world she portrays is one of violence in which her characters are emotionally troubled people who are trapped in a jungle from which there is no escape. Her plays are psychological explorations and raise issues that transcend national boundaries. She has found an international audience, particularly in London, England. Judith Thompson is also an actress. After an interval of 35 years, she returned to the stage in 2014 in a new one-woman play, written by herself, titled *Watching Glory Die*.

"Glory is a troubled teenaged inmate who, in her solitary prison cell, is tormented by hallucinations," we read on the back-cover of the printed edition of the play (Thompson 2016). And: "Inspired by a true story, *Watching Glory Die* is a bold, captivating portrait of three women who remain helpless in the tight jaws of an unjust judicial system." Indeed, Thompson's play addresses issues that still exist in correctional systems and undoubtedly transcend national borders. The play is inspired by a true story. It was on 19 October 2007, that a mentally ill 19-year old girl was found in her cell with a ligature around her neck. Although Ashley Smith, the inmate, was on a round-the-clock watch, the guards had not been permitted to go into the cell as long as she was breathing. She was asphyxiated. This happened in the Grand Valley Institution for Women in Kitchener, ON. It took 45 minutes before the supervisors entered her cell and confirmed her death. The guards in immediate contact with Ashley
Smith were initially charged with negligent homicide, only for the charges to be withdrawn a year later. Difficult material for the theatre, one would think. But Judith Thompson, so agitated by the mishandling of Ashley Smith, decided to write her play anyway, which had its world premiere in Vancouver in April 2014 and then moved to Toronto’s Berkeley Street Theatre. It was also staged in London, England. "There are Ashleys all over the world," Thompson is said to have said (Thompson 2014, n.p.).

Watching Glory Die is a one-act play, which 'looks at' a young woman trapped in a justice system that is not built for women with mental illness. The story is told from three different perspectives. There are teenaged Glory in her prison cell, her adoptive mother and a Correctional Officer named Gail. The parts of these three women are played by one actress – Judith Thompson. Glory has experienced cruelty and injustice for a long time. It started when she – as a fourteen-year-old girl – threw crab apples at a postman and, for that petty crime, was sent to a youth facility. A long incarceration was to follow, partly in solitary confinement. Rosellen, Glory’s adoptive mother, wants her child back. Gail is a tough woman, but nevertheless empathises with the young girl. What the three women have in common is their limited scope of activities. Each of them is in her individual ‘captivity:’ Glory because there is no public supervision; Gail, the guard, couldn't have disregarded what she was ordered to do; and Rosellen, the adoptive mother, realises that something must be done but feels that she is reduced to a helpless state. Watching Glory Die portrays the mistreatment of people in prison, especially of mentally ill inmates. Indeed, this is potent material for the theatre. But there is a sprinkling of comic relief, here and there, for instance in what the mother narrates about her daydreams in her teenage years. In the production at Berkeley Street Theatre in Toronto, Ken Gass, the director, in co-operation with his set and light designers, gave each of the three women her own stage space for acting: the three characters, present three different points of view. Judith Thompson comments: "I want the audience to feel what Ashley felt, what her mother felt, and even what the guard felt, and ask themselves, 'Where are they in this story? How are they implicated? Who is watching us, and who are we watching?'" (Thompson 2014, n.p.).

Life After God

Canadian playwrights in our days no longer confine themselves to dealing with specifically Canadian topics, but rather use these as a foil for a discussion of universal issues. This applies, in particular, to Life After God, a play by Michael Lewis MacLennan, about a generation raised without religion, "without the stability of a certainty of belief" (Penistan 2006). It tells the story of six friends who all attended high school in Vancouver fifteen years earlier. Their lives in those days were exciting and carefree. Now that they are adults, disillusionment overtakes them, as the six must try to cope with the challenges of modern living. They are Stacey, who works in a health club and wants to get all she is after; Julie is happily married, but finds it difficult to bring her sons up as caring human beings; Kirsty is a career woman in an office in Vancouver and enjoys her job, although she would rather be raising a family; Todd, a seasonal rice planter, is the most contented of the six; Dana has a wife and two children. After a life full of drugs and pornography, he is now trying to convert his friends to Christianity. While these five friends reflect on their past and do not really know what
to do in their current situation, Scout is the one who does not show up at the reunion; he is sitting in a forest, which to him is a place of healing. Towards the end of the play, "he plunges underwater, i.e. in a freezing mountain stream," and "then comes up for air." (MacLennan 2008, 66). This scene is in contrast to the scene at the very beginning of the play, where five naked bodies are floating in the warm water of a suburban swimming-pool. The warm water at the end, is replaced by freezing water which does not invite one to stay but to move on. It is a form of being reborn. As Scout himself says: "My secret is that I need God to help me give because no longer I seem capable of giving, to help me to be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness" (MacLennan 2008, 64). MacLennan's play is a story of rebirth. Scout's immersion is an image of the Christian ritual of baptism, and his rebirth seems to reflect the playwright's own immersion in faith a few years before he wrote Life After God.2

Category 3: Plays Based on Dramaturgical Concepts

Contemporary Canadian plays do not merely deal with special issues, but often, are also based on different concepts of playwriting. Structurally, they are not necessarily subdivided into acts and scenes. Rather, they are collages of interactive scenes and sometimes collectively composed. A few examples illustrate this – Judith Thompson's Palace of the End, a play about the situation before and after the US-led invasion of Iraq, is a trio of vignettes, i.e., three monologues spoken by individual actors. In Life After God, monologues, dialogues and narrative elements are interwoven; they are stages of a quest for transcendence in the minds of the characters and the theatre-goers. In Watching Glory Die, three different perspectives of Glory's self-inflicted death in prison are represented by three different women who have special and personal arguments. Their parts are spoken by one and the same actress. In the trans-hemispheric theatre project Ubuntu, the conflicting ideas of two cultures – South Africa and Canada – are intertwined. Sequence is a mixture of two stories, one of which can only happen if the other has already taken place.

Not only the different kinds of 'make-up' of contemporary Canadian plays are of interest, but the play scripts, the 'scores,' as it were, are also worth mentioning. Earlier on, prose material – i.e., novels and stories – was taken up and adapted for the stage. Jane Urquhart's The Whirlpool (1986) was mounted at the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto in 2000. Margaret Atwood's novel The Edible Woman has been rewritten by Dave Carley. And Michael Lewis MacLennan and Katrina Dunn at Touchstone Theatre adapted the title story of Life After God from Douglas Coupland's collection 1000 Years (1994) for the theatre.

Digital Performance

The omnipresence of the internet and social media in the 21st century, and – in particular – the fact that plays are now routinely staged online and on social media platforms raises the question if and how digital technologies can open up new ways to the performances of our live theatres. Vibrant experiments are taking place, prompting a debate as to whether technologies of the virtual can be compatible with live performance

at all, or if they redefine theatre by taking it outside theatrical spaces. Issue 159 of the Canadian journal *CTR (Canadian Theatre Research)*, edited by Peter Kuling and Laura Levin, focuses on experimentation with digital technology within the field of performance. This issue "interrogates the role that digital media play(s) in providing individuals from historically marginalized communities with DIV forms of self-expression," as Rebecca Burton of the Playwrights Guild of Canada (PGC) wrote to me in an e-mail. One script featured in the issue, for instance, is *Landline. Halifax to Vancouver* by Dustin Harvey and Adrienne Wong, a cellphone performance experienced simultaneously by spectators on opposite sides of the country (cf. Kuling/Levin 2014). Towards the end of their thought-provoking article, Kuling and Levin refer to an interview with performance artists Ken Monkman and Cheryl L'Hirondelle, who "emphasize the decolonizing potential of digital media when used by contemporary Indigenous artists;" "digital media," they argue, "offer potent frameworks for recovering histories, voices and styles erased by colonization" (Kuling/Levin 2014, 8). But towards the end of the article we are also asked to consider: "As we march into the digital future, we must acknowledge the historical violence that has also been wrought by 'new' technologies – technologies that have propelled resource extraction, colonial expansion and capitalist greed" (ibid.).

**Conclusion**

As we have seen, Canadian plays deal with a wide range of topics – from specific political and cultural issues of our time to portraits of modern life, from chances and problems of migration to subjects of general concern. Among the significant issues raised are

- our sympathy for our fellow creatures nearby and far away, our responsibility for future generations, and
- the legacy of our 20th-century political (German) past.

Suffice it to briefly comment on two relevant plays – David Yee's *Carried Away on the Crest of a Wave* and *East of Berlin* by Hannah Moscovitch. Yee's play is about the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami – a singular cataclysmic event. In his "Playwright's Notes," Yee states that the tsunami struck the coasts of fourteen countries. He read numerous accounts of survivors and interviewed people who suffered losses. His original idea was to illustrate that we are all interconnected, that no one is truly alone, and that we have to be sensitive to the needs of other people. *Carried Away on the Crest of a Wave* is a series of vignettes – unconnected with each other, but all related to the tsunami. It uses an episodic approach with a special coincidence in each of the vignettes – about an escort in Thailand, a Catholic priest in India, a housewife in Utah. Some scenes are partly based on Yee's account, others are fictitious. The ultimate question of *Carried Away on the Crest of a Wave* is: What happens when events that hold us together are the same that tear us apart?

*East of Berlin* is a play by Hannah Moscovitch, whose "Playwright's Notes" in the printed edition of the play read as follows: "The word 'East' [in the title] was used by the Nazis to refer to the genocide of the Jews. The official party line was that Jewish communities were being 'resettled in the East.' […] The word 'East' was used to refer...
to the death camps, and 'to go East' of the city signified 'going to your death'” (Moscovitch 2009). *East of Berlin* is the story of Rudi, a young man of German descent, whose father was an SS doctor at Auschwitz, where he performed scientific experiments on Jewish concentration camp inmates. Rudi and his parents left Germany for Paraguay in 1945 before the occupation by the Allied forces. He did not find out about his father’s past until his teenage years when Hermann, a school friend, revealed the truth to him, which makes Rudi furious with his father. He cannot forgive him and searches for a way to humiliate him. In Berlin, Rudi studies medicine but drops the course to start doing research on Judaism in the German General Archives, which becomes an obsession with him. There he meets Sarah, a young Jewish woman, daughter of a Holocaust survivor, who falls in love with him. He does not tell Sarah the truth about his father. However, an unexpected visitor arrives in Berlin who crosses their plans to marry by revealing to Sarah the secrets of Rudi’s family. He must go back to Paraguay – to his father. In the play, Rudi speaks directly to the audience in a kind of 'stream of consciousness' monologue. *East of Berlin* instils empathy in the audience, makes them raise questions, provides them with a great deal of food for thought – all this is, indeed, what one expects theatre to do. It is certainly worth considering contemporary plays for productions in German-speaking theatres. Printed editions (in English) can be ordered from Playwrights Canada Press, 202-269 Richmond Street Wets, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5V 1X1.

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**Works Cited**


