Staging Teen Life in the New Millennium: Canadian "Issue Plays" for High Schools

Introduction

In Canada, the development of a professional theatre for children and young audiences started in the early 1950s, at a time, when in Europe this "other theatre" (Beauchamp 1993, 179) had already developed into a genre of its own. Starting from its roots in children's literature, Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) has developed a unique style of drama which is both entertaining and educational. This is primarily owed to the many youth theatres that have emerged after the founding of Holiday Theatre in Vancouver in 1953, still considered a milestone in the emergence of this facet of Canadian drama. By the early 1980s, theatre groups were producing plays for young audiences all across the country, and many of the companies that had entered the stage in the first thirty years, especially since the centennial in 1967, are still active today. From the East to the West of Canada, there are, for example, Green Thumb Theatre (1975) in Vancouver, BC, Manitoba Theatre for Young People in Winnipeg (1982), Young People's Theatre (1966), Theatre Direct (1977) and Roseneath Theatre (1983) in Toronto, ON, Youtheatre (1968) in Montreal, QC, or the Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia (1972), in Windsor, Nova Scotia. These and many other companies have developed a drama which aims at producing "artistically excellent and culturally diverse Theatre for Young Audiences that explores issues relevant to the lives of young people and their families" (Concrete Theatre, n.d.), but above all "to engage its audience through compelling theatre which provokes, questions, challenges and entertains" (Youtheatre). In this endeavour to familiarize young people with the theatre, touring plays have been a crucial activity of many theatre companies, bringing live theatre to community centres, public places, but above all, to schools. This article mainly focuses on plays written and performed for teen and high school audiences in the past twenty years.

Touring "Issue Plays"

In the early years, plays from the US and England dominated the stage, but in the wake of the centennial, comparable to professional Canadian adult drama, youth theatres increasingly invited Canadian playwrights to produce their own works. Often, these plays had a historical background and thus contributed their share to the definition of who and what is (a) Canadian. However, already from the end of the 1970s on,

1 More theatres still active today are: Kaleidoscope Theatre for Young people (Vancouver, BC); 1973, Carousel Players (St. Catharines, ON); 1972, Carousel Theatre (Vancouver, BC); 1976, Concrete Theatre (Edmonton, AB), 1987; Geordie Productions (Montreal, QC), 1980.

2 Examples of these plays, although not necessarily produced at youth theatres, are: Buffalo Jump, produced in 1972 by Theatre Passe Muraille, a play by Carol Bolt that takes a funny look at Canada during the Depression. In 1974, Factory Theatre in Toronto mounted Hurray
companies increasingly produced plays that focused on contemporary concerns and included, for example, family and school life, but also social and health issues or concerns about nuclear power and environmental pollution. In fact, *Hilary's Birthday* by Joe Wiesenfeld, a play about the daughter of a divorced couple and produced by Green Thumb Theatre in 1979, is generally recognized as the first so-called 'issue play' for young audiences written in Canada:

This was the first time that a topic such as divorce had been presented in a school setting.

Some educators were outraged; others were thrilled. By today's standards *Hilary's Birthday* is tame, but in 1979 it set the course for Green Thumb as a cutting-edge theatre company. (Green Thumb Theatre, n.d.)

Since the 1980s, playwrights have always looked closely at a diversity of issues and subjects for school plays. They have dealt with racism and racial intolerance among young people in Canadian schools and neighbourhoods, drug abuse and alcoholism, but also with poverty, divorce and single parent families, peer pressure, bullying and lack of self-esteem, vandalism, date rape, depression and suicide and recently also with gender questions and islamophobia. Already at the end of the 1980s, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre* noted that 'sensitive, controversial issues are treated in scripts written for school tours' as a result of "Young people's Theatre's commitment to produce works relevant to contemporary children" (Benson 1989, 597). It has always been central to TYA to acknowledge that young people are affected by the same universal concerns as their parents and other adults, but it addresses these issues from the young people's perspective.

Although the theatre companies have worked closely with educators, writing plays for school audiences has always been a great challenge:

Principalwould demand that the production have a crystal clear curriculum tie-in. The entire experience — assembling the audience in the school auditorium, the performance, the discussion, and the dismissal — would have to fit into a seventy-minute class period. (Craig 2010, iii-iv)

As a consequence, playwrights have to draft tight forty-five to fifty minute plays using minimum lighting, sets and props, and they could only resort to a small number of actors. While their plays deal with relevant contemporary issues affecting young people, playwrights have always had to walk the fine line between entertainment and education, keeping the balance between being too didactic and having young people indulge into a reflection of their own world. Most of the plays manage to do so by avoiding a "preachy" tone and not sounding condescending.

For *Johnny Canuck* by Ken Gass, a play considered a heroic comedy of "[h]ow Johnny Canuck and the secret Canadian Supersquad saved the world from the fascist evil menace of Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, as authenticated by Bell Comic of Canada" (CanRevue 2015, 51). In 1975, the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto staged *Anna Jameson*, a play by Pauline Grey that offered an amusing account of Anna Jameson's journeys through the wilderness of Upper Canada in 1836, based on her writings. Anna Brownell Jameson (Murphy) was a prominent author, feminist, travel writer, and art historian. She is best known in Canada for her detailed and witty portrayals of life in Upper Canada in the 1830s, described in *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* ([1838] 2008).
Nevertheless, the main idea has always been to provide theatre for young audiences which incorporates relevant issues concerning the life of young people in an adult-oriented world. Thus playwrights try to "explore themes and situations that express as much of that complex life as possible and then distil it into an accessible theatrical form" (Roseneath Theatre, n.d.). They usually do a lot of research before they write a play to present a believable story, for example when the correct scientific background is required. They also often organize workshops or they carry out interviews with young people in communities and schools affected by and involved in the various issues. Plays for young audiences also have to use the right idiomatic typical teen language and high school lingo. The action and dialogue of a play are often supported and enhanced by the use of non-verbal elements such as music, dance, and mime. Today, playwrights have to include computers and smartphones and incorporate social media, such as WhatsApp, Twitter or Facebook, as they have become central forms (not just) of teen communication. TYA plays are written by adults, and especially young people in their late teens are least interested in hearing from grown-ups about how to deal with their problems. Moreover, they need a lot of imagination since the plays are normally performed by adults and often only a small number of actors play multiple roles.

'Issue plays' tackle sensitive subjects and aim for emotional impact and audience identification. They want to evoke empathy and understanding for the other, the different ones, the less fortunate in society, and they want students to take action and to make a difference. Companies design study guides to help integrate the plays into the curriculum and into classroom work and to guide students to a better understanding of the play presented. These guides contain, for example, character profiles, discussion questions, group activities based upon the play's concepts and issues such as role playing suggestions and further secondary material related to the subject of the play. Study guides also outline objectives and suggest methods by which teachers can elicit responses from their students to lead them into rational and focused, but usually informal discussions on the respective issues presented in the plays. If students are well prepared, they can be more perceptive and sensitive to the story and the characters' behaviour. Moreover, students are also given rules of how to behave in the theatre as, for example, eating, drinking or using their smartphones is not allowed.

Touring companies and playwrights have to find out how to interest young people in the theatre at a time when they are rather concerned with the multiple changes, challenges and developments in their young lives, with puberty, growing up and having to find their place in society. Despite dealing with problems, plays also have to offer a positive view of the future. Serious topics should not be portrayed too bleakly – conversations often have a humorous tone – and should always offer a glimpse of hope, not the perfect solution to a problem but practical ways out of a dilemma.

Issue plays are meant to have an educational effect. "Theatre, by definition, is the closest to life of all the arts" (Beauchamp 1993, 193), and theatre has always had an educational vein when holding up the mirror to its audiences.
Topics and Plays in the New Millennium

The six plays dealt with in the following paragraphs represent only a subjective, but hopefully illustrative, selection and personal choice from the multiplicity of plays published and produced during the past twenty years. Whereas the first five will get a short introduction, the last one, Jabber by Marcus Youssef, is a close textual analysis, following the development and story of the play as it shows many of the previously mentioned characteristics of TYA plays.

In November 2018, Dennis Foon’s New Canadian Kid and its companion piece Invisible Kids were published in a new edition by Playwrights Canada Press (see also Glaap 2005 for further references). The publication history of these two plays spans almost forty years, since New Canadian Kid was first produced in 1981 and Invisible Kids premiered in 1985. It is more than only a tribute to one of the icons in the field of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA); it rather illustrates and stands for the success of the numerous issue plays that have toured schools in the past four decades. New Canadian Kid "has been hailed as a quintessential play for young audiences and is recognized by theatre academics as the most produced Canadian play of all time" (Green Thumb Theatre, n.d.).

In his introduction to the new edition, Marcus Youssef describes why Foon’s dramas have become some of his favourite plays for young audiences:

[...] I was a student at the National Theatre School in the early 1990s. I was running a summer theatre employment program for “at-risk” youth (“potential early-school-leavers” was the preferred jargon of the time). I needed to find plays to help them understand what a play was. I needed plays that believably represented the lives of young people with nuance, complexity, and depth. Most of all I needed to find plays that a group of young people with a limited trust of adults might actually like. (Youssef 2018, ix, emphasis in original)

Nick, a new immigrant, has just moved to Canada from an imaginary country called "Homeland," and he is forced to deal with his fears of a new culture and language as well as to cope with classmates who taunt him because he is different. In this play, Foon makes use of "gibberish, a kind of language invented by the actors in each production" (Foon 2018, 5) by having Nick speak English, while his schoolmates speak gibberish. The audience "hears" the thoughts of the new Canadian, but is at the same time confronted

3 There are many more plays in this field than those mentioned here, for example, in chronological order (first year of production): Danny, King of the Basement (2001), a play by David S. Craig about poverty in Canada; Tough Case (2009), another play by David S. Craig about sixteen-year-old Dane who is about to be charged with a host of serious offences and agrees to participate in a court-ordered restorative-justice program; Black Dog 4 vs The Wrld [sic] (2013), is a play by Matthew Heiti about depression, suicide, wrong expectations, loneliness, unwanted pregnancy but also about friendship, mutual support and taking action. Outside (2015) by Paul Dunn is a play about homophobia, bullying, mental health and gay-straight alliances and again about friendship and making a difference. I Am For You (2013) by Mieko Ouchi tells the story of two girls who have a serious fight in the school's drama room and how a young teacher uses Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet to find a way for the girls to work together again.

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by a language it cannot understand. In the play, Nick is dressed “completely in shades of green in contemporary store-bought clothing.” The reason for this is: “The Home landers should look alien to the Canadians – and to the audience, but their costumes should not be identifiable to any specific country” (Foon 2018, 4). Accordingly, the Canadians should be dressed in other colours which may later become part of the design of Nick’s costume as he begins to integrate into Canadian society. In the course of the play, Nick, his family and his classmates start to learn how to accept one another. *New Canadian Kid* began with a series of drama workshops at Lord Roberts School in Vancouver, and in his introduction to the first publication of the plays, Dennis Foon writes:

> The children, most immigrants themselves, interviewed other New Canadians who spoke about their own experiences. The resulting transcripts were then edited by the children, and a script, 'Immigrant Children Speak', was developed. This script was then performed by the drama club in the school. (Foon 1989, 7)

Its universal message of tolerance and appreciation of other cultures has been received enthusiastically around the world, also because it can immediately be transferred to the problems which people of other cultures are confronted with.

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*Invisible Kids* is an updated version of the original play that itself had been a Canadian version of a British play. In the present story the young protagonist Ranem is a young Syrian refugee who has recently arrived in contemporary multicultural Canada. At school, he tries to make friends, and his class is overjoyed when Ranim wins a science fair contest which grants everyone a trip to an amusement park in the US. But when Ranem is not allowed to cross the border, his new friends, who are also all “different,” put their individual differences aside, take action, make their voices heard and have a petition signed by hundreds of people to deliver it to Ottawa. In the original *Invisible Kids*, the character of Ranem was named Thiun. And he was a refugee from Vietnam. Youssef is shocked “how ‘well’ this update works and how utterly believable the change of characters plays” (Foon 2018, xi).

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*The Shape of a Girl* by Joan Macleod premiered in 2001. It is a one-act monoplay set on the West Coast of Canada where Braidie, a fifteen-year-old girl, is fascinated by the news coverage of a murder trial involving a group of mainly teenage girls who have attacked one of their peers. (Joan Macleod was inspired by the horrific incident that happened in 1997 – the violent murder of Reena Virk by her peers.) At first she is repulsed by these girls, thinking that they have nothing in common with her or her friends, but as she watches the story unfold on TV and in the newspaper, she begins to realize that there is a parallel between this crime and their own bullying of their classmate Sofie. They have tormented her since grade 2 and now, in Grade 10, she is starting to worry that the bullying could escalate into irreparable physical violence. Although she has always been a bystander, she now feels guilty just the same. When their bullying of her classmate goes too far, she finally finds the courage to break with

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4 For further reference see also Glaap (2004) and Heinze (2005).
her friends. Braidie has been staying away from school and recounts her memories and flashbacks of their bullying to her absent brother Trevori. She realizes that she has to break out of this vicious cycle. The play ends with Braidie confiding to her old pre-school teacher Annie, who supports her in telling everything to the principal. 

The Shape of a Girl is the account of Braidie’s struggles to come to terms with bullying and violence. She discovers how detrimental they are to the victim and examines her own actions and those of her friends who participate in these cycles of violence. The play shows how events can develop from seemingly harmless conflicts to violent encounters. Through watching this play, the audience will come to understand how the passive bystander can also be part of the bullying process.

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In this world by Hannah Moscovitch was first produced by Youtheatre in Montréal in 2008, and Roseneath Theatre toured the play to Ontario Secondary schools in March 2013. The play won the Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding Production, Young Audiences, in 2010. In This World is Hannah Moscovitch’s first play written specifically for young audiences. Bijou and Neyssa are two girls at the same high school and in its volleyball team, but they are from two completely different worlds. Bijou is from a privileged background, whereas Neyssa is a recent Jamaican immigrant struggling to fit in. The play opens after a fight between the two friends. Neyssa has punched Bijou in the face, obviously for no apparent reason. Now, both girls have detention and are waiting in an office for a teacher to arrive. They are unable to discuss what happened between them, and their conversation at the beginning centres around Neyssa’s judgements about what her family, and specifically her mother, would think of Bijou’s sexual behaviour with her boyfriend. Bijou defends herself, but in the course of the play, Neyssa slowly reveals why she had started their fight and tells the truth about what happened to her with Bijou’s ex-boyfriend Frank. During a party at Bijou’s home, Neyssa was raped by Frank and nobody helped her. Almost immediately, Bijou moves from a position of conflict with Neyssa to becoming her biggest supporter. The play is no longer about Bijou but instead focuses on their friendship and how Bijou can best support Neyssa with what, if anything, should be done. The play thematizes a number of issues, for example, racism and immigrant experiences, since Neyssa has to defend the cultural values of her Jamaican background. However, the most sensitive topic is date-rape and the question of consensual or non-consensual sex. Although the play ends with the two agreeing not to tell anybody, it leaves the audience behind with a lot of unanswered questions.

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Rihannaboi95 by Jordan Tannahill was first produced in April 2013. It was nominated for three Dora Mavor Moore Awards in 2013 and won the Best New Play award in the

5 In 1987, Beverley Cooper and Banuta Rubess had already thematized date rape in their Chalmers Award winning play Thin Ice. In 2018, Concrete Theatre, Edmonton, Alberta, produced the play Consent, written and directed by Mieko Ouchi, and toured Junior and Senior High schools. The play deals with a young couple that after a confusing sexual encounter must grapple with the emotional aftermath.
The play deals with bullying and school violence, gender norms and being queer, identity and self-esteem, family and internet representation. The audience meets sixteen-year-old Sunny, who is forced to lead a double life. During the day, he is a quiet and shy teenager, hiding under his hoodie, and at night he becomes a confident and extrovert dancer. Sunny, who seems to have an Arab background, lives with his brother King and his parents in a small apartment in Toronto. After the family's computer breaks down, his teacher lends him his laptop to write an assignment. However, instead of writing the essay, he decides to make a movie and dances like Rihanna in one of her songs. When, to Sunny's surprise, his teacher Mr. Bailey is very supportive, he creates more videos with him dancing in girls' clothes, also using lipstick and other accessories. Moreover, he starts to upload them on YouTube under his alias rihannaboi95. Sunny is proud when more and more people watch him dancing, and even hate comments do not discour rage him from producing more videos. However, when his performances are shown around in school his family also becomes aware of them, the situation escalates. He is bullied and harassed at school, his parents are outraged and reproach him with bringing disgrace onto the family, and his brother's gang threatens to beat him up. Sunny seeks refuge with his friend Keira and he starts recording the video of his story in her room. The open ending of the play shows presumably his family entering the room while Sunny is dancing to a Rihanna song. He has accepted his identity and is proud of who and what he is.

The whole performance brings an innovative and clearly different approach to staging a play, as Jerry Wasserman argues: "live performance was paradoxically more important than ever in the age of iPhones, twitter, and YouTube, as a means of keeping us in touch – sometimes literally – with our culture, its stories, and each other" (2013, vii).

Rihannaboi95 was performed nightly in a bedroom, filmed by a webcam and could only be viewed live-stream on YouTube over the Internet. Is this play then closer to a film or to the theatre? Is it "A live film? Or intermedia Theatre?" (Tannahill 2013, 33). Owais Lightala, who performed the play in 2013, asks these questions in his introduction to the play and comes to the conclusion that it is both. On the one hand, the whole monologue is performed in real time as a live performance which is not recorded, and each new run of the show is a new and different performance. On the other hand, Sunny is alone with his situation and problems and the fact that he can tell his story only to a camera increases this feeling of loneliness. There is no possible contact and communion between audience and actor, and yet, he has become self-confident enough to reveal his innermost anxieties and thoughts to an anonymous audience.

Let's say... Jabber – A Close Textual Analysis

Jabber, by Marcus Youssef, is a play about prejudices, assumptions and diversity as well as a play about religion, fundamentalism, racism, discrimination, ethnicity, tolerance, bullying, home violence, stereotypes, misconceptions, acceptance, ignorance, preconceived notions, crossing boundaries, adolescence and high school life or simply about the fact that "[a]ctions have consequences" (2015, 20).

Youssef, who is of Middle Eastern ancestry, is a Vancouver-based playwright and actor. His work has been translated into multiple languages, and his plays have been performed at theatres and festivals (and school gyms) across Canada, the US, Australia...
and Europe. (As noted below, *Jabber* has also been translated into German.) Youssef is well-known for his plays dealing with political issues from the invasion of Iraq to Canadian involvement in Afghanistan, often exploring fundamental questions of diversity, difference or otherness. One central aspect in *Jabber*, a play he wrote for young audiences, is the phenomenon of Islamophobia. Especially since the September 11, 2001 attacks, feelings of anxiety, fear, hostility and rejection towards Islam and Muslims have increased in Canada, as in other countries, resulting in, for example, vandalism of mosques or physical assaults on Muslims, including violence against Muslim women wearing the hijab or niqab.

In his foreword to *Jabber*, Dennis Foon mentions an incident that happened on September 17, 2013, when a 17-year old Muslim girl was attacked by three teenagers in St. Catherines, Ontario. She was punched in the nose, which left her bleeding, and her headscarf was pulled off. The simple reason was that she was wearing a hijab. *Jabber* is set in a Canadian high school, and it tells the story of Fatimah, an Egyptian-born Muslim girl, who wears a hijab, a "jabber" as she and her friends call it. She is made to change schools by her parents when threatening anti-Muslim graffiti is found on the walls of her school. The guidance counsellor at her new school, Mr. Evans – his students call him Mr. E. – does his best to help Fatima fit in.

The play is also about Jorah, a grade ten boy, who is considered a troublemaker because of his temper and the aggressiveness which people believe he inherited from his father, who is in jail for physically abusing Jorah's mother. Despite Mr. Evans' warnings, Fatima befriends Jorah, and when the two feel more and more attracted to each other, they must realize that they have to cross a number of boundaries, personal as well as cultural ones, political and religious ones. The two young outsiders, who are met with prejudices and preconceptions, are confronted with judgments people make based on appearances, stereotypes and ignorance. The question is whether cross-cultural respect and mutual understanding between the two is possible or not? *Jabber* is a thought-provoking play for young audiences that tackles issues young Canadians as well as teens around the world have to cope with. Fatimah and Jorah are on the verge of adulthood, and they must decide what they believe in and how far they are willing to go to defend their beliefs. When Jorah posts a picture showing Fatimah without her "jabber," she feels utterly betrayed.

The play was commissioned by Geordie Productions in 2011 and has toured high schools and colleges across Canada since 2012. It was performed at Young People's Theatre in Toronto, the Manitoba Theatre for Young People and Green Thumb Theatre in Vancouver, which sent the play on tour across British Columbia.

*Jabber* has 18 scenes and a running time of about 50-60 minutes. It is set in a high school, but the decisive moments take place at the homes of the two main characters and at the DUCT, Jorah's hiding place, when he wants to be alone: "It's a river that runs under the whole city. They covered it up, except for this spot. Here you can see out, but nobody can see in. Evans followed me once, but I hid up in there, and he never found me" (Youssef 2015, 42).

The play opens with two scenes that set the tone for what is going to happen and introduces the audience to the characters, setting, theme and conflicts. The first scene is entitled "Let's say …," underlining the fact that Fatima's and Jorah's story is not the re-enactment of a true story, yet possible and could have happened or could happen
anywhere in Canada and not only there, thus standing for multiple similar incidents. The production notes add to this idea suggesting that the place names can be adapted to the place of performance.

_Jabber_ is a typical play for young audiences written touring the schools of the country. Thus the props and scenery are very sparse, asking students to imagine the places of action that seem familiar to them and, above all, to focus on the dialogue as well as the characters' behaviour, mime and gestures. The play tries to build up a close relationship between audience and actors, and the actors even say their real names, but also who plays who. Since normally they are adults, the audience has to imagine and also accept that they perform the roles of young people.

**Scene 1: Let's say**

ACTOR ONE, ACTOR TWO, and ACTOR THREE speak to the audience.

ACTOR ONE  
Hey, I'm (actor name).

ACTOR TWO  
Hey, I'm (actor name).

ACTOR THREE  
I'm (actor name).

ACTOR TWO  
Let's say we're in a high school.

ACTOR ONE  
Oh look, we are. (When performing in a theatre, cut this line)

ACTOR TWO  
Let's say I'm not twenty-four years old. 'But sixteen. (Change to reflect actor's actual age.)

ACTOR THREE  
And I'm not twenty-seven. But thirty-four. (Ditto)

ACTOR TWO  
Old.

ACTOR ONE  
Let's say her name is Fatima.

[...]  

ACTOR TWO  
Let's say Fatima's only been in Canada for a couple of years.

ACTOR ONE  
Let's say the country she's from is, like, nine thousand kilometres away —

ACTOR TWO  
And there was some kind of war —

ACTOR THREE  
Or revolution —

ACTOR ONE  
Or whatever —

(3-4)

**Scene 2: History Class, Earlier**

The second scene already shows Fatima and Jorah attending a history class together, where they become aware of each other for the first time. During the lesson, Jorah
makes fun of the Holocaust, and his history teacher, who is a Jew, scolds him in front of the whole class. Yet, it becomes clear quite quickly that Jorah is not anti-Semitic, but only reacting that way, "because he hates how teachers always look at him, like he's already done something wrong" (9). On their way out after class, Jorah notices Fatima looking at him and when he stares back at her, she says:

I know what they're thinking. You know how you can catch somebody's eye, just for a second, and you can see exactly what's in their head? Same as you, probably. "Whoa. What's with the scarf? I bet she has to wear it. I wonder if she's a terrorist. I bet she's really, like, timid and any of those things." (to JORAH, challenging) Hi. (9)

This scene ends with the actors describing the people present and introducing the third main character:

ACTOR ONE
Let's say we're actors.

ACTOR TWO
Let's say there's three of us —

ACTOR ONE
And about two hundred of you

ACTOR THREE
Let's say I'm a guidance counsellor. Let's say my name is Evans, but kids call me Mr. E. Let's say I like my job, and most kids pretty much like me. (9-10)

Fatima and Jorah meet again in the Counsellor's office and Jorah mouths the common stereotypes and prejudices about Muslim people. He considers Fatima a terrorist and wants her to blow up the school with him. He also refers to her hijab, showing that he does not have any clue about what it is or means:

FATIMA
[...] My scarf – it's part of my religion.

JORAH
It's called a Taliban.

FATIMA
Taliban? Oh my God. Now that's funny. Jorah?

What?

FATIMA
Taliban are the guys who are fighting in Afghanistan. It's called a hijab. (16)

Fatima is self-confident and she is not frightened by the graffiti like her parents. She says to Jorah before she leaves:

FATIMA
[...] By the way, if you say any more weird, racist, or insulting things about me, I will use my terrorist skills to kick you in the crotch so hard you'll be down your knees begging for your life. Just sayin'. (exiting) See ya. (18)

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6 Since the plays should be adapted to the actual location of the performance, the stage directions advise ACTOR ONE to "Change to reflect the approximate size of audience" (Youssef 2015, 10 fn. 4).
When she has left, Mr. Evans suggests that Jorah should find out more about Fatima and he reminds him of the fact that "[a]ctions have consequences" (20).

**Scene 5: Fatima's Home**

In the course of the play, Actors ONE, TWO and THREE often introduce scenes and comment on Fatima and Jorah's actions and behaviour, summarize what happens and guide the audience through the play almost like stage managers.

Especially when Fatima and Jorah are alone in their rooms, they talk about their lives and reveal their thoughts and feelings. Fatima and her parents came to Canada three years earlier, in the middle of winter and they had never seen snow before. Her father was an engineer in Egypt, but now drives a taxi. Since driving in Egypt goes without rules, her father got three tickets in one week only for speeding through red lights. Fatima lies to her parents about having to do much work and that she is using her computer only for homework – she rather thinks that school in Canada is very easy (23). Instead, she watches, for example, the images transmitted by a webcam that shows the corner of the street of the girls' school she went to in Cairo, where she sometimes even sees her old friends walking around. Fatimah has difficulties making friends at the new school: "It's the scarf. It weirds people out" (27), and when the maths teacher asks Fatima to explain in front of the class why she wears a hijab, she says: "it's part of who I am, and it also reminds me of where I come from" (30). Yet, she already likes it better in Canada. "Most of the time" (23). And she tells Jorah that she and her family had visited Cairo once again: "I'd forgotten what it was like to walk around the streets and not have people stare at me like I'm a freak. I was normal again, just like everyone else. That felt really weird" (64).

Fatima also uses Teen Chat and Omegle, a free online chat website that allows users to communicate anonymously with strangers without registering, and she learns English that way. In fact, Fatima does not represent the idea people have of a Muslim girl, she is self-confident, outgoing, funny, jokes around and is rebellious towards her parents. Yet, Fatima's parents are strict, and she fears their punishment. She is not allowed to date boys. (She even says that, if they knew they'd kill her and him).

Fatima and Jorah communicate via text or instant messages und use the typical short forms. Later they see each other through Skype. Jorah constantly shows how ignorant he is, and when Fatima tells him that her parents made her change schools because the graffiti on the wall of her old school said: "All Muslims must die," he does not understand the problem, but rather jokes: "It would be different, if it said: 'All teachers must die'" (26). Jorah persuades Fatima to skip classes and to go to the DUCT with him. He has googled how to talk to Muslim girls: "It said to tell you I saw your hair, so that means you have to marry me!" (43). Fatima assures him that this is pure nonsense. Nevertheless, Jorah seems to slowly start to understand more and when he says: "I'd guess you're not supposed to be this close to a guy," Fatima answers: "You're smarter than you look" (44).

The play comes to a climax when Fatimah tries to find out about Jorah's background. She assures him that he can trust her, and Jorah opens up and tells her his story. He is thirteen years old and in grade seven. His parents were fighting again, as so often, and his dad hit his mother so badly that they had to call an ambulance. As usual, Jorah put on his headphones and later ran to his hiding place. His father had to go to jail, but after that people also stared at Jorah; they seemed scared of him, as if he was dangerous, too.
He changed schools but people there "heard about it", because it was in the news: "If you google our name, it's what comes up" (55). His father got three years in prison and is now about to be released. Fatima is very moved and feels that she can trust Jorah. So she takes off her hijab, shows him her hair and makes the sign of a heart. Yet, alone on stage, she immediately regrets what she has done.

ACTOR THREE
Let's say Fatima had a dream.
In the dream, they start to make out, tentatively at first, then passionately. JORAH pushes further. She tries to signal enough, or to stop him. He keeps pushing. Music builds. It is big, epic.
FATIMA
Stop! (57)

After that evening, Fatima wants to end the relationship, and she does not respond to Jorah’s texting anymore. Moreover, Jorah has taken a screenshot of her without her hijab, commenting: "The most beautiful girl in the world" (64). She does not want him to show the picture to anybody, and JORAH tears it apart. She also tells him of her dream and says that she regrets having taken off her hijab. "It's a sin against God" (62).

Jorah has another talk with Mr. Evans, and the situation escalates. Jorah becomes very angry and even threatens to hit Mr. Evans: however, he only hits the metal locker. When the principal and the gym teacher try to pursue him, he runs away and hides at the DUCT. Fatima follows him and he explains:

We had these counsellers. They were always, like, your father is a violent man. You're going to want to forgive him, but you can't. That will just encourage him. It'll make it more likely that he'll do it again. But people aren't always what you think they are. (70)

The final two scenes inform us about what happens after that. Fatima finds out that JORAH has recorded their chat and has posted it on Facebook: "My Muslim ex-girlfriend takes off her hijab" (72). The caption under the video says: "Actions have consequences." The page spreads fast, although the counsellor has persuaded Facebook to shut it down. Fatima feels betrayed of their "secret," she also has to face her parents, because she has "dishonoured their family." Yet, Fatima’s parents surprises her. There is no drastic reaction. Their only punishment is a ban on the computer in her room, something probably any parent would have done. She even can go back to her old school and be together again with her friends, Seema, Hama and Lindsay. A couple of months later, Jorah contacts Fatimah again and apologizes. She accepts.

ACTOR THREE
Let's say, they may have gotten together again after that.
ACTOR TWO
Or maybe not.
ACTOR ONE
And let's say –
ACTOR THREE
The end. (78)

No doubt, Jabber echoes Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Perhaps, the young love was also doomed to fail right from the beginning. Yet, the play does not end with a
catastrophe. Fatima and Jorah have both made mistakes, and their "[a]ctions have had consequences," but the view ahead seems rather promising. *Jabber* shows characters the audience can care about and, in fact, it is not, as one might perhaps expect, one of the "issue plays" aimed at youth to teach them how to behave properly. It is rather, as a quotation at the back of the publication says: "A wonderfully complex tale that doesn't feel like a lesson plan" (Youssef 2015, back cover).

**The Value of TYA**

Since the 1980s, Canadian TYA has received international acclaim, and its plays and shows have not only toured North America, but have been translated into many languages and produced all around the world. Yet, in Canada, even today, Theatre for Young Audiences still does not seem to earn the respect it deserves. Heather Fitzsimmons Frey complains in the introduction to her recent anthology *ignite: Illuminating Theatre for Young People* that

> Although it has become a truism, it's worth repeating that many artists who produce TYA often feel that because their work is directed at young people, it is misunderstood, and imagined to be any number of dull adjectives: safe, conventional, overly didactic, facile, familiar, predictable, or boring. (Fitzsimmons Frey 2016, xv)

She also refers to Nicholas Hanson, a theatre scholar at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, who complains in an interview with her about a lack of scholarly interest in TYA: "Research on Theatre for Young Audiences – the performance of plays for young people – is […] largely invisible. The paucity of TYA research is particularly striking when you consider the robust TYA activities in Canada" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons Frey 2016, 5).

Does that make TYA any less important? In fact, only a few plays belonging to this genre have been close to receiving or even have received the most prestigious Governor General’s Award for English-language Drama so far. Recently, in 2010, among the finalists was *Scratch*, a play by Charlotte Corbeil-Coleman about a fifteen-year-old girl who has to cope with the fact that her mother is dying of cancer, and Jordan Tannahill, already mentioned above, was a finalist in 2016 for *Concord Floral*. He even won the award in 2014 for *Age of Minority: Three Solo Plays*. Yet there are many other awards that acknowledge the important work done in TYA. Thus, *Scratch* was the winner of the Herman Voaden National Playwriting Competition in 2009 and *Concord Floral* won the Carol Bolt Award and the Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding New Play, both in 2015. In 2019, for her play *Selfie*, Christina Quintana received the The

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7 Some plays have even made it to school editions in Germany. In the 1980s and 90s, Albert-Reiner Glaap, a pioneer in the research and study of Canadian Drama edited Henry Beißel's *Inook* and the Sun, the enactment of an Inuit legend, Drew Hayden Taylor's *Dreamer's Rock*, a play that dramatizes a vision quest of a young Ojibway to find his identity and culture, and Anne Chislett's *Chippin In*, a play about working in a fast food chain. In the course of the past twenty years some TYA plays have also been translated into German and have received productions at German Theatres, *The Shape of a Girl*, by Joan MacLeod, *Jabber*, by Marcus Youssef and, just recently, *Concord Floral*, a mystery thriller by Jordan Tannahill.

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Sharon Enkin Plays for Young People Award, a new prize created by the Playwrights Guild of Canada and awarded last year for the first time.

What is the impact of TYA on young people? What is its value? "Plays emerge from within specific socio-historical milieus" (Wasserman 2013, vii), and that is exactly what plays for young audiences show. They encourage young people to make a difference and to take action – in a realm that is not under the control of the adult world. They educate future theatre-goers, they offer adults a chance to learn about and understand their young people's real problems, situations and innermost troubles – if they decide to go to the shows. In his article "TYA=i. Assessing the Fair Market Value of Young People," Nicholas Hanson demands: "MAKE TYA MANDATORY. Require schools to host TYA productions. Mandate that all theatre companies offer programming. Ensure rural communities are touched by theatre" (Hanson 2012, 51).

No doubt, Canada has a dynamic and vital Theatre for Young Audiences, and the numerous companies across the country are devoted to introducing the Canadian youth to the plays and productions that address a broad range of themes and subjects relevant to their lives and tackle issues young Canadians as well as teens around the world have to cope with. Still, what makes a theatre experience unique and invaluable is the possibility of close communion between audience and actors. Especially when this happens with young audiences, it can contribute to a more humane world, as Macleod sums up:

For someone […] watching one of these plays in the school gymnasium, that sense of connection with any one of these characters might also be a lifeline – a point of light on a dark and distant horizon, an opportunity for change. It's what makes theatre for young audiences so important. (2011, vi)

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