

THE USES OF ORAL HISTORY IN CANADIAN THEATRE HISTORY RESEARCH

by Anton Wagner

RÉSUMÉ: Bien que le théâtre et l'art dramatique au Canada aient un passé important, une attention particulière à leur histoire vient à peine de se manifester. L'histoire orale a joué un rôle important dans la redécouverte du théâtre par l'histoire (Stage Voices, Stratford Under Cover) et perpétuera ce rôle tant et aussi longtemps que l'on fera usage des guides publiés sur la recherche en histoire du théâtre (ex. Bibliography of Canadian Theatre History 1583-1975 et Le Théâtre Canadien-Français). La Société d'histoire du théâtre du Québec et sa contrepartie nouvellement créée, l'Association for Canadian Theatre History (1976), sont maintenant devenues les points de ralliement de ceux qui comptent promouvoir l'histoire du théâtre canadien. L'attrait de l'histoire orale pour les historiens du théâtre canadien réside dans le fait que l'histoire orale agit comme catalyseur en fournissant au sujet traité la toile de fond ou l'ensemble de faits subjectifs qui plus tard seront complétés et vérifiés à l'aide de sources différentes. Seule une approche de ce genre peut rendre possible le jugement critique et historique.

Live theatre, whether on an amateur, semi-professional or fully professional level, has had a fairly continuous existence in various parts of Canada from the sixteen hundreds to the present. Among the first recorded theatrical events in English speaking North America were performances by jesters, dancers and musicians who were part of Sir Humphrey Gilbert's company in St. John's, Newfoundland in 1583. The first actual performance of a play was Marc Lescarbot's well known masque "Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France", "The Theatre of Neptune in New France", performed in the bay at Port Royal, Nova Scotia, Nov. 14, 1606 as a celebration of the successful return from an expedition by the explorer de Poutrincourt. In 1609, Lescarbot published "Le Théâtre de Neptune" in Paris as part of his Les Muses de la Nouvelle-France thereby also providing us with the beginning of Canadian Drama.

But while live theatre and drama are among the oldest art forms in Canada, the concerted analysis of Canadian theatre history on a national level is only a phenomenon of the 1970's. The oral historian can play an important part in this articulation of Canada's theatrical past provided he or she is aware of the increasing sophistication of Canadian theatre history studies and the increasing number of research tools being published which must be used to verify oral history materials. In Geraldine Anthony's Stage Voices, Twelve Canadian Playwrights Talk About Their Lives and Work, published by Doubleday in 1978, playwright Michael Cook makes the following protest against tape-recorded interviews made with a view for later publication:

The writer, in insensitive hands, is edited, tailored and moulded to fit the interviewer's concept. One may be forgiven for becoming slightly paranoid at this moment in time, for the country seems to abound with manic figures, brandishing cameras, tape recorders, pens, and notebooks, all seeking to publish definitive views of Canadian artists whether the artist wills it or not.

What Michael Cook is referring to is an all too frequent critical "rush to judgement" in which recorded interviews become virtual substitutes for more detailed historical research based on primary and secondary theatre materials and basic bibliographic tools. What, then, should be the relationship between oral history studies and ongoing Canadian theatre history research? Because the actual methodology of oral theatre history interviews has been discussed by Don Rubin in an article published in volume 2 of the 1976-77 C.O.H.A. Journal, I would like to provide a brief survey of the most essential theatre history research tools available to oral historians as well as to briefly analyze several of the few published uses of oral theatre history interviews.

Oral historians attempting to determine possible areas of research will find an examination of A Bibliography of Canadian Theatre History 1583-1975 and its 1979 Supplement, both published by the Playwrights Co-op, most revealing. The two bibliographies list over 3,000 published items documenting Canadian theatre history and the various actors, directors, playwrights, critics, etc. whose work, particularly from the 1930's on, is still subject to investigation through oral history interviews. There is also a great wealth of additional archival theatre history material, including oral history sources, much of which so far has not been analyzed in printed form. Heather McCallum's Theatre Resources in Canadian Collections published by the National Library in 1973 is still a very useful survey of such theatre collections across the country. It can also be used as a guide to those archival materials which could be analyzed with the assistance of oral history interviews.

Oral historians wishing to conduct research in Quebec will find volume five of the Archives des Lettres Canadiennes, Le Théâtre Canadien-Français, Evolution, Témoignages, Bibliographie, published by Fides in 1976, the first scholarly examination of French Canadian theatre and drama from the sixteen hundreds to the early 1970's, essential reading. Also particularly useful for research on Quebec playwrights, actors and directors, in addition to a considerable number of thesis, literary studies, biographies and bibliographies are Edouard Rinfret's Le Théâtre Canadien d'expression française; répertoire analytique des origines à nos jours published by Lemeac in three volumes from 1975 to 1977; Pierre Pagé's Répertoire des oeuvres de la littérature radiophonique québécoise, 1930-1970, published by Fides in 1975 and Pagé and Renée Legris' Répertoire des dramatiques québécoises à la télévision, 1952-1977 published by Fides in 1977.

Theatre history research in English Canada, while not as advanced as in Quebec, is nevertheless proceeding at a very rapid pace. Since Murray Edwards' pioneering A Stage in Our Past, English-language theatre in Eastern Canada from the 1790's to 1914, published by the University of Toronto Press in 1968, a steadily increasing number of thesis, biographies, literary studies, bibliographies and local calendars of performances has been issued in the last decade. One of the first published studies resulting from the CBC Radio Drama Project described in volume 2 of the 1976-77 C.O.H.A. Journal, is The Bibliography of CBC Radio Drama 1930-1961, edited by Howard Fink with Brian Morrisson. I have referred earlier to the Bibliography of Canadian Theatre History for which a companion volume, the 2,500 title annotated Brock Bibliography of Published Canadian Plays In English 1766-1978 will be published by

the Playwrights Co-op in 1979.

One significant factor contributing to the study of Canadian theatre history has been the founding of the Association for Canadian Theatre History/L'Association d'histoire du théâtre au Canada in 1976. The primary aims of the Association are comparable to those of the Société d'histoire du théâtre du Québec, namely:

- (a) To promote research into and publication of Canadian theatre history.
- (b) To encourage the collection, preservation, analysis and distribution of any and all Canadian theatre materials.
- (c) To foster public awareness of the significance of theatre in our cultural heritage.
- (d) To help maintain a communication network for the exchange of information and research progress and methodology.
- (e) To encourage the development of programmes in theatre history and specialized library archival training and to promote the advancement of education in Canadian theatre history.

The Association holds its annual meetings in conjunction with the Learned Societies in May and publishes a bi-annual newsletter. Papers presented at the Association's 1978 annual meeting covered topics such as theatre in Montreal from 1825 to 1844, the activities of the actor-manager E.A. Sothorn in Halifax from 1856 to 1859, the theatre criticism of Charles Handscomb in the Manitoba Free Press from 1901 to 1906, Moralité et théâtre au Canada français, (theatre and morality in French Canada), the seven trans-Canada tours of John Martin Harvey from 1914 to 1932, Nathan Cohen on Canadian theatre, radio drama in the sound archives of the Public Archives of Canada, Jean Gascon and the Stratford Festival and an analysis by playwright Aviva Ravel of a 1977 production by the Montreal Yiddish Drama Group. There was also a workshop and demonstration on the use of computers in theatre research.

The increasing scientific sophistication in Canadian theatre history research over the last few years requires similar increased expertise on the part of the oral historian if he or she is to avoid factual errors and scholarly embarrassment. Simply relying on oral interviews per se without other research and factual verification is no longer adequate. In his biography Mugwump Canadian: The Merrill Denison Story issued by Content Publishing in 1973, for instance, Dick MacDonald precedes a bibliography of Denison's works with the following preface: "If Merrill Denison cannot recall every last thing he has written, any attempt a biographer makes would tend to be feeble. Consequently, following is a relatively complete, but certainly partial, list of his major credits". One additional puzzling aspect of MacDonald's biography is the fact that, despite his heavy factual dependence on taped interviews with Denison, little of those interviews is presented in the book to provide a first hand impression of Denison's wit and personality.

Probably the most extensive and successful use of oral history materials in a published Canadian theatre history study can be found in Grace Shaw's Stratford Under Cover, Memories on Tape, published by N.C. Press in 1977. Shaw's book is the result of an oral history of Canadian theatre originally commissioned by Harry Boyle for the CBC which eventually included interviews with over 150 people. CBC radio broadcast part of this material in 1964 as a 13 week series entitled "Canadian Theatre...Fact and Fancy" and on other subsequent programmes. Through her interviews with actors,

directors, playwrights, producers, designers and others, Shaw argues convincingly that the Stratford Festival and, in fact, virtually all the present professional theatre in Canada was only made possible by the initial pioneering work of non-professional producing bodies such as the Montreal Repertory Theatre and Mountain Playhouse, the Canadian Repertory Theatre and Little Theatre in Ottawa, the John Holden Players, New Play Society and Crest Theatre in Toronto, and the annual Dominion Drama Festival in general. The work of these theatre groups was in turn preceded or complemented by university affiliated institutions such as Hart House Theatre in Toronto, the Banff School of Fine Arts and drama and extension departments throughout Canada.

Written in celebration of the 25th season anniversary of the Stratford Festival, Stratford Under Cover succeeds admirably in its use of oral history materials to trace the many origins of contemporary professional theatre. The book runs into some difficulty, however, when Shaw attempts to use this same oral history technique as a substitute for arriving at her own critical and aesthetic evaluation of Stratford productions over a 25 year period. In her Stage Voices, editor Geraldine Anthony partially yields to this same temptation of using a relatively small number of interviews with playwrights as the basis for a much more general history of Canadian theatre and drama. While the playwrights' own observations of their life in the theatre are interesting throughout, editor Anthony relies on too few other critical literary and bibliographic sources to satisfactorily achieve her larger historical and aesthetic objectives.

I hope I am not giving the impression of downplaying the importance of oral history sources by criticizing these three publications. On the contrary, I personally believe oral history to be one of the primary tools of current Canadian theatre history research. Oral history can provide access to vast sources of information, opinions and impressions. The subjective, personal relationship between interviewer and interviewee is a welcome change for the theatre historian forced to assimilate large amounts of printed and archival material and therefore acts as a humanizing factor stimulating theatre history research.

Oral history, however, must be used in conjunction with other research techniques, particularly bibliographic research and the critical examination and evaluation of primary and secondary sources and related archival material. Only with such a balanced approach using a variety of research techniques to verify information can sound historical and critical judgements be made. The appeal of oral history to the Canadian theatre historian, whether one is interviewing an actor, director or playwright, lies in its ability to act as a catalyst in quickly providing the subjective factual background for the area being researched which can then be measured against, verified and complimented with other factual sources. The great increase in the number of Canadian theatre history studies published in the last four years, some of which I have referred to, now makes such verification imperative.