

MARY VINGOE

OPENING WORDS

Celebrated director, actor, and playwright Mary Vingoe was one of two keynote speakers at the Shifting Tides: Atlantic Canadian Theatre Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow conference. The following is a revised version of her opening presentation.

When I was asked to speak here today, I asked my friend Sarah Stanley what I should talk about at this conference. Sarah is my Artistic Associate at Magnetic North Theatre Festival and she is a director whom I like and respect. She has worked with Live Bait in New Brunswick and Artistic Fraud in Newfoundland and she's a friend of Jest in Time.

"Oh God," she said, "there's so much wit, and depth, and despair, and poetry, and colour, and..."
"And you can't make a living there," I said, "period."
"No," she said, "that part is pretty hard."

This seemed like as good a place as any to start.

I first 'left' Nova Scotia in 1976, in the time-honoured tradition of all Dalhousie theatre graduates, to come to Toronto where I had a scholarship to do graduate work at the University of Toronto. But of course, I wasn't all that interested in doing graduate work. What I really wanted was to get to Toronto where things were happening, where Factory Theatre Lab (as it was known then), Theatre Passe Muraille, and Tarragon were all in their glorious first decade of existence.

I didn't want to be studying Canadian theatre history—I wanted to be making it.

Unbeknownst to ourselves in those first Toronto years, we were actually making it. We were part of the second generation of Toronto theatres, which included Nightwood, Buddies in Bad Times, and Necessary Angel—all companies still with us today. Nightwood Theatre was born out of a desire on the part of Cynthia Grant, Kim Renders, Maureen White, and myself to see more work by women on our stage. Like so many others we were making our work partly because we had a vision of what was important and partly simply to make work for ourselves.

But what was happening back home in Nova Scotia? As luck would have it, in the same workshop where I had met Maureen

White, and so had been introduced to the progenitors of Nightwood, I also met another person who was to alter my professional trajectory—Gay Hauser. The workshop was a Richard Pochinko clown workshop given by his protégées—Jan Henderson and Ian Wallace. Jan still teaches clown at the University of Alberta today. Gay invited me home that summer to join the newly formed Mulgrave Road Theatre Co-op company—there's a seventies name, and it really was a co-op. Mulgrave Road, in true 1970s style, had chosen perhaps the most isolated part of the province, Guysborough county, in which to establish operations. This was because Guysborough was the home of Mulgrave co-founder Robbie O'Neill. That summer we took up residence in Canso—the town literally at the end of the road, in a county at the end of the road, Guysborough. We created a show about the strike of the in-shore fishermen and fish plant workers in their dispute with the offshore druggers (sound new?) based on a book by Silver Donald Cameron. The show was called *Let's Play Fish*.

That summer, the summer of 1978, I really began to discover Nova Scotia and Atlantic Canada like never before. In a broken down Ford station wagon valued at 100 dollars, we toured the Maritimes. The back door was tied on with yellow twine that actually went around the whole car. We visited tiny towns and hamlets with names like Torbay, Little Dover, Upper Musquodoboit—no place was too small for us to present the show. People came out in good numbers; some of our best crowds were in small places: St. Peters, Cheticamp, Goldboro, Isaac's Harbour, Country Harbour and Larry's River.

Over the next five years I would do five more tours with Mulgrave Road. With one foot as an actor in Toronto and the other in the Maritimes, I was able to eke out a living. Some of the tours, like *Bring Back Don Messer*, covered four provinces and lasted nearly three months. It is almost impossible to mount such an extensive tour today. The funding to support it does not exist in Atlantic Canada.

In 1983, Michael Fuller and I started what was to be another unlikely proposition—The Ship's Company Theatre in Parrsboro, Nova Scotia. The idea was to bring Atlantic Canadian theatre to life upon an ancient wreck of a ferryboat, the M.V. Kipawo. In its time, the Kipawo had carried people back and forth on the Minas Basin, a waterway that has now completely fallen into disuse. We wanted to revitalize the community; we wanted to adapt the model of Mulgrave Road by staying in one place and bringing people to us. We began in the time-honoured tradition of writing our own plays; we used all local people to act in them, and there were some

very fine actors indeed. Soon, however, we were working with new scripts by Carol Sinclair and Silver Donald Cameron, among others. In four years, we were able to grow from a one-week season with amateur actors to a full summer season with two professional productions. The funding felt meagre to us then, but I wonder whether it would be possible to do at all today.

Paul Thompson once named Halifax as “the Bermuda triangle” of theatre because so many theatre companies had gone down without a trace in our provincial capital. Determined to disprove him and fulfilling a long cherished dream to have a successful theatre company producing the work of Atlantic Canadians in our largest Metropolitan area, Wendy Lill, Gay Hauser, and I embraced yet another wild dream, the Eastern Front Theatre, located in another unlikely spot—Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. I think that year we must have gotten the last Explorations Grant they ever gave out.

When I left in 2001, after nine years as Artistic Director, the Eastern Front had produced over 25 productions, most of them Atlantic Canadian, and presented over 100 more in our On The Waterfront and Kids on the Waterfront festivals. We had produced world premieres like Wendy Lill’s *The Glace Bay Miners’ Museum*, based on the short story by Sheldon Currie, and *Corker*; George Boyd’s *Consecrated Ground*; George Elliott Clarke’s *Whylah Falls*; and Alistair Macleod’s *Island*, adapted by Hans Boggild. Under the expert guidance of general manager Gay Hauser, the Eastern Front had remained debt-free, but then, in my last season, the company experienced unforeseen financial difficulties. Despite our best efforts, the government of the day would offer us no support, not even in the form of a loan. Fortunately, the theatre community rallied and funds were raised, mainly from individuals, and the company was saved, but it was a strong and disturbing indicator of how little our arts organisations—especially those who produce the work of Atlantic Canadians—matter to governments on their home turf.

In the last two years, I have travelled perhaps over a hundred thousand miles, crisscrossing the country seeing Canadian Theatre. It’s possible I am in the privileged position of having seen more Canadian theatre (upwards of 300 productions), than anyone else in the country. And it has been a very good experience for me to climb out of the fish bowl that is Atlantic Canada.

I have reconfirmed that great theatre gets made in tiny villages like Blyth, Ontario and Cowhead, Newfoundland, as well as in big cities like Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver. I have reconfirmed that

no one has the corner on creativity. From Kamloops to Cornerbrook, from Guysborough to Whitehorse, Toronto to Saskatoon, theatre artists are creating great work across the country.

What does change as you travel across the country is the sustainability factor. There is no secret about this. The engines of English Canadian theatre are Alberta, Toronto, and Vancouver. I would say about 80% of the English language theatre in this country comes out of these three regions, and the reason is money. Government and corporate support, infrastructure and training, audience development and critical support, all contribute to a theatre community's sustainability. These are all things that Atlantic Canada has lacked and still lacks.

If, as Christopher Newton once told us at a PACT meeting (and I for one believe everything that Christopher Newton says), only 4% of the population can be expected to go to any kind of theatre, and if we presume that perhaps only 1% will ever be interested in Canadian theatre, then that means that within Halifax-Dartmouth's population of 300 000 there may be 3000 people to see a *Drawer Boy* or a *Whylah Falls*. Here we begin with what I believe is the single most important issue surrounding Atlantic Canadian theatre—economy of scale. Are there enough people to support a viable theatre in Atlantic Canada that produces new work? For eight years in the On The Waterfront festival, we would present artists such as Theatre Smith-Gilmour, One Yellow Rabbit, and The Old Trout Puppet Workshop for audiences of fifty or sixty people per night. Sometimes I started to feel a little crazy. These are great artists, I would say to myself; why aren't more people coming? Then, as Artistic Director of the Magnetic North Theatre Festival, I got to present these same artists in Ottawa to two to three hundred people a night. I felt as if I had been vindicated after all those years, of trying to till rocky soil. But really it all comes down to a numbers game.

Do these grim economic facts mean that theatre in Atlantic Canada will always have to be more conservative and more populist to survive? Could an Old Trout Puppet Workshop or a Theatre Smith-Gilmour even happen in Atlantic Canada?

2002 was not a good year for Nova Scotian theatre. We lost our hard-won Arts Council, *Jest in Time*, our most senior ensemble company, decided to close up shop, and our regional theatre, Neptune Theatre, pleading debt reduction, was developing an unhealthy reliance on big musicals. Canadian and Atlantic Canadian plays were disappearing from our stages. Wolfville's clas-

sical theatre, Atlantic Theatre Festival was in trouble. The Eastern Front was in trouble. It looked as if Atlantic theatre would find itself permanently relegated to academic study rather than healthy practice.

I have learned a great deal about sustainability in theatre in this new job. Edmonton, Alberta is a city in which the major training institutions “bless their young” and work with the professional theatre community to provide ongoing support. Bob Baker, the Artistic Director of the Citadel Theatre, is a graduate of the Theatre Department at the University of Alberta, as are half the Artistic Directors in the city. There is significant support for the arts both provincially and federally. There is a critical understanding of the place the arts hold in our society from the local press. There is also enormous pride in the community. There is also enormous pride in spirit of place. Who could ever imagine a conference on Alberta theatre being held in Toronto? I imagine Albertans would insist on holding it on their own turf. Why is this conference only happening here in Toronto? Why hasn’t an Atlantic Canadian university taken it on? Because perhaps it still isn’t considered a subject quite worthy of study. Perhaps we thought no one would come.

And now for the good news: the creativity keeps on coming. The Artistic Frauds and the Zuppa Circuses and the Bunnies in the Headlights and the Live Baits just keep producing original work, finding their own weird and wonderful ways to survive. A few weeks ago, I sat in a St. John’s church with about 200 other people to watch a show called *Burial Practices of the Early Europeans Settlers* by Robert Chafe and Jillian Keiley. I lined up in Trinity, Newfoundland last summer to see Kevin Major’s *No Man’s Land*, a play about the battle of Beaumont-Hamel. I saw an excellent production of Michael Cook’s play *Jacob’s Wake* at Ship’s Company last summer. *Portia White—First You Dream* by Lance Woolaver did the best box office Eastern Front has ever seen. Live Bait keeps expanding, PARC is still helping new playwrights, Two Planks and a Passion are opening an arts centre on the North Mountain, and Ship’s Company is opening a new theatre building. Mulgrave Road has two hit shows on its hands, one written and starring Mary-Colin Chisholm, *Her Father’s Mother’s Cousin*, the other adapted and directed by her, *Lauchie, Liza, and Rory*, based on the short story by Sheldon Currie. Both *Lauchie, Liza, and Rory* and *Tempting Providence* from Theatre Newfoundland and Labrador will be presented at Magnetic North this summer in Edmonton. The Atlantic Theatre Festival looks like it might survive, and the

Canadian Television Fund has been restored so that, hey, there might be some paying work for actors this summer! Nova Scotia also now has its own professional theatre awards, the Merritts, as well as the new Mayor's Award for Theatre. But our strongest card, what we can celebrate with our heads held high, is the quality of our writers. George Elliott Clarke, Bryden MacDonald, Don Hannah, Mary-Colin Chisholm, Des Walsh, Daniel MacIvor, Kent Stetson, Wendy Lill, Berni Stapleton, Robert Chafe, Andy Jones—I believe that our playwrights are the finest poets of the Canadian stage. Their work is often rewarded as much with literary awards as with productions.

Perhaps the price of depth is isolation. Perhaps our greatest contribution in Atlantic Canada will always be the word itself. Vancouver is the master of visual choreography, the Prairies radiate youthful energy and enthusiasm, Ontario is full of fine craftsmen, but Atlantic Canada is where the true poets of the stage are born. As my friend Sarah Stanley says, “there is so much here, but you might still have to leave home to really appreciate it.”

It is my sincere hope that the next conference on theatre in Atlantic Canada will actually take place a little closer to home. ❁

**Mary Vingoe, *Shifting Tides* Conference,
Toronto, March 2004.**