The Dramaturgy of Appropriation: How Canadian Playwrights Use and Abuse Shakespeare and Chekhov

by

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Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama
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Abstract
Both theatre and drama were imported to Canada from European colonizing nations, and as such the canonical master-texts of European drama, particularly the works of Shakespeare, have always occupied a prominent place in Canadian theatre. This presents a challenge for living Canadian playwrights, whose most revered role model is also their most dangerous competition, and whose desire to represent the spectrum of contemporary Canadian experience on stage is often at odds with the preferences of many producers and spectators for the “classics.” Since the 1990s, a number of Canadian playwrights have attempted to challenge the role of canonical plays and the values they represent by appropriating and critiquing them in plays of their own, creating a body of work which disturbs conventional distinctions between “adaptations” and “originals.”

This study describes and analyzes the adaptive dramaturgies used by recent Canadian playwrights to appropriate canonical plays, question the privileged place they occupy in Canadian culture, expose the exclusionary hierarchies they legitimate, and claim centre stage for Canadian perspectives which have hitherto been waiting in the wings. It examines how playwrights challenge, usurp, or exploit the cultural capital of the canon by “re-citing” old plays
in new works, how they or their producers attempt to frame the reception of their plays in order to address cultural biases against adaptation, and how audiences respond.

This study draws from and builds upon contemporary theories of adaptation and particularly (Canadian) Shakespeare adaptation, seeking an understanding of adaptation based on the motives, tactics, and efficacy of adaptation. Simultaneously, it challenges the dominance of “Shakespeare,” in critical as well as theatrical practice, by comparing appropriations of Shakespeare to appropriations of Chekhov which exhibit similar tactics and motives.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents and grandparents, who, to their credit, never deliberately steered me in this direction but certainly paved the way; to my cousin, Bruce, who has been an inspiration more or less since the year of our birth; and to my brothers Patrick and Julian, who repeatedly teach me the virtue of humility in one way or another (someone has to).

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Introduction: Aiming the Canon at Canada

I have a dream. A dream that one day in the city where I live, at any given time of year, I will be able to find a play that is filled with people who look like me, telling stories about me, my family, my friends, my community. For most people of European descent, this is a privilege they take for granted.

Djanet Sears (“nOTES” 14)

Djanet Sears’s dream reflects on a depressing reality: the profound exclusion of “people who look like [her]” from Canadian stages and dramas. In an essay which accompanies her play, Harlem Duet, Sears describes the frustration of being unable to find stories either written by or representing the experiences of people of African descent. Her quest for an African hero in the “annals of western dramatic literature” turned up only one, Othello, and he was embodied by “Sir Laurence Olivier in blackface”; when she wanted to see a “live stage production by a writer of African descent,” Sears was forced to leave Canada and go to New York City to see Ntozake Shange’s for coloured girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf (14).

When, as an adult, she decided to start writing plays that would give her nieces’ generation the privilege she never had, Sears returned to the site of her first disappointment: William Shakespeare’s Othello. Appropriating Shakespeare’s protagonist as her own, she gives him a distinctly African-American background and begins her narrative at an earlier point in his story, focusing on the marginalized community he left rather than the dominant white culture he would join. Sears’s Harlem Duet became one of the most successful Canadian plays (by an author of any descent) in recent history. The plot is of her own invention, but she overtly and unmistakably
borrows from the same dramatic canon which, at one point in her life, symbolized everything from which she felt excluded in her culture – even the one black character was played by a white man. Sears’s dramaturgy of appropriation, and others like it, are the subjects of this study, which investigates how playwrights interrogate Canadian society’s privileged narratives by revising, restaging, and retelling them from previously marginalized perspectives.

Both Sears’s experience of exclusion, and her attempt to find a solution in “the annals of western literature,” illustrate the significant role the canon plays in establishing, reflecting, and policing normative cultural values. As David Savran argues, the process of canonization, which “guide[s] the production, distribution, and especially, the consumption of art works with an eye to what deserves to be immortalized,” is far from ideologically neutral:

[i]t represents an itinerary of cultural legitimation that privileges and excludes certain kinds of texts as well as their makers and consumers; […] it produces a genealogical history that helps to construct nations, social classes, and other forms of collective (and individual) identity; […] and it establishes aesthetic, ideological, and moral values and standards that masquerade as disinterested and universal. (Savran 566)

Although artistic values are ultimately arbitrary (think again of Laurence Olivier in blackface, e.g.), their social consequences are not. Canons serve “to differentiate and legitimate inegalitarian and hierarchical arrangements among individuals and groups” (Swartz 86). In Canada, the literary and dramatic canons were imported from Europe to serve colonization and consecrate colonial tastes, values, and relations, and the
“hierarchical arrangement” thus legitimated is one which, as Sears discovered, privileges Eurocentric values. Canadian theatre is still dominated by productions of plays from the European canon: Canada’s most famous and prestigious theatre festivals (Shaw and Stratford) are devoted to reproducing the works of Shaw and Shakespeare, and most Canadian cities have at least one theatre company devoted largely or exclusively to producing classical or Shakespearean repertories.

Since the 1970s alternative theatre movement, there has also been a call – voiced by theatre artists, academics, and cultural critics, and echoed in public policy documents – for the creation of a Canadian canon. But the process of Canadian canon formation, too, represents an itinerary of cultural legitimation, and as Jerry Wasserman observes in the introduction to the fourth edition of Modern Canadian Plays, the assumption that a locally-produced canon would be somehow different or better has been thoroughly critiqued:

Since about 1990, a revisionist school of Canadian theatre historians led by Alan Filewod and Denis Salter has relentlessly deconstructed the nationalist assumptions and evolutionary perspective built into most models of Canadian theatre history since the nineteenth century, including my own. […] a great deal of discussion has ensued over how [anthologies] may limit, select, privilege, circumscribe, and otherwise influence the kinds of plays and theatrical values that come to be understood as comprising the field of Canadian drama. (8)

Moreover, regardless of whether the Canadian canon is seen as reinforcing ideologies of “a unified national community” or, conversely, as embracing “a notion of difference as a
precondition of national culture” (Filewod, “Undermining” 182), the idea of a Canadian canon only makes sense in relation to another, non-Canadian one. Thus, contemporary Canadian theatre and its discourses constitute a binary opposition between producing a Canadian canon and reproducing the European one. Both of these activities (which frequently overlap in practice1) are constructed as signs of national achievement: insofar as the plays of Shakespeare, Shaw, Chekhov, Ibsen, and so forth are entrenched in the popular imagination and the curricula of Canadian schools and universities as the best plays ever written, acclaimed Canadian productions thereof are a source of national pride; on the other hand, the development of a native Canadian dramatic canon is also seen as a desired sign of cultural maturity.2

Given this bipolar model, it is unsurprising to observe the recent emergence of a dramaturgy which appeals to both of these apparently contradictory ideals by adapting, appropriating, and hybridizing the Western dramatic canon. Although such adaptations span a broad spectrum of playwriting and an equally wide variety of motives – the canon is adapted for many reasons, culturally affirmative as well as culturally oppositional – many, like Harlem Duet, cite canonical masterpieces specifically to critique them or challenge their cultural capital and the cultural hierarchies they privilege. As cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu writes, “the ‘return to sources’ is the strategy par excellence, […] the basis of all heretical subversion and all aesthetic revolution, because it enables

1 Relatively few companies or artists work on only classical or only new works – with the obvious exception of the playwrights themselves. Some exceptions include Alberta Theatre Projects and Tarragon, which have new work-oriented mandates, and Soulpepper, which is dedicated to a classical repertory; but the theatre artists themselves generally circulate freely between companies.

2 In both cases, Canadians often look outside Canada for approval: the big festivals in Ontario are heavily reliant on American patronage, and the authentic sign of success for a new Canadian artist (in any medium), in many circles, is not a Juno, Gemini or Governor-General’s Award, but critical and commercial success abroad.
the insurgents to turn against the establishment the arms which they use to justify their
domination” (84). By thus reworking the privileged narratives of the literary and dramatic
canons, writers can insert their own previously absent perspectives and voices, showing
what these stories have until now left untold, and perhaps substituting their own idea of a
happy ending. Such writers may use canonical stories and narratives either to expose and
contest their exclusionary function or, by re-imagining them from different perspectives
or in different places and times, to stake a claim on the canon, and in the theatre, for
themselves and the spectators for whom they write.

Although writing back to the canon, or “canonical counter-discourse,” as Helen
Tiffin calls it (22), is a favourite strategy of post-colonial writers worldwide, this study
focuses more specifically on Canadian playwrights who appropriate canonical plays in
new works of their own. Because theatre was imported to Canada from Europe along
with (and largely in the form of) ready-made repertoires which (along with American
touring productions) monopolized Canadian stages until well into the 20th century,
adapting canonical plays to Canadian contexts has long provided both an occupation and
pre-occupation for Canadian theatre artists and the scholars who study them: the online
Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project (or CASP:
http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca, developed at the University of Guelph by a team of
researchers led by Professor Daniel Fischlin), identifies over 500 adaptations of
Shakespeare alone. But although – or perhaps because – adaptation is ubiquitous in
Canadian theatrical history, it is still not clear why or how Canadian playwrights
appropriate canonical plays, or how their spectators respond to those strategies.
This study attempts to describe and analyze the “radical adaptive practices” used by recent Canadian playwrights to appropriate canonical plays, question the privileged place they occupy in Canadian culture, expose the exclusionary hierarchies they legitimate, and claim centre stage for Canadian perspectives which have hitherto been waiting in the wings (Fischlin, “Adapting” 327). By examining these adaptive strategies, this study will seek a better understanding of them, while simultaneously addressing several important questions raised in recent research on Shakespeare adaptation, Canadian and otherwise. First, the word “adaptation” is burdened with a problematic abundance of significations, both dramatic and otherwise. Aside from certain well-known and still widely circulating prejudices which cast adaptation as a derivative form of copying or even betraying art rather than creating it, there is not even a consensus among scholars about what adaptation actually is, or where – particularly in the milieus of theatrical production – it begins and ends, let alone why and how writers do it. This presents a problem for understanding plays like Harlem Duet, which create new stories, characters, and situations, but are also clearly and explicitly adapting other plays. Can we define a discrete form of adaptation – a dramaturgy of appropriation – that distinguishes the radical retellings of Sears, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Michael O’Brien, and others – plays which diverge so drastically from their sources that the source is barely present, hardly recognizable, or otherwise reduced to a supporting role – from the other 500 plays in the CASP database?

Second, the extant research on canonical adaptation is almost exclusively limited to adaptations of Shakespeare, but Shakespeare is not the only canonical source being adapted in Canada. Can we account for such similarly radical but non-Shakespearean
adaptations as Cowgirl Opera’s 2005 Fringe hit, The Three Sisters: A Black Opera in Three Acts, or Edmonton-based Catalyst Theatre’s internationally renowned The House of Pootsie Plunket, or Margaret Atwood’s Penelopiad?

Third, as specifically dramatic appropriations, these plays cannot be fully understood without a methodology that accounts for their production and reception in specific cultural and historical conditions of theatrical performance. It is one thing for a solitary scholar to analyze the intricate web of intertextual connections in a text like Ann-Marie MacDonald’s Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet), but it is quite another to determine how those connections signify in performance, or what cultural work they do in culturally and historically specific conditions of production and reception. Can we establish why, how, and to what extent, these plays use canonical source-texts to performatively renegotiate “Canadian gendered, ethnic, racial and classed subjectivities” (Knowles, “Othello”: 164)? Rather than attempting to define what these plays “mean,” can we determine what cultural work their authors attempt to do, the adaptive dramaturgies they use, and the reception of those strategies in specific performance conditions – conditions which change as, for example, a play is performed in larger or smaller cities and theatres, or in different regions of Canada, or as it accrues canonical status of its own?

This study addresses these questions by examining the strategies of canonical adaptation and appropriation in the creation and reception four recent Canadian plays: Sears’s Harlem Duet (1997), Jason Sherman’s After the Orchard (2005), Michael

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3 See Peter Dickinson on Harlem Duet, for example: his excellent analysis uncovers the play’s connections not only to Othello but numerous other sources including Wide Sargasso Sea and Not Now Desdemona, but these links are not readily available to the majority of spectators (nor are they pointed out in the play’s program notes and paratexts) and thus they figure much less prominently in audience reception.
O’Brien’s *Mad Boy Chronicle* (1995), and Kristine Nutting’s *The Three Sisters: A Black Opera in Three Acts* (2005). These plays are distinguished from the more general field of “Canadian Shakespeare adaptation” in three important ways: first, all four playwrights adapt canonical sources in order to challenge conventional assumptions about what it means to be (or who is referred to by the term) “Canadian.” They each, albeit to varying degrees and in different ways, re-cite canonical master-texts specifically to open up spaces for Canadian perspectives that have been historically marginalized by or absent from both the canon and the Canadian stage. Second, although each playwright clearly and explicitly adapts a well-known play from the canon, they all diverge so radically from their source texts that the term “adaptation” seems to be at once insufficient and yet an overstatement: these are not stage adaptations but essentially new plays with borrowed material. Third, since this study (and these plays) aim to question rather than confirm what Ellen MacKay refers to as “the constitutive Shakespeareanness of Canadian theatre” (10), two of the four case studies are appropriations not of Shakespeare but of Anton Chekhov, another prominent source in Canadian adaptation.

These case studies offer excellent opportunities to analyze and compare strategies of appropriation, and they also confine the scope of the study within certain limits. First, although it is possible to appropriate a canonical text without even changing a word of it (through *mise en scène* or re-mediation, for example), this study is primarily interested in exploring appropriation as a form of *playwriting*, rather than an approach to *mise en scène*. Many factors inform this choice: a printed text is more available to close reading than a “staging,” and it is less daunting to consider the agency of an author than to consider how it is diffused among various people who jointly create a *mise en scène*; but
primarily, this study focuses on appropriation as strategy for the creation of new plays rather than the reconstitution old ones. For similar reasons, although they would make an excellent topic for another study, I exclude such paratheatrical appropriations as those involved in Shakespeare-themed rave parties, for example. Second, while the plays studied here reflect (and re-enact) an ongoing struggle to represent, rethink, redefine, and rewrite notions of what constitutes Canadian drama and Canadian identities, I cannot claim to speak for or represent the full range of Canadian subjectivities, and I concentrate on English-Canadian plays, productions, and audiences. Finally, although there is abundant evidence that adaptation and appropriation have always been fundamental to Canadian theatre production this study seeks to contextualize the dramaturgy of appropriation in the present, focusing on four plays first written and performed between 1995 and 2005.

**Canada and the Canon: The Two Canadian Playwrights**

Shakespeare is a drunken savage of some imagination whose plays please only in London and Canada.

Voltaire

There used to be a joke to the effect that Canada had two playwrights – Shakespeare and Chekhov.

J. Douglas Clayton (151)

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*4 Although Toronto hosted both rave-themed Shakespeare and Shakespeare-themed raves in the 1990s, the relative dearth of counter-balancing non-Shakespearean examples suggests that Canada is just not ready for an all-night Ibsen-themed dance party (notwithstanding the obvious point of entry offered by Nora’s notorious tarantella). However, at least three productions of the Bacchae in Edmonton in the last decade have exploited connections between wild Bacchic dance rituals and the contemporary ecstasy-and-electronica-driven dance subculture.

*5 Much work has already been done on Québécois appropriations of Shakespeare, and the recent publication of the anthology *A Certain William*, which includes English translations of six such plays, is sure to provoke even broader interest in Québécois appropriations. See also Drouin.

*6 CASP’s online database contains many examples dating back to the nineteenth century, for example.

*7 As CASP notes, this “well-known” quotation is actually a misquotation, an appropriation of two separate Voltaire quotations from quite different sources. See [http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/essays/voltaire.cfm](http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/essays/voltaire.cfm).*
Given that Shakespeare is the ultimate canonical author, it is not surprising that he should also be the one to whom Canadians most frequently return. The sheer numbers documented by CASP (for an up-to-the-minute count, see www.canadianshakespeares.ca/Production_Shakespeare/SearchPublic.cfm) imply that Shakespeare adaptations account for a significant percentage of Canada’s entire dramatic output, and some scholars go so far as to describe Shakespeare adaptation as “a distinct Canadian sub-genre” (Fischlin, “Nation and/as Adaptation” 321; see also Knowles, “Othello”). The ubiquity and prominence of Shakespeare adaptation are such that it can hardly be overlooked here. But Shakespeare adaptation has also become a distinct sub-genre of Canadian theatre scholarship, at the expense of all other forms of dramatic adaptation in Canada. Since 2002, research on Canadian Shakespeare adaptation has exploded, producing two anthologies of plays, two of essays, a special issue of CTR, numerous essays and journal articles, and of course CASP. CASP, which “aims to be the largest collection of teaching and learning resources related to Shakespeare on the Internet,” presently comprises a “Learning Commons” with lesson plans, syllabi, and teaching guides; an “interactive folio” of Romeo and Juliet; a collection of interviews with Canadian dramatists; a multi-media library; electronic versions of over 50 plays; a

8 See Lieblein, Knowles (Shakepeare Is Mine), Brydon and Makaryk, Knowles (Shakespeare in Canada), CTR 111, Kidnie (“there’s Magic”), and Dickinson, respectively. Canada is not alone, of course, in its interest in Shakespeare adaptation. Some recent studies include Shakespeare and Appropriation (1999), Remaking Shakespeare (2003), Post-Colonial Shakespeares (1998), Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations (1999), World-Wide Shakespeare: Local Appropriations in Film and Performance (2005), and Remaking Shakespeare: Performances Across Media, Genres, and Cultures (2003). Canada is, however, under-represented in these anthologies. Only Shakespeare’s Legacy: The Appropriation of the Plays in Post-Colonial Drama (2005) and World-wide Shakespeares include essays on Canadian contributions. The former includes Albert Reiner-Glaap’s “Lear, Hamlet, and Othello: Canadianized,” which defines “Canadianized” Shakespeare in reference to a number of unquestioned and often baffling essentialist claims about what is “Canadian”; and Margaret-Jane Kidnie’s article on Robert LePage’s Elsinore, in World-wide Shakespeares, focuses on how LePage uses Shakespeare to target a global (British), not local (Canadian) audience. Even Even Thomas Cartelli’s Repositioning Shakespeare, which focuses on post-colonial appropriations in the New World, ignores Canada.
virtual warehouse of scholarly essays; the aforementioned database of 500 adaptations; and even a Shakespeare-oriented educational video game. The sheer mass of information stored on CASP creates an irresistible gravitational pull: that is, anyone interested in adaptations of Shakespeare need only type in the relevant keywords discover a wealth of information on previously obscure or unknown productions, while researching old adaptations of Chekhov, Ibsen or Molière takes a great deal of time and effort. Thus, as the Shakespeare’s star gets ever brighter, other kinds of adaptation are eclipsed and marginalized.

Although Shakespeare looms too large in both Canadian theatre and adaptation studies to be ignored, this study hopes to counterbalance rather than exaggerate the tendency to emphasize Shakespeare in these fields, a tendency which may reinforce the very assumptions that many adaptations (and scholars) claim to challenge. “[E]ven such alternative Shakespeares,” Ania Loomba writes (alluding to the title of the anthology in which her essay appears), “to the extent that they maintain the myth of an endlessly pliable Bard […] ironically undercut the effort to seriously re-think the place of Shakespeare” (“Shakespeare” 165). Keeping in mind Loomba’s point that “only the insistent placing of Shakespeare alongside other texts can help us to think seriously about ‘cultural difference,’ even ‘in’ Shakespeare,” this study puts Canadian Shakespeare appropriation in perspective by placing it alongside adaptations and appropriations of Anton Chekhov, another foreign pillar of Canadian drama. Comparing and contrasting how Canadian playwrights appropriate both authors will help illuminate whether and to what degree the same adaptive strategies and tactics identified in Canadian appropriations of Shakespeare are also productively applied to other texts and contexts. And in doing so,
this study will also shed light on a body of work which has not yet been examined as such: Canadian plays which use the works of Chekhov to contest the canon (and canonicity) of Canadian theatre.

Chekhov provides a good counterpoint to Shakespeare in this context, and their names are often cited together in public discourses on Canadian drama. For example, *Time* magazine’s review of the 1978 Stratford season is titled “Shakespeare, Chekhov, & Co.” (Kalem), and the old joke that Clayton alludes to, in the essay cited above, suggests that at one time, at least, it was possible to view the two authors as having near equivalent pre-eminence in Canadian theatre.¹ But whereas Ellen McKay may casually imply, in “The Spectre of Straight Shakespeare,” that the “constitutive Shakespeareanness of Canadian theatre is a fact” so well documented (by “both its historians and its critics”) that it requires neither elaboration nor illustration(10), the constitutive Chekhovian-ness of Canadian theatre does not go without saying, precisely because it has gone without anyone saying much about it: Clayton’s essay is the only account of Chekhov’s reception in English Canada, and it only covers up to 1980.¹⁰ The dearth of scholarship on Chekhov in Canada does not, however, mean that Chekhov’s star is fading. However unacknowledged by scholars, the spectre/spectacle of “straight Chekhov” remains common in Canada, and his works are still entrenched in the curricula of undergraduate theatre history courses and the repertories of amateur, professional, and academic

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¹ Reviews of Stratford seasons have often been similarly titled (e.g., Bains, “Shakespeare, Chekhov and Cole Porter at Stratford Festival 1989”). And perhaps not that much has changed: much more recently (2005), Edmonton theatre critic Paul Matwychuk opened a preview of an *Uncle Vanya* production with the same comparison: “I begin my interview with actor David McNally by presenting him with my pet theory about Chekhov versus Shakespeare.”

¹⁰ Clayton’s brief essay covers Chekhov’s reception in French Canada as well. The history of Chekhov in (English) Canada has been overlooked not only by scholars of Canadian theatre, but by scholars of Chekhov too, who have produced several book-length studies and journal issues on Chekhov in America, Britain, and elsewhere (see Allen; Senelick; *Modern Drama* 42.4 (Winter 1999); and Clayton’s anthology of essays on world Chekhov reception, for example).
theatres. And like Shakespeare (but unlike some of the other canonical authors who hold prominent places in Canadian drama, such as Shaw), Chekhov now comes bent as well as straight: several radical appropriations have emerged since the 1990s.

In addition, Chekhov’s assimilation into the Canadian repertory resembles that of Shakespeare in two important ways. First, it was, ironically, facilitated by efforts to create a professional Canadian theatre: the newly-created professional companies needed a repertory of full-length plays, and Clayton argues that “the integration of Chekhov into a Canadian repertory was seen as […] perhaps the most important [objective] after Shakespeare” (157). A well-executed Chekhov play, such as Stratford’s 1965 production of *The Cherry Orchard*, suggested that “at last were Canadian actors performing as well as any others and that the Canadian theatre scene was finally coming into its own” (155).

Second, as with Shakespeare, critics desired to see Chekhov performed in a manner that would reflect well on the nation’s nascent cultural industry – but what are the criteria for defining a good, Canadian production of Chekhov? Like Canadian Shakespeare, Canadian Chekhov has long been judged against an authentic foreign model, and in particular one which was seen as heralding a bold, even “revolutionary” new style of world theatre: realism (Clayton 154). In a 1924 essay in *The Canadian Forum*, Gladys Wookey sets a pattern that persists to this day, crediting the Russians as inventors of a “new” realism, different from the French “slice of life” play or the

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11 Significantly, this scenario – a community of would-be professional theatre artists in need of plays to perform – is not unusual but not unprecedented: when English theatres were reopened after the Restoration, the players needed decent material immediately, and thus Shakespeare, who might have been surpassed by new writers and forgotten if the theatres had stayed open, filled the gap while a new generation of playwrights learned the craft. In England, as in Canada, by the time the new generation of playwrights had caught up, the old/foreign classics had carved out a permanent niche in the repertory. See Taylor (*Reinventing Shakespeare*).

12 As Clayton points out, Wookey “ naïve[ly] equat[es]” Chekhov and Stanislavsky.
“conjuring trick[s]” of Wilde and Pinero: “[Chekhov] does not pretend to any criticism of life as Shaw and Ibsen do, nor any satire of manners or ideas, and therefore he cares not a whit for unity and form, but banishes them as theatrical and contrary to his purpose” (177). The association stuck, and generations of critics “echoed Wookey […] in identifying Chekhov with Stanislavsky and realism” (154). Yet this mysterious new genre which Chekhov was credited with creating remained elusive in production, perhaps because it was only ever an ideal. What performance, after all, could hope to live up to Wookey’s description of Chekhov’s realism: “It’s as if a luminous veil were thrown over life. […] One recognizes Omniscience without being able to point one’s fingers and say ‘Lo here, lo there,’ for it is in the whole texture and fabric.” (178). For decades, Chekhov’s reception in Canada was coloured by this association with a brand of realism that was widely described in textbooks but rarely if ever seen on stage – and he is still often introduced to students and readers as the father of psychological realism (which, thanks in part to the “Chekhov mania” of the 1960s and 70s, has become the dominant style of Canadian theatre [Clayton 151]).13

More recently, Canadian theatre artists have begun to liberate Chekhov from realism by appropriating his work in new plays and performances, projects which introduce Canadians to new styles and modes of performance, often while explicitly challenging or parodying realism. Toronto’s Theatre Smith-Gilmour, in particular, has achieved local and international renown with its productions, which use Jacques Le Coq

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13 As a result, Chekhov productions are often critiqued in strangely contradictory terms. Writing two decades after Wookey, E.G. Wanger describes the acting in The Seagull as “too mannered, too melodramatic […], too voluble and unrestrained” (154). Since this was perhaps only the third full-length Chekhov production in Canada since 1926, it is doubtful that Wanger had ever actually seen the less mannered, yet also more restrained acting he scorns this production for lacking. Wanger did, however, contrast his scorn for the acting with praise for the “superbly authentic settings,” following another, even more durable trend in Canadian theatre criticism (quoted in Clayton 154).
corporeal mime training to devise physical performance pieces out of lesser-known selections from the Chekhov oeuvre. Chekhov has also (like Shakespeare) been the subject of speculative reworkings, such as The Old Business, an imagined biographical episode co-written by Jason Sherman and Susan Coyne; Afterplay, Irish playwright Brian Friel’s imagined meeting between Sonja from Uncle Vanya and Andrei from Three Sisters, which has had at least two Canadian productions (one at Shaw in 2003); and two of the plays discussed here, Cowgirl Opera’s Three Sisters and Sherman’s After the Orchard. Thus, Chekhov, like Shakespeare, has become a valuable repository of familiar stories to be retold in new and innovative ways, and a symbol of certain theatrical and cultural ideals which invite investigation and critique as much as admiration.

The objective of this study – a description of the dramaturgy of appropriation that encompasses both the playwrights’ motives and methods for adapting canonical sources, and the efficacy of their adaptive strategies in performance, all contextualized in the conditions of production and reception – demands a carefully thought-out methodology which brings together theories of adaptation and intertextuality, reception studies, semiotics, and cultural materialism. This methodological and theoretical framework is explained in chapter one, and put to use in chapters two through five, each of which examines one play as a case study illustrating different strategies of appropriation,

14 Most recently, TSG captivated audiences in Russia (See “Russia Consumed by Canadian Culture”).
15 Re-visions, re-citings, and reinventions of Chekhov, no less than of Shakespeare, are a global phenomenon. New York’s Wooster Group, for example, a company with a long tradition of radical adaptations, parodies, and mash-ups, deconstructed The Three Sisters (and thereby conceptions of realism and the American Method acting style) in Brace Up! (1991) (Allen 146-57), and in 1986 Joel Gersmann deliberately “desecrated” The Cherry Orchard in Wisconsin, playing it as a rauccous, even carnivalesque farce, in order to save it from the “Stanislavskyan captivity of naturalism” (LeBlanc 59). And in 2010, the Canadian Association of Theatre Research will host a panel on “Generative Chekhov.”
influenced by different motives, and received in different circumstances. Considered together, the case studies seek an improved understanding of the motives, tactics, and efficacy of counter-canonical appropriation in contemporary Canadian theatre, by exploring both the diversity of approaches to appropriation in Canadian theatre, and the diversity of responses by Canadian spectators, ranging from outrage, to joyful recognition, to carnivalesque laughter.
Chapter 1: Defining the Dramaturgy of Appropriation

The objective of this study is to understand both how and why Canadian playwrights appropriate canonical sources, and also how and under what conditions such appropriations are received. As such, the case studies are explored using a two-phase methodology described in this chapter. The first phase looks at the dramaturgy of appropriation in the contexts of current theories of literary and dramatic adaptation, in the hope of developing a method for investigating the tactics of dramatic appropriation at work in a given play. Recent scholarship reconceives adaptation – long dismissed or discussed only in terms of copying, plagiarism, and parasitism – as a form (if not the form) of creative expression, one which is, as Bourdieu suggests, “strategy par excellence” for writing back to the canon. Drawing on these theories, I develop a vocabulary for defining and analysing the dramaturgy of appropriation: that is, playwriting which appropriates material from the canons in order to critique or respond to the ways in which old values and ideologies continue to prevail in contemporary discourses and practices (theatrical and otherwise). The second phase establishes the effectiveness of those tactics in practice, an analysis which must be carefully located in the local context of production and reception. To this end, I draw on Ric Knowles’s Reading the Materialist Theatre (2004), which combines the vocabularies of reception studies, cultural materialism, and theatre semiotics in order to analyse the production of meaning in theatre as “a negotiation at the intersection of three shifting and mutually

16 Although “dramaturgy” is often used in the context of theatre production to describe either the background research undertaken to ensure the authenticity of a production (in terms of its representation of dialect or historical moment, for example), or the process of workshopping of a new script to improve narrative consistency or character development, I use the term to refer to the work of dramatic composition, i.e. “the making of drama” (δρηματα + urgo). By “dramaturgy of appropriation,” then, I mean an approach to playwriting in which the acknowledged appropriation of a prior text is an important (if not dominant) factor in the reader or spectator’s construction of meaning.
constitutive poles” (3): the performance, the conditions of production, and the conditions of reception. The resulting two-phase methodology, combining the arsenal of intertextual reading strategies offered by contemporary adaptation theory with Knowles’s analysis of how “meaning” shapes and is shaped by the conditions of production and reception, will then be applied in the four subsequent case studies in order to explore the strategies and efficacy of (ab)using canonical material in recent Canadian plays.

**Adaptation and Fidelity Criticism**

Some people try to get cute and say, “That’s been done before, it’s not innovative.”
Well then riddle me this: what do we consider creative?
By that logic I’m forced to invent
A new form of music which I must present?
…
I bring innovation through my level of skills.
Still sceptical? I expect that you’ll
Redirect your perspective and chill
Once you chew on this:
Because that’s been done, I shouldn’t be doing this?
…
And since Shakespeare wrote plays
I guess Beckett shouldn’t have had his say?

--- DJ Format and MC Ab Dominal “Participation Prerequisite” (2005)

Recent studies of adaptation, like adaptations themselves, are situated in and respond to a tradition which views adaptation with suspicion and derision. Adaptation, insofar as it was regarded at all during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was most often viewed as a form of debasing or copying art rather than a creative act; but it is now enjoying a renaissance in critical theory. In 2006 alone Routledge published two full-length studies of adaptation and appropriation (Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation* and Julie Sanders’s *Adaptation and Appropriation*). Just as adaptations of Shakespeare

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17 See Fischlin and Fortier 4: “When [theatrical adaptation] has been the object of consideration, it has often been judged and understood in opposition to a criterion of ‘originality’ … [and] found lacking in ‘fidelity’ to the original work... .” (4a). Also see Hutcheon 2006: 2-4 and Stam.
and other canonical authors were once singled out for special condemnation, they are now considered with singular fascination in numerous anthologies and collections of essays and plays: Daniel Fishlin and Marc Fortier’s *Adaptations of Shakespeare* (2000), Jean Marsden’s *The Appropriation of Shakespeare: Post-Renaissance Reconstructions of the Works and the Myth* (1991), Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer’s *Shakespeare and Appropriation* (1999), Sonia Massai’s *World-Wide Shakespeares: Local Appropriations in Film and Performance* (2005), and Pascale Aebischer and Nigel Wheale’s *Remaking Shakespeare: Performances Across Media, Genres, and Cultures* (2003) are just a few of the major works on Shakespearean adaptation and appropriation in recent years.\(^{18}\)

All of these recent reappraisals of adaptation proceed from and seek to dispel earlier perceptions of adaptation as a derivative and parasitical activity. They argue that adaptation is a legitimate creative enterprise, and that the relationships between adaptations and their canonical sources are much too complicated to be summarized as simple copying, mimicry, or “dumbing down the classics.” Not only is there “no necessary relation of value between original and adaptation” (Fischlin and Fortier 4), but it is even possible (indeed, necessary) to see adaptations as shaping our understanding of the originals, rather than the other way around. This is precisely the objective of the dramaturgy of appropriation: to compel spectators to revise or reconsider their relationship with and ideas about a given text, and the author and/or the canon it represents. The obvious question, then, is *how*? How can a playwright adapt the material in such a way that, rather than viewing the adaptation as a lesser version of the original,

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\(^{18}\) This list is by no means exhaustive. See also Bristol (1990) on the mutually constitutive relationship between Shakespeare and America, Barbara Hodgdon’s *The Shakespeare Trade* (1998) on appropriations of Shakespeare in extra-theatrical discourses, and Brian Vickers’s *Appropriating Shakespeare*, a shrill condemnation of the appropriations of Shakespeare in New Historicist and Cultural Materialist readings.
the spectator is moved to reassess the original in light of the adaptation? Moreover, how
do their adaptations simultaneously contest with their canonical source-texts and with a
host of negative and dismissive attitudes toward adaptation – attitudes which, however
unfashionable they have become in academe, are still deeply embedded in popular culture
and in the language we use to describe adaptations?

Addressing these questions requires us, like the adaptors themselves, to
renegotiate what Robert Stam calls the “constellation of substratal prejudices” which
permeate discourse about adaptation (4). As Stam notes, these prejudices are revealed in
the “profoundly moralistic” vocabulary we use to discuss adaptations, a vocabulary
which reflects the assumption that the original is by definition superior to an adaptation.19
Discussions of adaptations frequently begin from (and end at) the assumption that the
sole aim of an adaptation is to achieve the maximum fidelity to its original, and since
total fidelity is impossible, the “standard rhetoric has often deployed an elegiac rhetoric
of loss,” using pejorative terms like “betrayal,” “violation,” “vulgarization,” and
“desecration” to lament what was lost in the translation from one medium or genre to
another, and to bemoan the various ways in which the adaptation fails to live up to (or
indeed be) the original (3; see also Hutcheon, Theory 2-3). Thus, the very language we
use to discuss adaptation reflects and reinscribes the “axiomatic superiority of literature
to film” (Stam 4): even to argue that an adaptation is “true to the original” is to concede
that fidelity is the only valid criterion for discussing adaptation.

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19 As Stam, Hutcheon, and Sanders have all noted, these “substratal prejudices” permeate discussions of all
genres and media of adaptations, albeit to different extents. Generally speaking, the hostility toward a given
adaptation seems to be determined not by its genre but by the relative difference in cultural capital of the
adaptation and its adapted text. Thus, popular films of classic novels, as Stam says, suffer not only from the
valorization of the original text but also from the assumption that film, as a popular and “iconographic”
medium which engages all the senses rather than the mind alone, is a dangerous form (5-7).
Although these negative attitudes have become naturalized, so that they appear to be “common sense,” they actually emerged relatively recently. As Hutcheon points out “[t]he desire to transfer a story from one medium or one genre to another is neither new nor rare in Western culture” (“From Page” 39), and for most of our history, authors who emulated old models were not judged for their fidelity to the original but for their skill at making “the adapted material [their] own” (Theory 20). From Aristotle’s time until relatively recently, the prevailing assumption was that imitation and creativity were not opposed, but linked together in the concept of mimesis. Imitating earlier works was not considered “slavish copying” in the classical and Renaissance worlds, but as fundamental to creativity (20). During Shakespeare’s life, creativity was not opposed to, but based on “mastery of imitation” (Fischlin and Fortier 9).

In fact, the idea that adaptation is anathema to true creativity (which is distinguished by “originality”) corresponds with the proliferation of adaptation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The inventions of photography, cinema, and other new technologies created not only new genres but whole new media, and adaptation flourished as artists tried to exploit the new media and the new markets they created: “[t]he Victorians had a habit of adapting just about everything – and in just about every possible direction; the stories of poems, novels, plays, operas, paintings, songs, dances, and tableaux vivants were constantly being adapted from one medium to another and then back again” (Hutcheon, Theory: xi). As adaptation flourished, however, literary criticism

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20 See also Martindale. Poonam Trivedi writes that a similar view of adaptation still holds in Indian culture, where the words for creation, representation, and translation all share the same root. In the Indian tradition, all creation is a kind of re-inscription, and new art works come into existence through the appropriation of extant material in ways that suit local conditions (2005: 47). However, as Trivedi points out in “Reading ‘Other Shakespeares,’” when it comes to Shakespeare, Indian audiences can be as quick as any to perceive and reject infidelities (2003: 56-73).
reacted with hostility: while the early film industry worked to legitimize itself by filming the classics, literary critics worked with equal fervour to defend the classics against the depredations of Hollywood. Criticism of the perceived desecrations visited upon the classics by the new popular media reflects the influences of Romanticism and Modernism, two schools of thought which, insofar as they held originality and anteriority to be among the chief virtues of art, were fundamentally prejudiced against adaptation.

Stam traces these prejudices to their cultural roots, noting among other things Western culture’s “a priori valorization of historical anteriority and seniority,” that is, the assumption that older art is better art (4); and a tendency toward “dichotomous thinking” (4), which imagines the relationship between adaptations and their sources as a bitter, “winner-take-all” rivalry rather than a symbiotic or synergistic relationship. Hostility toward popular film adaptations reflects anxiety that, if the adaptation is popular enough to become canonical itself, like Baz Luhrmann’s Romeo + Juliet (1996), it will effectively “replace” the original, at least in the minds of those high school students whose first or only experience of the story is through Luhrmann’s film. In addition, Stam argues, Western thought has historically privileged “written word as the privileged form of communication” (6), and thus views theatrical, cinematic, and other iconographic representations as unstable, ephemeral, contingent, and ultimately unreliable.

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21 The emergence of popular film came to preoccupy adaptation discourse to the extent that many twentieth century works on adaptation deal only with film adaptations of “classic” novels (see, for example, Aycock and Schoeneke [1988], Cartmell and Whelehan [1999], and McFarlane [1996]).
22 Paradoxically, according to such criteria, the best art is that which was innovative in the past.
23 Dichotomous thinking also plays out in debates about which of several adaptations – for example Luhrmann’s version of Romeo and Juliet vs. the “traditional” Zeffirelli film – is the “best” (or perhaps the least unfaithful?) one to use in educational settings, where films are often used as the carrot to counter the iambic pentameter stick. Such an argument overlooks the far more interesting possibility of using both films in the classroom, which is precisely the danger of dichotomous thinking.
interpretations of the (allegedly) stable, permanent written text. Although Stam refers primarily to prejudices against film adaptations of literature, his argument also applies to dramatic adaptations of classical drama, which is more valued – and most often transmitted in schools and universities – as written, dramatic literature than as performed theatre. Just as adaptations are often discussed only in terms of their fidelity to the (often hypothetical) original, discussions of performances (both live and filmed) in both popular and academic contexts often revolve around the “original” written text, assuming that fidelity is both possible and desirable, even though, as Stam points out, discussing performed adaptations in these terms puts them at an obvious disadvantage: not only does it subordinate one art work to another, and one medium to another, it also creates an impossible requirement for success: for how can an image be “faithful” to a word? If adaptations are remediated from words to images, they are seen as mere “illustrations” of their literary sources, and they are “doubly ‘less’”: lesser versions of their own source, and also lesser than an original work. By this logic, *Mad Boy Chronicle*, for example, is not as good as *Hamlet* at being *Hamlet*, and it cannot really be great art on its own, either, since it is “based on” another play. From a point of view informed by fidelity criticism, adaptation is by definition derivative and inferior: adaptors copy genius rather than expressing their own, and adaptations are not literature because they do not “stand alone”: literature is distinguished by originality, adaptation by fidelity.

**Adaptations and “Originals”: Fidelity Discourse and the Canon**

In recent years, and particularly since the emergence of post-structural and post-colonial criticism, critical theory has done much to liberate adaptation from fidelity discourse. The foundations for this reassessment of adaptation were laid in the late 1960s and early
1970s by thinkers influenced by semiotics and post-structuralism, most famously Barthes (1968) and Kristeva (1969), writers who consider all signifying practices as equivalent and interdependent, and therefore equally worthy of attention, whether or not they have enjoyed the designation of “literature.” Indeed, “literature,” from such a perspective, is merely a specialized signifying system, a genre of language. Moreover, the post-structuralists established that the meanings generated by such signifying practices are relational and provisional: signs have no inherent meaning outside the sign-system to which they belong, and meaning (literary or otherwise) neither emanates from nor resides within a text, nor can it be traced back to its ultimate origin in an author. Kristeva views all texts as “permeated by the signs, signifiers, and utterances of the culture” in which they participate, stressing “the endless permutation of textualities rather than the ‘fidelity’ of a later text to an earlier model” (Sanders 2; Stam 8). Because they are thus permeated by, and meaningless if divorced from, all the other signifying practices in their socio-historic context, all texts are “mosaics of citations, visible and invisible” (Hutcheon, Theory 21). In other words all texts necessarily cite, rework, and adapt other texts.

Furthermore, following Bakhtin, Kristeva treats texts as utterances, whose meanings (at any given time, from any given reading) are always shaped by the context in which they are uttered and heard (or read).

The work of Kristeva, Barthes, Bakhtin, et al., has enabled a thorough reexamination of adaptation, one which frequently appropriates the quintessential icon of

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24 This is not to suggest that these theorists appeared from thin air, of course. Sanders notes that T.S. Eliot queried the logic of making a virtue of originality as early as 1919 (when he asks, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” why we tend to base our praise for an author on “those aspects of his work in which he least resembles” his or her predecessors [37; see also Sanders 7-8]). However, as she points out, both Eliot and, later, Harold Bloom (in The Anxiety of Influence, which constructs literary influence as an Oedipal struggle) take the existence of a literary tradition for granted, without acknowledging that “the central problem with any tradition is the ability to recognize not only those who constitute that tradition but those who are at various times excluded from it, or, at the very least, consigned to its margins” (Sanders 10).
literary originality. Because Shakespeare is widely regarded as the quintessential canonical author, responses to adaptations and appropriations of his plays offer especially vivid examples of fidelity discourse; and yet they also best exemplify the fundamental absurdity of discrediting adaptations on the basis of infidelity and unoriginality: as the figurehead of literary and dramatic canons built on the values of seniority and anteriority, Shakespeare is the chief exemplar of original genius; and yet his plays are themselves adaptations (Fischlin and Fortier 4). Contemporary adaptation theorists have therefore found it very convenient to use the chief symbol of creative originality, Shakespeare, as an example of how originality and, therefore fidelity, are illusory, because originals always “turn out to be partially ‘copied’ from something earlier” (Stam 8).

For example, the impossibility of determining where Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* begins and ends illustrates how texts are never original but always iterations and reiterations of extant material. *Hamlet*, the “original” source of numerous adaptations, is itself a stage adaptation (quite possibly of another stage adaptation, the so-called Ur-*Hamlet*) of a French novelization of a Latin translation of a fragment of an ancient Norse saga which, having originated from an oral culture, has neither an author nor an original. Even if we confine ourselves to dramatic versions, and conveniently forget that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was not the first of these, the written text we use today is based on a collection of variant texts, many of which (e.g., the First Folio of 1623) were not

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25 Thanks is part to British colonial enterprises of the last four centuries and the continuing dominance of the English language in world commerce. Shakespeare enjoys special status even outside the English-speaking world, in nations such as Russia and India, for example. This is especially true among Western-style dramatic cultures, because Shakespeare is unquestionably the world’s most successful and recognized playwright. Even non-dramatic performance practitioners have often experimented with appropriating Shakespeare, although not without controversy, as in the well-known cases of *kathakali* adaptations of *Lear* and *Macbeth*.
printed until years after their first performances (or their author’s death), and is therefore a written adaptation of an ephemeral, performed original – which was itself, of course, the result of a collaborative process by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. From a Kristevan perspective, *Hamlet* is a network (or bricolage) of citations of countless texts, both contemporary and historical, pagan and classical, oral and literary, heard and silent.

The case of *Hamlet* illustrates Fischlin and Fortier’s point that “[t]he idea of originality posits an independence where none exists – or where only limited invention is possible” (4). All texts and utterances are kinds of citation and adaptation, because the activity of “reworking material is to some extent the only kind of cultural activity there is”:

> From such a perspective, originality and fidelity become largely spurious ideas. Theatrical adaptation can be retheorized as a specific form of the cultural reworking taken to be basic to cultural production in general…:
> everything we think, say, or do relies upon ideas, words, and cultural norms that pre-exist us. (4)

What is “original” to a given writer is not the text, but the iterative choices, the selection, combination, and arrangement of textual materials.

The absence of originals and the impossibility of fidelity becomes even clearer in the context of theatre. Although performances (especially of canonical works) are frequently judged by their fidelity to the text, the act of representing text as performance problematizes the ideal of fidelity: as Stam asks, “fidelity to what?” (15). As cited already, an image cannot be “faithful” to a word, and in theatrical terms, somatic gestures and verbal utterances are not commensurate with graphic text. Performances may
represent text, but cannot reproduce it. Performance demands verbal utterance, movements, systems of representing space and time, physical actions and reactions, none of which are “in the text.” (For a hypothetical alien visitor who has never seen or heard of plays, it would be difficult to understand how we posit a relationship between this stack of paper and that public spectacle, based in terms of fidelity.)

Furthermore, the ideal of faithfully reproduction ignores the fact that texts emerge (are uttered) in specific social and historical contexts, which they both shape and are shaped by. Any subsequent utterance, performance, or reading of the text is automatically different because it cannot recreate the socio-historic conditions in which it initially appeared. A reproduction that strives for “fidelity,” then, must choose between uttering the text as faithfully as possible or approximating the significance (or performative force) of that “original” utterance. For example, when Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* (which itself cites *Macbeth* and other Shakespearean texts) was first performed in 1896, the mere utterance of the word “merdre” [*sic*; meaning “shit” or perhaps “sheeeyit!” as one translation renders it] – the first line in the play – was sufficient to incite a riot; ironically the failure of *Ubu’s* performance (after a fifteen minute disruption, the play was restarted, initiating another disruption) cemented the play’s place in the canon. If productions of *Ubu* today are unable to provoke the same response with the same word, should the performers choose fidelity to the text or, attempt to find another way to provoke an audience? Is it faithful to Shakespeare’s text to cast a black man and a white woman in the roles of Othello and Desdemona, given that *Othello* was supposed to be performed (and largely viewed) by white Jacobean men,* for whom the play’s geographical context and racial

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26 There were, of course, some female spectators in the Elizabethan and Jacobean playhouses, but with certain exceptions (e.g. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which was apparently written to satisfy Queen
and sexual dynamics were invested with very different (and much more specific) meanings than they are now? Similarly, many critics have argued (from a variety of perspectives) that the history of the twentieth century has made it impossible to mount a “faithful” production of the *Merchant of Venice*.\(^{27}\) As Aebischer and Wheale put it, “an exact replica of an afternoon’s entertainment in the Elizabethan theatre is frankly unattainable – and how shocking that might be, if possible” (2).

As Stam argues, fidelity discourse “relies on essentialist arguments,” assuming that the source text “contains” an “extractable ‘essence,’” and depicts reality more or less faithfully. But in fact texts are not “merely portrayals of a pre-existing reality,” but rather “communicative utterances, socially situated and historically shaped” (10). All texts “comprise […] a series of verbal signals that can trigger a plethora of possible readings” (15), which remain indeterminate until they are “completed and actualized in the reading (or spectating)” (10), which is also socially situated and historically shaped. Thus, texts do not have a “meaning” to which one can be faithful until they are read; every reading, because it is shaped by the reader’s social and historical context and their literary horizon of expectations, will necessarily produce different “meanings.” As most readers can attest, even rereading the same book generates new and different meanings.

Like all texts, adaptations do more than merely portray their sources; they too are socially situated and historically shaped communicative utterances. Stam borrows from speech-act and performativity theory to highlight the aporias of fidelity theory: “just as the literary utterance creates the state of affairs to which it refers – rather than merely

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\(^{27}\) For examples, see Jones (2005) and Schulting (2005).
imitating some pre-existing state of affairs – so the […] adaptation might be said to create a new […] state of affairs, rather than merely imitating the old state of affairs as represented by the source” (11). As such, adaptation and appropriation are not secondary or derivative forms of writing, but primary to both literary activity and human behaviour in general; “adaptation” as a genre is a specialized form of the continuous rereading and rewriting that characterizes all cultural production (Fischlin and Fortier 4). Every production of a dramatic text is an adaptation, and every performance of a particular production is an adaptation of that production’s score or mise en scène. Literary criticism is also adaptive, since it involves recontextualization in one way or another; and reception, too, demands that the receptive subject(s) appropriate the text to fit it into a personal conceptual framework, or horizon of expectations. The significance of this kind of “appropriation” to literary history is made clear by H. R. Jauss, who argues that “[a] literary event can continue to have an effect only if those who come after it still or once again respond to it – if there are readers who again appropriate the past work or authors who want to imitate, outdo, or refute it” (22). Works that are not appropriated by new readers, spectators, and authors fade into obscurity, while those works which are most famous, prestigious, and influential are precisely those which have been frequently and continuously appropriated.

From Jauss’s perspective, then, the relationship between adaptation and adapted text is not that of a parasite and host, nor (as Bloom frames it) that of a son engaged in an Oedipal struggle with the canonical father; it is rather a mutual symbiotic relationship. Without continuous appropriation and adaptation, the canonical text would gradually diminish and disappear; conversely, if the adaptation were to somehow succeed in
usurping or suppressing its literary father, it would no longer be readable as adaptation (just as Shakespeare’s works are no longer received as adaptations except in scholarly works which seek to recuperate them as such). Adaptation is strongly tied to canonicity: each depends upon the other, because repeated adaptation is what makes texts canonical. Thus, on the one hand, “the auratic prestige of the original” is in fact “created by copies, without which the very idea of originality has no meaning” (Stam 8), and on the other hand, without a canon of familiar texts from which to appropriate and rework material, adaptation cannot exist: “it goes almost without saying that the texts cited or reworked need to be well known […] to serve as part of a shared community of knowledge, both for the interrelationships and interplay to be identifiable and for these in turn to have the required impact on their readership” (Sanders 97). As such, the history of canonical literature is in large part the history of its appropriation and adaptation, and vice versa: “to understand the cultural politics of adaptation, we must also examine how adaptation takes place within a certain structured relationship to such […] notions as the author and the canon. Adaptation is not a rejection of these notions, but rather an ongoing engagement with them” (Fischlin and Fortier 6).

**Beyond Fidelity Discourse: What Is Not an Adaptation?**

Dissolving the false “adaptation vs. original” dichotomy allows us to move beyond fidelity criticism – the lament for what is “lost in translation” – and focus instead on how adaptations *add* to our understanding of their sources, how adaptors make the material their own, and what tactics they use to put old ideas into a new context. And yet, this solution to anti-adaptation criticism creates a host of new problems, such as determining what is *not* an adaptation. That is, if every act of creation and even interpretation is in fact
an adaptation, what ensures that the term remains meaningful, and what distinguishes certain adaptations, such as reworkings of Shakespeare, as more worthy of special scholarly attention than others (such as grocery lists)?

The online database of Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare illustrates the problems created by this expansive view of adaptation (http://www.uoguelph.ca/shakespeare/Production_Shakespeare/SearchPublic.cfm). Despite being limited to the relatively specialized field of Canadian dramatic adaptations of Shakespeare, the database of over 500 plays (and counting) shows the difficulty of establishing and maintaining meaningful criteria for distinguishing adaptations from other writing, or each other. For example, while Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) is an obvious choice, De-ba-jeh-mu-jig’s New World Brave is somewhat less so; as the website’s creators acknowledge, that play’s only clear reference to Shakespeare (if it is that) is the titular pun on Miranda’s famous line in The Tempest – as much an allusion to Aldous Huxley, therefore, as to Shakespeare. Even more baffling is the inclusion of Daniel David Moses’s Brebeuf’s Ghost (1996). In CTR’s special issue on adapting Shakespeare in Canada, editors Fischlin and Ric Knowles identify Brebeuf’s Ghost as an adaptation of Hamlet (3), but in an interview posted on CASP, Moses and CASP researcher Marissa McHugh refer to it as an adaptation of Macbeth (http://www.uoguelph.ca/shakespeare/i_ddmoses.cfm)! Consulting the play is unlikely to help readers sort out this confusion either, as Brebeuf’s Ghost contains no explicit references to any Shakespearean text, whether in the form of allusions, character names, settings, or plot. What play could be confidently excluded under these criteria?28

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28 In addition, the CASP database includes not only plays based on Shakespeare’s plays, but also plays based on or about Shakespeare himself, e.g. Elizabeth Rex and Shakespeare’s Will, which extends the
If on the one hand CASP includes plays so tenuously linked to the adapted text that only a highly trained scholar can spot (or perhaps merely speculate on) the connections, on the other hand it also includes many plays which scarcely deviate from the source; that is, adaptations which essentially consist of the original text, cut, edited, or otherwise altered to be made fit for school tours, fringe productions, or other local contexts. Many of these plays retain Shakespeare’s titles and have been framed by their paratexts as Shakespeare’s work, and were thus not necessarily received as adaptations by their audiences. More confusing still, perhaps, is the inclusion of what might be called “second degree” adaptations; that is, translations or adaptations of plays which are themselves Shakespearean adaptations: the database contains over a dozen translations and adaptations of Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*.

CASP’s all-inclusive approach to adaptation points to another potential problem: criticism of adaptations of Shakespeare and other canonical works and authors, even when it seeks to valorize adaptation, tends to focus too much on the “of Shakespeare” at the expense of whatever else is going on in the adaptation. Poonam Trivedi sharply criticizes the tendency of Shakespeare-oriented criticism to obsess over the threat to “Shakespeare” posed by appropriations. Citing her participation in two global Shakespeare conferences in 2001 (one in India and the other in Spain), she complains that “the chief obstacle to reading these ‘Other’ Shakespeares was…the authority of the [Shakespearean] text. […] All appropriations continued to be judged according to the extent of their departures from the text” (“Reading” 60-61). Peter Dickinson’s essay on *Harlem Duet* demonstrates how adaptations are poorly served by analyses that focus only projects purview even further without acknowledging or investigating the distinction between adaptations of fiction and of historical or biographical fact.
on how the source is or is not represented therein. As Dickinson shows, *Othello* is only one of Sears’s sources in *Harlem Duet*; no less significant, and in some cases more explicit, are the engagements with other twentieth century Black authors, “many of whom are themselves busy rewriting Shakespeare in their own works” (194). Defining *Harlem Duet* as an adaptation of *Othello* is grossly reductive, even though Sears and producers and publishers of her work actively exploit the association with Shakespeare. CASP’s creators justify their broad criteria for inclusion by arguing that they are interested in “exploring the range of adaptive practices” ([http://www.uoguelph.ca/shakespeare/i_dsears.cfm](http://www.uoguelph.ca/shakespeare/i_dsears.cfm)), and it is certainly valuable as a repository of research material. Yet – even leaving aside the issue of how one defines a play as “Canadian” – CASP’s database cannot distinguish between such drastically different approaches to adaptation as Richard Ouzounian’s *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which set Shakespeare’s text in the 1950’s and interpolated several songs, and Matthew MacFadzean’s *richardthesecond*, which uses none of Shakespeare’s plot and hardly any of his dialogue.

“*The Problem of Naming”*: Distinguishing Different Kinds of Adaptation
Adding to the difficulty of determining what is *not* an adaptation is the fact that the word describes both an object and an activity. “Adaptation” refers not only to a textual object but also potentially almost any act of expression or reception – in addition to all its non-literary meanings. No wonder, then, that so many writers have attempted to abandon the word and adapt special terminologies that suits their own interests. As Fischlin and

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29 It is worth noting that although CASP seeks to explore the range of adaptive activity, it is actually organized around the textual products of that activity. This structure, in turn, is more or less dictated by the structure of the technology that enables the project, namely the database, which reinforces the habitual conception of adaptation as a thing, rather than the action or process through which the things in the database are created.
Fortier note, although adaptation may not be the right name, “there is no right name[,] only labels with more or less currency, connection to history, and connotations both helpful and misleading” (2). Coining new words, of course, can result in a proliferation of jargon, as each new study invents a new vocabulary to discuss the same general topic, with which subsequent authors must then grapple.

Ruby Cohn’s *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots* (1975) exemplifies the problems with inventing or adapting a new vocabulary: first, in attempting to classify different kinds of adaptation, one may inadvertently reinscribe the prejudices one is trying to transcend; second, any rigid system of classification is vulnerable to being undone by the discovery of exceptions to its rules; or it may marginalize those exceptions by drawing attention away from them. Cohn compiles a list of synonyms for adaptation, from “abridgement” to “version,” settling on “offshoots” because of its “neutrality.” But Daniel Fishlin and Mark Fortier point out that Cohn hardly valorizes “offshoots” when she compares them to the “Shakespearean stem.” Cohn’s ostensibly neutral vocabulary is in fact “loaded with limiting value-laden connotations” not unlike those Stam observes in traditional anti-adaptation prejudices. Fischlin and Fortier also critique Cohn’s system of classification as “untenable” (3). Her categories, which distinguish quantitatively between types of “offshoots,” based roughly on the amount of physical cutting and/or additions to the text, can only account for changes to a written text. In addition, the categories (“reduction/emendation,” “adaptation,” and “transformation”) are based on the degree of divergence from the “stem,” implying that the more lines, subplots, and characters are cut or added, the farther the offshoot sprouts from Shakespeare’s originary tree. Cohn’s arborial scheme is also threatened by *performance* adaptations that change
the play a great deal without significantly changing the received text. Marowitz, for example, rearranges Shakespeare’s words in his Measure for Measure, but adds none of his own; and The Taming of the Shrew, Henry V, and Julius Caesar can and have all been made to speak both for and against feminism, militarism, and monarchism, respectively, without major cuts or additions.\(^{30}\)

As an alternative to classifying adaptations based on the amount of words that are cut from or added to the original, Thomas Cartelli, in Repositioning Shakespeare, proposes a system of qualitative distinctions. Cartelli, writing on post-colonial reworkings of Shakespeare in the Americas, distinguishes between appropriations based on the attitude they take toward the adapted text rather than simply counting the number of words added or subtracted (17-18; his classifications are discussed in more detail below). Similarly, both Julie Sanders and Deborah Cartmell cite Geoffrey Wagner’s tripartite model based on the adaptor’s disposition toward the adapted text. (Sanders 20-23; Cartmell 24; see also Wagner 222-26). “Transposition” refers to adaptive choices that relocate the sources generically, geographically, historically, or culturally, in relation to their local audiences’ frame of reference. “Commentary” refers to adaptations which begin “to move away from simple proximation and towards something more culturally loaded” (Sanders 21), finding ways to make visible, through alterations or additions, what is repressed by the adapted text. “Analogues” re-imagine the adapted text to the extent that they “stand alone,” so that knowledge of the adapted text is not required to make sense of them, though it may enrich reception (examples of analogues include the films West Side Story and Clueless). Both Wagner’s and Cartelli’s qualitative schema, unlike Cohn’s, recognize non-textual adaptive choices involved in moving from the text to the

\(^{30}\) See Hodgdon, Breight, and Dobson, respectively, for examples.
screen (or stage). These strategies are problematic, however, in their assumption that the
“attitudes” or “perspectives” of adaptations, and thus those of their authors, are available
and determinable. Such claims have been highly controversial, if not altogether off-limits,
since Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “Intentional Fallacy,” and even more so since Barthes
declared the “Death of the Author” (whom Foucault, describing the “author” as merely a
“particular vacant space that may in fact be filled by different individuals,” subsequently
interred in an unmarked grave [96]).

Robert Stam, adapting Gérard Genette’s theory of “transtextuality” (in
*Palimpsestes*), offers another promising approach for analysing adaptations without
normative or source-based criteria. Transtextuality, Genette’s reformulation of
intertextuality, comprises “all that which puts one text in relation, whether manifest or
secret, with other texts” (Stam 27). Genette divides transtextuality into five categories.
The first and most obvious is “intertextuality” or, “the ‘effective co-presence of two
texts’ in the form of quotation, plagiarism, and allusion” (Stam 27). Intertextuality
includes both explicit references and those the author takes for granted as part of the
reader’s horizon of expectations: Biblical stories, myths, fairy tales, and so on. The
second category, paratextuality, refers to the relationship between the “text proper” and
all the “titles, prefaces, postfaces, epigraphs, dedications,” and so forth, that “come to
surround the text and … become virtually indistinguishable from it” (28). Paratextuality,
as the case studies will reveal, is a critical and often overlooked factor in the way
audiences and readers interpret the relationship between adaptations and their sources.

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31 Declarations of the death of the author can be seen as liberating adaptations from speculations about their
fidelity to the original author’s intentions, and yet such claims simultaneously nullify the intentions of the
adaptors themselves, who, like the plague victim in *Monty Python and The Holy Grail*, might reasonably
object to being declared dead. From the point of view of a living adaptor, the announcement of the death of
the author is overdue in one sense, and premature in another.
Metatextuality, Genette’s third category, is in many ways the central interest of this study; it refers to “the critical relation between one text and another, whether the commented text is explicitly cited or only silently evoked” (Stam 28). Metatextuality thus embodies the whole tradition of critical re-visions, parodies, récitemidation, and counter-discourse, from Aristophanes’ lampooning of Euripides to Wide Sargasso Sea to Harlem Duet; as such metatextuality often targets not only the hypotext but also the paratexts which have come to surround it. The fourth category of transtextuality is architextuality, “the generic taxonomies suggested or refused by the titles or subtitles of a text” (Stam 28). Architextuality proves as important as paratext in framing the reception of adaptations. The titles of adaptations may position them as either accommodating their hypotexts to a new audience (e.g., when they simply take over the title of their hypotexts) or as critiquing them (e.g., An Othello, A Tempest); or they may eschew any direct allusion in the title (e.g., Harlem Duet, Apocalypse Now) in which case it is left to paratextuality and/or intertextuality to mark the adaptation as an adaptation. Architextuality may also suggest the particular approach or target of the adaptation, as in The Three Sisters: A Black Comic Opera, where the subtitle signals a generic divergence from the adapted text.

Finally, hypertextuality “refers to the relation between one text, … the ‘hypertext,’ [and] an anterior text or ‘hypotext,’ which the former transforms, modifies, elaborates, or extends” (Stam 29). This concept, significantly, draws attention to the ways in which adaptations influence their sources rather than the other way around. It also considers the hypotext to be a cumulative, collective entity, rather than a single text: film adaptations, Stam points out, often engage with earlier film adaptations as much as with
the source novel (30), and parodies of Shakespeare are often really parodies of (in)famous nineteenth and twentieth century adaptations, such as Laurence Olivier’s Freud-inspired, Oedipal portrayal of Hamlet.

Genette’s model of transtextuality provides a useful framework for analysing the connections and relationships between the textual products of adaptation and their dramatic hypotexts, showing how a given adaptation works as an adaptation. But as Linda Hutcheon emphasizes in her Theory of Adaptation (2006), adaptation is also a process, an act. Hutcheon’s double definition of adaptation is crucial: whereas the fundamental object of both CASP’s database and Cohn’s categories is the material, textual product of adaptation, Hutcheon considers both product and process; moreover, she distinguishes the process of creative adaptation from that of receptive adaptation (7-9, 15-21). Any adaptation emerges from both aspects of that process: before one produces an adaptation, one must receive and interpret the adapted text. Adaptation, then, is defined as “a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging” (8).

Hutcheon also notes that an adaptation must be received as an adaptation to be of interest to adaptation studies, and to be received as adaptation it must somehow “acknowledge” itself as adaptation. Thus, while any utterance or text is permeated by citation and adaptation, Hutcheon limits her discussion to works which are both intended and acknowledged as adaptations of specific texts (8, 21). This distinction provides a basis for excluding works whose divergence from the adapted text is either so slight (e.g. a “straight” film adaptation) or so extreme (e.g., Brebeuf’s Ghost) that audiences will not recognize them as adaptations at all. In another way (which I will not explore here), her definition is helpfully inclusive, since it encourages consideration of adaptations in other
genres and media, from print to music to video games. She further defines adaptation as an “extended intertextual engagement[s] with the adapted work” (8), which would exclude “allusions to and brief echoes of other works,” most musical sampling, and plagiarism, because it is unacknowledged. Sequels and prequels too, are disqualified, because “[t]here is a difference between never wanting a story to end … and wanting to tell the same story over and over again in different ways” (9). (The exclusion of sequels and prequels, however, seems unconvincing and contradictory, since their creation and reception almost certainly involve a process of adaptation.)

Making the critical distinction between the products of adaptation and the “creative and an interpretive act[s] of appropriation/salvaging” (9, emphasis original) that create (and interpret) them allows Hutcheon to move beyond fidelity criticism – questions about what is done to the adapted text – and on to more interesting questions about how new plays are created with material from old ones, and why playwrights and audiences are so attracted to this strategy. Questions such as, what, exactly, is being adapted in an adaptation? What are the strategies and dramaturgies of adaptation? Why do authors adapt at all, when it exposes them to vitriol, derision and condemnation, such as H. N. Hudson piled on Nahum Tate: “[w]ithered be the hand, palsied be the arm, that ever dares to touch one of Shakespeare’s plays again” (Lectures on Shakespeare II; qtd. in Massai, “Stage” 247)! And what factors determine whether spectators respond to an adaptation with either Hudson’s hostility, or with the general enthusiasm that greeted such adaptations as Shakespeare in Love or The Lord of the Rings, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, and Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)?
Until recently few scholars have ventured into such territory, because an act of appropriation, unlike its material consequences (e.g., a text), has no tangible existence. Notwithstanding that an adaptation cannot be created or interpreted without such acts, the only evidence they leave behind is the text, and as mentioned above, speculating about the actions that create texts and the motives that drive their authors has long been taboo. Yet, as Hutcheon points out, neither Barthes nor Wimsatt and Beardsley denied that authors have intentions: “What both the New Critics and the poststructuralists were protesting, in their very different ways, was having recourse to authorial intent as the sole arbiter and guarantee of the meaning and value of a work of art” (106-7).

The question, then, is not whether authors have intentions, but how readers, spectators, and critics can claim to know them. Hutcheon’s most significant contribution, perhaps, is her argument that we can discover evidence of such intentions in the texts of adaptations, that indeed we must in order to experience them as adaptation. Michael O’Brien’s Mad Boy Chronicle (1995), for example, contains a number of readily recognizable elements from Hamlet: ghosts, vengeance quests, a treacherous stepfather, Danish setting, and so on; yet it also contains a significant amount of material that seems to have no obvious relationship to Hamlet, such as a sub-plot involving the conversion of the play’s Vikings to Christianity. In addition, unlike many Shakespeare adaptations, which set the plot in a time and place more familiar to the audience, it moves the plot back in time. Harlem Duet, similarly, contains obvious and explicit references to Othello, including a character with that name, but its plot concerns events that happen before Shakespeare’s play begins, even while it unfolds in three separate timelines, each of which is historically after Shakespeare, and all of which are in Harlem – which is neither
Shakespeare’s Cyprus, nor where Djanet Sears and her target audience reside. As a “knowing” spectator, I am always reading the text “palimpsestuously,” as Genette would say, trying to interpret the relationship between the hypertext and the canonical hypotext. In order to do this I am compelled to speculate on why O’Brien uses *Hamlet*’s plot and characters to depict the conversion of medieval Vikings, or why Sears gives Othello a Black Canadian wife and a Black American community – both questions which can be addressed without “reducing literature to autobiography,” as Hutcheon puts it (108).

Evidence of the author’s intentions is also made available to spectators in the form of paratexts, which writers, publishers and producers create and distribute in the hope of arousing interest and guiding interpretation. In film and theatre adaptations, posters, programs and publicity material are especially important in disposing spectators to view the intertextual relationship in a specific way: some adaptations are positioned as “faithful” to the source (e.g., Kenneth Branagh’s *Henry V* [1989]), while others are marketed as radical re-visions (e.g., Julie Taymor’s *Titus* [2000]). The paratexts of *Mad Boy Chronicle* claim that O’Brien’s play is not an adaptation of *Hamlet*, but rather a reclamation of the source of *Hamlet* – a claim which implicitly reduces *Hamlet* itself to the status of a mere adaptation. This is not to say that either the subtitle of *Mad Boy Chronicle* or O’Brien’s foreword should be read as indisputable evidence of his intentions, but such evidence undoubtedly influences the way people read or watch the play that follows it, and informs the meaning they make thereof. Hutcheon quotes William Bush’s response to George Bernanos’s adaptation of *Dialogues des Carmelites* (1949), which was framed by his knowledge that Bernanos knew he was dying when he wrote it: “How could I not be moved by the fact that [Bernanos], in the last months
before his death … had written those dialogues … about 16 nuns who, like him, were consciously preparing to appear before God?” As Hutcheon says, once a reader knows something like this, he or she will not easily forget it (110).

Genette’s framework of transtextuality and Hutcheon’s understanding of adaptation as both a textual product and a process of production and reception suggest new ways to ask both how and why adaptations “acknowledge” and engage with their sources. Hutcheon’s definition of adaptation as an “extensive engagement,” however, remains problematic, since it is not clear how “extensive” should be defined. Hutcheon’s criteria are not entirely problematic, and as Cohn’s system shows, any rules of classification, however pragmatic, run the risk of being proven untenable by exceptions. Would excluding prequels and sequels, for example, mean excluding Djanet Sears’s Harlem Duet, despite the fact that it is clearly an extended engagement with Othello? Derek Walcott’s A Branch of the Blue Nile (1986), too, sits uncomfortably within these more restrictive criteria. Set in Trinidad, it concerns the rehearsal and ultimately unsuccessful performances of two plays, including Antony and Cleopatra. Ultimately we see and hear very little of the adapted text, as most of the dialogue is given to debating the legitimacy and utility of staging Shakespeare in Trinidad. Similarly, although Australian playwright Michael Gow’s Away (1986) opens with the end of A Midsummer Night’s Dream and closes with the opening of Lear, it has less to do with either play than with a depiction of three families on different summer vacations. Although these plays borrow from and directly acknowledge their sources, their plots, characters, and themes are all original. When I asked Hutcheon about Harlem Duet at a conference in 2005, she agreed that such plays seem to cross an imaginary line between “adaptation” and “new
work.” And yet a process of adaptation is clearly at work in both the creation and reception of all these plays.

**Adapting an Appropriate Vocabulary**

This study, however, sidesteps the problem of definition, focusing on the acts of appropriation in each play, rather than on debating whether they are or are not “adaptations of” certain “originals.” Nevertheless, my distinction between adaptation and appropriation recalls the problem of naming. As Fischlin and Fortier say, there may be no “right” word; but instead of using the ambiguously broad definition of “adaptation” embraced by CASP, or coining a new vocabulary which may prove obscure and value-laden, I choose to adapt a vocabulary which is already in wide circulation and which, though it may be “value-laden,” is at least self-consciously laden with the values I am interested in exploring. This is the path taken by both Cartelli, in *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations*, and Sonia Massai, in the anthology *World-Wide Shakespeares: Local Appropriations in Film and Performance*: both authors choose the term “appropriation” precisely for its lack of neutrality, preferring a clearly stated and carefully considered political position to an ambiguous and perhaps false pretence to neutrality.

“To adapt” comes from a Latin word meaning “[t]o fit (a person or thing to another, to or for a purpose), to suit, or make suitable. (OED Online). “To appropriate” means “to make (a thing) the private property of any one, to make it over to him as his own; to set apart […] or assign to a special purpose or use” (OED Online) and “to take or make use of without authority or right” (Merriam Webster Online). Thus, while both words can be used to refer to the act of using material from an old text to create a new
one, “appropriation” has the benefit of emphasizing both the agency of the appropriator and the specificity of the use to which the appropriated thing is put. In common usage, “adaptation” is often used to describe a thing, and “appropriation” to describe the act—and the agency behind it. This emphasis on human agency is one of the reasons why Cartelli and Jonathan Bate (1989) prefer “appropriation”: it focuses attention on the motives and objectives of writers, rather than simply the theoretical status of the works they create.

Shifting the focus to creative acts of appropriation also enables discussion of the appropriation involved in works which might not meet Hutcheon’s criterion of “extensive engagement,” such as the previously mentioned examples A Branch of the Blue Nile and Away. Each uses canonical material prominently and significantly in allusion, rehearsal tropes, and parody, but both contain too much original material—new plots, characters, and themes—to fit comfortably within Hutcheon’s definition. To refer to Blue Nile as an adaptation of Antony and Cleopatra is misleading, and neglects Walcott’s extensive engagement with cultural politics and religion in contemporary Caribbean society. Away, too, appropriates several Shakespearean sources without really being an “adaptation” of any of them. And Harlem Duet, which might be excluded from Hutcheon’s definition of adaptation, as a prequel, clearly deserves attention as an example of creative appropriations of Othello and other hypotexts.

In contrast to Cohn’s quantitative distinctions, which classify texts by the degrees to which they diverge from the original, Cartelli exploits the connotations of “appropriation” to distinguish qualitatively between two different kinds of adaptation. For example, contrasting Ben Jonson’s treatment of The Tempest in Bartholomew Fair
(which few would consider an “adaptation”) with contemporary adaptations that set
Shakespeare’s plays in the US heartland or Fascist Europe, Cartelli notes that the former
is a “primarily critical,” the latter a primarily “emulative” act” (15). Thus, while Jonson’s
engagement with the Shakespearean hypotext is quantitatively less extensive than that of,
say, Welcome Msomi, whose uMabatha re-tells Macbeth (almost line for line) in the
socio-historical context and idioms of pre-colonial Zulu society, Jonson’s metatextual
critique may be more potent than Msomi’s.32 Following Cartelli, Bate, Massai, et al., I
have chosen to use “appropriation” to distinguish works that seek to challenge or respond
to the hypotext from those hypertexts which “accommodat[e] the original work to the
tastes and expectations of their own readership or audience” (15).33
In addition to focusing discussion on authorial agency and the disposition of the
hypertext to the hypotext, the term “appropriation” also helps address the question of
what is really being adapted in canonical adaptations. The conventional rhetoric of
adaptation often evokes images of adaptors literally carving up the adapted texts and
re-assembling them as a patchwork Frankentext (or a Frankenstein’s monster-text,
perhaps?), or stirring together disparate hypotextual ingredients like the Weird sisters.34
But the significance of an adaptation is not (or at least not usually) limited to the words,
dialogue, plot elements, and characters it takes from the hypotext (which may after all be

32 The works to which Cartelli alludes are Jane Smiley’s A Thousand Acres (1991) and the 1995 film
adaptation of Richard III starring Ian McKellen. Some would argue, however, that Smiley’s novel is poorly
served by Cartelli’s description of it as a primarily “emulative” adaptation. See Cakebread, for example,
who sees A Thousand Acres as “the product of Smiley’s struggle to map out her relationship with
Shakespeare” (87); and Smiley herself, who describes her novel as an attempt to “communicate the ways in
which I found conventional readings of King Lear frustrating and wrong” (42).
33 In addition to this distinction between adaptation (as emulative) and appropriation (as critical), Cartelli
also distinguishes between five different types of the latter – satiric, confrontational, transpositional,
proprietary, and dialogic – based on both the extensiveness of engagement with the source and the attitude
taken toward it (17-18).
34 Of course, literally carving up the text is a possible tactic; O’Brien himself describes his process this way
in the foreword to Mad Boy Chronicle: “With scissors and glue I put myself to work, trying to debase the
greatest play of all time” (8).
a relatively minor part of the hypertext). More often, an adaptation’s significance lies in
the way it engages with ideas about the hypertext in the spectator’s horizon of
expectations. Appropriations of canonical hypotexts, Cartelli argues, are “transacted not
only in relation to specific … texts, but in relation to specific constructions of [those
texts] which are themselves the products of earlier appropriations and have thereby
acquired a political significance of their own” (19, emphasis original). For example,
Mark Leiren-Young’s one-man play Shylock (1996) explicitly acknowledges a hypotext
in its title and is clearly an extensive engagement with that hypotext, but it is not a
retelling of The Merchant of Venice. It is rather an anti-censorship polemic, both literally
and figuratively “after Shakespeare,” a monologue framed as a post-show “talkback”
speech given by an actor playing Shylock to an audience who has just watched
Shakespeare’s play. Shylock appropriates certain ideas about Shakespeare, his cultural
value, his plays, and their production history, and cites some Shakespearean dialogue, but
it is not an “adaptation” in the sense of a retelling, transposition, or abridgement.

**Canonical Counter-Discourse**

The “dramaturgy of appropriation,” then, refers here to the repertory of creative
and interpretive strategies Canadian playwrights use to query and contest the roles that
Shakespeare, Chekhov, and other influential authors – or “specific constructions” thereof
– play in Canadian society and Canadian theatre. The object of this study is to ask how
this dramaturgy works, and especially to explore how (in contrast to the traditional and
still widely circulating view of adaptations as necessarily subordinate to their “originals”)
adaptations may in fact change the way their readers view the original. Is it true, as
Sanders and others claim, that “as readers or audience, we may never view that novel or
poem or play in the same light once we have had access to the critique implicit in their appropriations” (Sanders 98)? Do such reassessments, in turn, lead us to re-evaluate our relationships with that text, the canon in general, and by extension the values and ideals with which the canon is associated?

A common critique of adaptations is that even those which claim to challenge the master-text must ultimately reinscribe the canon and reify the cultural capital of their adapted texts, and that no appropriation, however brilliant in its critique, can ever truly vanquish its canonical master-text. But laments of this nature are the products of dichotomous thinking; in fact, the adaptation and the adapted text always coexist – and must coexist in order for the adaptation to be read as adaptation: “it is the very survival and endurance of the source text that enables the ongoing process of juxtaposed readings that are crucial to the cultural operation of adaptation” (Sanders 25). The objective of reworking and retelling the canon is not to vanquish the hypotext; rather, as Linda Burnett puts it in an article on Canadian Shakespeare adaptation, it is “both to disassemble and reassemble […] to create new texts in which the old stories are reimagined and reinterpreted from formerly excluded perspectives” (7). As Sanders writes, if counter-discourses, “in seeking to challenge the values on which a canon is established, cannot help but reinscribe the canon, […] they do so in new, and newly critical ways” (105). Thus, although adaptations reconstitute and reinforce the authority of their sources and the canon, the canon thereby becomes “something different from what it was” (Fischlin and Fortier 6). The effect of appropriation and adaptation is neither replication, as assumed by fidelity discourse, nor destruction, but amplification and multiplication (Sanders 63): new interpretations can never subtract from what is already
there (as dichotomous thinking often imagines), but always add to what it is possible to think and say about the “original.”

Sonia Massai’s introduction to *World-wide Shakespeares* uses Pierre Bourdieu’s model of the field of cultural production to explain how appropriations, though they help sustain the field of production, also change it. Though she focuses on Shakespeare, her illustration of how “appropriations of Shakespeare stretch, challenge, and modify our sense of what ‘Shakespeare’ is” applies to appropriations of any “world-wide” author (6). Massai argues that although the “field of Shakespeare production” (i.e., the historical product of the labour of generations of “Shakespeareans”) determines what it is possible to do or say about Shakespeare at a given moment, there are always positions available for new entrants to the field. In contrast to what Massai describes as a “Foucauldian” conception of the “field of forces,” Bourdieu envisions a field of *struggles*, acknowledging the agency of new entrants to choose how they will enter the field and what positions they will take. When new entrants take positions within the field, the entire field is displaced, however subtly, as more new positions are opened up (6-7), and while adaptations inevitably contribute to the survival of the overall field, they also change what the field signifies.

The dramaturgy of appropriation engages in precisely this cultural struggle, appropriating canonical hypotexts in order to exploit their central position – and thereby decentre them, however subtly. The field of struggle is not limited to Shakespearean, or even theatrical discourse, however; canonical plays are appropriated specifically because they allow adaptors to claim positions in numerous fields of cultural struggle simultaneously. In Canada, for example, a post-colonial “settler” nation, the literary and
dramatic canons, and indeed the theatre itself, both embody and represent the legacy (some might say patrimony) of colonization by European imperial powers – a legacy which is widely celebrated, but just as widely lamented. Canonical drama is widely circulated, frequently performed, and celebrated as a common national heritage, which gives it considerable cultural capital; but because it is simultaneously native and foreign, and signifies values and legacies that are exalted by some and assaulted by others, its symbolic value is highly ambiguous and vulnerable to appropriation: even a “straight” production of a play (*Henry V* is an obvious example) might be read as culturally affirmative and validating by some while striking others as a celebration of racism, sexism, and imperialism. All productions of canonical drama are appropriations – whether acknowledged or silent, whether culturally affirmative or oppositional – which invoke and take positions in ideological struggles that may have little to do with the hypotext itself.

The appropriations examined here tend toward the oppositional pole – after all, to rewrite a canonical text is to challenge any assumptions about its timeless or universal value – and seek to reassess or re-evaluate, in various ways, the colonial legacies embedded in and embodied by their hypotexts. As Joanne Tompkins writes in “Re-Citing Shakespeare in Post-Colonial Drama,” this type of appropriation is popular in recent post-colonial drama: “[g]iven that ‘Shakespeare’ has been generally figured as a prime signifier of imperial cultural authority, it is not surprising that many plays from former British colonies target Shakespeare’s plays” (15). Tompkins suggests that appropriations use canonical texts as symbolic stand-ins for both the canon and, by extension, colonial authority: by dismantling the text, they metonymically “dismantle colonial authority and
its effects in favour of articulating an identity that is both distinct from and yet equal to that of the imperial centre” (15). In other words, by appropriating canonical texts, which serve as ready symbols of colonial authority and national identity, the author takes positions in the various fields of discourse in which those texts are implicated – discourses of national identity, literary value, colonial history, and so on. Tompkins studies various examples of such re-citing in Australia, the Caribbean, and Canada, focusing in particular on adaptations involving metatheatre and rehearsal tropes as a strategy for displacing “an inherited tradition in order to accommodate other cultural traditions that, while perhaps originating in a Shakespearean model, have developed in quite different social, literary, and political traditions” (21). Her approach is also notably useful in that it adroitly sidesteps the question of whether a given play is or is not “an adaptation,” by giving full consideration to how new works “refuse mainstream readings and playings of Shakespeare […] by creating a hybrid form in which the Shakespearean content is only vestigial” (15-16).

A Local Habitation: Aiming the Canon at “Canada”

Although adaptation discourse often focuses on the dialogue between the hypertext and hypotext (or their respective authors, as Bloom imagines), post-colonial appropriations of canonical texts also – or even chiefly – initiate and mediate dialogues between the author and the audience; like all utterances, they take place somewhere and address someone. Although appropriations of canonical hypotexts engage with global and national fields of cultural production, they do so in relation to a local audience, and a critical aspect of the dramaturgy of appropriation is the way it uses canonical sources “as pretexts for cultural and ideological negotiations that are often more relevant to their immediate context” than
to the sources themselves, including negotiations of global, national, and local identity (Aebischer and Wheale 3). An analysis of such work, therefore, requires “a model of cultural appropriation which can effectively account for the variety of localities from which Shakespeare is being appropriated, […] and for the impact [appropriations] have on their target audiences” (Massai “Defining” 5-6). Accounting for location is critical to an understanding of dramatic appropriation, given that theatrical performance constitutes a very local field of production – one which is located by and through the playwright’s use of a source which itself occupies a particular location in the spectator’s horizon of expectations.

Sonia Massai (appealing to Shakespearean authority in a manner characteristic of both artistic and scholarly appropriators) notes that “Shakespearean usage [of the word ‘local’] suggests that the creative potential of writing is realized through the act of ‘siting’ or making local” (3). “Making local” is a critical aspect of any signifying practice, including Shakespeare appropriation: “[g]iven the relational nature of language, signification itself depends on giving airy nothings a local habitation and a name” (3, emphasis original). In other words, when authors re-cite canonical hypotexts, they also re-site them, in relation to both the audience and the network of signifiers and semiotic systems that make up the play (or performance) as a whole. Locating or re-siting the appropriated text in dramatic space and time is necessary so that the audience can quickly and accurately grasp the significance of the appropriated material: knowing where and when the playwright locates familiar material gives the audience clues about why and how. And – critically – playwrights choose such locations based on their knowledge that the audience itself is located, and not only geographically, but also within communities of
interest: spectators are located culturally, politically, and historically as well as spatially. For example, Matthew MacFadzean’s richardthesecond: a nightmare, for example, is much more concerned with 1990s rave subculture, new media, and cults of celebrity than either Shakespeare or Richard II – or anything explicitly “Canadian.” Location, then, is a factor of paramount importance in a study that is ostensibly delimited by national borders.

In fact, defining what is “Canadian” about these plays or their dramaturgy is as problematic as defining what is or is not an adaptation. Although Canada’s unique historical and cultural situation (with its many first nations, its history of colonization/settlement by two competing empires, its tortuous history of inter- and intraregional political conflict, its unusual policy of multiculturalism,35 and its contemporary and historic encroachment by the neighbouring American empire, to name just a few factors) have certainly created ideal conditions for it, the dramaturgy of appropriation is by no means unique to Canada. The plays examined here were written in Canada by Canadian nationals and have been seen mostly by Canadian spectators, but this is of little interest. What is of interest here is, first, the range, variety, and efficacy of such tactics available to Canadian playwrights and their audiences in the present cultural and historical moment; second, the question of whether and to what extent “Shakespeare” stands apart from all other possible canonical sources, which I will explore by looking at appropriations of Chekhov; and third, how these plays, by giving their canonical sources “a local habitation,” construct and address an always provisionally and problematically “Canadian” spectatorship.

35 Along with Australia, Canada is unique in this regard.
The appropriations examined in this study site/cite their hypotexts locally, but always in ways that “challenge simplistic national configurations” (Fischlin 327-28) and disturb singular notions of “Canada” or of what it means to be Canadian. That is, rather than following the by now familiar, even clichéd practice of retro-fitting familiar stories with a contemporary Canadian veneer in attempts to make them more familiar, accessible, or relevant, and thereby to reflect culturally affirmative ideals about “Canada” – adaptive strategies Canadian audiences have come to expect – the playwrights examined here re-site/cite familiar sources in ways that defamiliarize them, and thus displace them from their familiar positions as cultural landmarks on the spectator’s horizon of expectations. For example, instead of bringing *Hamlet* historically or geographically closer to a contemporary Canadian audience, Michael O’Brien moves it even further away, setting his story in tenth-century Denmark; and instead of transferring it to a new setting with great reverence for the integrity of the sacred text, he relentlessly debases it with carnivalesque parody. Djanet Sears makes *Othello* local in such a way as to complicate and disrupt expectations of culturally affirmative Canadian Shakespeare: *Harlem Duet* is not only set outside Canada, it foregrounds racial and gender differences and forces its audience to be constantly, uncomfortably mindful of its racial differences rather than its national similarities. And instead of either using familiar Canadian iconography to make Chekhov seem familiar, or recontextualizing Chekhov to reinforce commonplace notions of an uncomplicated, homogenously “Canadian” perspective of the world, Jason Sherman and Kristine Nutting, in their very different ways make Chekhov local in ways that emphasize the cultural, historical, and economic differences that transcend and disrupt such notions.
Many different types of “location” are considered here aside from the obvious geographic sense. Plays are located in both real and fictional spaces and times, and the relationships between these real and fictional locations critically influences how spectators interpret them: how do spectators in Toronto interpret Djanet Sears’s decision to set her play in Harlem, for example? How might spectators in Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, and British Columbia interpret Kristine Nutting’s contemporary rural Saskatchewan setting for *Three Sisters*? Some appropriations, like *Richardthesecond*, address communities defined by interests other than national or regional identity. For example, Anne-Marie MacDonald’s *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* is set in Canada, but it is primarily “located,” by its setting at Queen’s University, in relation to academia, which in turn allows MacDonald to turn Shakespeare’s texts into pretexts for an investigation of gender difference.  

This study, however, is specifically interested in playwrights who appropriate canonical plays to address (to varying degrees and from differing perspectives) questions about how “Canadian” is located in Canadian theatre and its audiences. Although they are Canadian citizens, their work contests the idea that national identity is the only or even the primary lens through which Canadians view the world, using a variety of techniques and strategies to aim the canon at the idealized Canadian audience – not to confirm its unity, homogeneity, or wholeness, but to explode it into fragments. By doing so, however, they do not seek to demolish or destroy the canon; rather, they suggest a multiplicity of ways in which it can be refashioned and re-sited in an ever-changing and increasingly diverse cultural and national landscape.

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36 Though not without a sideways glance at lingering manifestations of British cultural imperialism, as Ann Wilson has noted (3).
Performance Efficacy and Reception: Reading Appropriation in Context

In addition to investigating how dramatic appropriations (and appropriators) cite/site the canon in specific local contexts, this study inquires into the efficacy of the dramaturgy of appropriation. This entails looking at how local (including material, social, and historical) conditions influenced the constitution of the audience and framed its reception of the play. Intertextual analysis may reveal how appropriation is deployed to challenge dominant ideologies, rethink the adapted text, or speak for marginalized Canadian subjectivities, but as Baz Kershaw writes in Politics of Performance, we still need to determine whether those objectives are achieved in specific performance conditions. Ultimately, this means asking how theatre affects the real world, how it tries to “change not just the future action of their audiences, but also the structure of the audience’s community and the nature of the audience’s culture” (1). Kershaw uses the term “performance efficacy” to refer to “the potential that theatre may have to make the immediate effects of performance influence, however minutely, the general historical evolution of wider social and political realities.” Kershaw notes that although theatre scholars have traditionally been reluctant to make claims about how theatre affects the real world, this is precisely what it tries to do. Although Kershaw himself is primarily interested in theatre that explicitly challenges dominant ideology, he argues that even escapist plays seek to influence daily behaviour by pushing “social and political questions to the background of experience,” and more “serious” theatre explicitly seeks to “alter, or confirm” the audience’s attitudes about something (2).

But how do we verify performance efficacy? As Kershaw notes, one reason scholars have been reluctant to claim that art can influence real-world behaviour is that
such influence is very difficult to measure – except in cases where its effect was catastrophically negative, as in theatre riots. Thus Kershaw focuses on the “conditions of performance that are most likely to produce an efficacious result” and on contextualizing those performance conditions “in relation to local and national cultural change” (3, emphasis in original). Kershaw’s approach draws heavily on the theatre anthropology of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, focusing on how the theatrical event – and its potential to influence the audience – is framed as a theatrical event.\textsuperscript{37} Thus, Kershaw looks at factors such as the gathering and dispersal phases of the performance, the constitution of the audience (e.g., is the audience primarily a community of interest or geography?), and how the performers position themselves with respect to the audience (e.g., using Brechtian direct address or remaining behind the fourth wall).

Kershaw’s idea of performance efficacy is important, but his (strongly formalist) approach is insufficient as a method for evaluating the dramaturgy of appropriation. For one thing, Kershaw takes the text for granted, assuming that its radical objectives are explicit – which they often are in the British Alternative theatre of the 1960s and 1970s, Kershaw’s primary interest. But in contrast with the plays typical of this movement, which borrowed techniques from Brecht, Augusto Boal, and agit-prop in order to break mainstream theatre conventions and provoke the audience, the plays examined here (with the exception of Nutting’s \textit{Three Sisters}) do most of their work behind the conventional fourth wall. Also, as a practitioner of the work he writes about, Kershaw is more interested in \textit{predicting} the potential efficacy inherent in certain performance conditions, in order to maximize the potential efficacy of future work, than in analysing the efficacy

\textsuperscript{37} See Turner (1977) and Schechner and Schuman (1976), for example.
of a performance post-mortem. Fortunately, Ric Knowles articulates a more fully contextualized method of analysing performance in *Reading the Material Theatre*.

Whereas Kershaw takes the perspective of a practitioner who would rather plan for success than analyse what might have gone wrong, Knowles’s approach recalls the enduring theatre school maxim that one learns more from a bad show than a good one.

Both the ephemerality of performance and the subjectivity of reception limit our ability to reconstruction and interpret of performance conditions. But Knowles argues that if we cannot recapture a performance, we must reconstitute it in discourse to make it a subject of inquiry; and if we cannot establish with certainty how a spectator (let alone an audience) responded to a play, we can at least establish a *range* of responses from the documents of reception. If (returning to the Bourdieu/Massai model) the performance and its audience constitute a local field of cultural production, an analysis of the play that is situated in the specific conditions of its production and reception can illuminate the range of positions available within that field, and the documents of reception provide evidence of the positions taken by at least a few spectators. We know, for example, that spectators viewing an adaptation may take positions informed by fidelity discourse, in which case they will judge the play based on its perceived proximity to or deviation from the (imagined) source. In the case of a play which attempts to challenge the authority of a familiar hypotext, the discovery of an abundance of such fidelity-oriented responses would indicate that the strategies of appropriation were ineffective – at least in that context of production and reception.39

38 By “local,” however, I mean not an *autonomous* or independent field of production, but one which both produces and is produced by other fields of production.

39 Even generally positive fidelity-oriented responses might be seen to indicate a lack of efficacy, if the appropriation in question sought to critique its source rather than emulate. For example, Edward Bond
Seeking “a method for achieving a more fully contextualized and politicized understanding of how meaning is produced in the theatre” (9), Knowles articulates an approach to performance analysis that encompasses the entire theatre experience, including theatrical training and tradition, working conditions, location, and public discourse. Traditional analyses of drama and theatre, Knowles argues, presuppose that “theatrical scripts and productions ‘have’ universal meaning that is available for interpretation by audiences everywhere”; they treat performances as the more or less straightforward “products of the determinable intentions of […] theatre artists, in which specific meanings are contained and communicated with greater or lesser clarity across the footlights to anyone, anywhere, who cares to receive them”; and they assume that “artistic inspiration transcends the accidentals of historical and cultural context” (9).

Knowles, by contrast, sees performance texts as “the products of a more complex mode of production” and considers “meaning” to be produced by, rather than transmitted to, spectators:

I would like to consider theatrical performances as cultural productions which serve specific cultural and theatrical communities at particular historical moments as sites for the negotiation, transmission, and transformation of cultural values, the products of their own place and time that are nevertheless productive of social and historical reification and change. […] My focus, then, is on the ways in which the cultural or ideological work done by a performance may be seen to have been mediated by the cultural and, particularly, theatrical factors through which

might have been chagrined to read a glowing review which claimed that his Lear was faithful to Shakespeare.
it has been produced … and through which its meaning has been produced
(as opposed to being merely received, or interpreted) by theatre audiences.

(10)

Knowles is interested in how performance texts\(^{40}\) may either reinscribe or revise
“versions of society, history, nationality, ethnicity, class, race, gender, sexuality, ability,
or other social identities,” and particularly in “the degrees to which the transgressive or
transformative potential of a particular script or production functions on a continuum
from radical intervention and social transformation to radical containment (that is, the
control of transgressive elements in society in the interests of the reproduction of
dominant order” (10). His interest in exploring how the politically transformative
potential of a script is either fulfilled or subverted under specific conditions of production
and reception makes his method especially suitable for examining how appropriations of
canonical plays might challenge canonical values.

Knowles’s method is essentially a *bricolage* of several contemporary theories of
dramatic and performance analysis, chiefly cultural materialism, semiotics, cultural
studies, and audience reception studies. Knowles draws on cultural materialism, an
approach pioneered by Raymond Williams and applied to theatre, most famously, by
Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield in *Political Shakespeare*, for its politically
engaged, historically contextualized analysis of how meaning (in theatre and elsewhere)
is produced by – and productive of – specific historical, cultural, and material contexts.
Cultural materialism views both the text and the critic as “inseparable from the conditions

\(^{40}\) Following Marco de Marinis, Knowles defines the performance text (in contrast to the event of the
performance itself) as the activity of the spectator “in (re)constructing the performance, translating it into
the frame of another discourse” (16).
of their production and reception in history; [and] as involved, necessarily, in the making of cultural meanings which are always, finally, political meanings” (Dollimore and Sinfield ix). Like Knowles, it resists discourses of universal meaning and natural order, preferring to register “its commitment to the transformation of a social order that exploits people on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, and class” (x). It is worth noting here that the appropriations of Shakespeare in Dollimore, Sinfield, et al., are not unlike the dramatic appropriations of the playwrights mentioned above, whose works, no less than Dollimore and Sinfield’s, consist of historically situated, politically committed readings of their hypotexts; this connection will be explored in greater detail below. Knowles argues, however, that cultural materialism only goes, or at least has only gone, so far: it has mainly been preoccupied with the re-examination of cultural productions of the past, whereas Knowles is interested in theatrical productions in and of the present. Moreover, he criticizes materialist critics for failing to practice “‘really close reading’ of particular theatrical productions in particular places” (12), and for focusing their close reading on contexts rather than texts (14).

If cultural materialism has focused on context at the expense of content, theatre semiotics, conversely, offers a vast array of critical tools, techniques, and tactics for producing close readings, but often fails to account for the ways in which meaning in the theatre is contingent on factors outside the performance or its script. Theatre semiotics views everything in the theatrical frame as a sign, and “within that frame each of these

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41 In “Stage Over Study,” Massai argues that the connection is not coincidental, noting that Dollimore’s critical reading of Measure for Measure in Political Shakespeare could be seen to anticipate Marowitz’s radical re-vision of the play – if not for the fact that Marowitz’s version was first performed ten years before Dollimore wrote his essay! Massai’s argument that “cutting edge” criticism is influenced by avant-garde theatre rather than the other way around is an example of the mutually constitutive nature of the conditions of production and reception.
signs acquires significance as a sign that it does not have in everyday life” (Knowles 16). Moreover, insofar as it conceives of theatre as a signifying system made up of other signifying systems – including not only words and text but also non-verbal, non-textual signifying systems – theatre semiotics enables a more complete description of the various “languages” that constitute a performance, including lighting, sound, costuming, dialogue, and so on, including the web of inter-dramatic references playwrights use to refer to and construct meaning through the canonical referents. Some examples suggesting the diverse manifestations of this “language” include Sears’s decision to name a character “Othello,” Horvendal’s ironic iconic citation of Hamlet when he addresses a dog’s skull in Mad Boy Chronicle, and the rehearsal of scenes from Antony and Cleopatra in Walcott’s A Branch of the Blue Nile.

Knowles therefore proposes “materialist semiotics” as a blend of the strengths of cultural materialism and theatre semiotics, drawing from the former its detailed and politicized understanding of social and historical context, and from the latter its strategies for close reading of the performance text. In addition, Knowles borrows from (audience) reception studies. If semiotics is concerned with reading the complex network of signs and sign systems invoked in performance, and cultural materialism with analysing the larger social and historical contexts within (and in relation to) which those signs are produced, reception studies ask how audiences read those signs to “produce meaning in negotiation with the particular, local theatrical event, fully contextualized” (Knowles 17). Traditional concepts of cultural production, which conceive of meaning as being transmitted from an author, through a text – perhaps via the actors, director, and designers – to the audience, neglect the agency of the audience in creating meaning. But
in the years since structuralism and post-structuralism exposed the author as fundamentally absent, and the text as a network of signs whose “meanings” are relational, arbitrary, and highly unstable, the previously ignored reader has seized the territory left vacant by the exile of the author and the deconstruction of the text: culture abhors a vacuum.

Reception studies envision “meaning” in cultural production as a product of a negotiation between the text and the reader, mediated by the reader’s “horizon of expectations,” a concept introduced by H.R. Jauss in “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory” (1969). Reception, as Susan Bennett writes in *Theatre Audiences*, is not “purely arbitrary, subjective, or impressionistic,” but shaped by the readers’ expectations, which are in turn influenced by the social and historical conditions of reception, but also – and most crucially in the context of appropriation and adaptation studies – the reception of previous works (48). Even avant-garde texts can never be “completely ‘new’ – if they were they would be incomprehensible – but merely contain instructions to the reader that demand revision of the horizon of expectations of earlier texts” (49). For Jauss, works which, at their initial publication or performance, correlate closely with the horizon of expectations are “culinary” or low art (a description that reflects Jauss’s élitism), whereas avant-garde “high” art challenges the horizon of expectations. This distance between the work and the horizon of expectations “can be objectified … along the spectrum of the audience’s reactions” ranging from “spontaneous success, [to] rejection or shock, scattered approval, gradual or belated understanding” (25). Over time, this “distance” may change as initially successful works become outmoded or “culinary” and works that were initially rejected are reappraised under new social and historic circumstances: Jauss
cites *Madame Bovary* as an example of a work that initially provoked shock and rejection, was later praised for its daring formal innovations, and then gradually assumed the status of a “classic.” Reception studies, by recovering the horizons of expectations of given periods and bringing to light “hermeneutic difference between the understanding of a work then and now,” seek to dispel “the notion of objective and timeless meaning contained independently within a text” (Bennett, *Theatre Audiences* 49). Scholars of reception studies note that the text and the horizon of expectations always influence each other, stressing their interactivity: “cultural assumptions affect performances, performances rewrite expectations” (2).

Knowles also draws on recent work in cultural studies, citing Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” as a crucial link among reception studies, semiotics, and cultural materialism. Hall’s model of “production, circulation, use, and reproduction” posits that “power relations at the point of production loosely fit, but do not strictly reproduce, those at the point of ‘consumption,’” and that gap or difference “allows some space, however limited, for reading against the grain” (Knowles 18). Thus, from Hall’s model, Knowles derives his own “triangular formation” of “three mutually constitutive poles” (18-19). These poles include “Performance Text (script, *mise en scène*, design, actors’ bodies, movement and gestures, and so on, as reconstituted in discourse42); conditions of production (including “training and traditions, rehearsal process, working conditions, stage and backstage architecture and amenities, historical/cultural moment of production”); and conditions of reception (including “publicity/review discourse, front-

42 Knowles acknowledges that the “performance text” must be reconstituted in discourse in order to be rendered an object of analysis: “Raw event – the performance – and the conditions that produce it and shape its reception can only […] become available for analysis once they are together translated into the realms of discourse and understanding” – such reconstitution is of course another layer of appropriation altogether.
of-house, auditorium, and audience amenities, neighbourhood, transportation, ticket
prices, historical/cultural moment of reception, etc.”). By “mutually constitutive,”
Knowles, like Bennett, acknowledges that “meaning in a given performance – the social
and cultural work done by the performance – is the effect of each […] pole of the
interpretive triangle working dynamically and relationally together” (19).

Knowles shows how the material conditions, public discourses, and inherited and
ideologically coded practices of theatre can undermine the attempts of writers, directors,
and other theatre artists to challenge dominant ideology. By reading appropriations of
canonical plays this way – as produced by and productive of their local and locally
“Canadian” contexts – this study will probe the ways in which those material, historical,
social, and theatrical factors either reinforced or undermined the objectives of the
appropriation. For example, how did the prevalent working conditions (e.g., union
regulations, schedules, workload, professional practices) and public discourses (print and
online marketing, lobby displays, reviews) function differently in the premiere
productions and in later remounts of Harlem Duet and Goodnight Desdemona (Good
Morning Juliet), which were initially created by more intimate, independent companies –
targeting alternative audiences – and subsequently remounted at major theatres such as
the Stratford Festival and CanStage? How do reviewers respond when a formerly radical
show goes mainstream? How do the very different paratexts of the Obsidian and
Stratford productions of Harlem Duet locate Sears’s appropriation? What material or
social factors caused these two plays to be remounted repeatedly, while Mad Boy
Chronicle has had relatively few productions in spite of similar critical acclaim and
arguably wider accessibility? How do the locations, amenities, architecture, ticket prices,
and other material factors shape the production and reception of such plays? Would *Mad Boy Chronicle* have been more effective if, like Nutting’s *Three Sisters*, it had been produced on the Fringe circuit, with its populist atmosphere and relative preference for provocation and comedy?

The case studies in the subsequent chapters attempt a materialist reading of the dramaturgy of appropriation, combining Knowles’s methodology with close readings of each playwright’s adaptive strategies. Each play is analysed as both (hyper)text and performance: first, I analyse the strategies and politics of intertextuality at work in the play, its hypotexts, and its paratexts, in order to establish both the playwright’s objectives, and the strategies of appropriation he or she uses to achieve them; second, in order to explore how those adaptive strategies informed the reception of the plays when they were produced, I attempt to analyse how the material conditions of production (including the theatre and its physical and architectural possibilities and limitations, as well as the company and its working processes) and reception (public discourses generated by both the theatre and audience responses, material factors such as ticket prices, the location and local significance of the theatre, its marketing model, and so on) worked to either amplify, enable, or undermine the efficacy of the appropriation. In some examples, comparisons of different productions of the same play may not only be productive but inescapable. For example, it is impossible to talk about *Harlem Duet* in 2006 without referring to the question Knowles asked Djanet Sears and Alison Sealy-Smith in 1998: “at what point does *Harlem Duet* change Stratford?” In particular, as noted above, I seek to show how, and under what conditions, Canadian playwrights
exploit the cultural capital of canonical sources which are ambiguously situated in relation to Canada as both “native” and “foreign.”

Concerning evidence of reception, in the absence of documented responses for all the spectators of a given production, I draw heavily on the responses of a few, including newspaper reviews and my own responses. Like Knowles, I offer these selected responses not as “evidence of what audiences-in-general felt and understood – and therefore what the performance ‘really meant’ – but as evidence of meanings and responses that specific performances in particular locations made possible,” that is, as evidence of the range of possible responses enabled by a particular performance text (Reading 21). Although the opinions of professional theatre critics cannot be considered evidence of what “the audience” thought about a show, this study will demonstrate the persistent paratextual influence of newspaper theatre criticism. First, a play review in a metropolitan newspapers is read by a much larger audience than that which will attend the play itself, and thus reviews create an impression of the play for the vast majority of readers who don’t see it as well as those who do; second, many spectators read or hear (on radio, for instance) reviews before they attend the theatre, and such reviews will dispose them to a specific type of reception – or even influence their choice to go at all. Even when reviewers warn their readers about a play’s (potentially) negative aspects, they may thus moderate or pre-empt a negative reception, because a spectator forewarned is a spectator forearmed. Finally, reviews are relatively persistent, and retain their potential to influence readings of the play long after the production of which they speak is gone – one production’s review is often recycled as the next production’s preview.
The following chapters adapt the theoretical and methodological tools outlined above in order to explore appropriations of Shakespeare and Chekhov in four recent Canadian plays. Each case study analyzes a play as both (inter)text and performance text: first I read each play intertextually, in order to show how it appropriates material from a canonical play and to establish the objectives of that appropriation; then I analyse the conditions of production and reception in which the play was actually produced in order to determine if, and to what extent, those objectives were reached in practice. In addition, the four case studies are grouped together in two sections, each comparing two plays which use similar adaptive strategies on different sources – one appropriation of Shakespeare, the other of Chekhov. This structure facilitates the application of scholarship on Shakespeare adaptation to appropriations of Chekhov; but more importantly, it arranges the case studies not by the adapted source but by the adaptive strategies used on them. Although this study is heavily indebted to recent scholarship on Canadian Shakespeare adaptation, it also seeks to place it in context by investigating whether and to what extent the same adaptive tactics may be put to use on non-Shakespearean sources.

The first section examines appropriations based on geographical, historical, and cultural proximation – loosely speaking, plays which put canonical texts in contemporary “Canadian” spaces and places – by focusing on Jason Sherman’s *After the Orchard* and Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet*, both of which appropriate material from the distant past and put it in the immediate present of the spectator, re-locating canonical texts in contemporary Ontario. Chapters four and five look at techniques of appropriation that try to change the way spectators interpret canonical stories by recoding them in the
conventions of a different genre, recasting tragedy as carnivalesque comedy. Borrowing from Brecht, bouffon, and Bakhtin, Michael O’Brien’s *Mad Boy Chronicle* (1995) and Cowgirl Opera’s burlesque appropriation of Chekhov, *Three Sisters: A Black Comic Opera* (2005) use carnivalesque parody to submit the privileged genre of tragedy to a ferocious comic critique: “genre reassignment therapy,” so to speak. Bakhtin’s work on carnival has prompted many provocative academic re-examinations of Renaissance plays, most notably in Michael Bristol’s *Carnival and Theatre*; in these chapters I will show how carnivalesque forms and principles seem to guide *dramatic* re-examinations of classic texts, too. Finally, the concluding chapter ties together the findings from the case studies to articulate a theory of the dramaturgy of appropriation, along with proposals for further investigation.
Section 1: Appropriation and Approximation

Now, to “adapt or die” [...] is [...] a comment not only on the act of adapting, but on the need for playwrights to take on, if you will, drudge work in order to survive as playwrights. For the new play, especially in such [...] conservative times as these, has little chance to succeed, to earn the playwright much in the way of a wage.

Jason Sherman (aka “Prof. Harold ‘Bud’ Miller-Harrelson”)
(Introduction to Adapt or Die, iii).

Introduction
In After the Orchard and Harlem Duet, playwrights Jason Sherman and Djanet Sears appropriate their respective hypotexts through strategies of approximation, re-citing and resituating the plots in socio-historical, political contexts – Bakhtinian chronotopes, more or less – that are somehow closer, whether in space, time, or appearance, to their own worlds (and those of their spectators). After the Orchard depicts a contemporary Toronto Jewish family struggling with a situation very similar to that which besets the Ranevsky family in Chekhov’s Cherry Orchard, and Harlem Duet shows how Othello’s decision to marry Desdemona affects his first wife, Billie, a Black woman in Harlem. As appropriations that use similar strategies, but to quite different effects, the two plays complement each other well, demonstrating the considerable range of adaptive tactics available even within this (relatively) narrowly-defined category.

Adapting canonical plays by changing their setting in space and time is a very common strategy, and for this reason it is important to bear in mind Cartelli’s distinction between “emulative” dramaturgies, which primarily seek to “accommodate the original work to the tastes and expectations of their own readership or audience,” and “critical” appropriations, which seek to challenge those tastes and expectations (15). Dressing up Shakespeare or Chekhov in local costumes (be they Canadian, American, British, Indian,
or otherwise) costume can (and very often does) become an exercise in cultural affirmation. By demonstrating how well the classic text works in a local setting, such productions celebrate dominant assumptions about both: putting Chekhov in Canada illustrates how timeless and universal his plays really are while simultaneously celebrating dominant assumptions about Canada (or whatever vision of Canada the setting suggests). Although such resittings are viewed with suspicion by Denis Salter who argues that “instead of radically reconstituting [canonical] textuality, [they] merely seek to extend its authority in seemingly ‘natural’ ways” (127), some critics, including Thompson, Fischlin, Knowles and Cartelli, have insisted that it is at least possible to use strategies of resiting productively to undermine essentialist myths about both classic texts and national identity, and the plays examined here, in very different ways and with varying effectiveness, attempt to challenge or dislodge dominant assumptions about both the timeless themes embedded in the texts and the essential, defining qualities of Canadian character.

The extent to which Sherman and Sears are successful may correspond strongly with the extent to which each writer does not simply resite, but totally reconstitutes the canonical text: whereas the tradition of contemporary staging puts the classic text front and centre, albeit in modern dress, neither Sherman nor Sears is motivated by the desire to modernize the classic text. Rather, they each treat their respective hypotexts as the raw material from which a new play is created. In Sherman’s case, the original work is almost concealed in plain sight, while Sears’s play uses just enough Shakespearean material – and just enough Canadian content – to make it clear that both are pretexts and targets for critique.
The efficacy of each work may also correspond to each author’s strategy for making his or her motives apparent to spectators. These plays represent two authors for whom the objectives and potential rewards of adaptation are defined differently, and as discussed above, authors’ objectives are neither as inaccessible nor as irrelevant as they are often held to be in literary dogma. In fact, there is often considerable evidence of an author’s intentions, both in the intertextual variations that “function as indicators of the adapter’s voice,” and, more explicitly, in such “extra-textual statements of event and motive” (*Theory* 109) as the paratexts cited above, Sears’s “nOTES oF a cOLoured gIRL: 32 rEASONS wHY i wRITE fOR tHE tHEATRE,” and Sherman’s introduction to *Adapt or Die*, a collection of his adaptations of Chekhov, Gorky, and Dostoevsky. Once we read such statements, we cannot ignore or forget them, and they may significantly influence our reception of the play. Since such authors’ paratexts are often positioned to frame our reading or viewing, they make an appropriate point of departure for this discussion.

Sears’s and Sherman’s statements indicate very different stances on adaptation – and also very different deployment and circulation of paratext. Sears’s “nOTES” accompany the published version of the play as a preface, and have also prefaced its performances (in the form of program notes) at Tarragon, CanStage, and Stratford. Resembling a manifesto, the “nOTES” make Sears’s objectives – i.e., the “32 rEASONS” she writes for the theatre – very explicit. In them, Sears alludes to the trauma of growing up in a White-dominated world, and states that her writing is motivated by a desire to

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43 The programs of both the Stratford and Canadian Stage productions are archived online: [http://www.stratford-festival.on.ca/community/content/plays/text/06_harlem_bb.pdf](http://www.stratford-festival.on.ca/community/content/plays/text/06_harlem_bb.pdf), [http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/multimedia/pdf/harlem_bill.pdf](http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/multimedia/pdf/harlem_bill.pdf).
ensure that her (then newly born) “nieces’ experience of the world will … be different from [her] own” (14):

5 I was already eighteen when I saw Ntozake Shange’s *For Coloured Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf* in New York City. This was the first live production by a writer of African descent I had ever seen. 6 This will not be Qwyn’s fate. 7 She must have access to a choir of African voices, chanting a multiplicity of African experiences. (12)

Citing ntozake shange, Lorraine Hansberry, and others, this essay clearly positions the play in the “(counter)canonical tradition of Black women’s playwriting” (Knowles, “Othello” 157), and is itself deliberately positioned as a pretext to both performances and readings of *Harlem Duet*. Its ubiquitous quotation in scholarly articles about the play – and here – demonstrates how powerfully it has influenced readers and spectators. Once we know that Sears wrote the play as a response to *Othello*, we can’t help but read it as one, nor can we forget her dream (quoted from Langston Hughes) that “SOMEDAY SOMEBODY’LL / STAND UP AND TALK ABOUT ME, / AND WRITE ABOUT ME – / BLACK AND BEAUTIFUL / […] / AND PUT ON PLAYS ABOUT ME!” (15). Sears’s appropriation of Shakespeare’s cultural capital – and characters – reflects a seemingly personal obligation to redress the absence of Black stories and characters in Canadian culture.

Sherman’s paratexts indicate a contrasting stance toward rewriting and retelling canonical stories, and also toward such “authoritative” statements: his own preface, written under a pseudonym as the introduction to *Adapt or Die*, is less direct, less widely circulating, and thus less influential. Whereas Sears openly embraces appropriation

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44 See Kidnie (29), Dickinson (188), Knowles (“Othello,” 150, 157), Fischlin and Fortier (285-6), Burnett (7).
(albeit that she is, as she told me, slightly uncomfortable with the use of that particular word in relation to her work) as a strategy for addressing a conflicted relationship with the hypotext, Sherman’s comments suggest enthusiasm for the hypotext, but ambivalence about the method. None of his comments about his adaptations express a desire to challenge Chekhov; rather, he speaks of giving “voice to old works.” And he expresses clear misgivings about adaptation as a playwriting strategy: while he is happy to exploit the potential economic gains (indeed, he sees no alternative if he wants to survive as a playwright: “adapt or die”), he uses an alias (Professor “Bud”) to express veiled resentment that, “by refusing to stage new plays, the larger of our theatres essentially make voiceless the very voices they hire to give voice to old works” (iii). Like Sears, Sherman is a playwright of considerable stature in Canada, and a fellow winner of both the Floyd S. Chalmers Award (for *The League of Nathans*) and Governor-General’s Award for Drama (for *Three in the Back, Two in the Head*); and, like her, he is disenchanted with “the workings of modern Canadian theatre sensibility, where brand names are more acceptable than the untried”; but Sherman’s comments characterize adaptation not as an act of rebellion, but of submission, “taken on by economic imperative by a playwright who ought by rights to have made a living from his own works but didn’t” (iii). The past tense does not indicate that Sherman now makes a living from his plays, but that he is no longer a playwright: he resigned from the Playwrights’ Guild of Canada in 2007 and announced his intention to quit the theatre in order to pursue a better living as a screenwriter.45

45 Sherman satirizes the demise of his playwriting career in “Scenes From My Last Play,” in *This Magazine*, and confirmed his decision in a recent interview (“Scenes,” “Interview”).
These paratextual statements usefully frame their authors’ adaptive strategies. Sears’ “Notes of a Coloured Girl,” which have demonstrably influenced the receptions and responses of numerous spectators, also shape the central question of this study of Harlem Duet: how does Sears use a Shakespearean hypotext in an American setting to confront and rectify the marginalization of “African voices” in her chosen home, Canada? And although they have had much less influence on the reception of After the Orchard, Sherman’s less optimistic statements, too, raise important questions about his adaptive strategies and motives. Is it indeed “easier to sell a Chekhov […] than […] a Sherman; easier a Nike shoe than an unadvertised boot”? If so, then why did Sherman so painstakingly camouflage the distinguishing features and signifiers of his “brand name” author (the Chekhov mark to Nike’s “swoosh,” as it were) with his own “Canadian” inventions and approximations, and why, too, did National Arts Centre director Marti Maraden try to advertise the play as a Sherman, not a Chekhov? Why did Sherman’s Canadian Chekhov fail to impress audiences to the same extent as Sears’s Canadian Shakespeare?

The cases studies explored in the following two chapters will reveal not only a variety of different strategies for locating the canon in Canada, but also the important role of paratexts in locating such appropriations in relation to their spectators. It should be noted that although the general strategies of appropriation examined here are similar, the specific tactics and motives of each author, and the plays’ respective histories of production and reception, are very different. In addition, it will quickly become apparent that, first, all the plays examined in this study, and indeed all such appropriations, involve some aspect of approximation and re-citing; and second, that re-siting is rarely the only
aspect of such an appropriation. I have chosen a structure based on distinguishing and focusing on certain adaptive strategies, but any such taxonomy can only ever be provisional, because most if not all adaptations approach their sources from several angles simultaneously: Sears’s and Nutting’s plays could be examined together in the context of feminist revisioning strategies, for example. As such, the case studies are grouped together, but considered independently. Although parallels and contrasts are noted where appropriate, I have not attempted to structure the chapters as mirror images of each other because the evidence simply does not warrant such an approach: to do so would entail effacing the important differences between these two plays, differences which are every bit as interesting as the similarities.
Chapter Two: After the Orchard

To me, the real betrayal of a work is in trying to be “faithful” to it – a slavish devotion to some alleged truth of the work. […] Unless we want dead art forms, we’d better accept the proposition that things will change.

Sherman, interview with author, 2008 (emphasis in original).

Orchard and After: One fabula, two sjuzets

As its title suggests, After the Orchard succeeds The Cherry Orchard in more ways than one. Chekhov’s Orchard is about a contemporary (to Chekhov, that is) Russian family unable to face the fact that they are losing their prized cherry orchard and the estate both it and they are rooted in; Sherman’s Orchard is about a contemporary Ontario family facing, or rather, not facing, the looming loss of their treasured lakeside cottage. The given circumstances are different, but the plot and dramatic structure are almost identical, the dialogue corresponds closely to Chekhov’s, and the conclusion is essentially the same, which might suggest that Sherman’s dramaturgy exemplifies the “primarily emulative” dramaturgy that Cartelli defines as “adaptation,” which (in contrast with the “primarily critical” work of appropriation) is interested “merely in adjusting or accommodating the original work to the tastes and expectations of their own audiences” (15). But if After the Orchard is exceptionally “faithful” to its hypotext in many respects (certainly more so than the other plays in this study) it is faithful in ways that only exceptionally “knowing” spectators would notice: only those who have read or watched The Cherry Orchard very studiously, or very recently, will recognize how minutely Sherman’s dialogue and action correspond to Chekhov’s. Rather than using a Canadian backdrop to persuade the audience that Chekhov is still relevant to them, Sherman uses the dramatic structure of a Chekhov play as a framework for exploring issues and themes
specific to contemporary, middle-class, Canadian – and specifically Jewish Canadian – life. The parallels most emphatically illuminated by After the Orchard are not those between itself and The Cherry Orchard but those between the world of the play and the world of the spectators. In fact, Sherman’s sjuzet (or telling) so completely embeds the fabula (story)\(^{46}\) in a contemporary Canadian context that it was possible for even the play’s director to overlook (perhaps intentionally) its debt to The Cherry Orchard: in newspaper interviews leading up to the premiere, director Marti Maraden claimed that it was not an adaptation at all, and discouraged potential spectators from reading it as such.

This unusual phenomenon usefully illuminates a problem in adaptation studies: both Hutcheon and Julie Sanders define “acknowledgement” (by the hypertext, of the hypotext) as a key criterion for defining adaptation, but as After the Orchard demonstrates, it isn’t always obvious how this acknowledgment occurs. It is easy to see how Marti Maraden could claim that After the Orchard is more of a subtle homage than an extensive adaptation: the architextual allusion to Chekhov’s orchard in the title is clear only to those who already know it is there;\(^{47}\) the setting, at a lakeside cottage in Ontario in 1999, is distinctly not “Chekhovian” in any geographical, national, cultural, or historic sense; and the dramatis personae comprise three generations of a middle-class Toronto Jewish family, their neighbours, and a real estate agent, details that obscure, rather than

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\(^{46}\) Sjuzet and fabula are terms borrowed from Russian formalism, distinguishing the events of a story (fabula, or story) from the unique structure given to it in a specific retelling (sjuzet, or plot). This distinction helps to illuminate what each successive adaptor does with the material they inherit or borrow, material which includes not only the canonical hypotext (e.g. Shakespeare’s Othello) but also its other sjuzets, including both earlier (e.g. the story in Cinthio’s Hecatommithi that found its way to Shakespeare) and later (e.g. Marowitz’s An Othello) re-tellings. Discriminating between fabula and sjuzet also serves as a constant reminder that the canonical hypotext is not the “original” or definitive story, only its most influential telling. See Aston and Savona 20-25.

\(^{47}\) Since no orchard is referred to in Sheman’s play, a reader or spectator who was totally ignorant of Chekhov’s Cherry Orchard might find Sherman’s title utterly baffling: pace Barthes (S/Z), the “enigmas” raised by the title (What orchard, and how “after”?) are never resolved in the action. Such a hermeneutic quest could only be completed by searching outside Sherman’s text.
reinforce, any link to Chekhov. Although those who “know [their] Chekhov really well,” as Maraden put it (qtd. in Ball), might discern faint, mainly alliterative, connections between character names (Fiers/Faye, Leonid Gaev/Len, Trofimov/Trish, and so on), Sherman’s characters, who are middle-class rather than aristocratic and spread across three generations rather than two, do not always correspond with Chekhov’s. Neither the setting nor the characters clearly acknowledge Chekhov.

And yet, in contrast to the usual scenario of “betrayal” – a response generally observed when reading a text does not fulfill the expectations of fidelity raised by its title and paratext – the more closely one reads Sherman’s play, the more faithful it seems.48 A slightly more detailed synopsis begins to illuminate the subtle, but close correspondences between the texts. Three years after the death of the family patriarch, Sid, the Levys reunite at their cottage, at an unnamed lake within an afternoon’s drive of Toronto (151-52), to face an ultimatum: local authorities have ruled that the cottage, which has fallen into disrepair since Sid’s death, is too close to the water; the family must decide by Labour Day whether to move it back from the water or tear it down (153). None of the Levys can stomach the thought of losing the cottage, which represents Sid’s craftsmanship and forty summers’ worth of sentimental significance to the family; yet they possess neither the practical skills nor the capital needed to move or rebuild it (153-54). Local realtor Jack Skepian, who is also an old flame of Sid’s widow, Rose, advises them to clear the forest on their property and build small rental cottages to finance a new cottage of their own; but the Levys, who mistrust Skepian and his (apparently genuine) interest in Rose, find this idea appalling (159-62). So, like Chekhov’s family in The

48 I assume that readers are generally familiar with the plot of The Cherry Orchard, but those wishing to brush up their Chekhov can find the full text online. The version cited here is at <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ac/chorch.htm>.
*Cherry Orchard*, they spend the summer reminiscing about the past, bickering, and speculating about the future—anything but dealing with their present problem.

Ultimately, eldest son Sasha, using money from his wealthy in-laws (whom the Levys despise for snubbing them), covertly arranges to buy out his brothers’ shares of the property, and flip it—for a profit—to Skepian (198). The rest of the family is furious when the arrangement (which is made offstage) is revealed (at the party that mirrors act three of *The Cherry Orchard*), but powerless to stop it: Sid’s will stipulates that if one brother offers to buy the cabin out, the others must sell unless they themselves can raise the money to buy (197). In the final scene, the family says farewell to the cottage and departs forever—nearly leaving senile Aunt Faye behind.

In spite of its close adherence to the plot of *The Cherry Orchard*, the absence of a clear 1:1 correlation between the characters of the two plays discourages reading *After the Orchard* “simply” as a modernized translation of Chekhov. Only Rose, Jack, and Len physically resemble their Chekhovian counterparts (Mme. Ranevskaya, Lopakhin, and Leonid Gaev). Ranevskaya’s two unmarried daughters become Rose’s three married sons, David, Sasha, and Andrew, who each have families of their own, including Sasha’s wife (Caroline) and son (Jeremy), Andrew’s wife (Donna), and some other diegetic family members. Sherman’s *dramatis personae* reflect the fact that middle-class

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49 “Diegetic” and “mimetic” distinguish onstage and offstage space and referents. Unlike performance space (i.e., the stage), which is exclusively visible, dramatic space, constituted by the interplay of dialogue, stage directions, set, lighting, costume, sound, and so on, comprises both visible onstage (mimetic) and invisible offstage (diegetic) referents, (Isaacharoff 215). Mimetic space, being visible to the audience, is transmitted directly to them, whereas diegetic space “is described, that is, referred to by the characters […] and thus communicated verbally and not visually” (215). Diegetic space is often a critical element of how playwrights “re-site” canonical texts, as Tompkins observes in the essay cited in chapter one. Among the most critical—and visible—choices an adaptor makes are those about which of the events and characters will become part of the action (mimesis) and which will be relegated to the narrative (diegesis), or even omitted altogether. Consider, e.g., *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, or *The Queens*. Note that Isaacharoff’s usage (and mine) of the term “diegetic” is not strictly commensurate with its use in film studies (where diegetic sound, e.g., refers to sound emitted by someone or something in the story, as opposed to the score or soundtrack).
Canadian families don’t travel with a retinue of indentured servants. Focusing on intergenerational rather than class differences, Sherman makes Rose, Jack, and Len older than their Chekhovian equivalents, and adds a third generation in Jeremy (Rose’s grandson), and Trish (the granddaughter of the Levys’ neighbour, Morris). These changes in age and gender also clarify the potential romantic subplots: there is no possibility of Skepian courting one of Rose’s sons.\textsuperscript{50} Sherman focuses instead on the unfulfilled romance of Rose and Jack, and offers a contrasting vision of unrequited desire in Trish and Jeremy: the former ship sailed long ago, the latter never will (185). Trish and Jeremy also represent contrasting archetypes of the contemporary Canadian young adult: hen-pecked, sheltered Jeremy has no real sense of what to do with his life other than resist his parents’ plans for it by doing nothing at all, whereas Trish is a highly motivated social and environmental activist. Finally, all the characters are Jewish, an intervention not readily explained by the demands of historical or social proximation.\textsuperscript{51}

Although Chekhov’s characters are not easily recognizable in Sherman’s, his plot is. Both plays begin with an equivalent inciting incident and follow almost identical sequences of corresponding events. Furthermore, these events follow the same pattern of movement through time and space, in four scenes spanning a summer and alternating between interior and exterior settings. First, an interior scene beginning just before the arrival of the family and ending after the introduction of the crisis; second, an exterior scene, around sunset – the orchard is in the background in Chekhov, the lake in Sherman

\textsuperscript{50} While much is made, in the history of \textit{The Cherry Orchard}’s reception, about Varya and Lopakhin’s failure to get engaged, Braun suggests that one reason for this failure is the possibility that Lopakhin (like Skepian) may be set on the elder Ranevskaya, not her daughter, an attraction obscured by many translations (116).

\textsuperscript{51} As Nancy Copeland has pointed out to me, there are in fact Jewish characters in the margins of Chekhov’s play: the musicians who play offstage during the party in act three. But if Sherman appropriates a canonical text for a marginalized community, he subjects that community to the same satirical scorn Chekhov heaps on the Russian aristocrats and “\textit{nouveau bourgeoisie}” in \textit{The Cherry Orchard}. 
– showing various permutations and combinations of the family chatting idly while the “outsider” (Skepian/Lopakhin) reminds them that they must act now to avoid catastrophe. In Sherman’s play, laptops, cell phones, and “flares” replace telephone wires and snapping mineshaft cables as symbols of the encroachment of technology (and all it entails) into rustic paradise (168, 172, 183, 184). The third scene is technically exterior in Sherman and interior in Chekhov, but both scenes take place immediately “outside” of a party happening just offstage, and depict one group of characters waiting anxiously for the others to return (the auction in Chekhov becomes a futile appeal to the town council in Sherman) with news of the property’s fate. And the final, interior scene shows the family packing up their things and preparing to leave the property forever, while Lopakhin/Jack Skepian prepares to take possession – Sherman transforms Chekhov’s diegetic chopping into the rumble of idling moving trucks (200). Thus, though the details of time, place, and history are different, Sherman closely and consciously follows Chekhov’s plot. At least in most respects; some of Sherman’s subplots have no clear equivalent in The Cherry Orchard (notably, playwright David’s plan to leave Canada and move to LA to become a television writer), reflecting the different interests and opportunities available to the Sherman’s characters, particularly those who replace the (comparatively powerless) servants. Sherman also expands on Chekhov’s theme of failed and abortive relationships. As in The Cherry Orchard, the potential romances prove fruitless, the hint of a romantic comedy ending turns out to be a red herring, and not only do new romances fail to spark, the established ones are failing: there is tension and estrangement within Sasha’s family, and it gradually becomes clear that David has been living at the cottage because of the collapse of his own (diegetic) nuclear family.\footnote{Other subplots have equivalencies in Chekhov, but go in different directions. In contrast with Pischin,
Zooming in even further brings yet more similarities into view. Even though the characters do not always consistently correspond to Chekhovian counterparts, the dramatic action and dialogue usually do – even the same jokes are made in the same places. For example, the Levys’ reaction to Skepian’s plan to save the cottage corresponds precisely with the Ranevskaya clan’s response to Lopakhin.

**LUBOV.** Cut it down? My dear man, you must excuse me, but you don't understand anything at all. If there's anything interesting or remarkable in the whole province, it's this cherry orchard of ours.

**LOPAKHIN.** The only remarkable thing about the orchard is that it's very large. It only bears fruit every other year, and even then you don't know what to do with them; nobody buys any.

**GAEV.** This orchard is mentioned in the “Encyclopaedic Dictionary.”

**LOPAKHIN.** [Looks at his watch] If we can't think of anything and don't make up our minds to anything, then on August 22, both the cherry orchard and the whole estate will be up for auction. Make up your mind! I swear there's no other way out, I'll swear it again.

**FIERS.** In the old days, forty or fifty years back, they dried the cherries, soaked them and pickled them, and made jam of them, and it used to happen that . . .

**GAEV.** Be quiet, Fiers.

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who is as paralyzed as the Ranevskayas but is repeatedly rescued by blind luck, Morris takes action while the Levys dither, selling his own property for a huge profit.

53 See, for example, Morris’s joke about being descended from Caligula’s horse, which Chekhov’s Boris (Pischin) makes in exactly the same place in act three (186).
FIERS. And then we'd send the dried cherries off in carts to Moscow and Kharkov. And money! And the dried cherries were soft, juicy, sweet, and nicely scented. . . . They knew the way. . . .

LUBOV. What was the way?

FIERS. They've forgotten. Nobody remembers.


LUBOV. I ate crocodiles.

PISCHIN. To think of that, now.

LOPAKHIN. Up to now in the villages there were only the gentry and the labourers, and now the people who live in villas have arrived. [...] And it's safe to say that in twenty years' time the villa resident will be all over the place. [...] It may well come to pass that he'll begin to cultivate his patch of land, and then your cherry orchard will be happy, rich, splendid. . . .

GAEV. [Angry] What rot!

In the corresponding scene from After the Orchard, the characters speak in their own words and refer to the things and events of their own world, but the dramatic action is nearly identical, line for line and beat for beat.

JACK. ... The cottage is practically worthless; but the land it's sitting on is worth fifty times what Sid paid for it.
ROSE. How can you say it's "worthless"? We spent forty years up here; every weekend in the spring and fall, and in the summer we were here almost every day.

LEN. This house was written up in the Peterborough Examiner.

JACK. (looks at his watch) It's up to you, of course. But decide, and soon.

You're sitting on a gold mine, and you don't even realize it.

FAYE. They were always building things, Sid and Lou. Bookcases, chairs, tables -- people used to say, "The two of you should open a carpentry shop."

ROSE. Sid was always trying to show the boys how to make things.

FAYE. They've forgotten it all. Sid and Lou loved to work with their hands.

Not like now. Now it's all made for you, and if it breaks, out it goes in the trash, and you buy a new one to take its place.

LEN. Faye, drink your coffee.

FAYE. Oh, did someone get me a coffee? How nice.

Pause.

MORRIS. Well, and how was London? Did you see any shows?

ROSE. We saw the Andrew Lloyd Webber, but it wasn't up to his usual.

MORRIS. The theatre here did Fiddler on the Roof. It was a big production. [...].

JACK. The point is, when Sid bought this place, it was still pretty far from the city. But now Toronto's grown so much that people need to go even

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54 "Len," like Leonid Gaev, is the brother of the Matriarch (Lubov/Rose); "Faye" is the elder sister of the late patriarch, Sid, and, like Fiers, is apparently senile.
farther looking for a summer place [...]. I personally know the widow of a dot-com multimillionaire who's tearing her hair out looking for a place to build a new summer home. [...]. Just say the word and she'll write you a cheque for seven hundred and fifty thousand.

LEN. Look, we don't want to hear it. (160-61)

Sherman alters Chekhov’s structure of dialogue and dramatic action only where necessary to approximate the contemporary context: the obscure “Encyclopaedic Dictionary” becomes the local newspaper – a diegetic reference that helps locate the mimetic space in relation to real Canadian geography.55 Pischin’s banal question about eating frogs in Paris becomes Morris’s banal small talk about (equally banal) West End theatre.56 And moments later, David arrives with a bookcase,57 setting up Sherman’s version of Gaev’s famously absurd tribute to a bookcase, à propos of nothing.

LEN. Careful, David.

ROSE. There it is. It's the very first thing your father made by himself. Look, he carved his name into the back. And the date.

LEN. It's 40 years old -- on the button. How about that? Calls for a celebration. How about we all go into town tonight, to that Italian restaurant?

55 It also helps the spectator put both Len and the cottage in the proper context: after all, The Peterborough Examiner, as every Canadian knows, is no Globe and Mail.
56 There is a self-referential and metatheatrical aspect to the banter about the “legitimate” theatre which recurs throughout the play, most prominently in connection with David, a playwright whose high-cultural aspirations contrast sharply with both the lowbrow TV scripts he writes to make a living, and the other characters’ preferences for West End mega-musicals and dinner theatre over “modern plays where nothing happens and everyone’s depressed” (180). At one point Jack accuses David of betraying Israel in his plays (which Jack has never seen), a direct reference to Sherman’s own antagonistic position vis à vis certain segments of the Canadian Jewish community (181; see also “Scenes,” scene five).
57 An action motivated earlier when Rose notices its absence and (playing the perpetually mourning widow with as much commitment as Ranevskaya brings to her role as jilted lover) insists that David return “everything [to] the way it was” (151).
[...]

LEN. Sid made this. (holding an imaginary wine glass) Blessed art thou, O Lord Our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has given us this wonderful bookcase.

[...].

LEN. I never had Sid's skill. Whenever I tried to make something, it would come out all crooked. The only thing my hands were good for was crunching numbers. [...]. But a bookcase, just look at it … he left it behind, he left it for us to look at, to talk about. Sid was a strong man, you know. Right to the end. I'll never forget shaking his hand, the last time I went to see him. He -- well.

Pause.

JACK. Well, anyway I should --

LEN. “Hail, hail, the gang's all here! What the heck do we care...”

JACK. I should be going. (161-62)

The bookcase in After the Orchard is not just a stand-in for another Chekhovian bookcase; Sherman adapts it to his purposes to serve as a material, visible symbol of the practical skills the Levys lost when Sid died. It is this loss that makes the Levys’ situation equivalent to the Ranevskayas’, whose orchard, as Fiers points out (in a digression seemingly as obscure and unmotivated as Faye’s non-sequitur about Sid’s

58 This passage from a song in the Pirates of Penzance is repeated in three separate incidents, approximating the function of Gaev’s vacuous billiard banter.
59 Although the NAC production featured an elaborate naturalistic set, the symbolic value of the bookcase would be especially significant in a lower-budget or less naturalistic production, in which the cabin itself – the other major evidence of Sid’s ability to turn raw materials into useful things – was not represented on stage.
craftsmanship), is no longer profitable because no one remembers how to transform the perishable cherries into value-added goods. In other words, the bookcase actually substitutes for the cherry orchard. Although the cottage is purely recreational, not agricultural, and never sustained the Levys the way the orchard once supported Ranevskaya’s family, both estates have become liabilities, rather than assets, through the loss of the skills which made them sustainable. The Levys’ crisis, if less broadly felt than the Ranevskaya’s, is equally specific to a historical moment: Sherman depicts a situation to which present-day Canadians can relate (at least those who can afford to attend the theatre and own summer cottages). Many such cottages were built for single-family recreational use on land bought cheaply in the 1960s or earlier, and their owners inevitably face a crisis when the builder’s descendants form families of their own: demand goes up, but the supply of land is fixed; maintenance costs skyrocket, and “know-how” declines. Furthermore, the values that Sid represented are in decline, too: working-class, war veteran Sid was clearly a man of action and “principles,” as Trish says: he fought Fascists in the streets of London and the battlefields of Europe (184), immigrated to Canada, and became prosperous enough to buy the land he built the cottage on; since his death, his surviving relations have accomplished little other than to dissipate the wealth Sid accumulated. They talk a lot, but do little, as Trish tells Jeremy, Sid’s grandson, for whom inertia is a way of life: “Your family pretends to be these great liberals, who care about social justice. But in the end, they only care about themselves” (184). The characters frequently talk about “moving forward” (183), but like Chekhov’s characters they are not making progress, only arguing over its definition.
Replanting the Orchard: Dramatic Time and Space

Remaking the play as a contemporary Canadian story – as opposed to translating it and changing the place names – allows Sherman to reconstruct the correlation between dramatic time and real time that Chekhov’s play no longer represents (and, in Canada, never did). Canadians watching Chekhov’s plays may sympathize with the characters, but cannot easily empathize with them; from our point of view, they are the inhabitants of a strange (post-feudal, pre-modern, imperial Russian) world we know about only through history books or program notes. Chekhov’s characters, problems, relationships, and dialect (however gracefully translated) clearly belong to a distant historical and cultural moment, and we necessarily view them from a distance, encouraged by the universalist discourse of theatre and literature to focus on the “timeless” themes and the universal qualities of the characters, rather than on the specific, material causes of, and potential solutions to, their problems. Sherman’s play, on the other hand, represents the contemporary “us” rather than a historical – or an ahistorical – “them.” The Levys’ problems (with both property management and family affairs) and the language they use to speak of them (or avoid speaking of them) clearly reflect our own historical moment, and spectators recognize and respond to them automatically – and without the need for program notes. By approximating the setting and given circumstances, Sherman creates an experience that Chekhov’s play once did but no longer does: almost exactly 100 years after the (hypotextual) Orchard, it reflects on the century both its characters and the intended spectators have lived through, looking back on the twentieth century the way Chekhov’s play looks back on the nineteenth.
Although the events depicted in mimetic time take place over a summer, diegetic time reaches as far back as Faye’s memories of the years before World War II. Like Chekhov’s characters, Sherman’s constantly reminisce about (and in Faye’s case, actually live in) the past, but the past they remember is also the past both the playwright and audience have lived through, an effect no longer achieved by *The Cherry Orchard*. That is, by changing a feature of the hypotext, Sherman tries to retain one of its functions: to connect with the audience by engaging with its collective memory, as Chekhov did, Sherman must refer to a different history, one *his* audience remembers living through. Few (if any) contemporary spectators can appreciate the irony of Fiers’s look back in anger at 1861, the speech in which the reluctantly emancipated serf remembers the moment of his emancipation as both a personal and global catastrophe; but Sherman’s audience is historically well-positioned to appreciate the irony of Faye’s proclamation that “no one knows their place anymore,” and “[i]t’s all because of that women’s liberation” (179).

In addition to reflecting on his audience’s shared history, Sherman also, like Chekhov, uses dramatic time to stage anxiety about the future – although he deliberately uses the advantage of hindsight (which now makes *The Cherry Orchard* seem more prophetic of impending disaster than Chekhov may have intended60) by setting the play not in the present but in what is, from its audience’s perspective, the recent past. Trish’s reference to (what is now known as) the “Battle in Seattle” as an *upcoming* event explicitly, if subtly, sets the play in the summer of 1999, six years *before* the premiere of the play: “There's going to be this amazing gathering in Seattle, in November. All the big

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60 In January 1904, both Chekhov and his audience were undoubtedly worried about what was coming, but neither could have anticipated that the future would visit much worse “catastrophes” than Emancipation upon Russia (and the world), and thus could not read the play as prophetically as it is now possible to do.
powers are meeting […], to talk about what really needs to happen…” (185). This reference sets the play on the eve of the millennium, before the election and re-election of the Bush administration, the destruction of the World Trade Centre, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq triggered by the former events. As in The Cherry Orchard, there are plenty of warnings about impending crises both local and global, ranging from Trish’s green activism (which is ridiculed or dismissed as youthful fancy by her elders) to Skepian’s direct warnings to act now, but most of the characters’ fixations on past grievances render them unwilling or unable to engage with the present, let alone the future.

Sherman also approximates Chekhov’s use of offstage space, changing the specific locations represented to make them function the same way Chekhov’s setting did for its Russian audience. The mimetic space depicted in After the Orchard, like its mimetic time, is a relatively small part of the dramatic space as a whole, which expands to include such diegetic spaces as the nearby village where the Levys go to have lunch and see summerstock plays (159, 175, 45, 54); Peterborough, presumably the nearest town with a daily newspaper; Toronto, the city where the Levys grew up and most of them still live, and where Rose met Jack and Sid (148-50, 153, 177-79); Montreal, where Sasha and his wealthy in-laws live; Los Angeles, to which David hopes to escape (166); and London, England (153, 157, 160-61, 169), which Sherman uses as both a foreign cultural Mecca roughly equivalent to Chekhov’s Paris, and an ancestral home, where Sid, Lou, and Faye grew up (and where Faye often still seems to be living).

Sherman’s dramatic space is, if anything, even more extensively and specifically imagined than Chekhov’s, reflecting that the idea of “home” is as temporary and
provisional for the Jewish, immigrant Levys, as it is permanently tied to the orchard for the Ranevskaya family. In contrast with Chekhov’s characters, whose reminiscences usually refer to the location depicted in the immediate present (i.e., the cherry orchard), the Levy family history is embedded not only in the cottage, where they have spent forty summers, but also in diegetic spaces they have come from. Foremost among these spaces are London, where Sid battled brownshirts and survived the Blitz (184) and Toronto, specifically the old Jewish enclave where Jewish immigrants like Sid, accustomed to perpetual diaspora, found themselves unexpectedly at home. Early in the play, Jack talks about a walk he and Rose took a half-century earlier, “all along Harbord, and down Spadina,” reminding David of his late father’s experience of suddenly discovering “home” in a foreign city:

**DAVID.** … [A]fter the war, when he came over, a fresh-faced kid, missing his family […] a Jew in a city where there weren't that many, at least none that he knew, or none that he could find. And one Sunday morning, feeling lost and depressed, he went looking for a cup of coffee. That's all he wanted, a cup of coffee. So he started to walk, all along College --

**JACK.** Yes. And a Sunday in Toronto then --

**DAVID.** Nothing open.

**JACK.** Ghost town.

**DAVID.** And the more he walks, the more depressed he gets, and he's thinking, "I just want to be home, I want to be with my family, I just want to go home." Well, he gets to Spadina, he turns the corner, and --
what does he see? -- He sees shop windows full of Stars of David, and
menorahs and tallises … he sees delis and he sees men in felt hats and
païs … and he thinks, "I'm home."

Pause.

JACK. Course it's all Chinese now. (148-49)

Both the neighbourhood and the street names (Harbord, Spadina, College) to which Jack
and David refer are instantly recognizable to anyone who has lived in or visited Toronto,
as is the truth of Jack’s final observation: one diasporic population has supplanted
another, and the corner of Spadina and College is now the northern border of Chinatown.
So few traces remain of the Jewish community that once dominated the area, that Jack
now feels as alien there as he once felt at home.

Sherman’s diegetic locations (and history) locate the play in a time and place
instantly recognized (and remembered) by Canadian spectators, but also give it a
specifically Jewish context: the trauma of losing one’s land is an experience endowed
with a particular historical and cultural meaning to a Jewish audience. As Jews, the Levys
are not only immigrants to Canada (and the recent descendants thereof): even London
was only ever a provisional home. Whereas Mme. Ranevskaya’s wandering and exile are
self-imposed, and funded by seemingly eternal ties to an ancestral estate, the Levys
represent a population which has been symbolically rootless even longer than the
Ranevskys have been rooted to the orchard. Unlike Russian aristocrats, Jewish families,
even in liberal, democratic Canada, have seldom had the luxury of taking land for
So while both families suffer the pain of losing a home because they are unable to adapt to changing economic circumstances, that trauma in *After the Orchard* is not an unprecedented catastrophe, as in *The Cherry Orchard*, but a repeated one: the loss of the cottage, like the disappearance of the delis, menorahs, and felt hats that once dominated Harbord and Spadina storefronts, represents a trauma which, through its very repetition, has practically defined Jewish culture.

Sherman’s decision to set his *sjuzet* in a contemporary Jewish context has the effect of obscuring the Chekhovian origins of the *fabula*. The reconstitution of the characters into a single socio-economic class and (mostly) a single family, with different names, genders, and age distribution than Chekhov’s characters, discourages or preempts attempts to read the play as a Chekhov adaptation, because the characters’ shared religious, class, and family affiliations diminish the socio-economic differences that so dominate Chekhov’s play. 62 Representing the characters as a Jewish family encourages spectators to read *After the Orchard* as a Jason Sherman play rather than a Canadian version of *The Cherry Orchard*, especially given that Sherman is well-known for writing about Judaism, often critically.

On the other hand, the Jewish frame of reference claims a canonical work for a group that is marginalized by the canon in general and by this work’s hypotext in particular: Jews, in *The Cherry Orchard*, are consigned to offstage space (as the

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61 Within the lifetimes of most of the characters in *After the Orchard*, and thus of many of its spectators, there were still Jewish quotas on property ownership in Montreal’s Town of Mount Royal, for example (and on admission to McGill University). Mordecai Richler, of course, has written about Jewish Canadians’ struggles between an inherited culture that defines itself as landless and an adopted culture that distinguishes people by how much land or property they own.

62 For example, Lopakhin may have risen economically to be able to buy the estate from the people who once owned his father, but this doesn’t make it socially acceptable for him to marry the granddaughter of the man who owned his grandfather—and thus Varya’s superior social status, ironically, condemns her to destitution.
entertainment for the offstage party in act three). Putting Jewish Canadians at centre stage, however, does not amount to an unqualified celebration of a marginalized voice. Rather, it allows Sherman to submit his middle-class Jewish characters to the same withering critique the Chekhov brings to bear on the failing aristocracy in *The Cherry Orchard*, albeit in the context of late capitalism rather than post-feudalism. Like the Ranevskys, the Levys are, in many ways, a family in decline and heading toward one or more irrevocable ruptures: Rose has already run through the money from the sale of her house, at least one of her children is headed for divorce, and her grandchildren offer no hope for the future, Sasha betrays his brothers, and the cabin is lost. And, just like Chekhov, Sherman puts the blame squarely on them, using Sid as a pointed contrast to his surviving kin: whereas Sid was a man of principles and action who prospered in spite of global crisis, the remaining Levys lack principles, can’t act, and suffer a crisis in spite of global prosperity. Nor does Skepian represent a hopeful alternative: unable to recognize any values but property values, he is materially wealthy but emotionally and socially impoverished at the end of the play, rejected by Rose and detested by the Levys. If Trish represents the survival of Sid’s personal and social activism, any optimism that she represents a next “greatest generation” is tempered somewhat by the benefit of hindsight: viewed from the perspective of 2005 (or 2008), “this amazing gathering in Seattle” will not be remembered as a decisive victory for activists in the public mind (185).

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63 There are hints that Sid has been posthumously lionized. Even the supremely nostalgic Len remembers that Sid treated Rose badly (165).
Chekhovian Play About Canadians or Canadianized Chekhov Play?

After the Orchard exemplifies a somewhat paradoxical dramaturgy of finding similarities in difference. Working within the plot and dramatic structure of The Cherry Orchard, Sherman creates contemporary, Canadian equivalencies for the elements of the sjuzet that designate it, to Sherman’s audience, as a foreign, period drama (e.g., diction, the given circumstances of history, geography, and economics). But approximation is not replication, and “equivalent” is not “equal”: to presume that Sherman simply moves or transposes Chekhov’s play to a Canadian setting in order to create a Canadian Cherry Orchard is to view After the Orchard through the lens of fidelity criticism. Aside from the faulty implication that the source contains a core or essence which can be separated from the text, such an assumption fails to account for the extent to which Sherman conceals the most obvious traces of the hypotext (by changing the characters’ names and roles, for example). In fact, Sherman’s dramaturgy does not familiarize The Cherry Orchard but defamiliarizes it, by stripping the plot of both the referents that fix it in nineteenth-century Russia and all markers of canonicity and “classic” status. In contrast with the practices of “updating the classics” which use familiarizing gestures in attempts to illuminate the timeless essence and values of the canonical text which may have been obscured by historic and cultural difference, Sherman’s dramaturgy disguises or removes the traces of canonicity from the sjuzet, to recuperate the plot from the canon and experience it, as Chekhov’s audience did, without the baggage of classic status and historical distance. By rewriting the Chekhovian sjuzet in such a way as to remove the signifiers that might dispose spectators to recognize it as a “Chekhov play,” Sherman seeks, in other words, not to reify the classic but to de-classify it.
Performance – Chekhov x 3

*After the Orchard* was not the only Chekhov adaptation to play in Ottawa in 2005; it wasn’t even the only one to play at the NAC, which had closed its previous season in April with a “new version” of *Uncle Vanya* by Tom Wood. In between the two NAC Chekhovs, Cowgirl Opera’s *Three Sisters: A Black Opera in Three Acts* opened its cross-country Fringe tour in Ottawa in June, winning an award for best fringe production. As their architextuality suggests, these three productions spanned the spectrum of adaptation: Wood’s “faithfully” transposed *Vanya* moved Chekhov’s story to 1928 Alberta and added a few speeches, but otherwise made minimal interventions in the adapted text; *After the Orchard* goes further, significantly changing the title, plot details, characters, and setting; and Cowgirl Opera’s *Three Sisters: A Black Opera in Three Acts* aggressively parodies the source, retaining only as much of the “original” dialogue and action as it wishes to lampoon. The latter play is discussed extensively in chapter five, and *Vanya* is worth mentioning here insofar as its production and reception factored in the conditions of production and reception of the *After the Orchard*.

*Vanya* had special prominence in Ottawa as the centerpiece of Ottawa’s Alberta Scene festival. It was widely talked about and, although it is not mentioned in responses to *After the Orchard*, it must have influenced the local conditions of reception with respect to other productions of Chekhov in the near future. Like *After the Orchard*, *Vanya* too was an adaptation based on geographic and historical approximation, but, significantly, it set out to do exactly what *After the Orchard* does not: refurbish the canonical classic with a recognizably Canadian veneer, while faithfully maintaining the timeless essence of the canonical classic. A co-production between the NAC and the
Citadel, *Vanya* retains most of Chekhov’s title (dropping the “Uncle”) and credited him as the author (although adaptor and star Tom Wood’s name appeared prominently in publicity materials), while moving the plot to the Canadian prairies. It also retains the original characters, with their original names (although without the confusing surplus of traditional Russian nicknames and formal patronymics). The only major change was the Canadian prairie setting, which was represented visually (through detailed, realistic set and costume design) and reinforced by a localized prairie idiom (including a few interpolated speeches). Significantly, however, the place and time Wood chose for his adaptation was not present-day Canada, but 1920s Alberta – the play was re-sited in Canada, but a Canada that was deliberately quite distant in time (and also, for the Ottawa spectators, space), a world neither Chekhov’s nor our own – a strategy commonly seen in contemporary stagings of Shakespeare.

*Vanya’s* public discourse was grounded in terms of fidelity criticism, and justly so, since the production was trying to be faithful to Chekhov. Wood’s objective of fidelity-through-approximation was transmitted by such paratexts as program notes, newspaper interviews, a study guide for school audiences, and the NAC website, in which Wood, asked why he chose to adapt Chekhov’s play, says: “*Uncle Vanya* has always been my favorite Chekhov play, and perhaps the most powerful of his works, but every version I’ve ever read has been adapted in the 30s or 50s. The language was always so stilted.” In other words, Wood perceives cultural and historical distance (manifested in the dated idioms of old British translations) as a barrier to accessing the authentic *Uncle Vanya*, and he believes that by changing the look and sound of the play to make it more familiar to the audience, he can restore that authenticity. This is a common vision of
“fidelity” in adaptation, resting on the relatively safe assumption that playwrights don’t intend us to view their plays as historic artifacts. But Wood’s vision of fidelity also rests on some less safe assumptions. In an interview with the Ottawa Xpress, Wood defines Uncle Vanya as a “deeply beautiful and darkly comic portrait of regret and longing” (Ball); in an interview with the Edmonton Journal which was reprinted in the Ottawa Citizen, Wood describes Vanya as “[his] Hamlet,” and says the play is about Vanya’s “low self-esteem,” with which he “can totally identify.” Wood, in other words, may be substituting Chekhov’s vision of the play for his own. He also has a very precise definition of what “comedy” means in Chekhov, one which sounds more like that of one of Stanislavsky’s North American disciples: “There's the smile of recognition. A sort of natural humour. Not slap-your-knees funny, that's for sure. Downright sad. Definitely not a farce. Pants don't fall” (Nicholls, “Wood’s Vanya”). Woods’s vision of fidelity to Chekhov draws on the still common, if no longer ubiquitous vision of Chekhov as defined by melancholy and psychological realism.

Moreover, the 1928 prairie setting is a curious choice in light of Wood’s claim that archaic translations create an undesirable distance between Chekhov and the audience. Albeit that Wood points out several interesting equivalences between Chekhov’s 1890s and Alberta’s 1920s – “The suffragette movement, the ecology-minded doctor ... ‘it all slid in beautifully to the time frame,’ he says. So did the pompous professor's assessment that he's ‘fallen off the edge of the world’ coming back to Alberta” (Nicholls, “Uncle Tom”) – the choice nevertheless creates an aesthetic distance, vis à vis the spectator, that is at odds both with Chekhov’s intentions64 and with Wood’s

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64 Chekhov set his play in his audience’s present, not its past, and (notwithstanding Stanislavsky’s sentimental mise en scène, which Chekhov famously loathed) his characters’ seemingly sentimental
comments about wanting to bridge the gap between it and the contemporary audience. The historical setting and dialect (which is thus not modernized so much as regionalized), invoke a nostalgic mode of viewing, which is quite different from representing characters who are themselves captive to nostalgia, as Chekhov does. Vanya, in other words, might be profitably approached through the critical apparatus used by Susan Bennett in Performing Nostalgia, which examines how Shakespeare adaptations create a fictional vision of a past that invoke the hidden desires of the present. Although its paratexts appeal to the ideal of fidelity, we might question exactly how this adaptation is faithful to Chekhov (or exactly what it is faithful to, if not Chekhov).

At any rate, the play’s critics in Edmonton decided that Vanya was faithful, if not to Chekhov then at least to the nostalgic vision of the past. The Sun’s Colin MacLean celebrated the play in the rhetoric of fidelity criticism, noting that Wood’s “translation feels strongly contemporary while keeping the classic tone of the Chekhovian original” (emphases mine). Applauding Wood’s “fine ear for the way people talk way out here,” MacLean wrote that his adaptation “takes to its transplant to [… 1920s] Alberta […] like a northern scrub pine.” MacLean was so certain that there was “not a dull moment in Bob Baker's nuanced production” that he said it again two sentences later: “[t]here is not a false moment or emotion anywhere in this pitch-perfect production” (“Powerful Vanya”). The Journal’s Liz Nicholls, too, praised the suitability of both the setting and Wood’s “colloquial, unflashy translation,”: “Vanya […] brings alienation home, so to speak. Ditto […] the nagging sense of potential wasted and possibility reduced that is the obverse side of frontier can-do zeal” (“Wood’s Vanya”).

references to the past are always ironic in context (as when the emancipated serf describes Emancipation as a catastrophe).
In spite of arriving on the wings of 4- and 5-star reviews from its run in Edmonton – particularly Nicholls’s, which was reprinted as a preview in the *Ottawa Citizen – Vanya* bombed in Ottawa, where the critics attacked exactly what their Edmonton peers had praised: the unsuitability of the language and setting and the abundance of dull moments. Bruce Deachman wrote that the “production somehow takes the edge off Chekhov, leaving behind something very dull.” Describing the production as “a herky-jerky collection of forced ennui and dialogue unsupported by action or real emotion,” Deachman scorned Wood’s Albertan interpolations: “Vera's lengthy diatribe about women's rights (or lack thereof) appears to have been inserted with the sole purpose of announcing that this is, indeed, 1928 Alberta[, and] … Astrov’s … overly long dissertation on the vanishing wetlands, flora and fauna, etc., sounds as if Wood had a separate David Suzuki-esque agenda at work.”

Kate Taylor, also deploying the rhetoric of fidelity criticism, damned Wood’s adaptation with faint praise in the (nationally-circulated) *Globe and Mail*, calling the Alberta setting “clever[…] but unnecessary.” Although Taylor “delight[ed] in some of the transpositions,” such as “references to Rudolf Valentino and Carter's little liver pills,” she lamented the absence of “deeper resonance[s]” between 1890s Russia and 1920s Alberta, and claimed that while “the notion that Albertan farmers would be sending remittances to an Ontario university professor” might “score a few points with any Western separatist,” it isn't really a plausible plot line (“NAC’s *Vanya Not at Home on the Range*”). Although Taylor’s tone is not as hostile as Deachman’s, it goes much further than a critique of a specific production, challenging the very necessity of *all* Chekhov adaptations:
If Shakespeare is our contemporary, Anton Chekhov is even more so. […] It's so easy to move his plays closer to us -- a *Cherry Orchard* set on an Ontario farm; an *Uncle Vanya* in modern dress -- but, as long as you have a sound and recent translation, there's no particular need. The plays will do their work just fine in their 19th-century setting.

Notwithstanding its problematic assumptions (about the existence of an essential and ahistorical Chekhovian-Canadian *Zeitgeist*, about what constitutes a “sound” translation, and about just what “work” Chekhov’s plays do), Taylor’s argument that Chekhov’s works don’t need to be Canadianized is potentially devastating to a play like *After the Orchard*, which comes perilously close to being “a *Cherry Orchard* set on an Ontario farm.” Ultimately, *Vanya* shows how conceptions of Chekhov’s fidelity are as precarious and shifting as they are believed to be stable and fixed: Wood’s authenticating gestures were perceived as faithful by some Canadian spectators but banal and unnecessary by others, which highlights the importance of location. Albertan spectators may have been moved by Wood’s nostalgic vision and thus convinced that his adaptation of Chekhov was faithful (to their own nostalgic conception of a bygone prairie way of life, if not to Chekhov). Ottawans, however, appear to have been bored by a play designed to evoke nostalgia for a place to which they had no natural connection. *Vanya* may have given Chekhov a local habitation, but not in a locale familiar or compelling to Ottawans.

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65 Not all Edmonton spectators agreed with the critics, however. One Edmontonian, Peggy Proctor, was moved to protest in a letter to the editor of the *Journal*: “I am shocked, dumbfounded and embarrassed to see that the Citadel’s *Vanya* was chosen as Alberta's best. […] This attempted adaptation […] was abominable. The […] northern prairie setting was just not plausible, and the characters were not credible. The acting was amateurishly overdone and unconvincing. The set was the only redeeming feature.” Lamenting that she “did not leave at intermission along with the discerning half of the audience,” the author suggests that many other spectators shared her opinion.
After Vanya

Vanya’s disappointing performance in Ottawa is an interesting case on its own, but it also forms an important part of the conditions of production and reception for *After the Orchard*. The critical and box office failure of this expensive, highly-touted production became a minor news item in and of itself, as news coverage of Alberta Scene often noted that *Vanya* was “widely panned” and “bombed badly” (Gessel; also see Babiak).66 As a result, the sting of *Vanya*’s failure was still fresh when NAC English theatre artistic director Marti Maraden began rehearsing *After the Orchard* only a few weeks later. Perhaps anxious to defend her symbolic curtain call from similar criticism (she had personally commissioned Sherman to write the play, her last as NAC’s English AD), Maraden repeatedly downplayed the relationship between the two *Orchards* in publicity paratexts, claiming that *After the Orchard* was not an adaptation at all. She told the *Ottawa Citizen* that “though Sherman was inspired by *The Cherry Orchard*, ‘if you knew nothing about Chekhov, you could see this play and it would not be an issue in any way. It has the same central dilemma of having a beloved family possession in jeopardy, and a few of the characters have equivalents, but it's entirely Jason's play’” (Mazey). Maraden reiterated this claim in various ways in *Xpress* (see Ball) and the NAC study guide, where she states that *After the Orchard* is “by no means Chekhov or an adaptation of that play” – thus denying that the play is an adaptation at all, even while noting that it offers the joys of adaptation, such as “the fun [of recognizing] not just *The Cherry Orchard* but little sneaky echoes of his other plays as well” (qtd. in McNabb 9; emphasis mine).67

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66 It is difficult to gauge the extent to which *Vanya*’s poor attendance was influenced by negative reviews, as opposed to word of mouth or other factors especially given that attendance was poor at many Alberta Scene events. See Babiak, “Alberta Scene a $3.5M loser in Ottawa.”
67 Study guide author Jim McNabb points out that the “three Levy brothers possibly parallel Olga, Masha, and Irina in *The Three Sisters*, one being a tired school teacher, one in an unsatisfactory marriage, and the
Implicitly accepting Maraden’s severely restricted conception of “adaptation,” newspaper pieces leading up to the opening also avoided the a-word, describing *After the Orchard* instead as “inspired by” Chekhov, an “ode” or “valentine to” Chekhov, or even a “modern echo of” Chekhov (qtd. in Mazey, Ball, McNabb 9, respectively).

But if “adaptation” became a dirty word in the discourse surrounding *After the Orchard*, “Chekhov” did not: Chekhov’s name appears prominently in both the *Citizen* and the *Xpress* (four times in each, compared to seven references to Sherman in the *Citizen* and three in the *Xpress*). Notwithstanding Maraden’s claim therein that it is “by no means an adaptation of Chekhov,” the study guide bills the play as “*After the Orchard* / by Jason Sherman / inspired by Anton Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*” on the title page, describes it as “an echo of *The Cherry Orchard*” in the first sentence (2), and devotes two pages to a bio of Chekhov and “reflections of his works in *After the Orchard*” (11-12); all told, “Chekhov” and “*The Cherry Orchard*” each appear eighteen times in the study guide. Both the frequency and usage of Chekhov references in *Orchard*’s paratexts imply reverence for Chekhov. Mazey, for example, reassures us that Maraden is “a woman who knows her Chekhov,” and Maraden too claims that the play offers something extra to those who “know their Chekhov”: Chekhov, it is implied, is something we could all benefit from knowing. The pre-show paratexts simultaneously affirm and deny *After the Orchard*’s debt to Chekhov, striving with equal zeal to insist that the play is not another unnecessary adaptation like *Vanya*, and to associate it with Chekhov’s cultural capital.

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third dreaming of a better life elsewhere – Irina in Moscow and David in L.A.” There are also “faint echoes of *The Seagull*” in the play’s many theatrical references (12).
If, by denying that *After the Orchard* is an adaptation, Maraden hoped to discourage reviewers from critiquing another “unnecessary” Canadian Chekhov adaptation at NAC, she was successful to the extent that negative responses, rather than dismissing it as a bad adaptation, tended to dismiss it instead as simply a bad play. But just as the paratexts exploit Chekhov’s name and cultural cachet while suppressing the word “adaptation,” the responses both are and are not about Chekhov. Iris Winston’s positive review in *Variety* is structured like the publicity paratexts, citing Chekhov prominently in the first paragraph, with approving nods at the analogy between the sale of the cottage and the auction of the orchard. Thereafter Winston treats the play like a new work, devoting a considerable proportion (roughly a third) of the text to plot summary. Describing the production as “lavish and beautifully designed,” Winston praises both the acting and Maraden’s “characteristically light directing touch,” and describes the piece as a “fitting ending” to her NAC career in light of her reputation for being committed to “developing new works [and] honoring the classics.” However, she also expressed doubts about “whether *After the Orchard* will satisfy the modern taste for a faster pace,” and whether, as an expensive show with a cast of twelve, it has “much of a future in the current climate.”

In spite of its significance as Maraden’s swan song (and Sherman’s, it turned out), *After the Orchard* was ignored by the national newspapers, and the only other professional review was written by *Ottawa Citizen* critic Janice Kennedy.68 Given that the NAC’s audience includes far more readers of the *Citizen* than of *Variety*, Kennedy was better positioned to influence potential and actual spectators of *After the Orchard*,

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68 According to Sherman, the production would have received a “very positive review from the CBC – had the CBC not been on strike at the time” (2008).
which is unfortunate, because her response exemplifies the hostile, dismissive tone and unfair criteria associated with fidelity criticism. Priming the reader for mockery with the title “After the Orchard Goes Sour,” Kennedy begins with a reductive summary consisting largely of mixed metaphors. Worse yet, the play thus summarized is not the play being reviewed:

There are bonds between them, but the characters exhibit deep and diverse forms of dysfunction. They are caught up in a world of loss and absurdity. The laughter, when it comes, is etched in black.

Such is the world of The Cherry Orchard, Chekhov's 1904 study in darkness, light and echoing truths. A century later, Toronto playwright Jason Sherman tries to hammer at the human heart with the same timeless themes.

Depicting Sherman as either a carpenter in the wrong place or a surgeon with the wrong tools, pounding away at the spectator’s rib cage with “timeless themes,” Kennedy both defines The Cherry Orchard as an exercise in contrasting clichés and establishes impossible criteria for After the Orchard, which, to succeed, must manifest the same (unspecified) “echoing truths” to which she reduces The Cherry Orchard. Predictably, it doesn’t: “It is safe to say that After the Orchard, like a third-rate sitcom cancelled at mid-season, won't stick around as long as the Chekhov variation.” Since it doesn’t meet Kennedy’s criteria for excellence, the play doesn’t merit longevity or timelessness (like good drama) but is destined for ephemerality (like bad television): only good plays are timeless, and only timeless plays are good.
But even though Kennedy invokes the tropes of fidelity criticism, her real problem with Sherman is not his infidelity to Chekhov but rather his inability to be as good a playwright as Chekhov. Rather than criticizing his adaptation, she focuses on what she sees as a lapse in his usually solid playwriting, citing “pedestrian” dialogue, “flat and unfunny” comic material, “unmoving” drama, characters “pulled straight from the shelves of Central Casting,” and “false endings”: “You're aware that it should have ended ages ago. But it just won't stop.” She is particularly critical of the over-long plot (the most “faithfully” Chekhovian aspect of the play), calling it “all over the map,” when in her opinion, it “should be focused on the central metaphor” (she does not say what metaphor, exactly, this is). Ironically, Kennedy finds fault with the aspects of Sherman’s play which most resemble Chekhov’s: as we have seen, if Sherman’s plot is “all over the map” it is precisely because it so rigorously emulates *The Cherry Orchard*. Although Kennedy is really critiquing what she sees as sub-par playwriting (and the failure of the play to meet her taste for timeless themes, elevated diction, and tight narrative structure), her rhetoric ties the play’s failures to its status as an adaptation, judging it not simply as a play but as an attempt to live up to her vision of *The Cherry Orchard* as “a study in darkness, light, and echoing truths,” a description which might have been cribbed from the back cover of a *Penguin Classics* edition – of just about any “classic.” Although Kennedy does not complain that Sherman betrays Chekhov, she does respond to the association between the two created, in part, by the play’s paratexts, using it to berate Sherman, rather unfairly, for being a worse playwright than Chekhov.

By contrast, the responses of non-professional spectators who saw *After the Orchard* are not at all concerned with its relationship to *The Cherry Orchard*. The online
version of the *Xpress*, which encourages readers both to post responses to articles and to vote for other readers’ responses, collected four written responses, all positive, which in turn collected thirty-nine votes between them. So while a relatively small number of people wrote in, ten times as many signified agreement in principle by voting, and no one disagreed strongly enough to post a negative assessment. The sole critical comment targets the venue, arguing that the beauty of NAC’s huge, 1000-seat theatre “does not make up for [its] lack of intimacy.” The online responses, reflecting the perils of a medium which encourages hasty judgments rather than thoughtful analysis, consist largely of vague generalizations (e.g., “With the past’s help we can solve lots of problems.”) and baffling comments (one observes that “the actors are caught in a dilemma which we can all relate to […] so it’s interesting to follow their story and see how they solve it,” which implies, strangely, that the dilemma is resolved), but nevertheless they contrast sharply with Kennedy’s vitriol. Even the comment, “[w]hat struck me the most in this play was how each character seemed to have a role to play,” banal though it seems, contradicts Kennedy’s opinion that the characters were thin and the plot poorly organized. Most striking, perhaps, is that none of the respondents mentions Chekhov at all: for these spectators the play’s relationship to a famous antecedent text – a relationship explicitly announced in the article to which they were responding – seems to have been irrelevant to their reception. Or at least irrelevant to their own reflection on their reception; it’s possible, for example, that the Chekhov connection influenced their “pre-reception” of the play, including the decision to see it.

Sherman’s own testimony, in a written response to my queries, provides an interesting perspective on some of the other responses. Although he remains grateful to
Maraden for giving him “absolute freedom to write what [he] needed to write,” Sherman had serious reservations about how the fruits of that writing were realized in the production. Although he characterizes the performances as “excellent,” he found the production “tedious” and suspects that Maraden over-emphasized what she saw as the dominant mood of the play – “sombre” – at the expense of its “underlying tensions, passions,” and humour. In addition to the “plodding” staging and monotonous mood, Sherman feels the play was oppressed by its naturalistic, “cup-and-saucer” set, which he describes as “a monstrosity, the sort of thing – and it was a ‘thing’ – that completely overwhelms the actors, gives them no aid or quarter or effective playing space, and says absolutely nothing about the world of the play.” Sherman, who had instead imagined a “suggested,” fragmentary set, more evocative than corporeal, also felt a great “distance” between the actors and the audience, which suggests that both the monolithic set and the cavernous venue were inhibiting factors. Although his response was retrospective rather than immediate (the interview took place over two years after the production), his comments shed some light on the play’s disappointing reception. For example, Kennedy’s perception of the play as too long and of its comic material as “unfunny […] schtick” may reflect Maraden’s sombre pacing or the physical and emotional distance created by the dramatic and theatrical spaces, either or both of which would have retarded the action and made the play’s comic moments seem out of place. It is even possible that Maraden may have “misread” After the Orchard in exactly the same way that Chekhov accused Stanislavsky of misreading The Cherry Orchard: by turning it into a sentimental melodrama and thus blunting its comic aspect and related social critique.
Conclusion: The Axe Falls

*After the Orchard* does not explicitly comment on its source so much as experiment with the limits of approximation, as though Sherman set out to see whether he could graft Chekhov’s dramatic structure onto the story of Jewish Canadian family so seamlessly that no one would notice. It follows *The Cherry Orchard* so precisely, and yet, to the casual reader or spectator, so inconspicuously, that the NAC had to rely on paratextual public discourse to alert those spectators whose curiosity might be aroused by the prospect of a Chekhov adaptation, while simultaneously trying to pre-empt the possibility that it might be dismissed as an unnecessary Canadian Chekhov adaptation. As a result, the documents of reception suggest, spectators were confronted with a play which they knew to be somehow connected to Chekhov, but not exactly how or why. Although the professional critics cited Chekhov early and often, and made note of the obvious parallels between the plays – at least those to which the preview paratexts had already alerted them – their critiques of the play, whether positive or negative, focus largely on other things than Sherman’s motives for using Chekhov’s play the way he did. The review in *Variety* is largely descriptive, focusing on the acting, directing, and design; and where it ventures into interpretation it is to speculate on whether the play is autobiographical. Similarly, Kennedy’s prescriptive review is *framed* as a comparison of Sherman’s play and Chekhov’s, but the specific things she disliked about the play actually have little to do with its fidelity or infidelity to Chekhov. Neither review indicates a clear response to Sherman’s use of Chekhov, although both suggest that the reviewers, like the producers of the play, cited Chekhov’s name to bolster their own prestige and attract their
audience’s attention (a possibility that seems all the more likely given that the non-critics did not feel the need to mention Chekhov at all).

The responses suggest that spectators had a hard time reading Sherman’s appropriation of Chekhov, but the disappointing response to After the Orchard may have had less to do with Sherman’s unsuccessful dramaturgy than with the producers’ failure to situate the play and its adaptive dramaturgy within its spectators’ horizon of expectations. That is, rather than focusing public discourse on how the play was not really an adaptation of Chekhov, the NAC might have been better off initiating discussions about why Sherman might have chosen to use Chekhov as he did. They might thus also have productively addressed Sherman’s decision to focus on the Levys’ religious affiliation, another major element of the play which was also largely ignored in its reception. While Sherman denies that he writes with an ethnically specific audience in mind, the play seems to address a spectatorship that self-identifies as both Jewish and Torontonian – but the NAC is in Ottawa, which has a much less prominent Jewish community than Toronto or Montreal. Ottawa spectators, especially those unfamiliar with Sherman’s work, may have been uncertain how to respond to the play’s Jewish references. The play’s study guide includes a glossary of Jewish terms, but neither it nor any of the other paratexts circulated by the NAC make any other attempt to contextualize the play’s Jewish content, and the responses are largely silent on this aspect of the play. The exception is Janice Kennedy’s somewhat vague complaint about the play being “filled with […] obvious cliché” and “hopeless stereotype[s],” which may indicate that she felt uncomfortably aware of her identity as an outsider in relation to the minority

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69 According to Statistics Canada, Ottawa’s Jewish population is around 11,000, while Toronto’s is around 103,000 and Montreal’s around 90,000. See “2001 Community Profiles.”
group being mocked onstage. In the absence of a significant (and approving) Jewish audience to sanction the jokes, the self-deprecating humour may have come off as merely deprecating. Moreover, Sherman’s decisions to use a specific Chekhov play as his raw material, and to represent his characters as specifically Jewish, are clearly related, and yet none of the responses make much of either aspect of the play and none of them speculate on the connection between the two. Had the NAC focused its public discourse on these issues rather than on whether the play should be read as an adaptation of Chekhov, the play might have had a better or at least a more interested reception.

Shifting the perspective from post-mortem to the play’s possible future, since it is likely that the cultural/religious composition of the audience could significantly influence the reception of the play, After the Orchard might better serve and be better served by a community (or venue, such as Montreal’s Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts) with a large Jewish constituency. Just as the absence of a Jewish audience may serve to mute the play’s comic potency, since non-Jewish spectators are likely to be uncomfortable about laughing at Jewish jokes without the sanctioning presence of Jewish laughter (particularly in the culturally exalted auspices of the theatre), the presence of a Jewish audience might amplify it by giving all spectators permission to join in the laughter. Alternatively, such a production might, like some of Sherman’s other works, provoke an outcry among the Jewish community (an agon dramatized in Orchard 181-83 and in “Scenes”); and such a provocation might generate publicity and a broader extra-theatrical public response to the play, which could in turn increase both ticket sales and performance efficacy (by stimulating public dialogue about the state of the Jewish-Canadian middle-class).
Although these problematic aspects of the play might be productively addressed through greater attention to public discourse or a production in a more suitable community, the play presents some other challenges as well. Although Sherman’s approximation is admirably meticulous and creative in most respects, some things are not easily approximated, and *After the Orchard* lacks an equivalent for the large-scale socio-economic struggle central to *The Cherry Orchard*. Chekhov’s characters, both aristocrats and former serfs, are struggling to cope as the semi-feudal world in which they grew up is torn apart by sweeping social, economic, and political pressures; Sherman’s characters are comfortable middle-class Canadians living in a stable modern democracy in a time of unprecedented peace and prosperity. The “tragedy” of *After the Orchard* is mostly limited to the family depicted on stage, in contrast to the higher, more global stakes in Chekhov’s play. Trish, in *After the Orchard*, questions the characters’ “liberal” commitment to social justice (184-85), but her warnings lack the urgency of Trofimov’s speeches. Although the Levys, too, struggle with forces they cannot comprehend, the consequences are much less severe. At the end of *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov’s characters lose everything – some are facing starvation or death;⁷⁰ by contrast, the Levys sell a recreational cottage for a tidy profit (for Sasha, at least) and return to their comfortable metropolitan homes (except David), ending up not so much irrevocably dispossessed as disgruntled. The fact that the Levys can’t pull themselves together, *in spite* of the fact that their situation is not nearly so dire as that facing the Ranevskayas, may be Sherman’s point; but if so, it was too subtle for its Ottawa audience.

⁷⁰Specifically, the abandoned Fiers seems to be on the verge of death, Charlotta is left both jobless and homeless, Varya’s options are limited at best, and even Mme. Ranevskaya’s future is far from rosy as she heads off to Paris with limited funds, no income and no collateral.
In summary, *After the Orchard* is a fascinating example of strategies of resiting and approximation, but also of their limitations and risks. In transferring Chekhov’s plot from the chaos and imminent crisis of 1904 Russia to the prosperity and stability of 1999 Canada, Sherman cannot (or perhaps chooses not to) match the urgency and anxiety of Chekhov’s given circumstances, and as a result his characters’ paralysis seems less profound, their punishment less terrifying. In addition, Sherman’s exacting reproduction of *The Cherry Orchard*’s plot made the play vulnerable to Kennedy’s judgment that it was “all over the map.” Like its hypotext, *After the Orchard* depicts not an action but a failure to act, and for spectators accustomed to mainstream Canadian dramaturgy (in which, once the central conflict has been identified, the characters seldom discuss anything else), some scenes seem to exist only to make the play longer.

Although the play’s producers tried to exploit Chekhov’s cultural capital without arousing the anti-adaptation prejudices that helped doom *Vanya*, the results were mixed at best. Sherman’s meticulously detailed approximation of Chekhov’s dramatic action and given circumstances, however theoretically fascinating, strained the patience of its spectators, and there is also little evidence that it elicited what Hutcheon calls the “joy of adaptation,” the recognition of the familiar combined with the thrill of difference. In one sense, *After the Orchard* is so close to *The Cherry Orchard* that the “difference” is not apparent, but the more serious obstacle would have been the lack of recognition – the aspects of Chekhov that Sherman appropriated most cleverly are those with which most spectators are least familiar. Finally, as a specifically Jewish Canadian perspective on *The Cherry Orchard*, the “sombre” production provoked neither laughter nor anger, and doesn’t seem to have struck a chord – either consonant or dissonant – with either Jewish
or non-Jewish spectators. One wonders how the play would fare in Toronto or Montreal, with a lighter directing touch, a more intimate theatre, and a less oppressive set; or whether a more sophisticated effort to market the play (as something other than “not an adaptation of Chekhov”) might have produced a more positive reception; but, sadly, given the play’s expense and mediocre initial reception, it is unlikely that the play will have another chance. Indeed, when I asked Jason Sherman whether he thought it would be produced again, he said, simply, “you must be joking.”
Chapter 3  An Other Othello: Djanet Sears’s Appropriations of Shakespeare in *Harlem Duet*

As a veteran theatre practitioner of African Descent, Shakespeare’s *Othello* had haunted me since I first was introduced to him. Sir Laurence Olivier in black-face. Othello is the first African portrayed in the annals of western dramatic literature. In order to exorcise this ghost, I have written *Harlem Duet*.

Djanet Sears, “nOTES oF a cOLOURED gIRL” (14).

Like *After the Orchard*, *Harlem Duet* appropriates material from an antecedent text by setting it in a different context – or rather contexts, as it incorporates elements of *Othello* into three parallel storylines set in different historical periods. Although both plays depict often-marginalized minority groups in Canada, playwright Djanet Sears’s approach is obviously quite different from Jason Sherman’s, and so is her strategy of appropriation. Rather than using a familiar Canadian setting to facilitate identification, *Harlem Duet* frustrates attempts to read it as “*Othello* set in contemporary Canada,” because it is neither *Othello*, nor entirely contemporary, nor set in Canada; and in sharp contrast to *After the Orchard*, its plot and dramatic action are entirely original. *Harlem Duet* has also had several successful productions since its debut in 1997 at Nightwood Theatre, including one at the Stratford Festival in 2006. It has circulated more widely, garnered more critical attention, and generated more paratexts and documents of reception than *After the Orchard*, which makes it possible to ask how and to what extent changing conditions of production and reception have affected the play’s reception. As such, *Harlem Duet* makes an excellent counterpoint to *After the Orchard*: both plays re-cite the canon by resiting it, but using different tactics, in pursuit of different objectives, and with very different results.

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71 The play has also been staged outside Canada, in Britain, New York (where it is set and was first work-shopped), Detroit, Stanford, and St. Louis.
Harlem Duet’s success actually presents a problem for this study, in that its various productions, each taking place in different conditions of production and reception and each generating substantial paratexts and documents of reception, are too numerous to allow an in-depth analysis of each. Therefore the reception analysis below focuses on the play’s initial and most recent Canadian productions, showing how the play’s reception at Stratford in 2006 answers the question put to Djanet Sears by Ric Knowles in 1998: “At what point does Harlem Duet change Stratford?” (“The Nike Effect” 30). Other paratexts and documents of reception will be considered too, insofar as they contribute to the play’s ever-growing reputation and thus influence its reception. Direct comparisons of these different productions are particularly fruitful in this case, because although the play’s reputation and influence changed significantly over the decade between its Nightwood premiere and its Stratford remount, both its text and, to a remarkable degree, its creative contributors, have remained stable: almost every member of the Stratford cast (including some of the designers) had played their role in the play at least once before, and Sears has been closely involved with almost every production, usually as director.

As both the playwright and director of most productions of Harlem Duet, Sears has enjoyed an unusual amount of control over her work. And in addition to creating the text and the mise en scène, Sears is also exceptionally active in telling her audience how to read her work, exemplifying Linda Hutcheon’s argument that an author’s objectives are neither as inaccessible nor as irrelevant as they are often held to be in literary theory: Harlem Duet offers examples of both the intertextual variations that “function as indicators of the adapter’s voice,” and such “extra-textual statements of event and
motive” as the essay cited above, “nOTES oF a cOLOURED gIRL: 32 rEASONS wHY i
wRITE fOR tHE tHEATRE” (Hutcheon, Theory 109). This essay, having appeared as
both the program notes of the play’s productions and the preface to the published text,
has been deliberately positioned as a pretext to both performances and readings of
Harlem Duet, clearly positions the play in the “(counter)canonical tradition of Black
women’s playwriting,” citing both ntozake shange and Lorraine Hansberry, among others
(Knowles, “Othello,” 157). It also tells readers with remarkable directness how to
interpret her adaptation of Shakespeare. Once we read that Sears wrote the play as a
response to Othello, we can’t help but read it as one, nor can we discount Sears’s explicit
statement (already quoted at length above) that she is writing the play to ensure that her
“nieces’ experience of the world will […] be different from [her] own” (14). As
Hutcheon says, once read, such statements cannot be ignored or forgotten, and “nOTES
oF a cOLOURED gIRL” makes it very clear that Sears is using the Shakespearean
hypotext to confront and rectify the marginalization of “African voices” in her chosen
home, Canada. The essay’s frequent citation in other paratexts (including newspaper
reviews and scholarly articles, such as this one) demonstrates how powerfully it has
influenced readers and spectators: responses to Harlem Duet, both popular and academic,
have not only cited Sears’s notes, they also tend to focus on the aspects of the play that
the notes themselves draw attention to, while perhaps neglecting other aspects of the
play.

**Dualling Othellos: Harlem Duet and Othello**

*Harlem Duet* is a descendant of *Othello*, yet also its prequel: although it is set in the
nineteenth and twentieth centuries, historically after Shakespeare’s *Othello*, the plot
depicts events antecendent to those of the adapted text, imagining that before Othello met Desdemona, he lived in a Black community, Harlem, with a Black wife, named Billie.\textsuperscript{72} The play shows what happens to her after Othello’s announcement that he is in love with another woman, not just once, but in three distinct iterations. Each of the three storylines is set in different era in African-American history – just before Emancipation; at the height of the Harlem Renaissance in 1928; and in the present day\textsuperscript{73} – and each is complicated “by the spectre of inter-racial desire” (Kidnie 30). In the 1860s plot, Billie and Othello labour on the estate of “Miss Dessy.” They plan an escape to Canada, but when she comes to him on the eve of their escape, he has changed his mind. She is devastated, and he is lynched – the inevitable end, it is implied, of miscegenated relationships in the Civil War era. In the 1928 plot, Othello is a minstrel actor, and Mona a director who gives him the chance to perform Shakespeare.\textsuperscript{74} This story, too, leaves Billie distraught and Othello dead – this time by her hands.\textsuperscript{75} The present-day plot is the most fully fleshed out, both in the sense that it alone incorporates other on-stage characters – including Billie’s landlord, Magi; her sister, Amah; and her father, Canada –

\textsuperscript{72} “Billie” is short for “Sybil” (a name Billie hates), from the Othello’s description of the notorious handkerchief he gives to Desdemona: “A sibyl … In her prophetic fury sewed the work” (3.4.72-4). I have adopted Sears’s convention of capitalizing “White” and “Black,” which serves as a useful reminder that such racial categories are mental, cultural constructs, not biological facts.

\textsuperscript{73} The central plot takes place in an unspecified “present,” and Sears has made some effort to keep it there by occasionally updating the play’s soundscape. In the 2006 production, for example, the recording of Michael Jackson and Lisa Marie Presley’s \textit{Dateline} interview, which originally played over the opening of act two, was replaced with an audio clip of embattled New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin.

\textsuperscript{74} Specifically, Mona offers Othello the role of Pericles (100), so Knowles is mistaken in claiming that she only gives him Black (Shakespearean and minstrel) roles (“\textit{Othello},” 154). Kidnie makes much of \textit{Harlem Duet}’s citation of \textit{Pericles}, noting that both plays both depict reconciliations between diasporic fathers and daughters, and both share an “ability to see beyond tragedy” (41). Nevertheless, the allusion, however tantalizing, is subtle: \textit{Harlem Duet} has never been marketed or reviewed as an adaptation of \textit{Pericles}, a little-known play which does not resonate strongly with most Canadians.

\textsuperscript{75} The stage directions leave some ambiguity as to whether 1928 Othello’s death is an accident, a murder, or a little of both: “\textit{Her hand rises, the razor is poised, nearly touching the skin of his neck […]. He turns around, as if to see what she’s holding, and in that turn, his neck appears to devour the blade}” (100). Thus, though Billie may have been contemplating his murder, it is Othello’s own motion that turns the contemplation into a reality.
and in that it depicts a more realistic, complete narrative, in which Othello is an English professor at Columbia University and Billie is a stalled psychology graduate student struggling to cope emotionally and financially with Othello’s desertion and the subsequent announcement of his engagement to Mona (now a colleague at Columbia, along with “Chris Yago”).

**Re-citing Shakespeare in Space and Time**

Although Sears explicitly evokes a Shakespearean hypotext, she does so as if only to discard it, exiling both Othello and his story to the margins in order to focus on Billie. As a result, some readers (notably Hutcheon) have been hesitant to characterize *Harlem Duet* as an adaptation of *Othello*. Both plays, however, can be characterized as *sjuzets* of the “*Othello fabula*” (a *fabula* whose earliest known *sjuzet* is not Shakespeare’s, but that of his supposed source, in Cinthio’s *Hecatommithi*). Regardless of whether one defines the play as “an” adaptation, it is clearly produced by and read through adaptation.

In citing Shakespeare’s story only to exile it to offstage time and space, as several critics have noted, Sears’s appropriation of Shakespeare closely resembles the strategies described by Joanne Tompkins in “Re-Citing Shakespeare in Post-Colonial Drama,” discussed briefly in chapter one. Like Tompkins’s case studies, Sears displaces Shakespeare performatively, by “relegating Shakespeare to a minor role instead of centre stage” (Tompkins 17). Her dramaturgy combines verbal re-citing with spatial and historical resiting in order to “displace” the canonical text (21); in fact, at least two other essays on *Harlem Duet* cite her argument that “[p]ost-colonial revisions of Shakespeare’s plays displace an inherited tradition in order to accommodate other cultural traditions that […] have developed in quite different social, literary, and political directions,” (Knowles,
“Othello” 162; Dickinson 188). Linda Burnett uses a similar spatial metaphor to make the same point in her essay on Canadian Shakespeare adaptations. Distinguishing “deconstructive postmodernism” from “constructive postcolonialism,” Burnett claims the goal of the latter is not “simply to tear down [or] vanquish the stories that have been told […]. Rather, it is to advance narratives to stand beside (in addition to) earlier narratives” (6-7). As Stam would no doubt emphasize, such proxemic figures of speech (“displace,” “stand beside”) are apt in that “displace” does not mean “replace”: plays like Harlem Duet seek to build on their sources, not to dispel or erase them, and Sears, far from trying to vanquish Shakespeare’s narrative, instead goes to great lengths to include it so that we can see exactly how hers differs. Harlem Duet displaces its most significant canonical hypotext narratively, historically, and geographically – that is, it displaces Othello from the centre of the story as well as setting the story in a different time and place – in order to make space for Billie’s story.

Sears’s dramaturgy combines several familiar resiting/re-citing strategies in one play: she relocates the fabula in a contemporary chronotope (like After the Orchard, e.g.), and also (in the 1860 and 1928 plots) in chronotopes which are neither Shakespearean nor, from her audience’s perspective, contemporary (like Vanya or Tibor Egervari’s The Merchant of Venice at Auschwitz); in addition, she shifts the focus to new or previously marginal characters (like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Goodnight Desdemona); displaces the hypotext performatively by reducing it to a rehearsal within the play (like Away, A Branch of the Blue Nile, and A Tempest); and inverts the dramatic space of the hypotext, relocating Shakespeare’s mimetic space and characters to diegetic space (like Vogel’s Desdemona, and Normand Chaurette’s Les Reines). This latter tactic
is subtle but profound: like both Vogel and Chaurette, whose plays focus on what happens in the private, female-dominated spaces of their respective hypotexts while Shakespeare’s male-dominated plot unfolds offstage, Sears inverts the gender- and racially-coded relationship between mimetic and diegetic space in *Othello*. The mimetic spaces of *Othello* (like the Jacobean playhouse itself) are dominated by white, male characters and values. The play mostly depicts the characters in public spaces (traditionally the masculine sphere) and in political and military contexts. The offstage spaces, meanwhile, include both the encroaching, alien Ottoman empire and the female-dominated backrooms and boudoirs of the citadel on Cyprus, the interior of Brabantio and Desdemona’s home, and so on. Sears flips these binary models, prioritizing Black, female characters and spaces, while constantly reminding us that the Shakespearean action continues offstage with references to diegetic spaces and characters, particularly Mona and Chris Yago.

Mirroring *Othello*, mimetic space in *Harlem Duet* represents a (provisionally) safe haven from a racially-defined, diegetically-located Other that is all the more frightening because it is unseen. Just as Shakespeare never shows the Turks whose menacing offstage presence prompts Othello’s urgent mission to Cyprus, Sears does not allow us to see any representatives of the menacing diegetic White society that devours Billie’s husband and threatens her very sanity. *Harlem Duet*’s mimetic space represents Billie and her African-American (and largely female) community. The mimetic space of *Harlem Duet* (Billie’s apartment, the steps of the forge, the dressing room) is centered on Billie and designated both visibly and audibly (in both dialogue and an extensive soundscape) as a Black, African-American space. Dialogue locates the mimetic space,
through spatial and cultural references, at the literal and metaphorical crossroads of “Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. Boulevards” (25), in an apartment that (conveniently) overlooks the major cultural and architectural landmarks of Harlem; the playing space is dominated by Black characters; and a soundscape, too, including live Blues music\textsuperscript{76} and recordings of famous (and notorious) sound bites from African-American history, helps locate the play at the symbolic and geographical heart of African-America. The mimetic space is also endowed with symbolic and nostalgic significance by the dialogue:

**OTHELLO.** I never thought I’d miss Harlem.

(Pause.)

**BILLIE.** You still think it’s a reservation?

**OTHELLO.** Homeland/reservation.

**BILLIE.** A sea of Black faces.

**OTHELLO.** Africatown, USA.

(Pause.)

**BILLIE.** When we lived in the Village, sometimes I’d be on the subway and I’d miss my stop … [A]nd somehow I’d end up here. And I’d just walk. I love seeing all these brown faces.

**OTHELLO.** Yeh…

**BILLIE.** Since they knocked down the old projects, I can see the Schomberg Museum from here. You still can’t make out Harlem

\textsuperscript{76} Sears and composer Allen Booth envisioned the musical score as a hybrid of White and African-American forms: two musicians played African-American Blues music on cello and bass, instruments associated with European chamber music, creating “tension” between the two musical forms (see Knowles, “*Othello,*” 150; Sears, “The Nike Method,” 29).
Hospital. I love that I can see the Apollo from our – from my balcony.

(56-7)

These symbolic locations in the real Harlem – a museum of African-American history, a hospital where White staff resigned to protest the hiring of Black doctors and nurses, and a theatre where countless Black artists began their careers – anchor both the mimetic apartment and diegetic Harlem at the centre of African American culture and achievement (even the “old projects,” pointedly, are now a thing of the past). And when their reminiscence leads to a romantic reconciliation – however brief – the imaginary Harlem acquires positive and restorative connotations, as well.

Yet Billie’s space, like all spaces, is defined by its limits, and there are frequent reminders of the presence of the dominant White culture just offstage. Billie and Othello’s 1860s incarnations lament an offstage character named Cleotis, whose penis is on display in formaldehyde in “Mr. Howard’s hardware store” (33), comparing his grisly fate to that of Saartje Baartman (the so-called “Hottentot Venus”). The 1928 Othello is seen in a mimetically represented offstage space (i.e. a dressing room) in the process of applying blackface makeup in preparation for a minstrel show in front of a diegetic White audience (offstage from the spectator’s perspective is onstage from his). Even in contemporary Harlem, the fashion magazines depict blonde women (24) and getting a cosmetician’s certificate requires one to complete a “two year course on how to do White people’s hair and make-up” (26). Billie’s Harlem is still located in a world in which, to her dismay, “tons of dough” is available to fund studies “to prove the innate inferiority” of Black people (52), and “progress” is both defined in and measured by access to “White schools” (55), including Columbia University, or “Harlumbia,” as Magi calls it, “those 10
square blocks of Whitedom” in the middle of Harlem (67). Billie, having defined her world as a Black community surrounded by Whiteness, is constantly preoccupied by the Other, which she has supposedly banished, but which is always encroaching upon her space and even necessary to make its borders visible. She is therefore – like any racist, as Magi points out (103) – constantly traumatized by the presence of the monstrous Other on the margins of her world, especially Mona.

The threat of encroachment is most powerfully (dis)embodied in the diegetic character of Mona, the white woman who, in this inversion of Shakespeare’s colour- (and gender-)coded world, represents the agent of monstrous Otherness rather than its helpless victim. Although Mona is forbidden from appearing – a point Sears comically emphasizes by allowing Mona’s disembodied arm, hair, and voice to breach, just barely, the threshold of the playing space – she nevertheless has the power to traumatize Billie in all three stories. In the scene where Othello comes to gather his remaining possessions, Mona exerts a terrifying power over the action in the playing space, compelling an anxious response from Othello without even speaking:

(Othello returns to Mona at the entrance [of the apartment]. We see nothing of her but brief glimpses of a bare arm and a waft of light brown hair.)

Othello. It’s OK Mona, she’s in there. Why don’t you wait in the car.

Mona: (Offstage.) She’ll have to get used to me sometime.

Othello. I’ll be down in a flash. It won’t take me that long.

(She doesn’t answer.)

Hey, hey, hey! (47)
When Mona returns in the next scene, her silence is once again sufficient to utterly dominate Othello, who has just been cheating on his future wife with his ex-wife:

**MONA:** *(Through intercom.)* It’s Mona. Could I have a word with Othello.

**OTHELLO.** *(Overlapping.)* Shit!

**BILLIE.** One second please.

*(He rushes to the intercom, while attempting to put his clothes back on.*

*[…] He puts a finger over his mouth indicating to BILLIE to be quiet.)*

**OTHELLO.** Hey Mone… Mone, I’m not done yet. There’s more here than I imagined. Why don’t I call you when I’m done.

*(MONA does not respond. OTHELLO’s demeanour changes.)*

**OTHELLO.** Mona? Mona? I’m coming, OK? I’ll be right… Just wait there for a second, OK? OK? (61)

Othello’s reaction to Mona’s silence demonstrates her power over him: without even speaking she irrevocably shatters the renewed rapport between Othello and Billie and ends any hope of reconciliation. Mona’s absence, paradoxically, becomes a powerful, threatening presence, and it is precisely because we cannot see her for ourselves that we, like Billie, must imagine the worst.

Sears also uses Mona and Chris Yago to keep track of diegetic time, in which Shakespeare’s story is just beginning even as Sears’s comes to an end. Although it is rarely referred to as such, the idea of “diegetic time” – i.e., what happens before and after the dramatic plot, and is therefore narrated rather than performed – is a useful concept, particularly in regard to *Harlem Duet*. Almost all plays involve some aspect of diegetic
time in the form of antecedent action and inciting incident: the events that set off the dramatic action but are confined to exposition, such as Othello’s decision to leave Billie for Mona. But since *Harlem Duet* is a prequel, its meaning hinges not only on antecedent but also on subsequent action: the audience knows that the end of Sears’s plot is not the end of the whole story. At the end of *Harlem Duet*, Shakespeare’s plot – which is to say Yago/Iago’s plot – is still waiting to happen, and Sears uses references to Yago and Mona to help spectators track the progress of both stories at once. The revelation of Othello’s engagement to Mona tells the audience that this story takes place before Shakespeare’s, and his announcement that he will be “heading the department’s courses in Cyprus next summer” – a job “everyone” expected to go to Chris Yago (53) – strongly implies that Shakespeare’s story is still going to happen, regardless of the outcome of this one. In time as in space, the Shakespearean plot is displaced, but not negated, and Sears alludes to it to remind us that her intervention in Shakespeare’s story will not lead to a happy ending, as we might hope. When Othello departs Sears’s play (as he takes a call from Yago on his mobile phone), we know he is heading towards his doom in Cyprus (112).

Diegetic references also situate the characters in the cultural and geographic landscapes of both North and African America – and vice versa, in an erotic game Billie and Othello play, in which Othello re-cites Martin Luther King, Jr. (anachronistically in the 1860s, and nostalgically in the present). As he bawdily maps King’s “Dream” on Billie’s body, Othello re-cites a familiar trope that envisions the “virgin territory” of the New World as a passive female body to be colonized – but if Othello appropriates the trope by re-imagining America as a *Black* woman, Billie revises it too, by asserting her

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77 By revealing that Yago (along with the other faculty) had expected to get the position that went to Othello, Sears also thus provides a concrete motive for Iago/Yago’s perfidy.
right to evaluate the “claim” Othello stakes: “I don’t come cheap, you know” (36, 58-9).
In addition, the 1860s and 1920s plots, along with the soundscape of live blues music and quotations from a range of prominent Black artists, politicians, poets, and visionaries define the dramatic space as what Fischlin and Fortier call a “nexus for different forms of black voice” (286). And not just “black” voice, but a specifically African-American voice; the historical storylines connect Billie’s experience and Othello to each other and to the full span of African-American history, offering vivid reminders of the historical trauma of racism in America by showing Billie and Othello in dire situations, as slaves and minstrel performers. These depictions of suffering have the effect of underlining Billie’s trauma by reminding the audience that her suffering is magnified by the burden of cultural and personal history (and they also remind us of the darker side of Harlem’s history, in contrast with contemporary Billie’s utopic vision). From the point of view of the characters in Othello (and that of their original audience), the tragedy represented is a singular rupture of (White, male, Christian) cultural norms and hierarchies, one which, however terrifying, is neatly and irrevocably resolved by the deaths of Othello and Desdemona. But from an African-American point of view, the trauma is not singular but repetitive: only one Black character suffers in Othello, but millions have suffered in the real history of African-America, and Billie and her community are haunted by the knowledge that “[w]e keep doing this, don’t we?” (21).

Other Othellos: Displacing Narratives of Miscegenation
Sears’s displacement of the Shakespearean hypotext not only evades but even exploits the cultural prejudices against adaptation. Because her sjuzet takes place (chronologically)

78 The 1860s plot hints at slavery, but if the forge is located in Harlem, then Billie and Othello are not slaves, since New York abolished slavery in 1827. They may, of course, be servants.
before Shakespeare’s plot, rather than intervening in it directly, *Harlem Duet* does not betray the Shakespearean “original.” And yet, since its plot is chronologically antecedent to Shakespeare’s, *Harlem Duet* exploits the cultural bias towards anteriority described by Stam: because it happens first, Sears’s plot (at least potentially) determines Shakespeare’s. Sears does not posit a significantly different fate for Othello, but she does imply a different *cause*: when Othello leaves Billie’s apartment for the last time, he takes with him the handkerchief he once gave to Billie, and upon which she has placed a curse or “plague of sorts” (102), a detail which suggests that Othello’s (and Mona’s) fate(s) is sealed by Billie’s curse. On the other hand, as a representation of the Othello *fabula* in historic (and cultural) conditions Shakespeare never anticipated, *Harlem Duet* suggests that Shakespeare’s version is as topically outdated as it is stylistically outmoded, and no longer reflects social and cultural reality. Insofar as *Harlem Duet* depicts a contemporary world its spectators can readily identify – according to the dominant representational conventions of contemporary theatre – it represents the real world more naturalistically and directly than *Othello’s* stylized verbal, narrative, and scenic conventions. By simultaneously relegating the Shakespearean hypotext to the diegetic future and historical past, *Harlem Duet* “proleptically displaces Shakespeare's *Othello* from its anterior position in dramatic history,” as Dickinson puts it (204), creating the space to “accommodate other cultural traditions.”

Of course, the “inherited tradition” to be displaced – i.e., the cultural field in which *Harlem Duet* takes a position (thus shifting the entire field, however subtly) – includes not only Shakespeare’s *Othello*, but many other *sjuzets* which focus on
transgressive desire between a Black man and a White woman. The history of Othello’s appropriation and implication in racist and colonial (and now anti-racist and post-colonial) discourses is extensive, but it suffices to acknowledge Dympna Callaghan’s point that, for most of first four centuries of the Othello tradition, “Othello Was [played by] a White Man,” and performed in front of White, male-dominated audiences, for whom the play “dramatize[d] the possible consequences of not excluding the […] other from the community” – an otherness that is not only raced but gendered, as Callaghan points out, since Desdemona was a White man too (215, emphasis mine).

Accordingly, Black and female authors seeking to displace this tradition have often dramatized the consequences of being that excluded “other”: appropriations of the Othello fabula by Black authors, including Murray Carlin, Ralph Ellison, Chester Himes, and Amiri Baraka, have depicted miscegenation from a Black, male point of view, rejecting “dominant narratives that interpret the psychology of the Black male in White terms.”

79 According to both James Andreas and Jacquelyn McLendon, a plot centered on this erotic configuration and its transgressive significance is the characteristic that signals a given text as an African-American response to Othello. McLendon argues that such “African-American (Mis)Readings of Othello” use miscegenation as a trope for personal and social transgressions of the boundary between self and Other. Andreas adds that this particular model of interracial sexual desire is the basic element that marks any given narrative – both fictional and, as in the example of O. J. Simpson in the 1990s, “real” – as an appropriation of response to Othello. Of course, as Andreas points out, for all that miscegenation has traumatized the White American psyche, the more common experience, historically speaking, is that in which the man was a White owner and the woman a Black slave (181).

80 Both Desdemona and Othello were originally performed by White males in garish, non-naturalistic, conventional make-up (black-face for Othello, white-face for Desdemona, with wigs and bright red lips for both) (Callaghan 192-215). Although Desdemona was commonly played by women after the Restoration, both the dramatic action and the dialogue of the play strongly emphasize the women’s marginal status and objectifies them as commodities, and the assumption of the roles of Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca by actual women, therefore, may have merely naturalized the essential Otherness of female identity in the symbolic and rhetorical codes of the play. Meanwhile, as Desdemona’s passive, dignified suffering became naturalized as a role model for Victorian women, awareness of racial difference became more and more heightened by the changing social context. By the mid-nineteenth century “blackness” was intractably bound up with discourses of colonialism and slavery, and the idea of a Black general commanding White soldiers became increasingly implausible to audiences who now equated blackness with slavery and justified slavery through various discourses of racial hierarchy. Thus, Othello’s colour was either symbolically diminished, by making Othello a “tawny” (i.e., Arabic) Moor rather than an African, or cartoonishly emphasized in the many burlesque parodies of the play that appeared in the nineteenth century. See Hankey (14-66) for an account of Othello’s (and Desdemona’s) changing fortunes over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
Similarly, feminist revisions of *Othello* have used a variety of strategies and approaches to expose, dislodge, or reject patriarchal values. For example, Paula Vogel’s *Desdemona* expands the famous “Willow Song” scene (*Othello* 3.4) into an entire play, banishing the male characters in order to focus on the complicated relationships that develop among Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca in “a back room in the palace on Cyprus” (Vogel 236). Although these works represent a wide range of media, and genres, and often imagine the story in settings and contexts far removed from those of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, they are linked together by their appropriation of the miscegenation narrative at the heart of Shakespeare’s story; and as such they, too, are part of the inherited tradition to which Sears responds.

As Knowles, Kidnie, and Dickinson have observed, Sears puts a new twist on this familiar tactic, introducing a new perspective on the *fabula* which is both Black and female. Knowles identifies *Harlem Duet* with “a 1990s attempt to redress the imbalances of a feminist movement that […] seemed problematically to elide race,” (“Othello” 156); but it might equally be seen as a response to similar “imbalance”s in appropriations by African-American men, which, as both Andreas and McLendon acknowledge, have often reinscribed sexism even as they reject racism (McLendon 127).

In other words, Sears dislodges not only Shakespeare but subsequent appropriations

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81. Both McLendon and Andreas discuss authors and works representing a wide range of genres and media, including Chester Himes (*The Primitive*), Amiri Baraka (*Dutchman* and *The Slave*), and Ralph Ellison (*The Invisible Man*). Andreas goes as far as saying that *Othello* has “traumatized African American literature” in general (181). Outside America, Othello’s recent progeny include George Eliot Clarke’s *Whylah Falls* (which also features an Othello), and Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh*.

82. On feminist adaptations of *Othello*, see Novy.

83. Less frequently, retellings of the Othello story have hinged on class, as in Marowitz’s *An Othello*, or a more broadly defined “ethnicity,” as in Ken Mitchell’s *Cruel Tears* (see Knowles, “Othello”), rather than race or gender.

84. As an example of these “imbalance,” Knowles cites Anne-Marie MacDonald’s *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning, Juliet)*, which was also developed by Nightwood Theatre.
thereof, thus joining an inherited tradition of displacing an inherited tradition – by displacing that tradition, too. Sears’s entry into the tradition (of displacing the *Othello* tradition) both disrupts the field and also creates new positions for future entrants, exemplifying Sonia Massai’s (Bourdieu-inspired) model of the process of continuous renegotiation of the field of cultural production.

Sears displaces both Black and feminist positions on interracial desire, productively exploring the intersections of race and gender in an ongoing debate between Othello and Billie. Othello, a former Black activist, claims, not quite convincingly, to have moved “[s]piritually beyond this race bullshit” (73); Billie, who still clings to their once shared dream of an all-Black “sanctuary” and accuses Othello of hypocrisy (“So let me get this straight, you’re against affirmative action in order for White people to respect you” [53]). When Othello breaks the news of his engagement, Billie critiques the shortcomings and omissions of both Othello’s liberal humanism and Mona’s liberal feminism:

**OTHELLO.** Mona wanted me to tell you.

**BILLIE.** Yes. Yes. Being a feminist and everything—A woman’s right to know—since we’re all in the struggle… I thought you hated feminists.

**OTHELLO.** Well… I didn’t mean that. I mean… the White women’s movement is different.

**BILLIE.** Just Black feminists.

**OTHELLO.** No, no… White men have maintained a firm grasp of the pants.

I mean, White men have economic and political pants that White women have been demanding to share.
BILLIE. White wisdom from the mouth of the mythical Negro.

OTHELLO. Don’t you see! […] The Black feminist position as I experience it in this relationship, leaves me feeling unrecognized as a man. The message is, Black men are poor fathers, poor partners, or both. […] Black women are more concerned with their careers than their husbands. There was a time when women felt satisfied, no, honoured being a balance to their spouse, at home […].

BILLIE. Which women […] are you referring to? Your mother worked all her life. My mother worked, her mother worked… Most Black women have been working like mules since we arrived on this continent. […] When White women were burning their bras, we were hired to hold their tits up. […] I don’t support you? My mother’s death paid your tuition, not mine… (70-71)

Billie’s point is reinforced in the historical storylines, which show that every time Othello takes advantage of an opportunity offered by Desdemona – opportunities unavailable to Billie because of her gender or race – there are severe consequences for her as well, which have been overlooked in previous adaptations.

Canada Comes to Harlem

Although Harlem Duet’s critics have mostly focused on her innovative introduction of a Black and female perspective on Othello, Sears’s “nOTES” make it clear that her primary interest is to address the absence of Black stories from Canadian society and Canadian theatres.85 At the time of Sears’s writing, this absence was so profound, as Ric Knowles

85 Notes 3-25 are about why Sears writes to rectify this absence; Shakespeare and Othello are not mentioned until note 29.
reveals in “Othello in Three Times,” that even Othello adaptations didn’t acknowledge race: the best-known Canadian adaptations of Othello before Harlem Duet, Ken Mitchell’s Cruel Tears and MacDonald’s Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet), have exactly zero Black characters between them. Although Knowles cites Harlem Duet as evidence that, by 1997, “it was no longer possible to pretend that Black people were not a presence nor race an issue in Canada” (149), I would argue that the play and Sears’s accompanying “nOTES” indicate that it was still possible to pretend thus, and that Sears’s ultimate goal was to make it impossible. Re-examining Othello from a Black woman’s perspective is not only an innovative strategy for displacing the Othello tradition, but also and primarily a means to displace another set of inherited traditions: those of Canadian theatre. Responding to a tradition which has omitted Black people and voices – even from Othello! – Sears makes White Canada as absent from her stage as “people who look like [her]” have been from Canada’s.

The absence of White characters and Canadian geography in the play is not simply nonexistence, however; like the absences of Mona, Shakespeare’s plot, and “Whiteness” in general, Canada’s absence in Harlem Duet is an acknowledged, even emphatic absence – an exorcism, as Fischlin and Fortier put it (285). Although Canada is not represented in mimetic space, it is diegetically sited in references to Canadian cuisine (26), locations (specifically Dartmouth, NS), and characters – one of whom, Billie’s father, is even named after Canada. Canada is also sometimes envisioned as a place of

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86 At least not necessarily Black; in Goodnight Desdemona’s remount at Canadian Stage in 2001, the role of Desdemona was played by Allison Sealy-Smith, who played Billie in the first two productions of Harlem Duet.
87 Canada may also be named after Canada Lee (1907-52), a one-time boxer, film and stage actor, and civil rights activist, who was also the first African-American performer to play Caliban. Lee, born Lionel Canegata, came by the name fortuitously as a result of his own being mangled by a boxing announcer.
refuge. In the 1860s, Billie and Othello imagine Canada, proleptically, as a utopic Promised Land for escaped slaves; it is their intended destination until Othello chooses Miss Dessy (Sears 35, 62-3; see also Kidnie 37). In the present-day plot, Canada is referred to analeptically, not only as a former haven for slaves but as Billie’s former home (45, 62, 82). These references remind spectators that although Harlem may be the heart of African-America, Canada too has Black communities and an African-Canadian history. For Billie, however, Canada is a place she seeks refuge from: it is a site of painful diaspora where she and Andrew grew up after their mother’s death, when their father “hauled [them] all the way back […] from the Bronx” (45); a site associated with numerous grievances and humiliations involving her father’s alcoholism; and the site where White women began to consume the Black men in her life, when Canada began dating them (82). Like the diegetic references to Shakespeare and White characters, the references to Canada in the context of the emphatically un-Canadian setting, repeatedly draw attention to an absence that might otherwise go unnoticed, compelling Canadian spectators (who are accustomed to stridently Canadian settings, issues, and characters) to reflect on the (mimetic) absence of Canadians from this supposedly Canadian play.

But Canada is not totally relegated to diegetic space: if Billie never flees to Canada, it comes to her (just as Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane) at the end of act one, in the form of her father, who is both from Canada and also bears its name. Rather surprisingly, in light of Billie’s disparaging description of him as “the drunk of Dartmouth,” Canada turns out to be a sympathetic character, who has quit drinking and come to Harlem in the hope of reconciling with his family, and his arrival raises the

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88 I am indebted to Alexandra Prichard for pointing out that Canadian Lorena Gale’s Angelique depicts 1700s New England as a haven for Black, Canadian slaves on the run.
possibility of “seeing beyond tragedy,” as Kidnie puts it (41). In addition to the support he offers to Billie in her crisis, Canada may be the man Magi has long been seeking, and in spite of Billie’s breakdown and hospitalization at the end of the play, “[t]he promise of new beginnings […] is evoked in the final scene […]” when Canada announces his plan to stay in Harlem: “Oh, I don’t think I’m going anywhere just yet – least if I can help it. Way too much leaving gone on for more than one lifetime already” (Kidnie 41; *Harlem Duet* 117). The sudden arrival of an embodied “Canada” forces Canadian spectators and readers to consider the significance of the name and its relationship to the country in which they live, and thus the implied relationship between the real and dramatic worlds.

Sears exploits the performative potential of the eponym, using it to address Canadian spectators in Canada’s comically self-deprecatory recollection of confronting his fears upon his first visit to Harlem. “Everything I’d ever learned told me that I wasn’t safe in this part of town. The newspapers. Television. My friends. My own family.” But after a few minutes of walking fearfully through Harlem, trying to discourage imagined threats with his “‘baddest mother in the city’ glare” and a stride that, he hopes, says, “I’m mean. Killed somebody mean,” he realizes that no one is looking at him, because he looks “just like them,” that is, like an average Harlem resident. “I just had to catch myself and laugh out loud. Canada, where did you get these ideas about Harlem from?” (79). The question is directed as much to the normatively White “Canada” in the audience as well as the Black Canada on the stage, who realizes that his “ideas about Harlem” are the fears of White society, which he has internalized. As he says later, “if you spend too much time among White people, you start believing what they think of you” (97).

This moment materializes the discomfort that some spectators may be aware of
for the entire play, depending on the racial composition of the audience. By populating the mimetic space with Black characters, and making Blackness the norm rather than a marker of otherness, Sears doesn’t just invert the binary colour-code of the Shakespearean play, she also both exposes and challenges the “hegemonic whiteness” that Susan Bennett calls the “default position for the Western audience” (“Text,” 19). The conspicuous absence of White characters from mimetic space “forces the audience, regardless of who they are, into viewing the play from the perspective of Black audiences” (Sanders 558), while simultaneously forcing spectators to recognize how rarely this perspective is acknowledged in the theatre. White spectators, put in the position of eavesdroppers, may be jolted into the uncomfortable realization that other spectators see things differently; Black spectators may, like Canada, suddenly realize how unusual it is to confront a space dominated by people who “look just like them” (Harlem Duet 79). This is the very privilege, Sears notes, that White people take for granted, and her dramaturgy forces both White and non-White spectators to recognize this fact by turning the model inside out, thus exploding the notion of a singular “Canadian spectator” whose perspective is uncomplicated by either race or gender. By mimetically valorizing Blackness and placing “issues of race at the centre of a theatrical practice that exorcizes the ‘whiteness’ of theatrical representation generally,” the play exposes the assumed Whiteness of both the Canadian spectator and Canadian theatre (Fischlin and Fortier 285), at least in theory. Although most of the scholarly studies of the play focus on how it constructs and addresses the spectator, none have actually asked how Sears’s dramaturgy works in practice.
A Chorus of Duets: the Reception of Harlem Duet, 1997-2006

Canadian playwrights and dramaturgs often measure “success” not by a play’s first production, but its second: most Canadian plays, like After the Orchard, never get one.

By this measure, Harlem Duet has enjoyed extraordinary success, with full-scale professional productions in Toronto (April and November 1997), Halifax (2000), New York (2002), at the Stratford Festival (2006), and St. Louis’s Black Repertory Theatre (2008). The documents of reception themselves frequently construct Harlem Duet as a narrative of triumph, describing a familiar trajectory of Canadian achievement, from periphery to centre and small to big: beginning as a small, independent production at a rented “fringe” space, Harlem Duet went on to local and national awards, publication and anthologization, and repeated productions, culminating with a production at the Stratford Festival – by these measures, Harlem Duet is a success story. But it is less clear whether and to what extent Harlem Duet, notwithstanding its critical and commercial acclaim, does the cultural work Sears sets out to do. As Ric Knowles demonstrates in Reading the Material Theatre, the material and ideological conditions of production and reception frequently blunt or undermine the “transformative potential of a particular script or production” – a process of containment he illustrates most powerfully in his analysis of “how Shakespeare means at the Stratford Festival” (10, 106, emphasis original).

In order to look at “how Shakespeare means” in the reception of Harlem Duet, this reception study examines paratexts and public discourses surrounding the play’s productions to show how Sears’s strategy of appropriation functions in different contexts. Such comparisons are all the more intriguing in light of the fact that not only the play’s text, but also its cast of creative contributors remained relatively stable between 1997 and
2006,\textsuperscript{89} while the cultural and material factors surrounding its production and reception changed significantly as the play transformed from an independently-produced premiere production by a feminist theatre company in Toronto, into a celebrated, multiple-award-winning, anthologized play on the Stratford Stage in 2006. Particular attention is given to the first productions at Tarragon and Canadian Stage, which established Sears and her play in the Canadian theatrical landscape, and the production at Stratford, because it was widely anticipated as a culturally significant event, both for African Canadian culture and for the Stratford Festival, which used \textit{Harlem Duet} to launch a new mandate (at least in its public discourse) of diversity and inclusiveness. Much was made of the play’s challenge to Stratford’s image as as “Canada’s major whitebread playhouse,” as one critic put it, and this reception analysis will investigate the extent to which the cultural intervention anticipate in public discourse was realized on the stage and in the auditorium (Smith).

\textbf{First Impressions: The Initial Reception of Harlem Duet}

When \textit{Harlem Duet} premiered on 20 April 1997 at the Tarragon Extra Space, critics immediately hailed it as “bold,” “ambitious,” and “timely,” sensing that it would be recognized as a significant work. As Knowles notes in “\textit{Othello} in Three Times,” the conditions of reception were in many ways ideal: several factors had prepared Toronto, by 1997, for just such a play. Contrasting \textit{Harlem Duet} with earlier Canadian \textit{Othello} adaptations (\textit{Goodnight, Desdemona} and \textit{Cruel Tears}), Knowles argues that in Toronto in

\textsuperscript{89} All but one of \textit{Harlem Duet’s} productions have been directed by Sears, the other (in Halifax) being directed by Karen Robinson, who subsequently played Billie at Stratford; Nigel Shawn Williams has played Othello three times, in both Toronto productions and at Stratford; Alison Sealy-Smith played Billie twice (Toronto); Walter Borden played Canada in Halifax, New York, and Stratford; Barbara Barnes Hopkins has played Magi in all but the Halifax production; and Astrid Janson designed the set of the Canadian Stage, New York, and Stratford productions.
April 1997, “an adaptation of Othello that did not place race at centre stage would be unthinkable” (149).

Several factors converged to prepare Toronto for such a play. Since the early 1990s, a Black theatre community had been emerging in Toronto (a development in which Sears played a significant role), and Canadian Theatre Review published a special issue on African-Canadian Theatre in 1995. In addition, Toronto had witnessed some well-publicized incidents of police racism, and rioting on Yonge Street in the wake of the Rodney King verdict in L.A. (“Othello” 149-50), events that shattered (White) Toronto’s self-image as a multi-ethnic utopia immune to the divisive racial conflicts plaguing nearby American cities. And the company that produced Harlem Duet, Nightwood, had earned a reputation for successfully combining Shakespeare and gender politics in its earlier play, the wildly successful Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet).

Along with this convergence of social, historical, and material factors, the artists themselves played a direct and vital role in shaping the reception of Harlem Duet. In addition to Sears’s much-cited “nOTES oF a cOLOURED gIRL,” which were included in the programs of both Toronto productions, Sears and her collaborators, particularly Alison Sealy-Smith (Billie), contributed a number of important paratexts, including media interviews published in advance of the premiere. The interviews already framed the play as the start of something big. Sealy-Smith told Now’s Jon Kaplan: “We're involved in birthing a new aesthetic […] . Some artists are concerned about where we should look for our models […] . Others of us aren't concerned about the aesthetics […] . If we just do it, the result will be black Canadian theatre” (“Rivetting [sic] Alison Sealy-

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90 The Yonge street riots were dramatized the same year by another African-Canadian playwright, Andrew Moodie, in Riot.
Smith”). Sears described the play to *Eye*’s Christopher Winsor in equally profound terms, as “an excavation of the question of the importance of race.” Thanks to such interviews, *Harlem Duet* was portrayed in Toronto media as the vanguard of a long-awaited African-Canadian theatre before it even opened.

Having already constructed the play as a symbol of cultural achievement, most critics were thrilled to acknowledge the triumph they had already predicted, in reviews brimming with synonyms for “brave” and “important.” Kim Lingerfelt and Roger Kershaw’s described it (redundantly) as “bold and daring, […] the essence of courageous theatre,” and the *Star*’s Vit Wagner called it “an impressive achievement, an ambitious and accomplished work with scope and the vision to realize it,” in a review titled “Theatre As It Should Be.” Only the *Globe and Mail*’s Kate Taylor dissented, as discussed below. After its successful run at Nightwood, the show picked up numerous Dora award nominations (winning four of them) and a remount at Canadian Stage (implicitly confirming the sagacity of its first critics), which was if anything even more warmly received.91 Christopher Winsor calls it a “substantial achievement,” and the *Star*’s Geoff Chapman, too, calls it a “major achievement […] a powerful, fresh statement of familiar themes […] that has special significance for black culture.”

Throughout its reception history in newspapers, anthologies, and essays, this sense of “special significance” has been emphasized, occasionally more than the play’s dramatic significance.

Increasingly, after its successful premiere and subsequent remount at CanStage,
Harlem Duet’s paratexts (including media coverage and scholarly essays) portray the play as a major cultural achievement heralding an important new arrival in Canadian theatre. Ric Knowles’s wide-ranging 1998 interview with Sears and Sealy-Smith, published in CTR and often cited in subsequent paratexts, associates the play with an African-Canadian theatre community emerging amidst the pervasively White Toronto theatre culture – an accomplishment quite separate from its dramatic or theatrical qualities. The interview includes Sears’s powerful description of how Harlem Duet broke the colour barrier at the symbolically-named Canadian Stage Company: “Before Harlem Duet, Canadian Stage had never produced a work by an author of [Black] African descent. And the problem with Canadian Stage is that it’s called Canadian Stage, and it represents Canada, and I’m thinking, ‘I’m Canadian, so it must represent me’” (30).

Although the interview covers many topics, including Sears’s dramaturgy and the thought process that informs her use of live music and recorded soundscape, subsequent citations thereof, interestingly (with the exception of Knowles’s own in “Othello in Three Times”) use it almost exclusively to emphasize Harlem Duet’s significance as a symbolic triumph for the African-Canadian community.

Not every critic, however, has read Harlem Duet as a reason to be optimistic about Canadian theatre. Kate Taylor’s review of the first production in The Globe and Mail is exceptional in that it is totally free of the acute awareness of the play’s extra-theatrical significance that infuses other responses to the play. Almost alone among the play’s documented respondents, she was either unaware of or unmoved by what the play...

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92 For example, Sealy-Smith sharply criticizes a (then) newly formed company which, though an “all-White group,” chose a name with Black connotations, perhaps accidentally: “‘Soulpeppa’…??? […] Jesus Christ, it’s 1998. Put together a theatre company that reflects the community […]. This city doesn’t look like you anymore” (28).
portended to the nascent African-Canadian theatre movement, the play’s Black spectatorship, or the Black community in general. Although Taylor recognized Sears’s “sprawling literary and political ambitions” and found the play “brave and often moving,” her review is essentially a catalogue of ways in which *Harlem Duet* violates Taylor’s prescriptions for good drama (“Characters Lost,” emphasis added). Taylor complains that the “historical scenes are not stylistically distinguished from the main action” (as apparently they ought to be); that the historical embodiments of Billie and Othello are not “fully developed [n]or their stories completely told”; that the characters were subordinated to “political lessons” and “historical background”; and that Billie’s father represents a “completely gratuitous attempt to drag Canadian content into the play.” Whereas most of the other reviews implicitly accept that the play deliberately uses a familiar *fabula* to explore a variety of perspectives on race and gender, this is, for Taylor, precisely why it fails: by ignoring her dictum that a play’s “themes must emerge from its characters and story, not the other way around.”

In addition, Taylor claims that the play is flawed because, without getting to see and judge Mona for ourselves, we can never really understand Othello’s character:

> [I]f we are really to feel his struggle, we would have to see Mona on stage -- she appears as nothing more than a very, very pale white arm framed in a doorway, a joke that greatly amused Thursday’s opening-night audience. Without witnessing his pull toward Mona, we are left with an implausible figure who is supposed to be full of racial conscience and educated intelligence yet is leaving a woman he is clearly still in love with for a

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93 Taylor does not explain why the characters must be “fully embodied” or their stories “fully told.” Kidnie, by contrast, argues that Sears deliberately leaves gaps and inconsistencies in the web of narratives in order to create in the spectators the feeling of Billie and Othello’s *differend*.
phantom.

Notwithstanding the remarkable self-confidence Taylor displays in suggesting that *her* failure to get a joke constitutes a flaw in the *play*, her claim that we never witness Othello’s pull toward Mona is difficult to understand. As discussed above, this pull is particularly visible at moments such as that which Taylor describes, when Mona’s “pale white arm” is all she needs to dominate Othello. Othello himself admits that he (repeatedly) chooses Mona, not because of anything about her as a person, but because he only feels like a man when a White woman is paying attention to him: that Othello leaves Billie for a “phantom” is precisely Sears’s point.94 Moreover, as has already been noted, *Harlem Duet* is explicitly constructed – through its paratexts, its dialogue, its use of dramatic space, and its visual imagery – as a Black woman’s perspective on the *Othello* *fabula*, yet Taylor critiques it for not showing more of Mona – which indicates that the play was not completely successful at persuading spectators to recognize the default Whiteness of Canadian theatre and its audiences (although Sears would later appropriate Taylor’s review in anecdotes that instruct spectators how not to read the play; see below).

**The Shakespeare’s Mine: How Shakespeare Means in the Reception of Harlem Duet**

Although public discourse about *Harlem Duet* focuses on issues of race and representation, Shakespeare also figures prominently; in fact, every written and oral (i.e., recorded in interviews) response available mentions Shakespeare and Othello. Since, as Knowles notes, *Harlem Duet* “neither depends on nor rewards specialized knowledge of Shakespeare” to the extent that many such appropriations do, the prominence of

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94 Sears’s Othello, like Shakespeare’s, is enthralled by both (Desde)Mona’s gaze and her attentive ear, whether in 1604 (“She gave me for my pains a world of sighs”), 1862 (“She needs me. […] Looks up to me even. […] When I’m with her, I feel like… a man”), 1928 (“Mona sees my gift”), or 1997 (“The White women I loved saw me – could see me”) (*Othello* 1.3.159; *Harlem Duet* 113, 63, 99, 71).
Shakespeare references in *Harlem Duet*’s public discourse hints at the influence of “nOTES oF a cOLOURED gIRL,” which, as described above, provide quite direct instructions on how to read the play’s Shakespearean references. For example, Sears’s anecdote about exorcising the ghost of Laurence Olivier’s blackface Othello is as frequently cited in reviews and previews as it is in scholarly essays.\(^95\)

Shakespeare’s name and reputation grab the attention of spectators, including those who write and read reviews and those who sit on award juries and play selection committees. Shakespeare sells *Harlem Duet*, helping critics and publicists pitch the show to curious readers with headlines and hooks that exploit the implied conflict between old traditions and new voices. The title of the Kaplan interview cited above, for example, implies that creating African-Canadian theatre is synonymous with “Burst[ing] the Bard’s Bubble.” Reviewing its 1997 premiere, Vit Wagner used Shakespeare to link *Harlem Duet* to another wildly successful Shakespeare adaptation, Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, noting that “Shakespeare's Othello is beginning to look like a charm for Nightwood Theatre, […t]his time […] glimpsed through the prism of race, rather than gender” (“Theatre As It Should Be”; see also Lingerfelt and Kershaw). Public responses to *Harlem Duet* often focus on the issues to which Sears herself directs them in interviews and paratexts, and Shakespeare consistently plays a role in this discourse.

Shakespeare adapts remarkably well to this supporting role: whether a given response casts him as Sears’s collaborator or her antagonist (the “bubble” to be “burst”), Sears remains the star of the show. Although scholarly works (including this one) have

invariably concentrated on Sears’s use of Shakespeare (even if only to discover, as Dickinson does, how much one misses by doing so), mainstream media responses to *Harlem Duet*, though they always refer to Shakespeare, neither focus on him nor characterize *Harlem Duet* as a misuse of “his” property. Fidelity criticism has never factored negatively in the play’s reception. In fact, among the approximately 30,000 words of previews, reviews, interviews, comments, and blog entries collected as part of this study, one word, significantly, never appears: “adaptation.” Instead, writers prefer words like “rendition” (Bailey Nurse), “reworking,” or “prequel,” “prelude,” or “prologue” (Lingerfelt and Kershaw; Al-Solaylee, “Stratford”; Nemetz, et al.) to indicate the play’s conceptual antecedence to Shakespeare. Moreover, most responses emphasize the play’s innovation rather than its derivation, describing it as a “soul riff” (Morrow, “Harlem Shuffle”) that “uses Shakespeare's *Othello* as a springboard” (Kaplan, “A Riveting Duet”), or as a “black female intervention in the mythology of Othello” (Al-Solaylee, “Baring”).

The reviews never accuse Sears of falling short of Shakespeare; occasionally, they even suggest the opposite:

> Shakespeare's black Othello married a white woman, and his play has much to say on how her white friends felt about it. It tells us nothing about the reactions of his black friends; it doesn't even tell us if he had any. Djanet Sears’ *Harlem Duet* is a response to that, a recasting of the Othello situation [that] spins out variations on the play's existing elements. (Cushman, “Playing the Race Bard”)
In addition, the responses never question the validity or wisdom of such an undertaking, the idea of using Shakespeare thus. Sears’s logic is either implicitly accepted or openly applauded, although her execution is sometimes found wanting, as in Kate Taylor’s review. Even when a response invokes the language or imagery of fidelity criticism, as in Morrow’s description of the play as a “soul riff on that classic tragedy,” there is none of the hysterical language of anti-adaptation prejudice described by Stam, Hutcheon, et al.

Even Taylor is receptive to Sears’s treatment of Shakespeare; for her, what Harlem Duet betrays is not Shakespeare but her prescription for good drama. Harlem Duet’s explicit appropriation of Shakespeare is clearly a major factor in both its early success and the aura of prestige it has accumulated over the years, and also, no doubt, was a factor in the Stratford Festival’s interest in the play.96 “Shakespeare” is almost certainly the reason that Stratford chose Harlem Duet, rather than Riot or any other play by a non-White playwright, to launch its campaign to appeal to a new, less homogenous audience.

With the help of supportive reviews and other influential paratexts, especially “nOTES oF a cOLOURED gIRL,” Harlem Duet has been overwhelmingly successful at telling audiences how to read its Shakespearean referents, exploiting the pleasures of adaptation without invoking fidelity criticism. By contrast, however, some of Harlem Duet’s other notable features have rarely or never drawn strong responses. As mentioned above, Peter Dickinson is almost alone in noticing how Sears engages with many other African-American responses to Othello, and he is correct in suggesting that the play suffers from being read only in relation to Shakespeare’s Othello. Kidnie, similarly, is the only critic to note the significance of Sears’s citation of Pericles. The influence of such

96 Morrow reveals Stratford’s long-standing interest in Harlem Duet in his preview of the Stratford production: “As for Harlem Duet […] [Stratford Festival head of new play development] Tarasiuk says it’s been in Stratford’s sights for some time.”
paratexts as “nOTES,” therefore, entails something of a mixed blessing, in that it guides readers toward one interpretation and away from others.

The influence of Sears’s paratexts may also explain why so few responses have queried why Sears chose an emphatically un-Canadian setting, yet sprinkles the play liberally with Canadian referents. Among scholarly critics, only Knowles makes much of Sears’s (un)Canadian content, in “Othello in Three Times,” and newspaper critics too have overlooked Sears’s peculiar citation of Canadian signifiers. Even when the play was produced in Halifax, where it provoked considerable excitement (in a later interview, director Karen Robinson claimed that spectators would debate the play on their lawn chairs “till three o’clock in the morning” [Morrow, “Harlem Shuffle”]), the characters’ Nova Scotian origins were only mentioned in passing, in just one of the four newspaper articles on the play. This lack of interest is particularly unusual in light of the play’s frequent depiction, in the same public discourses, as an exciting and welcome sign of change in Canadian theatre. Perhaps Harlem Duet’s readers and spectators have never responded strongly to the play’s Canadian referents simply because Sears herself does not tell spectators how to read them in the way that she instructs them to interpret the Shakespearean content, in “nOTES” and other paratexts.97 To the extent that Sears seeks to raise awareness about a specifically African Canadian experience of marginalization, it is regrettable that so few spectators have responded to this aspect of her play; on the other hand, by rooting her play, which was first developed in New York City, in a more broadly African-American context, Sears enhances the play’s relevance to a broader audience – a successful strategy, perhaps, for getting the play produced in America and

97 As the play itself demonstrates, the issues Sears addresses are hardly unique to African Canadians, so it is not surprising that she does not focus on Canada in her “nOTES” or elsewhere.
thus addressing a much wider audience.

As *Harlem Duet* accrues more accolades, awards, and prestige, it has become more and more difficult to say anything negative about it; Taylor’s early review has been the only sustained negative critique of any Canadian production thus far. This may be less indicative of the play’s flawlessness, however (in fact, later responses often balance otherwise positive comments with echoes of Taylor’s criticisms of its plot and dialogue), than of the environment created by the play’s subsequent success: good reviews and awards create positive expectations while simultaneously creating a chorus of approval against which it may be difficult to speak out. Moreover, negative responses to *Harlem Duet* are forestalled by its symbolic significance. That is, since the play has been constructed in public discourse as a symbolic assault on racism, and as a triumph for an (increasingly) visible minority in a community that wants to see itself as multicultural, its theatrical success has to some degree been not only recognized, but anticipated in documents of reception. Public discourse about the play consistently reflects a desire (not always fulfilled) to see it succeed, because that success would signify that Canadian theatre (and thus culture) is becoming more diverse, more multi-cultural, and less White – something White and Black commentators alike want to be true. Even Knowles, in his interview with Sears and Sealy-Smith, implies that the play’s *success* is potentially as meaningful as the play itself, in his final question: “The experience at Stratford [i.e. Sealy-Smith’s three years of steady employment there] changed *Harlem Duet*. At what point does *Harlem Duet* change Stratford?” (30). Though he could not have known it at

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98 Responses to the New York production in 2002 were more mixed, though this may have been the result of a last-minute casting crisis arising when the actor playing Billie suffered a serious illness just before opening. See Bruckner, Gluck, and Murray.
the time, Knowles’s seemingly hypothetical question would be answered some eight years later.

**Stratford 2006: Pre-Production Publicity**

In fact, Knowles’s subsequent book, *Reading the Material Theatre*, already implies answer to this question: probably never. As discussed above, Knowles is pessimistic about the potential for culturally oppositional plays to overcome the culturally affirmative conditions of theatre, and he argues that the conditions of production and reception at Stratford are especially potent in this regard. In Knowles’s analysis, Stratford’s opulent “brass, glass, and class” aesthetic, its universalist public discourses and publicity material, its patriarchal and corporate management structures, and its traditions and training function[...] with remarkable directness as an Ideological State Apparatus, funded by government and corporate grants and catering to an audience it construct[s] as monolithic, the production of Shakespeare is necessarily the reproduction of a complex [...] but nevertheless conservative, affirmative culture, endorsed by the appropriated, high-cultural image of a universalist “bard of Avon.” (128)

Elsewhere in the book, Knowles demonstrates how even positive reviews do not necessarily indicate but may even thwart performance efficacy by framing and containing performances within essentialist and universalist discourse. Supposedly radical adaptations of Shakespeare, for example, can be and often are held up by reviewers as examples of the Bard’s enduring and unique genius.99 In a similar way, the rags-to-riches

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99 Analyzing Cheek by Jowl’s “gendered and racially cross-dressed *As You Like It*” in London (40) and the English Shakespeare Company’s *The Henrys* in Toronto, Knowles shows how ostensibly positive reviews
story told in *Harlem Duet*’s public discourse, which celebrates its transformation from an “indie” production at a rented “extra” space on the wrong side of the tracks, into an award-winning play produced at ever-bigger theatres, on ever-bigger stages, for ever-bigger audiences paying ever-higher ticket prices, is not necessarily indicative of the play’s efficacy, and may even contribute to its containment and neutralization.

If so, however, no one told Martin Morrow or Kamal Al-Solaylee, two of the journalists covering the 2006 Festival season, both of whom – prompted by Sears herself – boldly predicted that *Harlem Duet* would “challenge” Stratford’s “status quo” (Morrow). Both Morrow and Al-Solaylee, in nationally-distributed previews (for CBC and the *Globe and Mail*, respectively), jumped on the juxtaposition between *Harlem Duet*’s all-Black cast and the Stratford Festival’s all-White image in order to illustrate the symbolic significance of the play’s performance on a Stratford stage:

> Stratford’s Shakespearean festival\(^{100}\) is one of Canada’s oldest and most distinguished theatrical institutions. It’s also about as multicoloured as a loaf of Wonder Bread. That’s one reason why this season, amid the usual classics by the Bard and a bunch of other dead, white European and American males, Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet* sticks out like an African violet in a patch of daisies.

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\(^{100}\) The Stratford Festival of Canada dropped Shakespeare’s name from its own for many years, only restoring it in 2007, but as Morrow’s use of the adjective “Shakespearean” suggests, this fact was never really absorbed into the collective consciousness of its audience. See Gary Taylor (“Afterword: The Incredible Shrinking Bard”) on the programming difficulties that Stratford and other such “Shakespeare” festivals have created for themselves.
It’s a Stratford milestone — three, in fact. The show [...] is the first black work to be produced in the festival’s 54-year history; the first to be directed by a black woman (Sears); and the first with an all-black cast. (Morrow, “Harlem Shuffle”)

Al-Solaylee opens with many of the same statistics (avoiding such potentially contentious phrases as “black work,” which might prove as difficult to define as “Canadian content”) (“Stratford”). Both Morrow and Al-Solaylee focus on the symbolic importance – and belatedness – of these milestones, and on the danger that they might not turn out to be “milestones” at all, but only “tokenism” (Morrow). As Sears explains to Al-Solaylee, “Firsts are only great as the beginning of something” (“Stratford”).

In fact, although the print, radio, and online media portrayed the production as challenging Stratford, the festival went out of its way to accommodate the production, negotiating with Sears for months before announcing the play as a late addition to the 2006 season. Moreover, similarities between the paratexts strongly suggest that Stratford’s own publicity team encouraged the media to portray Sears and Harlem Duet as challenging what Morrow called its “whitebread” image: not only does almost every article about the production mention its important symbolic “firsts,” but at least three raise the specter of “tokenism” (Al-Solaylee, Morrow, Myrie), only to let (Stratford Festival general director) Anthony Cimolino exorcise it with his reassurance that “[t]he goal ultimately is not to have a diverse show here or there. The goal is to make it so that someone comes here and they look around the audience and they see a wide spectrum of humanity seated [and] they look on the stage and they see a wide spectrum of humanity

101 As Sears told me in Toronto shortly before she began rehearsals, the conditions had to be right before she would agree to do the show at Stratford: almost a decade after Harlem Duet’s first production, now a well-known and very busy artist, and fresh from the success of Adventures of a Black Girl, Sears no longer felt the need to work under less-than-ideal conditions, and perhaps she recognized that Stratford’s programmers needed her more than she needed them.
in all the parts” (qtd. in Myrie). In fact, as both Morrow and Myrie point out, Stratford had by then *already* commissioned new plays by Andrew Moodie and Daniel David Moses, two other prominent non-White Canadian playwrights. The Stratford Festival clearly wanted *Harlem Duet* to be viewed as “part of a movement to better reflect the face of Canada” and cited as the symbol of a new, more enlightened, more inclusive – and more sexy – Stratford Festival (Myrie).

But how did Shakespeare mean in the production? Most visibly, he functioned as a quality assurance representative, reassuring those more traditional Stratford spectators that the racy image they saw in the print ads, posters, and programs was not some sort of mistake. The image in question shows Karen Robinson and Nigel Shawn Williams in an implicitly naked embrace, with Williams standing behind Robinson, his arms wrapped around her and intertwined with hers, both heads turned so that his left cheek is against her right. The sexiness of the pose is tempered somewhat by the actors’ rather solemn shared gaze off to the right (reader’s left), toward the source of the light (which contrasts the actors against a velvety black background). Overlaid on the upper right corner of the image are the words, “Love, revenge, / loyalty, madness,” and at the bottom right corner, graphically positioned to serve as the punctuation mark concluding the iconic “sentence,” is an image of Shakespeare’s head, with the words “{*Othello, the prequel*},” bracketed to suggest that Shakespeare himself is whispering them. The effect of this latter feature is that of a seal of approval or tacit endorsement (“I’m William Shakespeare, and I approve this message”). The ad blends erotic suggestion (of the muted, tastefully-lit sort) and racial diversity (Black actors plus White Shakespeare and the Stratford logo) with the universalist discourses (“Love, revenge, etc.”) typical of Stratford’s public discourses.
(see, e.g., Knowles 107-08), using Shakespeare’s image (and the word “Othello”) to guarantee the play’s high-cultural pedigree without explaining too much: if you want to see what naked Black people have to do with Shakespeare, you’ll have to see the show.

The previews and reviews indicate that the marketing campaign was successful in framing the production as a tantalizing combination of timeless themes, sex, Shakespeare, and cultural diversity. Many journalists either commented on the image or described the production as “sexy” and “steamy,” terms which not been applied to *Harlem Duet* before (and only rarely to Stratford). Earlier critics had focused on the play’s treatment of “sexual politics” – a decidedly *un*sexy topic (Nemetz) – but at Stratford it was as if the critics noticed, for the first time, that there is a “steamy sex scene smack in the middle of it” (Elliott). Morrow’s pre-production interview with Sears, Robinson, and Williams has it both ways. After establishing the cultural significance of the production at Stratford and the play’s serious issues, Morrow and Sears focus on its titillating aspect:

> [R]ace is only one part of the play, notes Sears. […] “The [racial] stuff is good, it engages the intellect, but it’s also a good love story, sexy and racy.

And,” she goes on to confide in a half-whisper, “this is the *sexiest* version I’ve ever done. It’s hot. It’s contentious.”

Just how torrid does it get?

“There’s a reason I’m eating salad,” says Robinson coyly.

“And I’ve stopped drinking beer,” adds Williams.

The three burst into laughter. Contrary to what the promotional photo suggests, Robinson and Williams won’t be nude, but they will appear in a

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102 Astoundingly, neither Elliott, nor the other reviewers, nor *any* of the play’s respondents, have ever commented on how this scene, by showing Othello cheating on Mona with Billie, ironizes Othello’s infamous paranoia about Desdemona’s suspected infidelity.
state of semi-undress. “Yeah, sexy and racy,” says Sears. “That’s what I like.” After all, this University of Toronto professor is also a die-hard fan of Britain’s longest-running TV soap. “Yeah, this play is really just Coronation Street with black people in Harlem,” she sums up. “Well, OK, maybe not. But if you like Coronation Street, you’ll love Harlem Duet.”

Stratford and sex; universal themes and contemporary issues; the erotic and politic; Black (actors) meeting White (Stratford’s traditional audience); Coronation Street with Black people in Harlem: it is difficult to imagine a more blatant attempt to pique curiosity by juxtaposing conceptual opposites, all linked with and through Shakespeare.

**Stratford 2006: Reception**

Having generated so much hype in the pre-production phase, the play would be hard-pressed to meet the high expectations, and its reception, though generally positive, reflects this. While the play won a few raves, most reviews reflect mixed feelings. Nevertheless, all the critics acknowledge the significance of the play, even if they often criticize the quality of the production. “Shakespeare” figures in these responses as it has throughout the play’s reception history: to draw interest, to authenticate or legitimize the play and its subject matter, and to lend an extra dimension of significance. Sears’s treatment of the Shakespearean content is given added significance – and added notice – by its context as a production of the Stratford (Shakespeare) Festival, and all the responses give either implicit or overt approval to the idea of using Shakespeare in this way, in this specific context (as Stratford’s first “Black play,” a statistic almost all the reviews acknowledge).
More interestingly, for the first time in *Harlem Duet*’s history, reviewers explicitly reveal how desperately they had wanted the play to live up to the hype because of what it would signify. Jon Kaplan, who had reviewed the original Nightwood production, confirms this pre-emptive lionization by attempting to dismiss it: “*Harlem Duet* goes on the record books not just because it's Stratford's first show with an all-black cast, but also because it's one of the finest pieces of contemporary theatre the festival has mounted.” Al-Solaylee, whose preview in the *Globe and Mail* had significantly contributed to the excitement, found the real thing a bit anti-climactic:

> With all the excitement greeting the current revival of Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* at the Stratford Festival, it being the first play there by a black writer, with a black female director and an all-black cast, it would be wonderful to report that Thursday's opening-night performance was equally as exciting and groundbreaking. (“Baring the Burden”)

But, sadly, it wasn’t; Al-Solaylee describes the production as “a great story told by Sears the writer nearly botched by Sears the director,” a judgment echoed almost precisely by John Coulbourn:

> It would be nice to report that Sears' script -- which won both Governor General and Chalmers Awards -- opened in triumph. But let us be content with celebrating the fact that it opened at all, marking a series of firsts for a festival that has clung too tenaciously to its lily-white roots.

Both reviewers indicate in their comments that they are big fans (and readers) of the play, but not of the production, which they both found mildly disappointing and lacking in “sexual tension” (Al-Solaylee).
Many of the reviewers, in fact – especially those who acknowledge having seen the play before, were critical of the *mise en scène* and design, arguing that the play, which was written for a proscenium theatre, “does not […] sit very happily” on the thrust at the festival's Studio Theatre (Cushman, “Playing the Race Bard”). Several critics noted that the stage did not easily accommodate the play’s several distinct spatial/temporal “areas.” Robert Cushman pointed out that the Studio’s thrust stage was “inhospitable to domestic drama, which this essentially is, and to the kind of buttoned-down acting it naturally summons forth. […] One of the crucial images – the stripping-down of a home – doesn't count for much in a setting that never looked lived-in in the first place.” Al-Solaylee, too, felt that the production was “[c]learly […] set for a stage with a proscenium arch,” and that the necessary “re-tool[ing]” failed to exploit “the wonderful immediacy that a small, open space like the Studio can create” (“Baring the Burden of Race”). Such criticisms may indicate that Sears, taking her fourth turn as director, struggled to adjust to a thrust. Nor was Sears the only person in an accustomed role adjusting to a new space: John Coulbourn sensed that the play also suffered from “the inexperience of most of its cast” – most of whom had been directed by Sears in the play before – “with the demands of” the thrust, and observed that set designer Astrid Janson (also in her third tour of duty on the show) didn’t help matters by trying to “stage a kitchen-sink drama without a kitchen sink”.

The widespread criticism of the design and directing hints at how material factors, including Stratford’s mammoth scale and operating practices, shaped both the production and its reception. First, as the reviews note, *Harlem Duet* played at Stratford’s smallest venue, the Studio Theatre, a space designated for the Festival’s more challenging plays,
“including new and experimental works and rarely produced classics” (“What’s On”).

Putting Harlem Duet in the intimate thrust space mitigated the financial risk for Stratford, but it was also supposed to benefit the play by creating an exciting environment of relatively small, but packed houses of interested spectators (or, as then-Artistic Director Richard Monette said on the first day of rehearsals, “You’ll like the audience here; it’s different from our other audiences. They’re open-minded”). Although much ado was made about Harlem Duet in the Festival’s marketing and publicity material, it had a much lower profile in Stratford’s hierarchy of productions, which prioritizes the biggest shows, including 2006 headliners Oliver!, Much Ado About Nothing, Twelfth Night, the Glass Menagerie, and 1 Henry IV, and, in particular The Duchess of Malfi, in which most of Harlem Duet’s cast had minor supporting roles. While this low priority allowed Harlem Duet a certain freedom from administrative oversight, it also meant continuous disruption to the rehearsal schedule as actors were pulled to accommodate Duchess.

In addition to the show’s relatively low priority, the work environment at Stratford also contrasted – visibly – with that of previous productions. Sears has acknowledged elsewhere that what made the first productions so special for all the participants was the rare experience of a creative atmosphere with “all Black people in a

103 The Studio shows in the 2006 season included The Blond, the Brunette, and the Vengeful Redhead, Fanny Kemble, and The Liar. Obviously, designating the smallest theatre as a space for risky or challenging fare is itself a strategy for containing or limiting the disruptive potential of the plays that are performed there.

104 I was present at the first day of rehearsal because Sears had invited me to participate in the production by offering a “scholar’s perspective” on the play to the company.

105 In 2006, that is, Black actors could still only star in Black plays at Stratford, and continued to play minor roles in the “regular” plays. Indeed, the casting of Duchess of Malfi could be read as undermining the project of improving Stratford’s record of ethnic and racial representation: while her Harlem Duet castmates split such juicy roles as “understudy,” “Malatesta,” and “Doctor,” Sophia Walker (Amah) was cast as the “Madwoman.” But better to be a madwoman on the stage than confined in the attic, perhaps.

106 I was invited to the first rehearsal and was also to come for a second day when the entire company would be working together, but by the second week, the schedule had already been disrupted and my second visit was postponed until the cast was all together again – which didn’t happen until it was too late for me to make any further contribution.
room” (“The Nike Method,” 28). The conditions at Stratford were very different. As noted above, the cast and director were only rarely all in the room together; and when they were, they were supervised by a triad of (White) stage managers and frequently visited by the design team and the various production and administrative personnel. From day one (when Monette showed up with an enormous contingent of Stratford Festival staff, acting as a sort of welcome wagon) there was an acute awareness of racial difference in the company, and of the entire process being ruled not by the artists themselves – who were now a small sub-colony of Stratford’s hive of worker bees – but by a code of externally-imposed institutional policies and labour practices, union regulations, and a rigorous schedule of meetings, design presentations, costume fittings, and so forth.

Furthermore, as Knowles says, Stratford’s corporate structures and institutional hierarchies obtain “a certain institutional, structural, and procedural inertia […] that can defeat even the best-intended creative efforts at change, resistance, or subversion” (Reading 112, 111-13). Certainly, none of the Stratford employees who introduced themselves at the first rehearsal of Harlem Duet expressed any passion about or interest in creating “change, resistance, or subversion.” The tone cultivated in the rehearsal hall by the union stage managers was rather one of following rules and procedures, obeying administrative hierarchies, and ensuring stability and continuity. And as is standard at Stratford, the designs were pre-approved before the rehearsals began, leaving little margin for error. It is possible that the company was aware of the problems cited by the reviewers problems but had no opportunity to fix them, having neither the power to alter
the design to better suit the thrust, nor the rehearsal time to re-conceive the *mise en scène*.\(^{107}\)

Notwithstanding its staging problems, most reviewers saw the production as a success, albeit a qualified success, and even its less positive reviews acknowledge the significance of the play and of its staging at Stratford. But many of these responses exemplify the tendency of reviews, as discussed above, to contain potentially disruptive or provocative performances. Al-Solaylee, for example, hails *Harlem Duet* as “a rich, significant modern Canadian play,” emphasizing that “[t]he intellectual reach of the text is breathtaking”: like countless reviews in the history of Shakespearean performance, Al-Solaylee’s directs those disappointed by the performance to take reassurance from the transcendent text. Other reviews echo Kaplan’s position that the production is important because it is a good play, not because it is a black play. This claim reads as a preemptive strike at those who might cite *Harlem Duet* as an example of Stratford bowing to political correctness by putting “cultural diversity before excellence” – a charge Kate Taylor laid when the play won the GG Award.\(^{108}\) But Kaplan’s attempt to defend *Harlem Duet*

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\(^{107}\) To take just one example of the difficulties Sears faced in dealing with Stratford’s Byzantine bureaucracy – albeit one of little consequence to the production – it took her several phone calls and emails and over two weeks of negotiation to persuade the Festival (at her insistence, not mine) to give me a program credit. Moreover, they refused to use the word “dramaturge” in the credit for various obscure internal reasons. At one point, Sears called me and (refusing my offer to go uncredited) asked for a list of three possible titles, in order of preference, to help her in this battle; in the end, I ended up being credited as “Academic Research by…” – a misleading credit, but one acceptable to the Festival and not infringing on the job descriptions of any paid employees.

\(^{108}\) “There has been some grumbling,” Taylor grumbles, “that the Governor-Generals literary awards are increasingly recognizing cultural diversity before excellence, and recent drama winners give credence to the complaint. Last year, the jurors […] picked Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet*, an ambitious but severely flawed reinvention of the Othello story. In 1997, Winnipeg Metis Ian Ross won the prize for *fareWel*, a work which, to judge from its current Toronto premiere, is a very minor comic drama” (“Prize Fare”). That Taylor uses a review of an entirely different play – two years later – as a vehicle to take another swipe at *Harlem Duet* suggests that she took it personally when her initial judgment of the play was ignored by both audiences and jurists. In addition, Taylor writes as though excellence was a criterion in and of itself, without explaining what the criteria for “excellence” are (or whether, if “cultural diversity” isn’t one of them, homogeneity is).
resorts to familiar clichés about “the timeless cancer of racism.” (Racism, as Othello’s reception history proves, is hardly timeless.) John Coulbourn, similarly, praises Sears for creating “a back-story to Shakespeare’s classic that is perhaps as timeless as the play that inspired it.” And Chris Hoile claims (in an otherwise exceptionally sensitive review) that “Sears sets the play in three distinct” times “in order to show the timelessness of the situation.” The Hamilton Spectator’s Gary Smith opens with a provocation, but falls back to a familiar and comfortable position that could have been uttered by (Sears’s) Othello himself:

   It's pretty iconoclastic. A play by a black female is taking centre stage at Stratford. Canada's major whitebread playhouse is finally making the effort to be more inclusive and to reflect […] a country that is no longer a replica of white Europe. […]

In the end, Harlem Duet isn't good because it's a play about blacks produced for the first time on the Stratford stage. No, it's good because it's good. Theatre shouldn't really be pigeonholed as black and white, gay and straight, European or American. A good play is a good play. And that ought to be the end of it.

Reviews of the Stratford production repeatedly portray it as a Black woman’s successful challenge of monolithic, Eurocentric, dead-white-male values; and yet, having done so, they must hasten to defend the play as universally good, that is, to reassure readers that the play is for White audiences too.

   It would be an overstatement, however, to suggest that Harlem Duet at Stratford was utterly contained and neutralized by familiar discourses of universality and
timelessness. Even the reviews that describe *Harlem Duet* in terms of universalist discourse do so in ways that remind readers to reconsider what “universal” means, and to whom – many of the reviews, for example, cite Sears’s Laurence Olivier anecdote. Moreover, many of the stories told by (non-Black) critics and spectators about the experience of watching the play, are stories of confronting, for the first time, both the feeling of being excluded from the “universal” and the uncomfortable realization that many people experience that feeling on a regular basis. Such responses may have been prompted by one of Sears’s own anecdotes which was recounted in the Stratford program, where it served to frame the reception of many spectators. In the version of the anecdote printed in the program, Sears encounters a woman who approaches her to say how much she loved *Harlem Duet* by saying, “This is not a Black play. This is an extraordinary human play!” Sears responds, “While I undoubtedly accepted the praise, I was struck by the idea that Black plays and human plays were completely different entities […] I mean, all Black plays are human plays! What part of the Black experience is not part of the human experience?” (Stratford Festival Program 10). The spectator’s praise, as reported by Sears, represents an anxious attempt to accommodate the Black experience depicted in the play within a liberal, humanist, universalist worldview; but, as Sears points out, in so doing the spectator unwittingly implies the exclusion Black people from humanity.\(^{109}\)

\(^{109}\) Compared to versions of this anecdote which appear in other paratexts, version in the Stratford program has been neutralized. In this version, Sears’s response (“I was struck by the idea…”) is framed as a thoughtful one. Other versions imply a direct confrontation. In the preface to *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*, Sears sets the encounter at a public post-performance talkback: “My response was kind, but immediate. All Black plays are human plays! What part of the Black experience is not part of the human experience? Most likely to the discomfort of the woman who spoke, I elaborated further.” The version recounted in the Stratford program has been stripped of any suggestion that attending the play or asking questions at a talkback will put spectators at risk of a public browbeating from the playwright.
Stratford 2006: Harlem Duet the Play vs. Harlem Duet the Event

In addition to the reviews, other documents of the play’s reception offer evidence of how *Harlem Duet* catalyzed change and intervention in Stratford’s norms. For many spectators, both Black and otherwise, the play was only part of an encompassing experience that included shopping, dining, and strolling around Stratford – perhaps for the first time – watching other spectators watch and respond to the play. Evelyn Myrie’s account is not a review of the play at all, but it speaks to the kind of experience the play’s production enabled.

For the past few summers, I have made numerous unkept promises to myself to go to the Stratford Shakespearean Festival. It was Djanet Sears’ new and exciting play *Harlem Duet* that finally got me there.

As we walked through downtown Stratford […] we came across three local young black women who observed us with curiosity. They sensed that we were from out of town and rushed up to greet us.

"Hello, Hello," they said. "It's good to see you all … we don't see many of us around here." We chuckled as we walked along to be a part of Stratford history.

This encounter reminded me of a story my mom recounted many times to us. […] One day she ran into a black woman in a local store and was overcome with joy. Without knowing the woman, my mom rushed up to her and gave her a big hug. “I was just so happy to see another black person in town.”
I guess that's how those young women felt as they met us heading toward the theatre.

As we entered the theatre where *Harlem Duet* was being staged, we acknowledged the significance of our journey […] to Stratford. We knew we were participating in breaking new ground. We were making history -- we were on our way to see the first black work to be produced in the festival's 54-year history and the first to be directed by a black woman and the first with an all-black cast.

Myrie is relieved when the performance doesn’t disappoint, but as her response indicates, much of its cultural work had already been done before the house lights dimmed.

Black spectators were not alone in seeing the play as just one component of a larger performance. Gary Smith, too, responds to both the play and the equally significant “performance” of the audience:

There is little doubt the play is attracting black people to Stratford. The day I saw it the theatre was almost full and there were far more people of colour than us pale-faced whites.

It reminded me of the days in New York when I'd go to see the early plays of James Baldwin and sit in a theatre full of blacks who cheered that anti-white sentiments in Baldwin's dramas, making me feel decidedly uncomfortable. So this is what it feels like to be in a minority I thought.

Although Smith defeats his purpose by constructing his readership exclusively as “us pale-faced whites,” his anecdote frames the play for potential spectators (at least the pale-faced ones) in precisely the way Sears is hoping for: Smith recognizes that in making him
feel uncomfortable about his skin colour, the play is not failing but *succeeding*, by forcing him to confront the experience of exclusion.

Responses such as Smith’s and Myrie’s indicate how *Harlem Duet* was able to do its cultural work at (and for) Stratford in spite of perceived problems with the *mise en scène* and design, obstacles obtaining from the material and ideological conditions of working and spectating at Stratford, or even problems with the play itself.\(^{110}\) In addition, the “cultural work” in question depends on the identity of the spectator: *Harlem Duet* targets two distinct audiences who experience the same play in different ways. The production did significant cultural work by offering Black spectators the opportunity to “make history,” as Myrie puts it, just by showing up at the theatre. Moreover, those spectators are not only seeing, but being seen, and in this sense the thrust stage *did* serve the play well by making the spectators as visible as the play. Black spectators, as confirmed by the observations of Smith, Myrie, and others, were able to see others like them, creating a meaningful sense of inclusion. They were also visible to the non-Black spectators, who were in turn visible to them; and the consciousness of every spectator of the play’s subject matter and the production’s cultural significance (a consciousness heightened by all the paratexts mentioned above), made all spectators aware, in some cases for the first time, of “performing” their own skin colour, whether proudly or

\(^{110}\) Contrary to Sears’s claim, in a 2004 interview with CASP, that “ninety-eight percent of all the negative criticism for *Harlem Duet* had nothing to do with the production, the play, [or] the acting,” but rather with “their reaction to the subject and their discomfort,” reviews of *Harlem Duet* very seldom indicate discomfort with the subject matter. Sears’s example, “one negative review of *Harlem Duet* where the reviewer spent a paragraph and a half talking about the white woman who didn't appear in the play,” is clearly a reference to Taylor, but Taylor found many other faults with the play. While Sears has certainly encountered many such “uncomfortable” responses in the many conversations, interviews, and post-show talkback sessions she has given or mediated, the negative comments in print reviews almost always focus on technical and formal issues rather than content, repeatedly citing “clunky dialogue” and “confusion” resulting from the tripartite, non-chronological narrative; and in the case of the Stratford reception, as seen here, the critics took exception with the space, the directing, and the design, but not the subject matter.
sheepishly. This unusual temporary community was at once divided by visible differences, but also united, since they all shared the roles of spectators at a play and, more importantly, participants in an event they all recognized as “historic.”

**Conclusion: Harlem Duet changes Stratford?**

The reception of *Harlem Duet* at Stratford suggests that the factors Knowles identifies in *Reading the Material Theatre* continue to influence “how Shakespeare means at Stratford.” Stratford’s institutional policies, corporate hierarchies, and working conditions did influence the production’s rehearsal process, and may have contributed to the repeated negative assessments of play’s directing and design; and the universalist discourse promulgated in Stratford’s publicity and marketing material, and habitually adopted by its reviewers, does threaten to transform the play into a cathartic purgative for White, liberal guilt. Nevertheless, responses to *Harlem Duet* also demonstrate how it resisted such containment, at least to some degree, because of its unusual capacity for transforming its audience into a performance of its own – a capacity exploited and amplified by both Sears and Stratford in paratextual public discourse. The production successfully focused the attention of the public (both playgoers and the much larger group who only read or heard about the play) on Stratford’s poor record of representing Canada’s (and North America’s) ethnic diversity, both on its stages and in its audience. It was also successful at drawing significant numbers of Black spectators to Stratford; and even if those spectators didn’t stay to see Sophia Walker play the Madwoman in *Duchess of Malfi*, as Stratford might have hoped, their presence in the audience of *Harlem Duet* nevertheless guaranteed its performance efficacy more than any other factor.

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111 According to Knowles, 34% of Stratford’s revenue in 1993 was from direct sales to the United States (107).
could have. Thus, although the forces of containment Knowles identifies are clearly at work, they are not as depressingly all-powerful as they sometimes appear to be in his analysis, and *Harlem Duet* was perfectly positioned, through its public discourses and its strategic use of Shakespeare, to question the very universalist discourses that made it appealing to Stratford in the first place. Without either overemphasizing its success or understating its flaws, it can be said that the play succeeded at Stratford in doing what Sears set out to do with it: work productively toward a world in which Black spectators can always find a play that appeals to them, and White spectators realize that not everyone can take this privilege for granted.

Only time will tell whether the new Stratford regime will to realize its goal of representing “a wide spectrum of humanity” both in the seats and on the stage. The Festival has continued its mission of cultural diversity in small steps by casting a more ethnically diverse ensemble and producing plays that deal with ethnic and racial difference. But many challenges remain: for one thing, that “wide spectrum of humanity” needs at least $50 to secure one of those seats, and perhaps $30,000 worth of conservatory/university-level training to audition for a place on the stage. In addition, like all such festivals, Stratford needs to keep its traditional audience of big spenders happy even while it attempts to seek out new audiences, a factor that inhibits rapid or radical change and makes it likely that shows like *Harlem Duet* will continue to be confined to the Studio Theatre. And finally, it is worth pointing out that what Stratford really means

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112 Stratford staged Derek Walcott’s *Odyssey* in 2007, and cast Black actors in prominent roles in its 2008 season including Nikki James as Juliet, Anika Noni Rose as Cleopatra; in addition, the 2008 Festival included a production of Joanna McClelland Glass’s *Palmer Park*, a play about racial tensions in Detroit. A glance at the headshots of the 2009 company (http://www.stratfordfestival.ca/about/company.aspx?id=806) reveals considerable ethnic diversity, although the show posters are still dominated by white faces. The 2009 season also features *Rice Boy*, Sunu Kuruvilla’s play about the struggles of a paraplegic Indian teenager.
is a wide spectrum of Westernized, post-modernized humanity. It is hard to imagine Stratford representing a truly wide spectrum of humanity – including displaced Iraqis, Quechua farmers, Innu hunters, Laotian laborers, and so on – or what and how a typical Stratford production (of, say *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*) might signify to such an audience.

**Post-Script: The Carnivalesque Character of Black Spectatorship**
In the summer of 2006, I attended the premiere of *I Am Not a Dinner Mint*, a collection of women’s monologues directed by Trey Anthony, author of the acclaimed and wildly successful *Da Kink in My Hair* (since developed as a TV series). Both Anthony and *Da Kink* represent the fruits of Sears’s labours as a playwright, director, public figure, and event coordinator.¹¹³ The artists collaborating on *Dinner Mint* were a multicultural, polyglot mix of African-Canadian, European, and (Caucasian) Canadian actors, dancers, and radio personalities, but the celebrity of Anthony and the other Black artists drew an overwhelmingly Black crowd. It was also an overwhelmingly female crowd, which is not surprising given that what the monologues had in common was their collective resentment of the poor treatment of women by their male partners. I was, therefore, a double minority in the audience, and the ideal target of many of its jokes. What I did not anticipate was the radically different character of spectatorship among the (dominant) Black, female constituent of the audience, which turned out to be a critical aspect of the event. In contrast with the passive, polite, private, and predictable responses of most theatre audiences I had seen, this audience was active, raucous, vocal, and unpredictable.

Among other things, spectators frequently called back to the performers, or loudly

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¹¹³ As we have seen, Sears not only laid the groundwork for future artists like Anthony, but also helped develop and mobilize a Black theatre audience, while simultaneously capturing the attention of White-dominated media.
vocalized their feelings about what the performers were describing (essentially, abuse at
the hands of men, viewed either comically or seriously), and often engaged in call-and-
response discourse with the performers, behaviours I had only ever seen at the Rocky
Horror Show and read about in accounts of theatre history (even audiences at improvised
theatre generally only call out when invited to do so). Some of the performers,
particularly those better known as DJs on local urban and hip hop radio programs, were
clearly comfortable bantering with the audience and responding to their catcalls. The
White performers, however, were surprised by the vociferous response of their crowd;
Greek actress Aktina Stathaki was visibly unsettled by the spectators’ insistence on
interpreting her decidedly serious monologue as a comedy. More than in any other theatre
performance I have seen, the character of this performance was determined by the
participation of the crowd; as such, it was a clear example of how meaning is shaped
through performance, and not transmitted from the stage to the audience.

This experience reminded me of something I had read in Martin Morrow’s
interview with the Harlem Duet cast. Morrow warns Stratford’s bars and restaurants to be
prepared, because previous productions have provoked a “lot of post-show arguments
over racial politics.” This claim alone (backed up by Karen Robinson’s anecdote about
the Halifax spectators debating the play “till three o’clock in the morning,” already
quoted above) testifies to the play’s exceptional efficacy, and in addition Morrow warns
that “[i]n Toronto, some audience members didn’t wait for the end of the performance to
voice their opinions”: “‘At one point, Nigel was afraid to go outside after the show,’
recalls Sears with a laugh, ‘because there was a large group of black women out there
who’d made a lot of noise in the theatre.’” Clearly, the audience composition of Harlem
Duet was potentially even more significant than I had theorized and experienced. When I saw the play at Stratford, Black spectators made up a significant but not dominant part of the audience, and the polite, passive conventions of Western spectatorship prevailed, but it is possible – especially given that Stratford arranged a number of outreach events, including subsidized bus trips from Toronto, to bring in Black spectators – that some or many of the performances enjoyed audiences like the one I saw at Dinner Mint and like the Harlem Duet performances in Toronto and Halifax sometimes had. (And Williams, notwithstanding his fear of being mauled at the stage door, makes it clear that he did enjoy having an audience that was so actively involved.) The collective, aggressive, exuberant laughter of such a crowd has a carnivalesque quality to it, as becomes clear from its tendency to crescendo in response to action or dialogue that is (even vaguely) erotically or scatalogically suggestive – even when laughter seems otherwise inappropriate to the context. Such laughter indicates that another level of appropriation is going on, as the audience joyfully and vocally asserts its authority to make whatever meaning it wishes, not just those meanings – about the timeless themes of “love, revenge, loyalty, [and] madness,” for example – that are sanctioned by the author, the producers, or the culturally exalted context of the theatre. I can’t help but think how such a performance – by the audience, that is, not the performers – could be profoundly disturbing and disruptive to a “traditional” Stratford audience (and even the cast). If Sears’s dream of “a choir of Black voices” is ever realized in Stratford’s big theatres, by
an audience raucously demonstrating its collective refusal to read Shakespeare’s plays the way Stratford tells it to, and insisting instead on realizing every possible opportunity for bawdy laughter, it could indeed change “how Shakespeare means at Stratford.”
Section Two: Carnivalizing the Canon

The plays discussed in the following chapters are also, like those examined above, resited in new chronotopes, but not necessarily more contemporary or more “Canadian” settings. Rather, the second half of this study focuses on appropriations in and through which the hypotext is not so much adapted as assaulted, debased, and travestied according to the logic of the carnivalesque, famously illustrated by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* and applied to Renaissance drama by Michael Bristol in *Carnival and Theatre*.

Describing contemporary Canadian dramaturgy as “carnivalesque” is theoretically problematic. Bakhtin is famous among theatre theorists for categorically dismissing drama as a monologic genre, and his discussion of the carnivalesque focuses on the literary works of Rabelais. Although Bristol successfully applies Bakhtin’s theory to theatre, powerfully demonstrating the carnivalesque tactics and potential of Renaissance performance, he defines that potentiality as an essentially historical phenomenon, dismissing contemporary theatre as “an essentially moribund social form” (4). In Bristol’s analysis, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theatre created a privileged site for the “consideration of forms of collective life and of subjectivity other than those proposed and legitimated by a hegemonic culture” (5); but contemporary theatre is no longer a potent site for the struggle of conflicting ideologies, but rather a medium for the transmission and affirmation of the “durable literary values” cherished by its almost exclusively bourgeois audience (24). Instead of covertly challenging dominant values, Bristol argues, most theatre now overtly champions them, and Shakespeare has become

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115 Bristol (24), Goodkin (145), and Carlson (313) all question Bakhtin’s somewhat puzzling elevation of the novel over drama as the heteroglossaic genre *par excellence*. 
the most powerful signifier of the very high culture values his plays once subverted.

Contemporary cultural studies, however (many of them inspired by Bakhtin and Bristol), have demonstrated that although the radical potential of theatre has undoubtedly diminished, the carnivalesque impulse still thrives in popular culture. To name just a few, recent studies of the carnivalesque in contemporary culture include M. Keith Booker’s *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection, and the Carnivalesque*, which traces Rabelasian influences and impulses in authors as diverse as Thomas Pynchon, Salman Rushdie, and Monique Wittig; John Alberti’s anthology *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture*, which contains a number of essays probing the carnivalesque potential of *The Simpsons*; and in a recent essay in *Communication Studies*, Paul “Pablo” Martin and Valerie Renegar examine Joel and Ethan Coen’s *The Big Lebowski* as a “carnivalesque social critique.”

Closer to home, Jennifer Drouin’s essay “Daughters of the Carnivalized Nation in Jean-Pierre Ronfard’s Shakespearean Adaptations *Lear* and *Vie et Mort du Roi Boiteux*” shows how the French Canadian playwright Ronfard “employ[s] carnival … to parody the bastardized state of the nation” in parodies of *King Lear* and *Richard III*. Drouin observes that “Rabelasian carnival dominates every aspect of these two Shakespearean adaptations”:

- food, drinking, rampant sexuality, and references to the grotesque lower body abound in every scene. […] In addition, Ronfard’s carnivalesque approach to adaptation illustrates the artificiality of the signifier “Shakespeare” as the embodiment of high culture, simultaneously
appropriating and undercutting le grand Will’s claim to cultural authority.

(2)

Ronfard’s works are considerably older than the plays I discuss here (1977 and 1981, respectively), which may reflect the extent to which “the artificiality of ‘Shakespeare’ as a signifier of high culture” has always already been self-evident to French-Canadian culture. Nevertheless, it is significant that Drouin’s analysis of Ronfard, a playwright little known outside of Quebec, reveals strategies of appropriation very similar to those of O’Brien and Nutting, and indeed to those of Shakespeare himself.

Mad Boy Chronicle and Three Sisters: A Black Opera in Three Acts follow what Bristol calls “the basic principle” of Carnival: to “represent everything socially and spiritually exalted on the material, bodily level” (22). In addition, both plays exhibit the same fundamental elements that Bakhtin identifies in Carnival, and which Bristol points out in Shakespeare: the “language of the marketplace,” grotesque bodily imagery, and the presence of a mock-king, clown, or “Lord of Misrule” (Bristol 67). Both O’Brien and Nutting deploy these tactics to expose and uncrown the elitist values of high culture by appropriating their most cherished symbols: the great authors and their celebrated poetic idioms, the great works and glorified genres of the dramatic canon, and the exalted institution of the theatre itself. Ultimately, O’Brien and Nutting de-crown Shakespeare and Chekhov in order to contest the appropriation of both these authors and the theatre itself by high culture, in the hope of returning the exalted to earth and restoring the theatre to ordinary Canadians.
**Abusive Language**
Carnival mocks the complicated syntax and specialized vocabularies of law, religion, bureaucracy, and literature in order to expose them as a means of fencing off these discursive fields from the uninitiated (i.e., the plebeian classes). Using special language protects elite culture by excluding the uninitiated, but it also creates a powerful symbol of elite values and *de jure* authority\(^\text{116}\) which can be appropriated by anyone. Bakhtin comments on the long tradition of liturgical parodies in Europe (14), and notes that Rabelais, writing in a world where “the line of demarcation” between official and popular culture “was drawn along the line dividing Latin from the vernacular,” frequently parodies the “latinizers” (465-69). Shakespeare too, Bristol argues, frequently mocks exalted discourse and latinizing. His plays often show common people mocking the over-elaborate jargon of the dominant classes, as in *Hamlet*’s gravedigger scene, in which the clowns mangle the Latin of official legal discourse in their mock trial: “argal” for “ergo,” “*se offendendo*” for “*se defendendo*”, and so on (Bristol 188-90). Shakespeare also shows how fools pretend to greater authority than they actually command by affecting the jargon of elites, as exemplified in his famously malapropistic constables, Elbow and Dogberry, and in Polonius’ baffling catalogue of dramatic genres (2.2.396-400).

Chekhov, too, mocks people (and entire social classes) who pretend to high status by affecting high diction, although translations (and the cultural tendency to view Chekhov as a “serious” writer) often efface this satirical aspect. Gaev’s ode to a bookcase in *The Cherry Orchard*, discussed in chapter two, furnishes one example of a fool who confuses wisdom with rhetorical embellishment and incomprehensibility. Whether deliberately or

\(^{116}\) Bristol uses the term “*de jure* authority” to indicate the agents and symbols of various kinds of official authority, including royal, civil, and ecclesiastical authorities. *De facto* authority, may, particularly during times of carnival festivity, be concentrated or constituted outside official hierarchy.
accidentally, such characters mock the exalted language of elite discourses, exposing it as ludicrous gibberish that actually obscures what it claims to elucidate.

Ironically, for contemporary audiences (and perhaps even more so for the people who avoid theatre) few things signify the exalted, or the division between plebeian and elite culture, as powerfully as the complicated, elevated, and frequently arcane language of the playwrights at the centre of the western dramatic canon. Most Canadians are introduced to Shakespeare as a poet rather than a playwright, in high school English classes where students are enjoined to celebrate him as the unsurpassed master of the English language. And yet, this language, with its metrical rules, archaisms, obscure references, and in-jokes, is available (or at least enjoyable) only to those who have the resources to master its secrets. Chekhov, too, is hardly easy to appreciate. Although he writes in prose, both historical and cultural distance, along with his elliptical style (particularly as rendered in often dated translations) are barriers to comprehension, and his subtle humour, in particular, often eludes even the grasp of trained actors and directors, let alone casual readers. For many students, it is traumatizing to discover that to “master” one’s language is to be able to use it in ways such that mere comprehension (let alone appreciation) requires great effort. As Alan Sinfield writes, this trauma can have lifelong consequences: having been taught that literature is universal, students come to internalize their success or failure with literature as a judgement of their capacities as human beings (160). In this way, literature and drama, no less than law, philosophy, theology, and medicine, become exalted discourses accessible only to those who have the economic and cultural resources required to master them.

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117 Sinfield presents statistics to suggest that those who succeed in mastering literature and Shakespeare are far more likely to continue to post-secondary education and professional careers.
Consequently, popular travesties and parodies of Shakespeare often target the exalted language that is supposed to signify his greatness, exposing it as baffling and archaic. Gary Taylor offers an example from an evening of improv theatre, in which the actors took a suggestion from the audience to perform a scene “as if written by Shakespeare.” Taylor notes that although the “result was screamingly funny,” he did not “hear a single quotation from Shakespeare; his style was suggested, instead, by acrobatic contortions of grammar, the occasional “alas,” odd “doth,” and frequent “thee,” incongruous mixtures of orotund polysyllables and street slang, and a singsong approximation of blank verse” (Afterword 203). Taylor’s experience illustrates how, for contemporary audiences, the chief signifiers of “Shakespeare” are archaic pronouns, contorted syntax, “polysyllables,” and verse. It is also a striking example of the carnivalesque: a collective audience uses mockery in order to bring the exalted (Shakespeare) back into a familiar relationship with daily life, and the solidarity of the community is realized by its common laughter: spectators who have long assumed that their difficulties “appreciating” Shakespeare stem from their own personal shortcomings, rejoice to discover that everyone shares their secret shame.

If the minimum requirements for an easily recognizable Shakespeare parody are mock pentameter and a smattering of “ye olde Englishe,” Chekhov’s language is only

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118 Improv comedy is an area for further study of the relationship between carnival and theatre because of the attenuation of the boundary between the performers and the audience. This boundary is the critical difference between carnival festivity and theatrical spectacle. As Bakhtin says, “carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it…” (7). At improvised theatre, however, the boundary between spectator and spectacle is relaxed, or even abolished, as direct, verbal and semantic input from the audience is critical, and spectators may be asked to participate individually on stage, or, as in Theatresports, to collectively act as a judge in the competition between teams. Furthermore, such events attract a different audience constituent than “mainstream theatre,” due to various social and economic factors. As such, improvised theatrical events may provide a closer approximation to the medieval carnival than conventional theatre.
slightly more difficult to uncrown; for while Chekhov is, on the surface, easier to make sense of, the first thing we are told about Chekhov is that what is on the surface doesn’t count. If elite culture constructs Shakespeare as the master of poetic expression, it celebrates Chekhov as the master of subtext, a different but, to the uninitiated, no less inscrutable way of using language to retard communication rather than expedite it. For many readers and spectators, the refusal of Chekhov’s characters to say what they mean or take meaningful action (in addition to the barriers noted above) can make for a dull read or a dreary, interminable evening.¹¹⁹

In addition to mocking exalted language, carnival celebrates common language, or what Bakhtin (or his translator) rather oddly dubs the “various genres of billingsgate,” or, cursing, profanity, obscenity, and abusive language (5, 15-17). In carnival, official hierarchy is suspended, and the reciprocal use of vulgar language among participants signifies (and creates) temporary familiarity and equality. In a theatrical context, profanity and abusive language serve a different, albeit equally carnivalesque, purpose: instead of signifying the suspension of rules, it reminds us of them by breaking them. Profanities and oaths, as Bakhtin says, are “excluded from official speech because they [break] its norms” (5, 17). The contemporary theatre is an “official” institution with an elevated standard of verbal and behavioural decorum, and profanity (whether it issues from the stage or the auditorium) constitutes a breach of decorum. Spectators are highly sensitive to this decorum, even if they are not conscious of this fact. Like many drama

¹¹⁹ In addition to the negative reviews of the NAC/Citadel co-production of Vanya, cited in chapter two, Douglas Clayton cites several examples of “boredom-centered” critical responses to Chekhov. Typically, at least in Canadian reception, Chekhov theatre criticism is very similar to negative reviews of Shakespeare: that is, the great author escapes criticism while the hapless director is castigated for ruining his work. Nathan Cohen’s review of The Cherry Orchard in 1958 is exemplary. Titled, “Landau directs this play but … He Doesn’t Know What It’s About!”, Cohen’s review condemns the production as a “turgid procession” (qtd. in Clayton 156). David Allen, in Performing Chekhov, cites many similar responses from English and American critics reviewing the 1964-65 Actor’s Studio production of The Three Sisters (123-27).
teachers and theatre workers, I have often noticed that spectators are less tolerant of coarse language in a plays than in other, popular genres (e.g. film), and responses to *Mad Boy Chronicle* and *The Three Sisters: ABOTA* reflect this sensitivity by warning prospective spectators about language which, in some cases, would be considered only mildly offensive, if at all, had it been uttered outside a theatre.

**Grotesque Realism**

In addition to their profane language and parodies of specialized discourse, carnivalesque texts and performances are also preoccupied with exaggeration of the flesh, excremental and scatological humour, and bodily functions. Grotesque realism, like mock Latin and malapropism, transfers “high ceremonial gesture or ritual to the material sphere”: “all […] forms of grotesque realism degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh,” and carnival laughter “from immemorial times was linked with the lower bodily stratum” (Bakhtin 20). Grotesque realism is closely connected to abusive language, of course, as “the grotesque concept of the body forms the basis of abuses, oaths, and curses” (27). Thus grotesque realism has both a verbal, indexical aspect, and a visual, iconic one. The former transgresses the conventions of appropriate speech, and the grotesque body transgresses conventions of what it is appropriate to display: just as theatre is constructed as a place for the utterance of appropriate language, so is it constructed as a place for the display of appropriate bodies.¹²⁰ Early modern drama is well-stocked with examples of grotesque imagery and displays, although cultural distance

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¹²⁰ “Appropriate” means conventionally beautiful, as a glance at any acting conservatory recruitment brochure will confirm. Prospective applicants to Stratford’s conservatory actor training program were once advised by the company’s website that they should possess a body “suited to the classics,” but such instructions have now given way to more inclusive (if equally arch) criteria: “We recognize that diversity – in our workplace, in our audiences and on our stages – fosters a rich and creative environment. We are actively engaged in building a more diverse workforce and encourage all those qualified to apply” (https://www.stratfordfestival.ca/employment/employment.aspx?id=1045&terms=conservatory).
and contemporary staging conventions often render the grotesque invisible to contemporary spectators.\textsuperscript{121} Grotesque realism is less apparent in Chekhov’s more genteel Modernist dramaturgy than in that of Renaissance drama, but our very expectation that Chekhov’s plays are refined and dignified makes them all the more vulnerable to grotesque parody, as we will see.

**Clowning and (De)Crowning**

In addition to abusive language and grotesque imagery, carnival festivities dispel the rigid hierarchies regulating everyday life by staging rituals and spectacles that parody official pageantry and ceremony; these spectacles are generally led by a clown-king. In Renaissance Europe (as today), secular and clerical hierarchies were regularly displayed in symbolic form in official pageantry and ceremony (Bristol 59). Official pageantry makes visible, through allegorical representation, “ranks and categories of the social structure, idealized in mythological, historical, or biblical images,” embodying “the ideals of the social order objectively present in the here and now” (59).\textsuperscript{122} Every official procession had a carnival counterpart which appropriated and inverted the symbols of \textit{de jure} authority: “[c]ivil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools […] mimicked serious rituals” (Bakhtin 5). Because “authority presents itself as the […] naturally elevated agency of changeless, already perfected and complete, reality,” official processions rely on the idea of a fixed relationship between symbol and

\textsuperscript{121} Historical distance has rendered the abusive language of Shakespeare and his contemporaries obsolete or merely quaint, while realism and gender/race-appropriate casting have greatly diminished the grotesque qualities of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.

\textsuperscript{122} Contemporary examples include parades (although the carnival parades of \textit{Mardi Gras} et al. have generally outstripped and even become the “official” parades they once parodied), the hierarchical seating arrangements of theatres and arenas, Olympic opening and closing ceremonies, and the military parades and public assemblies of 20\textsuperscript{th} century communist and fascist states, which, preserved on film, remain powerfully iconic.
referent, and attempt to fix a “real” relationship between sign and referent (Bristol 61-2). But the very strength of signs – their “power to generate surplus meanings,” so that a crown represents more than “a fancy hat” – is also their weakness, because the appropriation of official signs and symbols in un-official contexts reveals that the link between symbols and their referents is not fixed, but contingent and arbitrary (Bristol 63). And thus the use of such symbols in a public display “frustrates and confuses the desire to protect valued symbols from both inadvertent and wilful misinterpretation. […] To display such a symbol in the public square is to invite quotation, and therefore misquotation, and abusive mimicry” (63). And if a valued symbol is exposed as contingent and arbitrary, then the naturalness, permanence, and stability of the authority for which it stands are also thrown into doubt. Contrary to the official use of symbols of rank (such as crowns, liveries, and coats-of-arms) to fix the order of things, carnival misuses the same symbols to expose the “arbitrary transitoriness” of all social forms and social order: “in Carnival a crown is just a funny hat, and a funny hat, or some even more inappropriate object, is a crown. […] Carnival masquerade displays the impermanence of any relationship between an individual and the social identity claimed by the symbolism of his clothing” (Bristol 65).

In carnival, transgression becomes the law, and hierarchies are inverted: “the jester proclaimed king, the clownish abbot, bishop, or archbishop was elected at the feast of fools” (Bakhtin 81). The clown-king, or Lord of Misrule, both embodies and initiates the inversion of hierarchy and debasement of authority and its symbols. The role of the clown-king, in carnival festivity or on stage, is manifold, including such functions as the discovery of laughing matter, the disclosure of the contiguity between the carnival world
and the “real” world and, most importantly, the demystification and exposure of authority by strategic misunderstanding (Bristol 140-45). Shakespeare’s most familiar Lord of Misrule is probably Falstaff, a grotesquely fat clown who mocks all authority and role-plays Hal’s father, but Bristol also points out darker and less obvious examples, such as Iago, who skilfully guides the chaos and misrule of *Othello*. There are, of course, numerous examples of the clown-king in the canons of both drama and popular culture (Jarry’s grotesque Ubu – “Mockbeth,” as it were – and Homer Simpson being obvious examples of each), and the carnivalesque dramaturgies of both *Mad Boy Chronicle* and *The Three Sisters*, too, focus on clown-kings in the characters of Fengo and Mommy-Daddy Cuddy, respectively.

As a form based on appropriating the symbols of high culture in order to critique it, carnival offers an ideal template for the dramaturgy of appropriation, especially when the target is drama itself. In the 21st century, Shakespeare, Chekhov, and the theatre have become symbols of the values and ideologies they once subversively mocked; but while the process of canonization has diminished the carnivalesque efficacy of the plays themselves, the very same process, ironically, has increased their value as targets for carnivalesque critique. And just as carnival appropriates symbols of *de jure* authority and elite culture in order to critique the things for which those symbols stand, the appropriations in *Mad Boy Chronicle* and *The Three Sisters: A Black Opera* do not target the hypotexts themselves, but rather the cultural elitism and “durable literary values” that they have come to represent. The carnivalesque appropriations of Shakespeare in *Mad Boy Chronicle* and Chekhov in *The Three Sisters: A Black Opera* are driven by an impulse to attack and demystify the gentrified conventions of the theatre in the hope of

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123 See Bristol, “Race and the Comedy of Abjection in *Othello*.”
bringing it down from the exalted and returning it to popular culture.
Chapter 4  Mad Boy Chronicle

The curious relationship between *Mad Boy Chronicle* and its antecedent texts is announced by numerous paratexts, including the blurb on the back cover claiming that it “hauls the Hamlet story howling back to its origins.” This imagery not only indicates the play’s hostile orientation *vis-à-vis* the alleged source, it also hints at an unusual intertextual genealogy. Like Djanet Sears, Michael O’Brien’s adaptive tactics claim antecedence, by moving the entire plot to another historic era. But instead of moving the canonical story forward in time to accommodate contemporary Canadian spectators, O’Brien moves it *back*, setting the plot in Denmark, circa 999 AD, and reconstituting Shakespeare’s dignified courtiers as cartoonishly grotesque Vikings. O’Brien justifies this unusual choice by citing *Hamlet’s* origins: the implied argument, frequently reiterated in *Mad Boy Chronicle*’s paratexts, is not that the forces of history and culture have made Shakespeare’s story obscure to contemporary spectators, but that Shakespeare himself did so when he adapted the *fabula*’s ultimate source, an ancient Norse saga that, as O’Brien’s dedication puts it, is at heart a simple story for “those who dream of slaughtering their Stepfathers [sic]” (7). However, O’Brien diverges radically from both the genre and the plot of the hypotext: he substitutes parody and low comedy for high tragedy, and, in contrast to Sears, who invents a new beginning to the story but points implicitly to the same conclusion, O’Brien begins in the same place but then takes the story in a very different direction: at the end of *Mad Boy Chronicle*, the usurper is still

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124 Each playwright’s claim to antecedence is, however, staked out according to a different logic: O’Brien uses transposition to set the story farther back in historic time, whereas Sears moves the story forward in time, but begins her plot from a much earlier point of attack. O’Brien claims antecedence in relation to real time, while Sears claims it in relation to narrative chronology.

125 The “Playwright’s Note” declares that “[s]pelling, punctuation, and syntax are erratic to suggest emphasis, dialect, and state of mind” (11), a convention I will preserve for the same reasons.
alive, in charge, and more powerful than ever, his tyranny now sanctioned by a multinational empire and a new god.

As Daniel Fischlin has argued, “the interpretive frisson generated by adaptations lies precisely in the extent to which recognizable aspects of the source-text are interwoven into the new contexts, however defamiliarized, of the adaptation,” and of all the plays considered here, Mad Boy Chronicle best exemplifies how the repetition of “recognizable aspects,” especially plot and characters, creates a horizon of expectations that is subsequently disrupted when the adaptation diverges from the expected trajectory (“Nation and/as Adaptation,” 317). Much more than Harlem Duet (the mostly unique sjuzet and characters of which do not invite extensive comparisons with Shakespeare’s), or After the Orchard (which mirrors Chekhov’s plot so closely that spectators focus instead on the significance of the explicitly un-Chekhovian setting), Mad Boy’s dramaturgy is based on re-citing the fabula in order to create, and then disrupt, a horizon of expectations. O’Brien’s deviations from the expected plot arouse the spectator’s curiosity, and his paratexts explain those deviations by informing audiences that Mad Boy is actually based not (only) on the hypotext they recognize, but on a third, even more antecedent original text. Looking closely at what O’Brien takes from this mystery source, and how he uses it to position Mad Boy Chronicle as both a faithful adaptation of one

126 The so-called interpretive frisson may also spring from unexpected convergences with the hypotext, as in Giuseppe Manfridi’s farce Cuckoos, which uses its hypotext to achieve a similar effect, but in exactly the opposite way. Manfridi carefully arranges his plot so that his play only gradually reveals itself to be a re-telling of (spoiler alert!) Oedipus the King, in a stunning comic manifestation of anagnorisis and peripeteia which is experienced as fully by the spectator as by the characters. Manfridi distracts the spectator from prematurely recognizing the connection (which subsequently seems to have been obvious all along) with grotesque spectacle: the entire play takes place during an interrupted – indeed interminable – act of anal sex between two of the three characters.
source and a travesty of another, reveals a great deal about his motives, and thus suggests how to interpret the so-called frisson.

The long-lost “original” is “Vita Amleti,” from Gesta Danorum, a 13th century anthology of Nordic sagas and oral literature compiled and recorded by a monk named Saxo Grammaticus. As a Christianized Latin verse recapitulation of the oral saga, comprising both the plot and Saxo’s moralizing commentary on the wicked deeds of its pagan characters, “Vita Amlethi” is itself an adaptation, and one in which the adaptor’s voice is far from subtle. In keeping with his religious convictions, Saxo condemns as villainous what the saga itself celebrates as heroic: the hero’s pursuit of vengeance. The story begins with the murder of king Orvendil by his brother Fengi (97; cf. Hamlet 3.3.36-38, Mad Boy 36, 39), who subsequently assumes control of a large part of Denmark by marrying Orvendil’s wife Gerutha (97; cf. Hamlet 1.2.1-14, Mad Boy 20). Gerutha and Orvendil’s son, Amleth (known as Horvendal the Younger in Mad Boy), finding that both his birthright and personal safety are in jeopardy, feigns madness in order to spy on Fengi while simultaneously eluding his scrutiny and persecution (98; cf. Hamlet 2.1.180-81, Mad Boy 44). Fengi suspects Amleth’s cunning and lays a series of traps for him (98; cf. Hamlet 2.2, Mad Boy 44). First, he puts Amleth together with a young girl and eavesdrops on them to see if Amleth will drop his disguise (98-101; cf. Hamlet 3.1, Mad Boy 52-55). When that fails, Fengi has his lackey hide in Gerutha’s room to eavesdrop on Amleth and his mother, but Amleth detects the spy and kills him (101-102; cf. Hamlet 3.4). Finally, Fengi sends Amleth to the King of Britain in the company of two friends, bearing a letter to the King asking him to execute Amleth; but

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127 All citations of Saxo refer to Hansen’s translation in Saxo Grammaticus and the Life of Hamlet.
Amleth discovers and alters the letter so that his escorts are executed instead (103; cf. *Hamlet* 4.3.41-72, 4.6). After a lengthy episode in Britain, Amleth returns to Denmark, where he kills Fengi and all his supporters in a skilful and cunning act of mass murder/vengeance, thus restoring his honour and assuming control of the community.

Since very few readers or spectators of *Mad Boy Chronicle* will be familiar with “*Vita Amlethi*” or Saxo Gramaticus, paratextuality is important to the play and its reception: the “interpretive frisson” derives not only from the friction between the familiar story and the new plot but also from the knowledge that both are adaptations of another text, and this knowledge is supplied exclusively (except for those *Hamlet* scholars in the crowd) by paratexts. By situating the two texts in the context of an unfamiliar, but older and thus implicitly more authentic third text, the paratexts – particularly program notes, advertising, newspaper reviews, and, in the case of the reading audience, book-jacket copy, graphic design, and the playwright’s notes – simultaneously invoke and invert fidelity criticism. The paratexts inform the audience exactly what they need to know about the mysterious third source, namely that it exists, that it predates Shakespeare, and that it is the ultimate source of *Hamlet*. No other information is needed (or offered), because this alone suffices to destabilize conventional assumptions about Shakespeare’s antecedence and originality, to justify the tenth-century setting and the substitution of pagan Vikings for Renaissance courtiers, and to imply that *Mad Boy* departs from *Hamlet* in order to undo Shakespeare’s unfaithful adaptations and “faithfully” restore the story to its authentic state. By (re)citing “*Vita Amlethi*” as the “original original,” *Mad Boy Chronicle* simultaneously mocks high culture (by parodying it) while laying claim to cultural legitimacy (by recuperating a lost, authentic original).
Thus, like the adaptors Knowles discusses in “Othello in Three Times,” O’Brien can have his cultural capital and eat it too.

**“Repetition with Difference”: Manipulating Expectations through Adaptation**

As the foregoing summary of “Vita Amlethi” reveals, O’Brien is in some ways less faithful to Saxo than Shakespeare is: for one thing, *Mad Boy* actually retains some “inauthentic” elements that were added by Shakespeare, such as the Ghost, and more notably, its plot turns sharply away from both hypotexts in Act Two. Much of *Mad Boy*’s effect, in fact, stems from O’Brien’s use of intertextuality and paratextuality (which paves the way, by alerting spectators to read the play in relation to *Hamlet*) to prepare and then disrupt the expectation that *Mad Boy Chronicle* will faithfully follow the familiar *Hamlet fabula*. His opening scenes closely follow the plot of *Hamlet*, creating a horizon of expectations about the story trajectory in the same way that *C.S.I.*’s aerial establishing shots of the Las Vegas skyline instantly prepare channel surfers for a reassuring affirmation of the effectiveness of the American legal system in the form of forensic procedural drama. When the play opens with a ghost who appears before two fishwives, most spectators (who have already been paratextually alerted to read *Mad Boy* in relation to *Hamlet*) will quickly spot the parody of *Hamlet* 1.1. Scene two evokes *Hamlet* even more explicitly, introducing Lord Fengo and his “court” enjoying a feast which marks the anniversary of his brother’s death – and of Fengo’s subsequent marriage to his widow, Gerutha, and election as ruler of Helsingor. By the time Horvendal the

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128 The ghost was first added by Francois de Belleforest, whose romance novella of the story may have been Shakespeare’s proximate source.
129 Not all spectators read reviews or program notes, but all productions of *Mad Boy* to date have widely publicized the play’s relationship to *Hamlet* and its source, which is the play’s main selling point.
130 The seven year gap between the inciting incident and the beginning of the play is a feature of the original oral saga. Fengo’s explanation, that “Thorr […] struck [Horvendal the Elder] down […] with a
Younger is introduced, and certainly by the time the ghost reappears in the next scene and orders Horvendal to avenge his death (35-38), most spectators will already think they know how this story turns out.

Along with plot, character, too, functions to reinforce a horizon of expectations based on *Hamlet* (which is later disrupted by the appearance of new characters). In contrast to Sears and Sherman, who deliberately discourage spectators from closely identifying their characters with a particular Shakespearean or Chekhovian counterpart (either by creating new characters or by “disguising” the old ones with different characteristics), O’Brien emphasizes the connections between the two plays by populating Helsingor with characters clearly conceived as crude bouffon versions of Shakespearean equivalents. In addition to Horvendal, Gerutha, Fengo, and the Ghost, O’Brien replaces Polonius, Laertes, and Ophelia with Matthius, Ragnar, and Lilja (who gets a considerably larger role in O’Brien’s *sjuzet* than in any of its antecedents). The remaining roles are redistributed to the old women (Anna and Inga), and a collective of generic Vikings. Notably absent are equivalents for Horatio (by removing Hamlet’s allies, O’Brien emphasizes Horvendal’s isolation) and Fortinbras (there is no need for a new king at the end of the play, since the old one is still alive and as nasty as ever).

mighty meteor" (20), may be taken at face value by the superstitious and gullible Vikings, but it is a clear signal to the audience that foul play was involved, a fact later confirmed explicitly when Fengo becomes “Fengo the Confessor”.

131 O’Brien’s use of generic, nameless characters reflects the return to the original oral epic, in which minor characters are usually identified only by the roles they played in the action. In order to reduce the strain on the memories of both the skald and his (or her?) audience, names and other individualizing details are deployed only when necessary (see Hansen 46-7). O’Brien adapted The names “Fengo,” “Horvendal,” and “Gerutha” from “Vita Amlethi,” and the others were chosen for their ring of Viking authenticity. “Ragnar,” of course, suggests *Ragnarok*, the apocalypse in Norse mythology.

132 If there is an equivalent to Fortinbras, it is either King Rollo or the Pope, the ultimate, but ultimately diegetic, sources of the encroaching foreign empire, who are represented (mimetically and legally) by the delegation of monks.
Mad Boy’s early scenes set the pattern of “repetition with difference” on which adaptation depends, with plot and characters providing the repetition, while setting, language, and genre generate the differences that compel the spectator’s attention. Other, more subtle differences include the subplot that will ultimately take over the play, which is introduced with an innocuous reference to Horvendal’s recent conversion to Christianity (after finding a Bible in Fengo’s “plunder-sack” [22]). At first, this detail is merely a clever equivalent for Hamlet’s education at Wittenberg (a center of Renaissance Protestant thinking). Horvendal’s religious dissent, like Hamlet’s erudition, underlines his isolation in the community, and, like Hamlet’s education, it justifies his resistance to the ghost in the following scene, when the latter stops the ostracized Horvendal from fleeing to Jerusalem (he has comically underestimated its distance). As in Hamlet, the ghost scene dramatizes the protagonist’s interpellation by the old pagan ethos, and although Horvendal’s beliefs (again, like Hamlet’s) make him sceptical about both the ghost’s existence and his mission of revenge, he is still compelled to return to Helsingor, “the Truth to know” (38), thus launching his career as the “Mad Boy.”

Although Mad Boy’s setting is ostensibly more historically and culturally distant than Hamlet’s, O’Brien brings it close to home by invoking the “family values” discourse

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133 Francois de Belleforest introduced the ghost specifically to dramatize the protagonist’s inner struggle between the old pagan ethos, which demands honorable revenge, and the new Christian way, which forbids killing (Belleforest’s motive is made explicit by both the Ghost’s dialogue and the narrator’s commentary on it). This transformation of the story from a pagan saga into a confrontation between the dominant and emergent ideologies begins with Saxo Grammaticus, whose written, Latin adaptation turns the oral epic into a moral fable in which barbarous actions are explained by the narrator as the consequence of the (lamentable) absence of Christianity. Belleforest’s literary conceit has become a vital part of the fabula’s dramatic sjuzets because a ghost makes the perfect vehicle for the old ideology: it paradoxically makes present the absence of the old Nordic culture by embodying it, but in an incorporeal form. See Belleforest, Bevington, Matheson, and Hansen.
of the 1990s in its depiction of family relationships. Like many of the most popular TV and film satires of the period (including the still-popular – and notably carnivalesque – Simpsons franchise) Mad Boy satirizes the neo-conservative notion that a conventional nuclear family is the foundation (and microcosm) of an orderly, just society, and O’Brien’s exploration of family situations and relationships alludes as clearly to the 1990s as the 90s. For example, Fengo, Gerutha, and Horvendal are recognizable as a contemporary dysfunctional family, complete with a re-marriage and an adolescent stepson who rejects normative values and embraces a heathen ideology; except that, since Fengo is already a violent pagan warlord, rebellion, for Horvendal, means worshipping a god of peace, mercy, and forgiveness. Horvendal’s perceived assault on Viking family values provokes Fengo to kick the boy out of the clan after some contemporary-sounding parental histrionics: “Godd of Peace? See Matthius? This is what I been talking about. Yer a disgrace lad to yer own people, yer brave forefathers what fought’n died fer you. What is this new Godd, what wrenches sonns away from their fathers, tearin families and kingdoms apart?” (22). Just as Shakespeare shapes the Danish setting in order to poke fun at stereotypically English behaviour, O’Brien uses a supposedly exotic setting to make Hamlet’s action seem more familiar, not less. Mad Boy’s tone and topical humour align it

134 The term was rarely used without irony after Dan Quayle’s notorious 1992 speech which cited the L.A. riots as the result of a breakdown of “family values” (rather than the breakdown of the judicial system signified by the verdict of the Rodney King trials), implicating the TV show Murphy Brown (presumably because its eponymous character, a single, working woman, adopted a child). Many subsequent TV and film comedies of the 1990s can be seen as mocking responses to the Bush/Quayle administration’s claim that the American way of life was under attack, not by Soviets, but by single parents. The conventional celebration of traditional “family values” typical of 1980s sitcoms is aggressively parodied in series such as Roseanne, and The Simpsons, and such films as Addams Family Values (which exposes and critiques the assumed race (white) and class (rich) of conventional “family values,” against which the monstrous but more genuinely loving title family’s beliefs and practices are contrasted). By the first decade of the 21st century, broken marriages, single parents, and otherwise non-traditional and/or dysfunctional families had become the norm in TV sitcoms. Of course, the parallel between broken families and broken societies is as much a Shakespearean (or even ancient Athenian) theme as a contemporary one.
with other contemporary popular comedies, while also suggesting comic parallels between the medieval and modern experiences of pre-millennial tension.

In addition, O’Brien brings *Hamlet* down from the exalted by supplying simple, common-sense explanations for actions that seem arbitrary or unmotivated in Shakespeare’s version. The strategy of feigning madness, which Shakespeare’s character seems to pull out of thin air, makes perfect sense in the context in which O’Brien resites it, as does Hamlet’s puzzling indecisiveness. Horvendal is totally isolated, physically vulnerable, and limited by serious material obstacles: Fengo has banished him (24-25), and could easily kill him. But playing mad nullifies Fengo’s physical advantages because the Vikings’ code of honour protects “fools and cripples” from such abuse, as Gerutha reminds Fengo by citing the Song of Hávamál (an authentic Old Norse text held by the historic Norsemen to be the word of Odin):

What sort of Norsemenn are you?
What sort of leader lets this pass?
Beatin on cripples, on poor defenseless children,

…………………………………………………………

It is written – on Odinn’s Mighty Stone,
The Song of Havamal, which all of you should know –
That he who raises sword ’gainst fool or cripple
Is doomd to die a Coward’s Death;
And never ever enter the Hero’s Afterlife –
But suffer his victim’s affliction – forever! (58)
In fact, the only flaw in Horvendal’s strategy is that playing mad is such a rational choice that Fengo, like the audience, has seen this charade before. In fact, he has even perpetrated it: “He’s shammin! I played this trick once meself!” (42). Fengo’s natural suspicion motivates a scheme to catch Horvendal out by using Lilja as bait (66-73), another familiar episode. Just as Harlem Duet puts Othello’s actions in perspective by giving him an origin, Mad Boy Chronicle helps make sense of the play it parodies through its common-sense interpretation of Hamlet’s baffling actions, which have previously only been explained through recourse to other rarefied discourses, such as Freud’s famous diagnosis of Hamlet’s indecisiveness as a symptom of an unresolved Oedipal complex.

Within the context of the historically distant but culturally familiar setting, Mad Boy’s familiar plot and characters create expectations of a predictable outcome, and by the time the ghost reappears and commands Horvendal to avenge him, the audience will be anticipating a resolution involving Fengo’s downfall and the restoration of justice to Helsingor. The second act, however, betrays this expectation. In a coup de théâtre at the climax of act one, a procession of Christian monks appears out of nowhere, interrupting a duel between Fengo and Horvendal at what seems to be Horvendal’s moment of victory (84-85). When the priests announce that the Vikings must either embrace the “Godd of Peace” or else be destroyed by crusading “Knights of the Purple Cross” (87-88), Fengo abruptly converts. But far from becoming a model of enlightened rule, Fengo uses the backing of the monks and the Christian empire they represent to consolidate his power and ruthlessly purge all opposition, appropriating and perverting Christian doctrines so impetuously that finally Jesus Himself appears on stage and begs
Horvendal to murder him (134-36). By the end of the play, all resistance to his reign of terror, including Horvendal, has been destroyed – an unexpected conclusion that compels spectators to look beyond conventional plot and generic structures for meaning.

While this vexing conclusion deserves further attention, for the moment I want to focus on how O’Brien transforms tragedy to travesty by recoding the well-known plot of the most exalted story in the dramatic canon according to the conventions of a different genre. Using *Hamlet*’s plot to create the expectation of a familiar resolution, O’Brien converts its courtly characters into grotesque Viking bouffons who debase *Hamlet* by reducing Shakespeare’s exalted poetry to crude doggerel, and breach conventional stage decorum generally with their offensive speech and revolting behaviour – familiar conventions of carnivalesque comedy, a genre which comes with certain expectations of its own. Like Rabelais, Shakespeare and other carnivalesque authors, O’Brien exposes the mystifying effects of high culture by inverting them, using crude language to expose the commonsense meaning of exalted texts, grotesque realism to mock elite ideals of beauty, and a mock-king or Lord of Misrule, Fengo, who appropriates the trappings and symbols of *de jure* authority in order to reveal how they legitimize tyranny, cruelty, and iniquity. Ultimately, however, O’Brien defies these expectations too, by refusing to close the play with the restoration of *de jure* authority that concludes both *Hamlet* and carnival festivities.

“**Hie off you Fengo-fucker!”**: Abusive Language

O’Brien’s assault on the conventions of Shakespearean/theatrically-appropriate language is a vital element of his critique (insofar as the whole play is essentially an exploration of politically expedient appropriations of exalted discourse). In both content and form, the
language of *Mad Boy Chronicle* constitutes an assault on exalted discourses, particularly those associated with the theatre. It is thoroughly obscene, violent, and lively, and liberally peppered with grotesque neologisms, (e.g., “piddleprophet,” “fesitvitatin’,” “cockwhallop”). In addition, it is written in an invented dialect, the very sound of which violates the conventions of stage English. Martin Morrow’s review notes that “[m]ost of the actors talk in mongrel accents that sound much less […] Danish than a kind of bastard Irish,” but then again, as he goes on to say, “authenticity clearly isn’t the point here” (*Mad Boy Chronicle* 153). What is the point is that the dialect is far removed in both vocabulary and in sound from the standard Mid-Atlantic dialect conventionally used in and associated with Shakespeare and theatre (except in other plays where language is used both for shock value and to establish a specific locale, such as the works of Martin McDonagh).

In his flair for profanity, O’Brien pays tribute to Shakespeare’s own distinct talent for both coining and using abusive language. But since a penchant for obscenity (much lamented, and redacted, by the later critics and editors who would play major roles in Shakespeare’s canonization) is not a part of the socially-constructed Shakespeare of the popular imagination, O’Brien’s own abusive language has the effect of de-crowning Shakespeare by association – ironically subjecting Shakespeare to debasement by the

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135 O’Brien’s dialect also resembles the “retro-Jacobean” dialect used by Peter Barnes in *The Bewitched*, *Red Noses*, and other plays. As an artificial dialect, it appears to contain and combine elements of Irish and Maritime Canadian, but is also somewhat arbitrary and inconsistent, and any production of the play must take this into account. For the 1997 McGill University production, the Viking characters were drilled in a hybrid dialect of Danish and Newfoundland English, dubbed “Denfundskveege,” which was engineered by voice instructor David Lecky. The priests spoke a dialect modeled after (continental) French, a choice informed by Paavo’s reference to “Rollo, King of Neustria” (85). There was no King Rollo of Neustria, but Neustria is roughly the area now known as France and Rollo was the ruler of the Viking principality of Normandy in the early 10th century.
same obscenity he once used so capably. Moreover, whereas many of Shakespeare’s obscenities have lost their performative force, having become obscure or laughably archaic (e.g., “poppering pear,” “Zounds,” “strumpet”), O’Brien’s cursing commands the attention (and often the delight) of contemporary spectators.

This assault on linguistic decency commences in Mad Boy’s first scene, when the fearsome appearance of the ghost of Horvendal the Elder (ten feet tall in the McGill production, accompanied by drums and giant wolves) is comically deflated by the old women, Anna and Inga, who shower him with verbal abuse and snowballs:

INGA. Hoy sister – look we gots company.

ANNA. Here piss off, we’re tryin’ to eat.

INGA. Go on then, have ye nothin’ else to do? Be off with ye! Off I say!

ANNA. Ruffian! Hedge-hogg!

INGA. Arse-manglin curr!

ANNA. Aye, go cockwhallop someone’s else!

INGA. That’s tellin’ him!

INGA throws a snowball. The GHOST vanishes. (15)

The deliberate bathos of the scene is augmented by both the slightly displaced (from an Anglo-Canadian perspective) nature of the profanity (“arse” for ass and “shite” for shit) and by the breach of decorum occasioned by the two old women – already established as pathetic and helpless – swearing with sufficient ferocity to dispel a ghost who is desperately trying to be terrifying.

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136 See Romeo and Juliet, 2.1.38-9, for example.
In order for carnivalesque debasement to be effective, the spectator must be able to connect it to the official discourse that is being mocked. *Mad Boy Chronicle* meets this requirement in part simply by cursing on stage, because high standards of decorum and heightened diction are part of the horizon of expectations of contemporary theatre. In addition, the obscene language works in combination with formal conventions to target Shakespeare in general and Hamlet in particular. Much of the dialogue is blank verse, and O’Brien uses iambic pentameter to create an audible parody of Shakespearean verse. The combination of metric precision (or at least a measured imprecision) with the unruly dialect creates the poetic equivalent of a travesty as the formal structure of “poetry” is decrowned by the substitution of obscene and un-poetic words and phrases in the place of appropriately “poetic” content. The more closely the language resembles Shakespeare’s – or a recognizably “Shakespearean” cliché – the more pronounced the de-crowning. For example, Horvendal’s epiphany, “The Baptism’s the place, / Where I’ll rubb Viking Justice in his Face!” (93), debases both *Hamlet* and the ritual of baptism, and Matthius’ parting advice to his son radically abridges Polonius’s famous “to thine ownself be true” speech to, “don’t do nothin’ stupid will ye hey son? It int wise” (29).

O’Brien’s deflation of exalted language reveals that the universal truth contained in Shakespeare’s mystifying, bombastic poetry is often less impressive than it sounds. Hamlet’s contemplation of death is stripped of its grandeur when Horvendal reduces it to doggerel and delivers it not to Yorick, but to a dead dog whose skull he has tripped over: “I nae knew ye. I can guess ye well. / Where your doggish soul went, there should Horvendal. / Howso died ye, sure it served ye right” (130). By thus dignifying an animal’s skull, Horvendal debases its Shakespearean counterpart, which has become a
hallowed icon of Shakespeareana (despite the fact that Hamlet himself uses the skull to turn death into laughing matter\textsuperscript{137}) to smash through the ice in a (botched) suicide attempt. Transforming hallowed objects into productive tools (and vice versa) is a common carnival motif, and by putting the skull, a symbol of the solemnity of death, to such a (potentially) productive (but also, paradoxically, destructive) use, Horvendal debases the exalted and brings the famous skull down to earth (or ice, at least).\textsuperscript{138}

By repeatedly reducing great moments in the history of Western drama to crude clichés, \textit{Mad Boy Chronicle} implies that at the heart of the Mad Boy \textit{fabula}, before Shakespeare obscured it with ornate, exalted language, there is a lively, straightforward tale of revenge to which any audience can relate. The debasement of Shakespearean language in \textit{Mad Boy Chronicle} performs the work at the heart of all carnival forms, bringing the symbolic \textit{Hamlet} – the mystified and mystifying icon of cultural authority – back into a familiar relationship with popular culture. And like the improvisation witnessed by Gary Taylor, the crass language and graphic obscenity of \textit{Mad Boy Chronicle} is less an attack on Shakespeare than on the construction of Shakespeare and the theatre itself as a symbol of appropriate and elevated language, art, and high cultural pretensions.

\textbf{“Have ye ever seen Fengo’s Hole?”: Grotesque Realism}

In theatre, the grotesque body is to the eye what obscene language is to the ear, an affront to the dignified conventions and elevated aesthetic standards of the stage. The grotesque,

\textsuperscript{137} See Bristol 188-93 on how the gravediggers show Hamlet how to use gallows humour and the grotesque body to reveal the “contingent and impermanent” nature of “all categories of social existence, gender, rank, \textit{métier}, and so forth” (193).

\textsuperscript{138} As Bristol notes, carnival celebrates the productivity and fecundity of everyday life and the common people (in contrast with the essential uselessness of the elites and their luxury possessions) by turning symbols of rank and authority into useful tools and vice versa: thus a royal scepter might become a soup ladle, or the ladle could become the clown-king’s scepter.
unruly body is perpetually on display in Mad Boy, because the characters are violent, slovenly Vikings. Although O’Brien pays homage to the real Norsemen of history with various references to their authentic cultural practices (including the Song of Havamal [58], the custom of electing chieftains [40], and the matrilineal descent of property rights [20]), their physical representation reflects and reinforces contemporary stereotypes about the Vikings as, essentially, a medieval forerunner of the Hell’s Angels. The Helsingoreans are given to inappropriate bodily display and poor hygiene, a point underscored in the play’s numerous Rabelasian feasting scenes, which depict them devouring whole animals with their bare hands, and sloshing, chugging, and possibly snorting beer, among other things.

Fengo, in particular, potently embodies the grotesque. He is described in the stage directions as “very huge and very drunk, covered with food, [wearing] an eye patch” (18), and his predisposition to excess in all bodily matters – eating, drinking, sex, and so on – is a dominant motif in the play. The play introduces him in the act of molesting a thirteen year-old girl (Lilja). After pouring beer over her (later he will try to impress the priests by

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139 There is a contradiction at work in O’Brien’s representation of the Helsingoreans: on the one hand, he takes pains to depict ancient Nordic culture accurately and respectfully as part of his critique of the European/Christian colonization of Scandinavia; but on the other, the characters’ appearance and behaviour plays right into the very stereotypes of the savage “Viking” produced by and circulated among that colonizing culture. Thus O’Brien reinforces the quasi-Orientalist stereotype of the Viking (which was popularized along with the word itself in the 18th century) even as he challenges it.

140 The images of excessive eating and drinking, which dominate scenes 1, 2, 14, and 28 of Mad Boy Chronicle, are staples of the carnivalesque, so to speak. Mad Boy’s depictions of excessive feasting and drinking signify a) the contrast between the powerful and the poor, by showing Fengo feasting while Anna and Inga fight over a stolen rabbit or share a pot of boiled seaweed; and b) the corruption of the monks through alcohol: in scene 14 they appear ambivalent about Fengo’s offer of ale, but in scene 28 they are described as “drinking with” Fengo (s.d., 142). The grotesque feast-hall imagery is a detail of the text that may either be nullified or amplified in a specific performance, of course. The decidedly gastronomic language of Morrow’s review of Mad Boy’s 1995 premiere (“slobbering,” “meatier,” “juicy,” “thirst for revenge,” “spilling forth bubbling comedy like an overturned hogshead of wine”) speaks to the visceral quality of the production’s representations of feasting and other bodily functions (“A Viking Free for All,” 152-3). In the McGill production the consumption of food and ale was made grotesque by using real (and very greasy) chickens, but no utensils.
imbibing the same through his nose), he has his men hold her down, then forces her to look in his empty eye socket:

**FENGO:** Have ye ever seen Fengo’s Hole? Fengo show yez Fengo’s Hole. Nasty dirty eyesockett, nothin inside! Look, prettygirl, look!

*FENGO pulls off his eye patch and opens his eye socket. LILJA screams.*

Look’s a bit like a rabbit’s bum, don’t it?

**GERUTHA:** Fengo stop –

**FENGO:** Why art afeard, girlie? It’s a good honest Warr-Wound!

Hoy Matthius – Matthius look! (*MATTHIUS cringes.*) Haaa

haaaa – (19)

Fengo’s graphic display of an unsightly body part (or in this case, his display of the unsightly absence of a sightly body part), coupled with his conflation of human eye-socket and animal anus, exemplifies how grotesque realism breaks decorum, both in the world of the play (as the other characters’ reactions indicate), and in that of the theatre: the scene is both comic and viscerally revolting.

The grotesque is almost ubiquitous in *Mad Boy*, but other notable examples include Lilja brandishing her father’s severed head (112), Gerutha’s lingering death scene (after being stabbed in scene 19, she crawls around begging for mercy until finally
expiring in scene 25), and Fengo’s description of her funeral, which utterly robs the ritual of dignity:

Hah haaaaa!! Dint the ol’ girl flare up? Didn’t she flare up like a blob o’ fish-oil? Burn’d fer hours she. Brighter than a torch! ‘Spect it’s all the lard an’ blubber like, hey? All them pancakes she ett in her stupid life! Hey, Brother Paavo, hey? […] Drink up! Tomorrow we burn the little girl.

(142)

Fengo’s violations of decorum are varied and colourful, usually involving or combining sexual and scatological imagery. When Matthius offers Fengo Lilja’s hand in marriage to curry the favour of the newly-anointed Christian Lord of Helsingor, Fengo stalls, mindful of the new rules of the Church: “Whoa! Hold yer horses, prettygirl, hold yer horses! We’ll get married, nae ye fear, soon as the Church okays it. Gotts to flush out the pottie afore ye shits in it again, right Matthius?” (96). This grotesque equation of the Church’s control of sexual relations with latrine protocol, and of women with excrement, brings the authority of the Church and the sacred bond of marriage down to the material plane, degrading both, making it brutally explicit that the Church’s sanctification of marriage does nothing to alleviate the objectification and oppression of women.

“Looka me, I’m the force o’ wisdom and progress!”: The Lord of Misrule

The most significant (and, along with the profane debasement of exalted speech, most critically celebrated) aspect of O’Brien’s carnivalesque dramaturgy is Fengo’s role as a mock-king or Lord of Misrule. In the tradition of carnival clowns from Falstaff to Homer Simpson, Fengo is a rude, indecorous, and physically grotesque figure who discovers laughing matter through his lack of guile and subtlety. Instead of concealing the
oppressive motives of authority in lofty rhetoric or diplomatic finesse, he uses his power openly and liberally, exposing authority as essentially cruel and self-interested. Fengo’s blatantly self-interested appropriations of the symbols and rituals of authority expose folly and transgression as “the covert reality of rational government” (Bristol 67), especially in act two, when he is endowed with the power and authority of the Church.

Although one might expect the Church’s arrival in Helsingor to signal the restoration of *de jure* authority, it actually begins Fengo’s true rise to power. When the priests arrive – just in time to break up a fight between Fengo and Horvendal, which the latter, surprisingly is on the verge of winning – they identify themselves as emissaries of the Pope and “Rollo, King of Neustria.” Up to this point, Fengo’s rule has gone unopposed, but the priests make it clear that there is a new sheriff in town.

E’en as we speak, Fengo, Jesus Christ impends.

His Knights of the Purple Cross sweep North!

Lord Thorstalf, your neighbour, he refus’d our clerics;

Lo and behold, Fengo, his house burnd down. (88)

Fengo sees the writing on the wall, but proves more than a match for the monks in their game of *realpolitik*. His most potent weapon as a carnival clown is his ability to strategically misinterpret exalted discourse and render it into laughing matter, which both debases it and exposes its real use in legitimizing tyranny. When the priests first show Fengo their huge Bible, he is impressed – not by the authority of the Holy Scriptures, which he cannot read, but by the grisly pictures of the crucifixion, which appeal to his sadistic sensibilities (89). As Paavo explains the exalted scriptures, Fengo instantly
translates them into a commonsense understanding, intuiting how the new ideology can be used to consolidate the power of the old regime:

**PAAVO.** Jesus said, love thine enemy as thy self.

**FENGO.** Aye, that'd throw’em!

**PAAVO.** He said, judge not, lest ye be judged.

**FENGO.** Aye, no judgin’ Fengo!

……………………………………………………………………

**FENGO.** Punishments! Punishments! Yuz gots t'have punishments boys. Whatve ye gott?

**PETRI.** Why --

**PAAVO.** Penances Fengo.

**PETRI.** Excommunication.

**PAAVO.** Depending on the Severity of the Sinn.

**FENGO.** Depending on the Severity -- of Fengo. Ha haaaa! (89-90)

Fengo’s subversion of Christian dogma exemplifies the carnival tactic of comically exposing the role of exalted symbols in worldly oppression. As in all carnival forms, the laughter in these scenes is not trivial, but critical to an alternative epistemology which “purifies the consciousness of men from false seriousness, from dogmatism, from all confusing emotions,” by revealing both the abuses of authority and the ease with which it can be critiqued.(Bakhtin 141). *Mad Boy* uses laughter to reveal how exalted discourses extolling freedom and equality actually enable the tyrant not only to maintain but even to strengthen his political power. Before the priests arrive, Viking custom limits Fengo’s rule with checks and balances, such as regular elections and Gerutha’s legal ownership of
the lands he rules. Once baptized, however, he is consecrated as a Christian lord for life. In addition, he immediately perceives that the new system actually extends his temporal authority to the eternal realm: he no longer needs the threat of physical violence to maintain authority, because as a Christian ruler his dominion extends over his subjects’ afterlives, which he can destroy with a simple “hex-communication.” Thus, he embraces the new order, but far from becoming a model of enlightened rule, he gleefully commences exercising his authority over the souls of his subjects, starting with the wife he no longer needs to legitimize his authority: 141

FENGO. Well, good holyman, I likes your words. […] Don’t want to stand i’ the way of progress!

GERUTHA. But Fengo –

FENGO: Let the statues of Odinn be cut down,

    Let great crucifixes be erected in their stead!

    Tell yer Christian bosses Fengo wants aboard!

    Womann – yer the first heathen I’m hex-communicatin’! (90)

Christianity essentially allows Fengo to outsource oppression to the spiritual plane: we later see Anna and Inga rushing to be confessed and baptized because Fengo has decreed that “Jesus murders all sinners with a Hammer,” and “specially hates […] old wimmen” (92). From the moment of his “conversion,” Fengo doles out and rescind “hex-communications” with relish and spite, blatantly bartering eternal salvation for personal favours. His refusal to treat the exalted ritual with religious solemnity, or even pronounce

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141 Early in the play, Fengo’s introduction of Gerutha to the audience as “Fengo’s wife of seven years, widowed wife of deadbrother lord; [and] lawful holder of deadbrother’s lands,” and later he and Matthius discuss the upcoming Freeman’s Assembly and election (20, 40). The play implies that Fengo’s de jure authority depends on both his marriage and the election, contingencies which Helsingor’s conversion removes.
it correctly, debases and demystifies it. His mis-pronunciation also carries a connotation of superstition ("hexing"), linking it to the pagan practices the Church officially abhors. In addition, as Fengo’s perfunctory announcement of the conversion of Helsingor makes clear, the adoption of a new faith signifies little more than a new veneer over the old idols: the changeover is as simple as nailing crossbeams onto the dragonhead posts.¹⁴²

Similarly, Fengo’s baptism scene uses laughter to show how the new religion sanctions – and even sanctifies the crimes of the powerful. When Fengo finally concludes his comically lengthy confession of horrible crimes – which he interrupts several times to chuckle in delighted reminiscence – he adds, as if in afterthought, the public confession that Shakespeare’s Claudius never utters: “Oh yeh – plus I smashed me brother’s brains” (105). This revelation prompts a concealed Horvendal to attack, but the assault fails because the long-awaited proof of Fengo’s guilt is neutralized by the very act of its utterance: not only is Fengo officially forgiven, he even gains the honorific title, “Fengo the Confessor.” By reducing sacred rituals and discourses to laughing matter, O’Brien exposes both the corruption and cruelty of de jure authority and the role of exalted discourses in legitimizing it.

Once Fengo realizes the utility of religious dogma in expediting material tyranny, he becomes expert at subverting Christian teachings through strategic misquotation. His appropriations of Biblical verse show how the most apparently pious doctrines may play a potent role in legitimizing de jure authority. When Ragnar returns from his whaling trip

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¹⁴²In the McGill production, the expedience of the ideological make-over was emphasized by a comic dumbshow in which clownish Viking carpenters initially refused to deface the sacred dragon-head totems, but were quickly persuaded, by the promise of money and the threat of beatings, to nail perpendicular beams across them, expediently transforming the symbols of Odin into symbols of Jesus.
to find his father dead and his sister missing, Fengo harnesses his Viking rage with an adaptation of the wisdom of Ecclesiastes:

FENGO. Easy ladd easy, this here’s a Christian land.
We gots to take the Boy, legally.
Administer the punishment, slowly and deliberately.
This here’s the Christian Way.
RAGNAR. The Christian Way?
FENGO. Aye, it’s a New Age, innit? To everythin’ there be a season, To every season a meaning.
RAGNAR. What?
FENGO. A time for warr, ladd, and a time fer hate.
A time for fightin, and a time fer dying;
A time for combat, a time for wrangling,
A time for torture, a time for hackin out spleens – (116)
Fengo decrows both Biblical verse and ritual when he baptizes Ragnar to make him a “Christian Soldier”:

FENGO. The Lord is my shepherd what I don’t want,
He maketh me lie down in green water.

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143 Compare the version in King James (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8): To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.
He deploreteth my soul, my cupp runneth over,

For we walk in the shadow of death forever, Amen.

**RAGNAR.** What the fuck was that?

**FENGO.** I just made you a Christian Soldier. Whatever ye do, from here on in, ye do on behalf of the Lord Jesus Christ, understand?

**RAGNAR.** Lord who?

**FENGO.** The fella I been talkin about!

**RAGNAR.** Oh yeh, yeh right. (117)

Fengo’s crass appropriation of Christian doctrine and rhetoric comically demystifies religious discourse and reveals its use in authorizing and legitimizing certain forms of violence on behalf of the state; Ragnar’s reaction shows that as long as everything stays essentially the same, adopting a new religion is only as complicated as learning a new name. (Later, however, Ragnar shows how genuine faith threatens authority. At Lilja’s funeral, he throws his sword on the pyre, renounces violence, and incites “all fighting men” to follow his example; Fengo’s response – “Oh fuck, not another one” – sums up the Christian King’s worst nightmare: that his subjects will begin to take their faith too seriously [146].)

As Fengo’s power grows, Horvendal and Lilja, the “true” Christians, lose their faith and resort to violence, having been even further marginalized and disenfranchised by the regime change that was supposed to liberate them. In what may be the play’s most bitter and blasphemous irony (and certainly among the more daunting stage directions in dramatic history), “the real JESUS” appears to Horvendal, so disillusioned by the results of the conversion that He is driven to advocate violence:
Ohh Horvendal: my shining shattered Angell.

How you failed me! Failed my Path of Love.

Ohh my Hope-Child, how I tried to reach you!

All is soiled now. Listen to your Christ:

Turn Ye Back – Save my Strangled Gospel.

Turn Ye Back – Go mend the Harm they’ve don.

Slay thine Uncle! Go take thy Viking Vengeance!

Stop him! Stop him! Oh Poisoned Love-Truth!

Turn Back and Slay that Mann! (135)

But no one can stop Fengo, and by the end of the play, all opposition has been either wiped out or, in the case of the priests, corrupted and co-opted, in a shocking conclusion which marks a significant departure from the expected trajectories of both Hamlet and typical carnivalesque structure.

Carnival festivities typically begin by crowning a mock-king, and conclude with his overthrow, beating, and un-crowning, which herald the return of de jure authority. According to both the plot it parodies and the conventions of popular comedy (like Hamlet, every episode of The Simpsons, Family Guy, and almost any other sitcom, concludes with a symbolic decrowning and return to order), Mad Boy should, like any plot incited by a misappropriation of authority, end with justice and restoration. The first act reinforces this expectation: at first Fengo seems invincible, but when Christ begins to appear to other characters in visions and dreams, his increasing apprehension suggests that the arrival of Christian order will lead to Fengo’s de-crowning. But when the priests do arrive, instead of reinstating justice and order they symbolically crown him – and then
find *themselves* subverted and de-crowned by him. This reversal clears the way for Horvendal to restore the balance – particularly after a desperate Christ appears and commands him to seek vengeance – but Horvendal’s final attack on Fengo, at Lilja’s funeral, is thwarted by agents of the Church. The priest Petri impales him on a cross, leaving Fengo unopposed and thwarting the spectators’ expectations of just resolution through the intervention of a greater, more legitimate power. Fengo’s triumph suggests that the conventional restoration of order also restores cruelty, injustice, and hegemony, and rather than celebrating the triumph of rule over misrule, the conclusion forces spectators to wonder whether there is even any difference.

**The Dissident Hamlet**

O’Brien’s carnivalesque tactics, including the obscene debasement of sacred language, the grotesque body, and the de-crowning of symbols of authority by a mock king, in some ways resemble those used by Shakespeare himself. But there are some key differences. First, of course, is the surprising conclusion: O’Brien’s mock-king refuses to submit to de-crowning, breaking the conventional promise (of both comedies and tragedies) that justice, peace, and stability will be restored by the return of *de jure* order. Second, although *Hamlet* is an adaptation, it has not typically been *received* as one, nor has it been viewed through the lens of fidelity criticism as a response to a canonical author. Third, O’Brien wrote *Mad Boy Chronicle*, an acknowledged appropriation, to expose, respond to, and critique Shakespeare’s own, unacknowledged appropriation of “*Vita Amleti.*” O’Brien attempts (or fashions his work as an attempt) to reclaim the story, restoring the signifiers and cultural markers of the ancient Danes that Saxo, de Belleforest, and Shakespeare erased in order to accommodate Christian audiences.
In other words, the Christian colonization depicted in *Mad Boy Chronicle* is not wholly O’Brien’s invention but rather a dramatization of the process by which a popular *fabula* was appropriated by a series of Christian, non-Scandinavian authors, and ultimately over-coded with the values of high culture. O’Brien responds to this process of cultural appropriation with a sort of counter-colonization. Restoring the extinct cultural voice of the Norse saga is impossible, of course, but O’Brien attempts to at least strip the story of its canonical, exalted status, savaging one “original” to salvage another.

Using Shakespeare’s own source against him entails a pre-emptive strike against fidelity criticism: the implicit rebuttal to charges of infidelity is that *Mad Boy* is not betraying Shakespeare but restoring faith in the “true” original by stripping away the thick lacquer of Shakespearean refinements that obscure and mystify the spirit of the original. O’Brien’s illumination of this “lost” source of *Hamlet* reminds spectators that *Hamlet* is not really original, and by setting the play in Viking Denmark O’Brien exposes Shakespeare’s courtly, Renaissance Christian setting as inauthentic – a mere adaptation.

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144 The sagas, in the context of pre-literate Nordic culture, were much more than fireside entertainment: as “the principal way in which knowledge of ethics, religion, history, and political ideology were transmitted in Scandinavian society” without writing or schools or a code of laws (Sorenson 206), they constituted essentially the entire ideological state apparatus. The oral literature passed on by the *skalds*, including the *Mad Boy* *fabula*, was the means by which the entire culture was transmitted from generation to generation. Beginning with the Latin translation of the Christian monk, Saxo, however, the *fabula* has been appropriated by other cultures which retain the story while changing its utility, in much the same way that Fengo uses Christianity. Saxo changed the poetics and the politics of the saga, turning the oral epic into a Latin poem modeled on Silver Age Roman poetry, into which he makes frequent digressions about the inappropriately behaviour of the ignorant pagans; Francois de Belleforest, too, frequently reminds his readers that the story takes place long “before the kingdome of Denmark received the faith of Jesus Christ,” and that, therefore, “the common people in those dayes were barbarous and uncivil and their princes cruel, without faith or loyalty, seeking nothing but murther” (85). Shakespeare, in effect, completes this process by making the characters Christian and reducing the Norse *skald’s* voice to the incorporeal form of the Ghost (first introduced by de Belleforest). In the saga, the question is not whether revenge is an appropriate action but how to execute it; for Shakespeare, who erases all but the most superficial aspects of the old Danish culture, the question is how to restore divine (Christian) order to Denmark while resisting the interpellation of the old pagan code, (dis)embodied by the Ghost, which demands revenge. For a more detailed examination of the appropriation of the saga, and of O’Brien’s counter-appropriation, see my MA dissertation; I have not examined this aspect of O’Brien’s dramaturgy in depth here because it is not readily available to most spectators.
Furthermore, by repatriating Hamlet to his Danish roots, O’Brien implicitly disintermediates the English colonial heritage through which we receive Shakespeare: Canadians don’t need to emulate the English model because the story isn’t really English at all. Although it may be a stretch to claim that “only in Canada could such a play get writ” (9), Canadians are well-positioned to appreciate *Mad Boy Chronicle*’s ambivalent relationship with *Hamlet*: the play targets an audience which can both claim Shakespeare as its own and yet feels he is strangely foreign; which appreciates Shakespeare and yet also feels somewhat tyrannized by him; and which lives in a culture characterized by both the constant pressure of foreign empires at its historical and geographic borders, and the equally constant pressure to define itself in relation to them.

Such claims, however, are only effective to the extent that readers and spectators are made aware of them, and this awareness can only be spread through paratextuality: unless spectators are prepared by posters, reviews, program notes, or other publicity material, they may interpret O’Brien’s adaptations as trivial buffoonery – “Viking *Hamlet*” sounds more like a pretext for a five-minute improv scene than a full-length play. Therefore, the following reception analysis will focus on how the play frames itself and is framed by public discourse (including the playwright’s notes, publicity material, and newspaper reviews). The reception of *Mad Boy Chronicle* shows both the efficacy of O’Brien’s tactics and their paradoxical weakness: while O’Brien clearly attempts to return *Hamlet*, Shakespeare, and theatre to a familiar relationship with popular culture, he also wants to be taken “seriously,” which means he claims high cultural legitimacy even as he dismisses high culture. Or, as he puts it, “The question I get asked the most is:
Should we take this play seriously, or is it just a big joke? The answer is, as always, yes” (9).

Reception

_Mad Boy Chronicle_ has consistently aroused the excitement and praise of critics and theatre “insiders,” and yet its performance history is somewhat disappointing: in spite of consistently good reviews and a spot on the short-list of nominees for the 1996 Governor-General’s Award, it has had only one major professional production in Canada (Alberta Theatre Projects’ _playRites ’95 festival_), one small professional production in Los Angeles (24th Street Theatre, 2001), one abortive summer festival production in Kingston 145 (1997), and four university productions (McGill in 1997, Trinity Rep Conservatory in 1997, Capilano College in 2004, and Lethbridge in 2006). Although this is a better-than-average record for a Canadian play, _Mad Boy_ lacks the profile of _Harlem Duet_ or _Goodnight Desdemona, Good Morning Juliet_, and until its recent anthologization in _The Shakespeare’s Mine_, it had gone out of print and was not gaining any new readers.

Several factors contributed to the play’s failure to catch on in spite of its critical acclaim. Perhaps the most significant is that the play’s large cast, epic scale, and technical difficulties make it a daunting project for most theatres to tackle: small companies cannot afford to hire such a large cast, 146 and large regional companies

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145 The 1997 Kingston Summer Festival shut down two weeks early. Festival organizers cited the resignation of lead actor Michael McManus, who played Horvendal. McManus, who gave two weeks notice upon finding out that the acting company would be kicked out of its residences at Queen’s University two weeks before the end of the run, maintained that he could have been easily replaced, and in turn accused the producers of using his resignation as an excuse for closing down a festival that was losing money due to poor attendance (sometimes as low as 10% of seating capacity). See James Adams, “Kingston Festival to Wrap Early,” _Globe and Mail_, 23 August 1997: C4.

146 _Mad Boy Chronicle_ requires at least nine actors, but even this number would amount to a skeleton crew unable to fill out its numerous crowd scenes: in addition to the many feasts, the play features a procession.
generally only undertake such a venture if the large cast can be offset by large audiences. Thus, big shows usually mean a combination of musicals, “family fare,” and big brand names such as Disney, Dickens, or Shakespeare. University companies have the luxury of free labour, but may not be up to the play’s material and technical demands: in addition to the expensive and challenging spectacles, stunts, and stage combat, the play is long and requires talented actors with the ability and energy to carry its momentum through its twenty-nine scene and act transitions (both the McGill and Kingston productions suffered from flagging energy, which can make the first act drag painfully). In addition, most universities seek shows with an abundance of strong parts for women, and although Mad Boy surpasses Hamlet in this regard (with four good female roles), it still represents an overwhelmingly male world that brutally limits the options available to its female characters.

Notwithstanding its failure to overcome these material and cultural obstacles and carve out a more prominent niche in the Canadian (counter)canon, Mad Boy Chronicle’s reception history does suggest that O’Brien’s intertextual – and especially paratextual – strategies achieved many of his objectives. Most notably, in spite of being exactly the sort of play one might expect to see dismissed as an unfaithful, unoriginal adaptation, Mad Boy has for the most part evaded – and even exploited – the discourses of fidelity criticism and anti-adaptation prejudice. As a Canadian comic parody of the quintessential English tragedy, Mad Boy Chronicle faces triple jeopardy: the play is a copy of the most canonical of originals, Canadian theatre is a derivative of “authentic” English/European

of monks, Fengo’s Baptism, and two funerals, and its chorus of Vikings and priests is necessary to remind spectators that the fate of an entire community is at stake.

147 On the Kingston production, see “Mad Boy’s a Full Show Piece” I can attest to the shortcomings of the McGill production in this regard, because a number of spectators complained to me about the pacing.
theatre, and “trivial” comedy always takes second place to exalted tragedy. And yet the newspaper reviews, which often provide the strongest examples of fidelity criticism, are generally positive, some of them exuberantly so, and where anti-adaptation prejudice is present it is usually not directed at O’Brien – some critics even praise O’Brien’s originality.

Publicity and Pre-Show Paratexts
Because of Mad Boy Chronicle’s somewhat star-crossed production history, there are relatively few surviving programs or posters, and although ATP maintains an archive of its productions, Mad Boy was produced as a part of ATP’s playRites ’95 festival, and at that time all playRites shows shared a single program and poster. In addition, the play has received scant scholarly attention and debuted before the internet created a forum for more democratic responses. Therefore the paratexts available for analysis are mostly newspaper reviews, the few surviving program notes, and the playwright’s notes (printed as a “Foreword” to the published play). Although newspaper reviews reflect the responses of only a small and unusual group of spectators, they frame the reception of many or most of the “average” spectators. As such, they represent not only the spectrum of possible responses to the play at that moment, but paratexts which strongly influence the reception of the play (i.e., by spectators who watch the play after reading reviews).

As with the earlier case studies, however, it makes sense to start by looking at these “interior” paratexts – the public discourses created by the playwright and the theatre.

148 They still do, but now each play at least gets a distinctive image in publicity material. ATP is also remarkable for encouraging patrons to fill out feedback forms inserted in the program and post them in the lobby, but – most unfortunately – the value of this extraordinary archive of responses from ordinary spectators has not always been recognized. ATP only began archiving them recently, and my search for the audience feedback forms on Mad Boy Chronicle was fruitless. They are, tragically, either long gone or buried deep in a box of miscellanea under the Epcor Centre for the Performing Arts in Calgary.
companies producing the work, which may frame the reception of the reviewers in the same way that the reviews frame the reception of subsequent spectators. Like Djanet Sears, Michael O’Brien has quite a bit to say about his play, and his statements appear in both the published script as a foreword and in program notes and interviews. Wherever he is quoted, O’Brien explains the origin of the play and its complicated intertextual genealogy, cueing readers and spectators to interpret the *Hamlet* references in a specific way. His foreword acknowledges a variety of sources in addition to those already mentioned, including the “Bad Quarto” of *Hamlet*, “the Icelandic Hrafnkel's Saga, Rosalind Miles' *The Rites of Man*; Robert McNeil's *The Story of English*, and Jane Goodall's *Life Among the Wild Chimpanzees*” (O’Brien 8). It also offers a comic description of O’Brien’s creative process, describing how, armed with scissors, glue, and copies of the “infamous ‘Bad Quarto’ of Shakespeare’s ‘Hamlet,’” and Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*, O’Brien “put [himself] to work trying to debase the greatest play of all time” (8). Thus O’Brien characterizes his paradoxical relationship with Shakespeare and *Hamlet* – on the one hand, he admires them as the greatest of all time; on the other, he delights in subjecting both to a violent “debasement” with scissors – which encourages the reader to adopt a similarly mischievous frame of mind.

In addition, the layout of the published script (which contains extensive paratextual material, including a jacket with a summary and quotations from the reviews, a frontispiece, an author bio, an acknowledgements and dedications page, a playwright’s foreword, a production chronology, and a dramatis personae) graphically destabilizes Shakespeare’s authority. The front cover shows a bare-chested Shaun Smyth (Horvendal in ATP’s production) brandishing a broadsword, immediately invoking the medieval
period and promising plenty of swordplay. The back jacket summary tells us that *Mad Boy Chronicle* “hails the Hamlet story howling back to its origins,” challenging default assumptions about *Hamlet*’s originality (although it appeals to a more conservative ideal when it describes the play as a “timeless tale of murder and revenge”). Following the summary are quotations from reviews by Morrow, Jon Kaplan of Toronto’s *NOW Magazine*, and Anika Van Wyk of the *Calgary Sun*, which describe the play as “hilarious,” “wickedly funny,” and “witty,” respectively, but also endow it with a certain *gravitas* with adjectives like “audacious” (Morrow), “sprawling” (Kaplan), and “bold” (Van Wyk). The excerpt from Van Wyk’s review passionately (if awkwardly) declares that “Michael O’Brien has earned the label of brave,” suggesting that the play is somehow daring, challenging, or innovative.

The title page, too, challenges Shakespeare’s status, even while acknowledging his contribution:

*Mad Boy Chronicle*

by Michael O’Brien

from

“Gesta Danorum”

by Saxo Grammaticus c. 1200 A.D.

and

“Hamlet, Prince of Denmark”

by William Shakespeare c. 1600 A.D.”

The implicit descending order of importance graphically belittles Shakespeare even while crediting him, and the dates which follow Saxo’s and Shakespeare’s names serve no

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149 The script employs a Celtic font; this is the closest approximation I can provide.
apparent purpose other than to make it absolutely clear that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is not
the original, but is in fact as belated in relation to Saxo as O’Brian is in relation to
Shakespeare. In addition, the “c,” indicating *circa*, subtly degrades Shakespeare by
treating him as if he too, like Saxo, was an obscure figure shrouded in the mists of
history, about whom only a few vague and imprecisely dated trivia are known.

Like the paratexts in the published script, theatre company publicity materials do
the important work of framing the play’s relationship to Shakespeare and establishing a
horizon of expectations. Alberta Theatre Projects’ publicity materials for the 1995
premiere *Mad Boy Chronicle* are rather unusual in this respect. First, as mentioned,
above, ATP did not create separate posters and programs for each play in the festival, so
there is no image (as there is on the cover of the book). Second, although a press release
announcing the *playRites ’95* lineup on 8 September 1994, puts *Hamlet* in the foreground
(opening with “Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is one of the most famous plays ever written.
However, the basic story of the great tragedy goes far back in Scandinavian lore”
[“*playRites ’95 On Its Way*”]), the 9 January 1995 press release, announcing the
impending premiere, mentions Saxo Grammaticus in the second sentence, but makes no
mention of *Hamlet* or Shakespeare whatsoever (“Vikings Plunder *Mad Boy Chronicle* at
*playRites ’95*”), and the daily ad running in the *Calgary Herald* Entertainment section
offers only the most oblique of hints, without any direct reference to Shakespeare. Its
brief description, beneath the play’s title (in Gothic lettering, superimposed over a blotch
representing blood spatter), and above a coarse language warning, reads: “Set in a world
rife with religious turmoil, wandering spirits, rollicking horror, and merciless humour
comes a timeless tale of murder and revenge. A tale told many times before but never like this!”

One can only speculate on ATP’s motives for omitting references to Shakespeare – it may have to do with avoiding a perceived conflict between the idea of a Shakespeare adaptation and ATP’s mandate of producing only contemporary plays, or the fact that the newspapers had already emphasized Shakespeare enough. O’Brien himself may have wished to suppress Shakespearean references, as his comments in the Calgary Sun’s preview piece suggest that he was tired of fielding questions on the subject: “As far as comparisons between himself and the most famous playwright of all time, they aren’t welcome. ‘I’m not trying to be better than Shakespeare. If people want to compare me to Shakespeare it’s their problem’” (van Wyk, “The Rite Stuff”). O’Brien’s brief program notes, too, omit any direct reference to Shakespeare (a fact which Marzena Czarnecki, reviewing the production for the University of Calgary Gauntlet, found “rather curious”), although his use of Saxo’s character names provides a hint: “The tale of Amleth, son of Orvendel, and his wicked Uncle Fengo was first scratched on parchment around 1200 AD, though it had been kicking around Nordic campfires for centuries before that.” Another oblique allusion follows: “This rambling tale of revenge soon spread through Europe, forming the basis for many a poem, play and folktale.” (O’Brien neglects to mention that one of these just happens to be the most famous play ever written.) He concludes with a cryptic claim to authenticity: “This then is my version of the saga … if not the truth behind the myth, then perhaps closer to the truth than ever. If not the truth
behind our cultural roots, then perhaps the truth about myself.” Read in advance, this note seems enigmatic; in hindsight, it is an explicit claim to be restoring the “true” *Hamlet.*

Although there are few surviving examples of theatre publicity material from Mad Boy Chronicle’s 1995 premiere, the online publicity material from the 24th Street Theatre’s 2001 production in Los Angeles did survive the production by several years, and it is worth mentioning here because of the innovative way in which the theatre attempted to exploit this relatively new paratextual medium. At a time when most theatre companies were just discovering the possibilities of online box offices, 24th Street Theatre created a multimedia web site of “Frolicking Fun Viking Games,” which attempted to capture the play’s anachronistic irony with interactive parodies. The main page features a Viking warrior who offers users the chance (communicated both audibly, though voice recordings, and visibly, with cartoon dialogue bubbles, when users moused over links shaped like Norse runes) to “Look into Fengo’s hole … and Win!”, “Dress the Mad Boy,” check out “Ragnar’s Viking-cam,” learn how to make saffron whale blubber soufflé on “Cooking with Anna and Inga,” or master the Viking dialect. Using the actors’ images and voices, the site alluded to *Hamlet* in ways that suggested the sort of treatment of Shakespeare spectators could expect from the play, complete with parody ad banners flashing “To Be…/…or Not To Be? / Click for Matthius’ Suicide Hotline” (alluding to scene 12, in which O’Brien’s analogue character for Polonius advises his daughter to kill herself (74-76)). The relatively subtle references to *Hamlet* catch one’s

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150 When I asked them, neither O’Brien nor director Bob White could recall whether there was a deliberate attempt to suppress references to Shakespeare in ATP’s publicity materials.

151 The same Viking appeared on the production’s poster with a cartoon-style dialogue bubble reading “Hamlet is a Pixie Boy!” The website remains active: [http://www.24thstreet.org/madboy/](http://www.24thstreet.org/madboy/).
eye even while the site in general emphasizes that *Mad Boy Chronicle* offers something other than a parody of *Hamlet*.

**Reception and Newspaper Reviews**

Reviews of *Mad Boy Chronicle* comprise both descriptions of and responses to the production, so in addition to framing O’Brien’s use of Shakespeare, they also offer evidence of the efficacy of his adaptive tactics. The reviews generally share two common features: they all do the crucial work of invoking a specific relationship between *Mad Boy Chronicle* and *Hamlet*, and most of them also comment on the play’s “provocative” elements. The reviews invariably exploit the Shakespeare/Hamlet connection, in part for the same reason the playwright does: citing “Shakespeare,” whether in a play or a headline, attracts the curiosity of a wider audience. In so doing, they also automatically situate *Mad Boy* in the discourse of adaptation and anti-adaptation prejudices. In this sense *Mad Boy*’s newspaper paratexts follow the pattern observed in the cases of *Harlem Duet* and *After the Orchard*: they invariably draw attention to the canonical hypotext or author, framing the reception of the new play in the context of an old one. Here are some exemplary excerpts:

“Michael O’Brien loved the classics. And he loved *Hamlet.*” (Burliuk, “Hamlet’s Norse Roots.”)

“29-year-old Toronto dramatist Michael O’Brien is a bit of a scholar. To write *Mad Boy Chronicle*, he happily rooted back into medieval European literature to unearth the Danish saga that inspired the world's most famous tragedy.” (Morrow, “Let the Plays Begin.”)
“Imagine Hamlet, prince of Denmark, as a grungy teenage barbarian who pretends to be a dog.” (Morrow, “Viking Free for All.”)

“[…] Michael O’Brien’s rude, irreverent retelling of Hamlet straddles both parody and serious intent.” (Morrow, “Proud to Be PlayRites.”)

“‘One of the great things about […] Mad Boy is it’s like working on a Shakespeare piece,’ [Kingston director Peter Hinton] said, although he is quick to add it is not a Hamlet send-up.” (Brousseau.)

“O’Brien’s Mad Boy Chronicle […] is not technically an adaptation of Hamlet.” (Kirchhoff, “A Hamlet By Any Other Name.”)

“It would be a stretch to call Mad Boy Chronicle an adaptation of Hamlet. In fact O’Brien’s advice to theatre-goers is to forget Hamlet altogether.” (Burliuk, “Hamlet’s Norse Roots.”)

The latter three examples recall Marti Maraden’s anxious insistence that After the Orchard is not an adaptation of The Cherry Orchard. As in that case, mentioning the hypotext in order to suppress it precipitates a paradox: once one has read such a statement, ignoring it is indeed like “not thinking about elephants while a parade of them goes by” (Kirchhoff). But whereas After the Orchard’s paratexts tend to mention Chekhov only briefly (and ostensibly only to downplay the connection), Mad Boy Chronicle’s paratexts more often discuss its relationship to Hamlet in detail, and if the critics view adaptation with suspicion, they don’t label O’Brien as the guilty party. Some, clearly buy into the logic of O’Brien’s appropriation, including Kate Taylor, who notes for the benefit of her readers that “Shakespeare did not invent his plots but borrowed them from literary sources. The story of Hamlet appears in a medieval history of
Denmark, and that is where O’Brien returns with *Mad Boy Chronicle*” (Taylor, “Black Spoof”).

Positive reviews of *Mad Boy Chronicle* attack fidelity criticism from two sides: they pre-empt their readers’ prejudices against copies by emphasizing the play’s originality, while simultaneously pointing out that *Mad Boy’s* true pedigree predates even *Hamlet*. Like Taylor, Martin Morrow lets his readers in on the secret: “Michael O’Brien’s rough, irreverent retelling of literature’s most famous tragedy owes less to Shakespeare than to the Bard’s ancient source: the tale of Amleth found in the “Gesta Danorum,” a 13th Century Latin collection of Danish history and legend by Saxo Grammaticus” (Morrow: 1995). Madeleine Shaner, who reviewed the Los Angeles production, also educates her readers about *Mad Boy’s* complicated origins:

Combining some irreverent Norse history with a giant dollop of farce, a barrel of bathos, some worse-than-verse, some Viking urban legends, some crusading Christianity, and a giant dose of stick-this-in-your-ear puh-leaze!, this work purports to tell the real story of *Hamlet*, as extrapolated from the "Bad Quarto" of Shakespeare’s Hamlet; [and] Gesta Danorum, the Medieval source for the Hamlet story. (Shaner 2001, emphasis mine)

These reviews tell readers how to interpret the Shakespeare references and the Viking setting, justifying this adaptive choice (which spectators might otherwise puzzling or trivial) as a gesture of fidelity and authenticity. Almost all of the previews and reviews point out that *Mad Boy* is actually based on *Hamlet’s* ancient “Viking” source, and several (Morrow, Kirchhoff, Shaner) mention Saxo Grammaticus or *Gesta Danorum* by
name. This information arouses the curiosity of readers while allowing the critics themselves to display their own erudition and class. The fact that Shaner’s review cites the same sources as the playwright’s foreword, in the same order, also demonstrates how paratexts influence reception: Shaner herself had been prepared by O’Brien’s notes.

Aside from potentially arousing the reader’s curiosity about the “original” Hamlet, references to Saxo suggest the influence of another layer of paratext that is only slightly less perishable than the performance itself: the theatre’s own publicity material. Although the critics are content to let their readers imagine that they were already acquainted with “the Bard’s ancient sources” before they received the media kit, it seems highly unlikely that Shaner, Kirchhoff, and Morrow all instantly recognized O’Brien’s allusions to a twelfth-century Danish manuscript they just happened to have on their last summer’s reading list. In some cases, critics are content simply to pass on a theatre’s publicity material directly to the public: the Lethbridge Herald’s preview of the University of Lethbridge production, printed on October 12, 2006, is nearly identical to an article written by U of L publicist Katherine Wasiak for the October 2006 edition of the Legend, U of L’s monthly newspaper. The Herald reviewer, Al Beeber, adds about three paragraphs, but leaves the rest untouched.

In addition to framing (and implicitly justifying) O’Brien’s dramaturgy as a faithful return to an authentic source rather than an unfaithful desecration of Shakespeare, positive reviews focus on the play’s novelty rather than its fidelity. Morrow identifies it as a “new” play, even though “Hamlet” is the second word after the subtitle:

152 Since the reviews also invoke Monty Python with suspicious frequency, it seem germane to paraphrase King Arthur’s response to the question of how he just happens to know the average velocity of an unladen swallow, in The Holy Grail: “well, when you’re a theatre critic, you just have to know these things.”
There’s method to the madness in this hilarious new play!

Imagine Hamlet, prince of Denmark, as a grungy teenage barbarian who pretends to be a dog. Think of his wicked uncle, King Claudius, as a slobbering, lecherous Viking lord who looks like Long John Silver crossed with a … Hell’s Angel [sic]. And … Polonius … as a fawning idiot whose sage advice to his son is, “Don’t do anything stoopid, lad, it ain’t wise.” (Qtd. in O’Brien 152)

Morrow deliberately invokes the aforementioned anti-adaptation prejudices specifically to dispel them, adding, “Is this yet another misguided interpretation of Shakespeare? Hamlet for the Dumb and Dumber crowd?” The phrase “yet another misguided interpretation” both reflects and invokes anti-adaptation prejudices: Morrow is confident that his readers will know exactly what he means. And yet he quickly and unambiguously divorces Mad Boy Chronicle from this dreadful genre, continuing “No, it’s Mad Boy Chronicle, an audacious hilarious new play making its debut in a wild and often exhilarating production” (152). For Morrow, Mad Boy Chronicle crosses a line between adaptation and novelty, and thus effectively transcends the status of mere adaptation or “misguided interpretation.” Mad Boy, that is, did not challenge Morrow to rethink his assumptions about adaptations, nor does he ask his readers to rethink theirs (although van Wyk comes closer, suggesting that an adaptation can be better than the original: “Mad Boy is a witty, bold, spry interpretation of a classic – a much better version than the modernized Hamlet, which Theatre Calgary attempted to make fresh last February”). And
although Morrow characterizes *Mad Boy* as a new play rather than an adaptation, his description actually invokes myriad cultural and literary sources. He appeals to the reader not by describing how original the play is but by how well it blends together so many disparate *familiar* icons, including Shakespeare, Hamlet, Hells Angels, Vikings, Biblical verse, Long John Silver, the “grunge” aesthetic (prevalent among youths of Horvendal’s age in 1995) and the cult heroes of British absurdist comedy: “At times *[Mad Boy]* resembles nothing so much as a Monty Python parody of a Norse legend” (152).

Theatre artists often assume that positive reviews correlate with strong attendance, but (whether or not this is actually true) reviews may influence reception in less obvious ways as well. Reviews of *Mad Boy Chronicle* not only negate fidelity criticism by informing readers how to read O’Brien in relation to Shakespeare and Saxo, they also warn readers about the play’s provocative elements, and in so doing, pre-empt provocation. For example, both Martin Morrow and Anika van Wyk warn that “some will be offended” by the scene in which Jesus appears and impels Horvendal to murder his uncle. Readers who already know they will hate a play that blasphemes both Jesus and Shakespeare are likely to avoid it, in which case the reviews pre-empt a possible negative reception. On the other hand, readers who might otherwise have been offended, had they not been forewarned, may instead respond to Morrow’s construction of the ideal spectator: “for those who can tell the difference between wanton blasphemy and a pointed look at the abuse of Christianity, O’Brien’s bold comedy is fresh, funny, fascinating, and one of the best to come out of this nine-year-old festival” (in O’Brien 154). Most of Morrow’s readership of middle-class *Calgary Herald* subscribers would like to see themselves as “those who can tell the difference,” and Morrow’s review gives
them both permission and instructions on how to do so. In addition, this closing line in the review speaks to the reader’s sense of civic pride, reminding readers that playRites is both a local tradition and a national event. Morrow’s review implicitly urges Calgarians (who are sensitive about their city being portrayed in national media as a cultural backwater populated by uncultured, ignorant cowboys) to make a strong showing at playRites and thereby prevent the out-of-town reviewers from using a half-empty auditorium as an excuse to depict Calgarians as puritanical rubes who can’t distinguish “wanton blasphemy” from sophisticated social critique.

Local newspaper coverage of the Kingston and Lethbridge productions, too, warns readers about (or perhaps tempts them with) the play’s “ irreverence” and violence. In an interview with the Kingston Whig-Standard, director Peter Hinton plays up the potential for controversy, saying, “It’s a challenging play for Kingston because Kingston is [a] very largely conservative and […] religious […] community and this play is savage in its take on […] Christianity […]. I think there will be people who will be offended and […] people cheering. […] I love outrage” (qtd. in Brousseau). The subsequent review does not mention any outrage, but does warn that “[y]ou might not always like what you see” (Mad Boy’s a Full Show Piece”). The Lethbridge Herald also plays up the play’s controversial elements: “Many will think it blasphemous, but O’Brien fearlessly confronts the reason why the Gospel of Peace has led so often to war, and his play is a searing indictment of the established churches” (“U of L Play Deftly Explores Serious Themes Amid Comedy”). Like Morrow in 1995, Beeber’s review probably increased the likelihood of a friendly audience and pre-empted provocation, by causing those who
choose to attend to anticipate a positive experience, while discouraging potentially hostile spectators from attending at all.\footnote{Lethbridge is located in southern Alberta’s “Bible belt,” home to many of Alberta’s most right-wing politicians and voters, and a prominent Mormon community. Shortly after ATP premiered \textit{Mad Boy Chronicle}, two Conservative MLAs from this region (Lorne Taylor and Ron Hierath) were among a group of provincial politicians who called for punitive funding cuts to ATP for producing \textit{Angels in America} in Calgary (a four-hour drive away).}

Enthusiastic reviews may also affect future reception, when they are appropriated as publicity material for subsequent productions. Morrow’s review has been especially potent in this regard. It won the 1995 Nathan Cohen Award for Theatre Criticism and was reprinted (along with a note to that effect) as an Afterword to the published version of the play. Thus framed as an example to theatre critics everywhere, this review is now in an unusual position to influence future readers, reviewers, and audiences. It is unusual for a published play to include this kind of paratext, so one may assume that O’Brien and his publishers chose to include it as the ideal example of how to interpret and respond to the play. Preserving an otherwise ephemeral review in this way also makes it available to future publicists, and traces of Morrow’s influence in later responses suggest that it has been appropriated and recycled as publicity material. Reviews of the Lethbridge and Kingston productions echo Morrow’s description of the play as a “Monty Python parody of a Norse legend,”\footnote{Anika van Wyk’s review for the \textit{Calgary Sun} also compares the play to \textit{Monty Python}. Both reviews first ran on 6 February 1995.} and Taylor’s review of the latter notes that “the [Kingston] festival’s publicity to the show keeps invoking Monty Python” (Beeber, “U of L Play”; Burliuk, “Hamlet’s Norse Roots”; Taylor, “Black Spoof”). In fact, the comparison is not especially apt – although \textit{Mad Boy}’s anachronistic presentation of history and cynical take on religion recall \textit{The Life of Brian}, the play is darker in tone and relentlessly rational, in contrast with the absurdist and surrealist tendencies of Monty Python – so it is
unlikely that the reviewers all thought of it independently. But even if it is not a particularly accurate comparison, “Shakespeare + Monty Python” is certainly a marketable equation for producers to exploit, and Morrow’s off-hand reference has now become a powerful association: spectators of this play are very likely to read it through Monty Python as well as Shakespeare.

**Fidelity Criticism and Genre Elitism in Mad Boy Reviews**

In contrast with the positive reviews (Beeber, Morrow, *Whig-Standard*, Shaner), which generally focus on its original and novel aspects, the negative comments are grounded in comparisons with *Hamlet*. *LA Times* critic Philip Brandes perceived how the play complicated the relationship between adaptations and adapted texts, but was clearly disturbed by the implications:

> But the uneasy question remains: What to do with the references once we get them? Echoing the original in couplets like "The baptism's the place/Where I'll rub Viking justice in his face" underscores the central problem here: The conceit is too weirdly elaborate for parody, but not strong enough to extricate itself from the shadow of a greater play. (Brandes 2001)

Brandes’s review is firmly embedded in what Robert Stam would call dichotomous thinking. His image of *Mad Boy* as struggling to escape the shadow of the “greater play” imagines that adaptations seek independence from their “master-texts”; but if *Mad Boy* did somehow manage to extricate itself from *Hamlet’s* shadow, it would be a much less
interesting play. Unlike Morrow, Brandes found that the play did trouble his assumptions about adaptation and, unable to resolve this “central problem,” he gave the play a comparatively lukewarm review.

The reviews by Kirchhoff (cited above) and Kate Taylor\textsuperscript{156} reveal similar ambivalence. Even though neither critic is quite ready to dismiss the play outright, both reviews (like Brandes’s) ultimately come down to the question “To be, or not to be Hamlet?” For one reviewer, the answer is clear: Marzena Czarnecki’s review for the University of Calgary \textit{Gauntlet} is titled “Not to Be.” Czarnecki is by far the harshest critic of the play, and also the most transparently prejudiced against adaptation: “The script is second-rate at best and not particularly more innovative than \textit{Hamlet}. One wonders how arrogant a playwright must be to think, ‘Hey, if I rewrote \textit{Hamlet} it’d be way better.’”\textsuperscript{157} This response exemplifies knee-jerk fidelity criticism, but most other critics acknowledge the unfairness and inaccuracy of such a response. H.J. Kirchhoff concedes that “It seems mean-spirited to criticize a play for not being Shakespeare,” although he goes on to do just that, claiming that “it would be easier to appreciate [the play] if you could see it without thinking about \textit{Hamlet}” – which would indeed be “like not thinking about elephants while a parade of them goes by” for anyone who has read Kirchhoff’s review. Having thus deprived his readers of any chance of viewing it in the

\textsuperscript{155} Brandes’s imagery recalls Bloom’s model of literary influence as an Oedipal struggle (1973).

\textsuperscript{156} Both Kirchhoff and Taylor reviewed the play for the \textit{Globe and Mail}, writing about the Calgary and Kingston productions, respectively.

\textsuperscript{157} Czarnecki’s dismissive tone is more typical of its medium than of responses to the play: university reviewers are much more inclined than professional critics to use reviewing as a forum to display their wit and erudition by crafting clever insults at the expense of the subject. The \textit{Calgary Sun}’s Anika van Wky, by contrast, praises O’Brien for exactly the reason Czarnecki attacks him: “When a modern playwright rewrites \textit{Hamlet}, one of Shakespeare’s best-loved dramas, most people would consider him either excessively brave or crazy. Michael O’Brien has earned the label of brave, because … \textit{Mad Boy Chronicle} is an intelligent, bold, and – most importantly – entertaining retooling of \textit{Hamlet}.” (“Playwright Is Right On In Rewrite”).
way he thinks would be most enjoyable, Kirchhoff subsequently claims that even
“without a word of prompting, you’d recognize Hamlet immediately.” Taken together,
the reviews suggest that Mad Boy Chronicle’s critical reception does not depend on
transcending fidelity discourse, but on strategically locating itself within it,
simultaneously constructing itself as both a faithful adaptation (but not of Shakespeare)
and a new work rather than a copy.

The reviews by Kirchhoff and Taylor also indicate what might be called genre
elitism: even if being an adaptation is not necessarily a crime (or if so, a crime of which
Mad Boy is “not technically” guilty, as Kirchhoff puts it) both critics deduct points from
Mad Boy for not being a tragedy. Kirchhoff finds “a lot of gross fun” in Mad Boy, but
concludes that “one is left with the thought that, no matter where O’Brien started his
research, he has written an unsubtle comedy, with cartoon Christianity substituting for
existential doubt, and coarse gags instead of poetry.” Taylor’s headline says it more
succinctly: “Black Spoof Charming, if Lightweight.” Taylor finds Mad Boy “very funny,”
and notes “continual laughs as the audience recognizes the references to Hamlet and sees
[…] a funny lowering of the classic,” but this only gets one so far (as far as 2.5 stars, to
be precise). Hamlet, Taylor claims, “endures […] because Shakespeare took that story
and turned it into a philosophical tragedy about the burden of conscience,” and while
Taylor concedes that O’Brien seems to be aiming for (rather than just at) such lofty
sentiments, either he or director Peter Hinton misses the target:

For a moment, you can glimpse a large drama debating the wisdom of a
cult of mercy in a world where survival itself is a vicious struggle. But the
moment is fleeting, and if one compares Mad Boy Chronicle to a play like
Seven Lears, an exalted contemporary drama […], this show starts to look disappointingly lightweight.

Both critics posit a genre hierarchy in which an “unsubtle comedy,” however clever and effective, simply can’t be as good as a “philosophical tragedy.” They assume that “poetry,” “existential doubt,” and “philosophical tragedy” are simply and unquestionably superior to “coarse gags” and comedy.

Even positive responses indicate a similar bias, as they tend to stress that the play, though funny, is also serious, as if to shore up this perceived weakness. For example, having just dropped the reference to “Monty Python-type characters,” Al Beeber warns, “[b]ut beware: the comedy balances on a knife edge and laughter opens up into the abyss” (“U of L Play”); Morrow promises that the play “grows” from a “spook into something meatier”; and the Kingston Whig-Standard describes the play as “sprawling, funny, brutal, thoughtful, [and] sad,” sequencing the adjectives as if the latter three are required as ballast against excessive levity (“Mad Boy’s a Full Show Piece”). Such comments illustrate a (high) cultural tendency to suppress the political efficacy of comedy by dismissing it as trivial. Whereas Taylor argues that O’Brien “cannot do justice to the characters’ struggles” by “reducing them to brutal jokes,” Bakhtin and Bristol would counter that, according to the logic of carnival, that is the only way to “do justice.”

From the perspective of Mad Boy Chronicle, Shakespeare (or perhaps Shakespeare criticism) did an injustice by appropriating the revenge saga and obscuring its direct, popular wisdom with obscure poetry, “existential doubt,” and other high culture interests. Taylor and Kirchhoff exemplify precisely the attitude that O’Brien opposes, the assumption that theatre is valuable to the extent that it champions the “exalted,” as Taylor
puts it, and the correlative assumption that poetry, tragedy, and philosophy – not coarse, brutal comedy – are the paths to enlightenment and wisdom.

If the reviewers are divided over whether Mad Boy Chronicle is original and serious enough to be a truly good play, they agree on some of O’Brien’s dramaturgical tactics. They all agree that the play is funny, even the normally dour Taylor; they recognize that the both the purpose and the origin of the laughter is the debasement of a classic text; and almost all of them comment on the verbal aspects of that debasement, noting both the reconstitution of Shakespearean and Biblical language into profane “doggerel” (Beeber) and the creation of an entire, non-standard dialect of English.

Morrow and Taylor pay special attention to these aspects of the play. Morrow notes the “amusing[…] debase[ment of] the exquisite poetry of Shakespeare,” and the purposefully “garbled” rendering of Ecclesiastes into “a sanction for everlasting violence.” Taylor even claims that “O'Brien's chief achievement […] is to create a silly yet plausible dialect for these medieval Danes that is part archaic English and part contemporary” (“Black Spoof”). (And when I have taught the play, my students, too, often cite O’Brien’s profane neologisms and verbal travesty as their favourite aspect of the play.) The reviews also applaud O’Brien’s strategic use of the Hamlet plot as a red herring to create the expectation of a Hamlet parody, only to shatter it in the second half, when “those of us who, to this point, have been ticking off in our mind the Hamlet parallels, suddenly find ourselves confused over terrible departures from the story. The ending is truly shocking […]” (Beeber, “U of L Play”).

One subject that seldom comes up in Mad Boy Chronicle’s reception is the play’s pertinence to a Canadian audience. O’Brien himself, in interviews with the Calgary
Herald and the Kingston Whig-Standard, connects the play to one well-worn theme of Canadian literature: thriving in harsh environmental conditions. Speaking to Martin Morrow just before the play’s 1995 premiere, O’Brien said, “I think the spirit of the Viking people is very much alive in us. They were very pragmatic people who accepted the universe as it was and tried to live within it. Survival was so much a part of their psychology and that is also deeply imprinted on us as Canadians” (Morrow, “Let the Plays Begin”), and two years later he repeated the same idea before the Kingston production: “It’s about people living in an environment that’s harsh and the spirit that rises out of it” (Burliuk). Kate Taylor picks up on this idea in her review, describing the setting as a “world where survival itself is a vicious struggle.” But even though the wintry, northern setting is an almost automatic Canadian allusion, nowhere in these paratexts (other than in the program notes I wrote for the 1997 production at McGill) is there any engagement with the parallels between the colonization of O’Brien’s Denmark by a Christian Empire, and Canada’s colonial legacy (not to mention Canada’s continuing struggle with the encroachment of a southern empire). H.J. Kirchhoff comes closest to making an explicit connection when he notes a contrast between the Vikings’ “working class Irish/Newfie” dialect and the “Queen’s English” spoken by the priests.158

The documents of Mad Boy Chronicle’s reception demonstrate the important role of paratextuality in framing and influencing the reception of appropriation and adaptation. The play’s efficacy depends on the spectator being adequately prepared to interpret it as something other than what Morrow calls “Hamlet for the Dumb and Dumber crowd,” and paratextuality does much of that preparation, reassuring readers and

158 Of course there was no such thing as “the Queen’s English” in 999 AD. See note 135 regarding the dialect designed for the McGill production.
spectators that the play represents the culturally sophisticated fruits of smart writing and research and that, therefore, laughing along with it distinguishes one as sophisticated enough to get the joke. Perhaps most crucially, the paratexts engage with anti-adaptation prejudices, but rather than challenging their validity, they try to exploit them. First, they peg Mad Boy’s significance to a source that is historically anterior to Hamlet, thereby negating Hamlet’s antecedence and with it any question of “fidelity” to Shakespeare; second, by positioning Mad Boy as an adaptation not of Shakespeare but of Shakespeare’s source, the paratexts expose Hamlet too as just another adaptation, and an unfaithful one at that, dispelling Hamlet’s presumed “originality.” Finally, Mad Boy’s paratexts not only negate the charge of “infidelity” to Shakespeare, they even turn the tables by claiming that Mad Boy is a more faithful adaptation of their shared source than Hamlet – a claim most readers must take on faith, since they only know of Saxo through those paratexts. Mad Boy Chronicle’s paratexts are a critical part of the play’s strategy for evading – and exploiting – anti-adaptation prejudices, and if it is possible for readers to view Mad Boy Chronicle not as a copy or adaptation but rather, as Shaner depicts it, as a “multilevel attack on accepted concepts … open to any and every interpretation” (Shaner 2001), this is in large part because paratextuality is able to create that opening, by pre-emptively negating prejudices that might otherwise tempt spectators to dismiss Mad Boy Chronicle as just “another misguided interpretation.”

Conclusion
Mad Boy Chronicle illustrates an important and effective strategy for appropriating the canonical classic in order to critique canonical values, by using the same tactics of carnivalesque parody that Shakespeare himself used (well before he himself became a
symbol of those values). As it mocks exalted discourses and symbols to reveal the roles they play in tyranny and colonization, the play reveals how theatre itself has become such a discourse. Mad Boy’s reception suggests the relative effectiveness of this strategy, but it indicates even more strongly the role of paratextuality in framing the reception of such plays in the context of widely circulating beliefs and prejudices about adaptation. Mad Boy Chronicle resists these prejudices not by challenging them but by exploiting them, partially through claiming antecedence and anteriority over the “original” – but it relies on paratextuality to make those claims explicit to its readers and spectators. In this regard Mad Boy Chronicle is similar to Harlem Duet, which also relies on an arsenal of paratexts to legitimize its claim to be more than just “another misguided interpretation of Shakespeare” (Morrow 152). Moreover, both plays offer a contrast to NAC’s production of After the Orchard, which sought, paratextually, to distance itself from adaptation discourse altogether. Together, these three, varied reception histories suggest the importance of anticipating and neutralizing fidelity discourse. In “Alas, Poor Shakespeare! I knew him well,” Ivo Kamps claims that left-leaning scholars (and playwrights) must continue to appropriate Shakespeare rather than just “let the conservatives ‘have’” him (20), and it appears that a similar claim could be made in regard to adaptation discourse: to distance oneself from it or ignore it is to surrender one’s best opportunity to appropriate it, and to let the critics define adaptation in their own terms. Paratextuality seems to be a major aspect of reception, enabling adaptors to exploit the strengths of intertextuality.
Chapter 5: Chekhov Meets Prairie Gothic

Although the first three plays examined here followed different paths and arrived at different destinations, they are similar in that each one uses a canonical hypotext in order to critique the dominant practices and politics of Canadian theatre while essentially participating in those practices. After the Orchard, Harlem Duet, and Mad Boy Chronicle were all written and produced within the dominant material and ideological framework of so-called mainstream Canadian theatre: an author writes a text, which is then developed through a series of workshops and readings and eventually staged by one or more major regional companies, following the usual working practices of Canadian theatre, adopting the usual conventions of representation and decorum, and in front of the usual Canadian audiences (although Harlem Duet has been somewhat successful at both problematizing the racial homogeneity of that “usual” audience and attracting an unusually diverse one). They are also judged by familiar (and mostly quantifiable) criteria: number of productions, seats sold, size of producing company, scale of production, critical response, number of times anthologized. But ticket sales indicate popularity and publicity, rather than performance efficacy, and the previous reception analyses have borne out, to varying degrees, Ric Knowles’s claim that the dominant working and viewing practices of professional theatre (including anti-adaptation prejudices) may blunt the playwrights’ progressive ideals. Appropriation in this context may be an example of trying to use the

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159 Harlem Duet – the success of which has always been imagined by its critics and fans alike as a trajectory from Nightwood to Stratford – leads the pack, appearing in at least four anthologies thus far (Adaptations of Shakespeare (2000), Testifyin’ (2000), Modern Canadian Plays Volume Two [4th ed., 2001], and The Shakespeare’s Mine [2009]).
master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house, as Audre Lorde famously put it.\textsuperscript{160} (On the other hand, the reception of \textit{Harlem Duet} at Stratford suggests that aesthetic success may not be a precondition for successfully exposing and challenging the status quo.)

Because it would be shortsighted to confine this study (of supposedly radical and subversive dramaturgy) to plays written within and for mainstream theatre, the final case study examines a different paradigm for creating and watching theatre. Between 2004 and 2006, Edmonton-based company Cowgirl Opera packed houses and captured four- and five-star reviews and awards across Canada with a show called \textit{The Three Sisters: A Black Opera in Three Acts}, in which a troupe of nightmarish, white-faced freaks perform the story of three sisters who long to escape the miseries of Biggar, Saskatchewan for a better life in Edmonton. Debuting in Calgary at the 2004 Mutton Busting festival at One Yellow Rabbit’s High Performance Rodeo,\textsuperscript{161} \textit{The Three Sisters: ABOTA} toured the Canadian Fringe Festival circuit in 2005, playing in Ottawa, Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Victoria, and Vancouver; and concluded its run with a triumphant return to the High Performance Rodeo in 2006 – this time on the main stage. In March 2009, Kristine Nutting (who is both the \textit{de facto} playwright and Cowgirl Opera’s \textit{prima cowgirl}) remounted the play as a student production at the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta, in Camrose. “Fringe” or not, \textit{The Three Sisters: ABOTA} has played

\textsuperscript{160} The analogy is famous, but from the perspective of appropriation not particularly apt: not only are the master’s tools as well-suited to the task as any (tools, like texts, do not have objections about the uses to which they are put), but putting them to such a use endows the act with a certain powerful irony – which is one of the particular joys of the dramaturgy of appropriation.

\textsuperscript{161} The High Performance Rodeo is a world-renowned avant-garde performance festival produced by One Yellow Rabbit; from 2002 to 2006, HPR hosted another, concurrent festival called “Mutton Busting,” the brainchild of Eric Moschopedis (and his company Bubonic Tourist). The Mutton Busting festival was conceived as a “sideshow of young, emerging artists” – the sort who used to perform at HPR before it had accumulated enough prestige to attract stars like Philip Glass (Czerski, “Theatre on the Lamb”). OYR still trades on its reputation as an alternative or fringe company within Calgary’s mainstream, but in many ways it is now part of the “establishment.”
in front of a broader geographical and social cross-section of Canadians than any of the others examined here (even *Harlem Duet*, which has thus far only been produced in Southern Ontario, Halifax, and outside of Canada).

Both its development process and its designation as a “fringe” play (in terms of both the venues it toured\(^{162}\) and its deliberately “outrageous” content and aesthetic) distinguish *The Three Sisters: ABOTA* from the other plays examined here. Kristine Nutting, a performance artist with a critical theory-based MA in Drama (rather than a BFA or National Theatre School diploma, for example), has never defined success in terms of getting picked up by Mirvish, CanStage, or Stratford, nor has she any inclination to work within the standard practices of Canadian theatre production. She has a unique and eclectic development process, frequently collaborates with artists (including musicians and dancers) who are not trained in theatre, and usually performs in venues not associated with professional theatre. For example, her most recent production, *Pig!*, premiered in June 2008 in the burnt-out, unlicensed basement of one of Edmonton’s seediest strip clubs, Chez Pierre (which was also the site of an early incarnation of *The Three Sisters: ABOTA*).\(^{163}\) *The Three Sisters: ABOTA* extends this study beyond the dominant modes of dramaturgy, production and spectatorship in Canadian theatre, and into the world of devised theatre, and fringe festivals (with their non-subscription audiences). In addition, its different reception by different Canadian audiences reveals how the supposed “Canadian audience” (or even English Canadian audience) is in fact a

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\(^{162}\) Even the “Mutton-Busting” festival was essentially the High Performance Rodeo’s fringe festival.

\(^{163}\) *Pig*’s Winnipeg Fringe run was also staged in a strip club (Solid Gold). The play involves many performance elements that are so unsafe (e.g., live flame sprayed from an aerosol can) or unsavoury (e.g., raw animal flung at the audience) that even a “fringe” theatre venue would never allow them, so *Pig* was a “Bring-Your-Own-Venue” show.
plurality of Canadian audiences, distinguished by region, ethnicity, gender, and urban/rural origins – and in relation to “the other Canadians.”

In order to focus on the aspects of *The Three Sisters: ABOTA’s* production and reception that are unique among these case studies, this chapter is structured slightly differently, although it still proceeds from an analysis of the play’s dramaturgy to an investigation of its reception. First, it includes a description of Cowgirl Opera’s non-traditional devising process, which significantly shaped both the play and its relationship to the canonical hypotext. Second, compared to the other case studies, the analysis of the dramaturgy relies heavily on the *performance* text, as opposed to dramatic text. There are two reasons for this: first, as a long-time associate of Nutting’s and the dramaturg of the 2009 production, I have uniquely privileged access to information about her process and dramaturgy; second, because the play was devised with methods more akin to *commedia dell’arte* than to traditional text-based playwriting, the text is, to a much greater extent than the other plays discussed here, a rather spare blueprint for a much more richly detailed performance text. Third, because the extant text was conceived and performed in the context of a fringe festival tour, the reception analysis must attempt to account for the numerous material and cultural factors that distinguish the practices and spectatorship of “fringe” theatre from those of “mainstream” theatre.
“Prairie Gothic” Dramaturgy: Devising, Cowgirl Opera-style
Both the script and the performance text were developed between the fall of 2003 and the spring of 2005, through an eclectic and somewhat cyclic process in which writing/rewriting retreats alternated with practical workshops, gradually building up to public performances. During this period, the cast changed frequently, and the group that performed in the 2005 tour contained few if any of the “original” cast. This long and eclectic process reflects the convergence of aesthetic ideals and material constraints: first, Nutting prefers to work in a collaborative mode, and second, in spite of her solid track record of creative achievement, her funding applications are routinely denied by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, Canada Council and other arts granting agencies, forcing her to balance (and fund) her artistic projects with other work. In fact, she has transformed this perennial rejection by mainstream funding bodies into an entire aesthetic. According to the carnivalesque logic of Cowgirl Opera, good is bad, so bad is good: since mainstream Canadian theatre is distinguished mainly by being so unappealing to Canadians that fewer of them participate in it every year, being marginalized by that mainstream is cause for celebration, and Nutting frequently speaks of – and even markets – her work as a celebration of failure. The fundraising event for The Three Sisters: ABOTA was billed as “A Night of Prairie Failures in Burlesque,” and is itself a story of failures, as performed by failures: the play is a framed narrative, in which the sisters’ sad tale is acted out by a troupe of grotesque bouffons – “the traveling

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164 The text has not been altered since the beginning of the 2005 tour; the performance text is more fluid, but even when Nutting mounted a new production with a new cast in 2009, the mise en scène stayed relatively faithful to the touring version of the play, for reasons discussed below.
165 See Collins, “The Pierre Principle,” and Bouchard, “What a Shocker!” for example. In fact, the play came into existence as an indirect result of Nutting’s failure to obtain funding for a totally different project: having set aside time to pursue an artistic development opportunity in Italy, she did not get the funding and wrote The Three Sisters: ABOTA during the period she had hoped to be in Italy.
freak show players of the North Saskatchewan, specializing in Operas of the macabre” (2) – who lack the talent and beauty to pull it off (in fact, of course, the performers display considerable virtuosity in crafting what is in fact a very polished representation of “bad acting”).

The play emerged from a collection of “images,” and is also drawn from personal experiences, including Nutting’s origins in rural Saskatchewan and her experiences as a female artist trained in a discipline whose practices and politics are notoriously phallocentric (Nutting, Interview). Among the images Nutting began with, there was a fascination with Chekhov, and particularly *The Three Sisters*. Like the other playwrights documented here, Nutting distinguishes between the historical Chekhov (or Shakespeare, as the case may be) and the popular conception of “Chekhov” as a revered founding father of psychological realism; just as *Mad Boy Chronicle* and *Harlem Duet* reflect both their authors’ admiration for Shakespeare (the writer) and their loathing for what “Shakespeare” (the cultural construction) has done to Canadian theatre, Nutting, too, sympathizes with the author who has unwittingly come to represent everything she despises about theatre, particularly the dominance of realism and old classics at the expense of theatricality and new works.

Nutting rejects realism on both political and aesthetic grounds: first, because of its tendency to rely on the exploitation and victimization of women (whom it thus, no less than the “old-fashioned” styles it displaced, represents as passive objects to be studied, saved, or scorned); second, because although it was in Chekhov’s day an effective tool for aesthetic and political provocation, realism is now the dominant form of mimetic representation in film, television, and drama. As such, it has long since lost its power to
shatter conventional perceptions of the world, but instead merely reinforces them. As a result of this habituation, formal realism (i.e. any combination of emotional, psychological, and scenic realism) is, in and of itself, no longer provocative or shocking. Realism can still be a powerful vehicle for shocking content – realistic depictions of sex and violence, of course, remain highly controversial in most popular and elite media, and it is still possible (and even commonplace) to explore the (legal and aesthetic) boundaries of what can be represented “realistically.” Nutting herself deliberately deploys realism in this way late in the The Three Sisters, shifting from comic, clownish slapstick into realistic violence in order to destabilize her audience. But for Nutting, there is no longer anything surprising, radical, or defamiliarizing about choosing to represent fictional things and beings as quasi-real, as if they were the things themselves and not merely (conventional) representations thereof, and she therefore labours to subvert realism in her work.

The object of Nutting’s parody, then, is “not an attack on Chekhov itself,” but on the cultural fixation with – and of – Chekhov as an icon of realism:

Chekhov, when he was writing, was […] cutting edge, and even realism was […], but we’re in now. You know? […] Haven’t we done anything different since then? […] I really am disappointed in theatre that does realism all the time, because I think for our [culture] it doesn’t work anymore, it’s not exciting […]. Because the job is to entertain the audience, and somewhere, that got lost. […] [Entertainment] is something that theatre has left behind, and that’s why people don’t go to the theatre anymore. (Nutting, Interview)

166 See The Three Sisters: ABOTA: 31, for example, where the stage directions indicate that “a line has been crossed. There is silence and Maggie and Olga go at it for real, this violence is suddenly not comedic.”
Just as Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* uses “Shakespeare” to attack then-dominant conventions of mainstream theatre, Nutting’s play is not a sustained adaptation of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* so much as a sustained assault on the generic conventions with which Chekhov is now associated. Exemplifying Thomas Cartelli’s argument that appropriations are “transacted not only in relation to [their sources] but to specific constructions [thereof] that are themselves the products of earlier appropriations” (1999: 18), Nutting uses “Chekhov” as a signifier of dreary realism, an aesthetically and commercially bankrupt form which has lost its audience and its relevance. As she puts it in an interview with Gilbert Bouchard, “theatre is competing with pop culture, film and even music culture so it can’t live in kitchen sink realism and the beautiful Broadway play” (Bouchard, “A Night of Prairie Failures”).

And yet Nutting, who grew up in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, was also intrigued by *The Three Sisters*, not only because its central situation reflects profoundly on the experience of feeling trapped in dying or isolated communities – an experience, it hardly needs to be said, that is well-documented throughout the history of Canadian writing, fictional and otherwise\(^{167}\) – but also because of its somewhat innovative investigation into what happens when women are oppressed not by men but by other women (although the oppressor in *The Three Sisters: ABOTA*, Mommy-Daddy, ended up being a little of each). Nutting was also fascinated by the idea that Chekhov had insisted his works were comedies and – like many a contemporary theatre student forced to read, watch, or

\(^{167}\) And particularly in Canadian women’s writing: the feminine perspective on the hardships of rural isolation in Canada pre-dates Canada itself and may even be seen as the inaugural Canadian literature – and like Nutting’s heroines, Frances Brooke, Susanna Moodie, and Catherine Parr Trail can hardly be said to share the torpid dispositions of Chekhov’s three sisters.
produce monumentally boring productions of Chekhov – wanted to imagine how *The Three Sisters*\(^{168}\) could possibly be funny.

The draft Nutting wrote in the fall of 2003 formed the skeleton for the physical workshop process that really brought the play to life. As opposed to the dominant process of script development in Canada, which is usually centered on tablework and a (sometimes endless) series of “minimally staged readings,” Nutting’s workshop process is physically-oriented. Instead of reading the play aloud and then asking questions around the table, the actors (including Nutting) use the script as raw material for building a basic framework of action and characters, introducing new elements, which Nutting would subsequently (and rather haphazardly) incorporate into a constantly changing text. As Nutting explains, the process is based on the “code scenario” system of *commedia dell’arte*:

> [Y]ou build the code scenario, the events or scenes that happen, and build the stock characters through that code scenario. Basically all that matters is the code, and nothing else. Anything else could happen, to the point that if you wanted to you could improv the show differently every night.

(Interview)

Although Nutting resists the suggestion that her dramaturgy is consciously influenced by her academic training – she claims to be more influenced by her performance art training with One Yellow Rabbit and others – she does identify her collaborative process with an

\(^{168}\) Nutting had recently worked on just such a stereotypically dull production of *The Three Sisters* at the University of Alberta in the spring of 2001. It is so common for Chekhov productions to bore Canadian audiences that theatre critics often frame their positive reviews of *The Three Sisters: ABOTA* with an acknowledgment of this fact and an assurance that this play will be different. For example, Liz Nicholls writes, “It’s easy to get impatient with the way things just don’t happen in Chekhov (that’s why productions that miss by a little, miss by a country mile)” – offering not only an implicit acknowledgment that Chekhov is often boring, but even a theory about why.
oppositional feminist poetics: “I guess a feminist structure is present because it’s not ‘one creator,’ one ‘god figure’ behind the typewriter” (although she quickly adds that this “traditional” idea of playwriting has probably always been more of a myth than a reality).

Whatever its basis, Nutting’s hybrid creative process – fusing feminist politics, performance art praxis, a Brechtian disdain for fourth-wall realism, and a structural approach inspired by *commedia dell’arte* – has several practical and theoretical consequences. First, it means that the plot, characters, and dialogue emerge from a collective process and over a considerable span of time. Second, it means that the play is largely made up of a somatic or physical score which is as important as the spoken words, but which was only haphazardly committed to text. Third, because the play was devised through improvisation, the performers (presumably like their *commedia* ancestors) were very comfortable with both planned and unplanned departures from the script, an aspect of the play that became important to reception, as one performance’s mistakes, depending on their effect, might become a regular part of the show; many of the performance elements emerged after the cast (by this time a very different group than that which began the process) began their Fringe tour in Ottawa. Even more than is usually the case, then, the written text of *The Three Sisters: ABOTA* is a mere skeleton (and missing numerous bones, at that) of the embodied performance. It is difficult to imagine how one could critique the play without having seen it, or how it could be performed by another group (although, under Nutting’s direction, the recent student production at Augustana achieved a remarkable level of consistency with the earlier production).
Another important consequence of this lengthy, collaborative development process was the dramatic reduction of the Chekhovian content of the play during the final rehearsal/revision cycle leading up to the 2005 Fringe tour. When Eileen Sproule came in to dramaturg and direct (as a last-minute replacement for Karen Hines [a.k.a. “Pochsy”]), she found that the play was in danger of becoming a belaboured in-joke about Chekhov, and she advised Nutting to cut most of the Chekhov parody in order to focus on the story. While it is impossible to say what the outcome of a more explicitly Chekhovian show would have been, Nutting agrees that it was the right decision. After all, such parodies require intimate familiarity with the target, and (as discussed above in relation to After the Orchard) Canadian audiences do not have that familiarity with Chekhov’s plot, characters, or dialogue. In fact, Robert Hewison’s description of what “Chekhovian” signifies to the British (in his review of Wild Honey, Michael Frayn’s adaptation of Platonov) may apply equally well to Canadians: “bitter-sweet longings, unfulfilled ambitions, the decaying elegance of straw hats and linen suits, and the indefinable exoticism we attribute to unhappy people with unpronounceable names.” Just as “Shakespeare” conjures up associations that have less to do with Shakespeare than with cultural appropriations thereof (such as archaic speech and visions of Laurence Olivier cradling a skull), “Chekhov” does not signify a repertoire of memorable plots and beloved characters (few Canadian theatregoers could produce a plot synopsis of a Chekhov play, or even name all three sisters), but a rather vague constellation of pervasive melancholy, limited action, psychological and aesthetic realism, and samovars, all cloaked in the auratic prestige of high culture. Therefore a close send-up of The Three
Sisters would most likely miss the mark with its audience and reinforce the very estrangement from the theatre that Nutting seeks to avoid.

As a result of Sproule’s guidance in the final cycle of rehearsal and revision, the play retains only a few references and allusions to Chekhov. Aside from the recent loss of their father (albeit to decidedly unnatural causes, as we will see), their sense of being stuck “on a road between nowhere and nowhere,” and their overarching longing to escape to the metropolis, Nutting’s titular sisters (Olga, Maggie, and Pax Cuddy) share little with Chekhov’s, and her plot likewise bears very little resemblance to The Three Sisters. But even though it is in this sense the least deeply engaged with its alleged source of all the plays examined here, it is the only one to retain (albeit in a modified form) its source’s title: although the play offers relatively little Chekhovian intertextuality, its architextuality explicitly promises a confrontation with a more famous and distinguished play.\(^{169}\) Whereas the titles of the plays discussed above (After the Orchard, Harlem Duet, and Mad Boy Chronicle) offer only coy and subtle acknowledgements of their respective hypotexts, Nutting’s title clearly signals something that both is and is not Chekhov.

Nutting’s architextual strategy may reflect a different cultural context: Sherman, Sears, and O’Brien are (or were) all trying to establish reputations as playwrights, not adaptors, so they created titles that discourage fidelity criticism and position their plays as new works, while relying on paratextuality to engage an intertextual mode of reception.

Nutting and Cowgirl Opera, on the other hand, are “fringe” (in every sense of the word),

\(^{169}\) The Three Sisters: ABOTA is also unique in that it’s dialogue, too, explicitly acknowledges the source: in the middle of the play, the MC covers a time lapse in the action with a “don’t touch that dial!”-style patter which overtly acknowledges Chekhov as the source of the story: “Our little chekovian freak show on the prairies does not end here. No… we see our young ladies put in the face of peril…will they ever get to Edmonton? Will they overcome? Or will they merely be sold off like the meaty little potatoes, the lovely little side dishes that they are?” (26).
and in the competitive free market atmosphere of fringe festivals – which offers spectators scores or hundreds of shows to choose from – marketability, name-recognition, and word-of-mouth are paramount. In this context, a title which invokes a known brand name while also promising something very different is highly attractive. The title also promises something more spectacular than the increasingly pervasive (and thus increasingly derided) one-person show, of which Nutting is as critical as she is of kitchen-sink naturalism: “[When] I began touring […] I was feeling cheated, or at least hungry for something more. Gone were the days of Fringe ‘spectacles’ – it seemed as though everything […] was a two-hander or a one-man show” (“Bringing Cross-Dressing to Camrose”). Nutting’s title, which promises the novel and spectacular treatment of a (vaguely) familiar source, is ideally suited to a context where spectators are much more interested in spectacle and entertainment than in literary values, originality, or fidelity.

If most of the Chekhov has been subtracted from the play, one hardly misses it, because so much has been added. In addition to the genre shift suggested by “Black Opera” – which turns out to be a combination of grotesque farce, tragedy, melodrama, and burlesque musical170 – and its meta-theatrical frame, within which the actors play members of a traveling “freak show,” Nutting’s subtle interpolations include “a transsexual mommy-daddy, a train-induced miscarriage […] and] a scene where a dead body is consumed nearly whole, not to mention a psychotic banker who pathologically whispers ‘pork,’” none of which have any obvious precedents in the Chekhovian canon (Kubik, “Meat, Murder and Accordions.”). The play also parodies a number of other

170 In spite of its musical numbers, the play is more soap opera than grand opera, a fact which, Nutting reports, seriously irritated one Toronto spectator who attended the play based on his expectation that it was indeed an operatic adaptation of The Three Sisters. The other part of the subtitle also turns out to be false advertising: although the characters announce the beginning of each act, the acts are themselves divided into semi-autonomous Brechtian episodes.
texts, including *Lakmé, West Side Story*, and “I’m a Woman,” a single made famous by Peggy Lee (1963) – which are at least as familiar to Canadian spectators as anything Chekhovian. Although the given circumstances allude to *The Three Sisters*, the tone is closer to melodrama than Chekhovian realism, and the plot is in some ways closer to *The Cherry Orchard* than *The Three Sisters*: its central crisis is precipitated by fiendish credit union banker (the aforementioned “pork whisperer”) Mitch Mitchell McCracken, who plots to seize the Cuddy farm and devour Pax’s heart. And the sisters, in contrast to their Chekhovian counterparts (but not unlike O’Brien’s Mad Boy), take direct and decisive – but ultimately tragic and futile – action to change their circumstances. Pax plans to elope with Billy Hamm, Maggie saves every penny she earns giving twenty-five cent blow jobs towards a bus ticket to Edmonton (where she dreams of joining the Lawrence Welk dancers), and Olga is working on a circus sideshow act:

> At night when the other girls are in bed I pretend that me and my accordion run away with like [sic] the local Chautauqua; we make it all the way to Edmonton and we are featured nightly on the side show stage with freaks of all kinds. The bearded lady, the tall man and Olga the ugly and her clothespins novelty [act].\(^{171}\) (19-20)

As these examples suggest, Cowgirl Opera’s play is closer in style, diction, and genre to Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* than to anything Chekhovian. Whereas Chekhov’s work is admired for what is left unsaid in the silences between the lines, these sisters seldom think anything they don’t say; they revel in hurling obscenities at each other and frequently refer to – or expose – each other’s (often soiled) underwear: “You’re better than the blue sky in a canola field, brighter than a shit stain on the back of Maggie’s underwear” (5). Whatever

\(^{171}\) Olga’s “act” involves giving herself a “facelift” with clothespins while playing the accordion.
this play does with Chekhov, it does not claim to make his timeless message accessible or relevant by transposing *The Three Sisters* to the Canadian prairies. Rather than claiming fidelity to a particular vision of Chekhov, Nutting rejects the ideal of fidelity altogether: she borrows only the basic situation and jettisons the rest of the hypotext in order to move on to other things, using Chekhov as a springboard rather than a template or blueprint.

**Not Your Grandma’s Three Sisters: The Play**

In fact, any assumptions about fidelity to Chekhov that might be generated by the title are dispelled by the time the first words are uttered. The first appearance of the cast (in the pre-show phase, as they perform an acrobatic warm up while the audience gathers in the auditorium) instantly establishes the play’s non-realistic, presentational style, and grotesque aesthetic. To the strains of haunting accordion music, the actors appear in white-face makeup with darkened eyes, garish rouge, lipstick, and eyeliner, and brightly coloured polyester costumes. The costumes, in addition to evoking thrift stores and the 1970s, are also provocatively and disturbingly ill-fitting: the three sisters all wear rubber boots, knee-high stockings, and too-small, too-tight dresses which reveal their (decidedly un-sexy) underwear as they go through their warm-up routines, making the grotesque body constantly, relentlessly visible (and audible). Exemplifying the technique Elaine Aston calls “over-display,” the costumes compel one to look and yet also to feel ashamed of looking, and the spectators become uncomfortably aware of “the female body being constructed as an image for male consumption” – and of their own roles as consumers (Aston 95). If the space allows it, the actors also use the auditorium space for their warm-up, and may even climb up, over, and around the spectators as they gather in their seats,
aggressively breaching the actor/audience barrier and conventional standards of theatrical decorum with which “Chekhov” is powerfully associated.

The end of this pre-show phase is signalled by a monologue delivered directly to the audience, which sets the “prairie gothic” tone, establishing the remarkably carnal (in every sense) quality of the play and its imagery.

Strange music plays in the background, the aria of the freak show opera plays on the accordion. The first image is a woman on the stage; she is wearing rubber boots, there is blue cyc behind her with a wedding dress on a laundry line. Monologue begins and the music hushes.

ENTER OLGA SR

OLGA. Mamma always told me the key to a man's heart was his stomach.

I never quite understood this. Did this mean that you had to rip out his stomach in order to find the elusive key all covered in sinews slime? What about a woman's heart? For a while I used to imagine mamma taking daddy to the hospital and ordering the doctors to "Cut", (Cut CUUUT [spoken by cast]), and find that damn key!" My Mom being a determined prairie woman would have him tied down. And then, the doctors cut one long slice along his abdomen, out pop his innards and bang, there it is . . . the key to his heart. And then the doctors rip out his heart and dance and sing around in pools of blood, spraying the remains of his entrails all over the stark North Battleford hospital walls. Biggar's too small to have a hospital of its own, see. Of course I realized that this was just a colloquialism (the stomach, not Biggar being too small for a
hospital). But even so I know this is inaccurate. You can feed a man anything and all yous get is flatulence. However, the heart of a good prairie man cannot resist the power of a good piece of prairie pork. Feed a man this and you'll find you have more than the key to his heart. You have his soul forever. (1-2)

The play revels in such graphic and grotesque imagery, rendering the exalted to the earthly and carnal by relentlessly associating the (eternal, exalted) human subject with the (temporal, debased) blood, flesh, sinew, and organs which constitute it. As in Mad Boy Chronicle, flesh, excrement, and the lower bodily stratum are repeatedly invoked in a comic rejection of codes of theatrical decorum and propriety – the association with Chekhov heightens this effect by reminding us of the high culture, genteel associations of theatre: if Mad Boy uses Shakespeare as the vehicle for a metaphorical debasement of theatre, The Three Sisters: ABOTA uses Chekhov to disembowel it.

Olga’s prologue gives way to a parados introducing the rest of the performers as a troupe of “traveling freak show players of the North Saskatchewan” (2), a framing device that reinforces the show’s presentational style and demolishes whatever may be left of the “fourth wall.” The Brechtian defamiliarization effect created by the direct-address, presentational style (and the vulgar treatment of an exalted drama), is amplified by the dual roles, as the audience is often reminded that each performer is playing a member of

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172 The script remains unpublished. Page numbers refer to the manuscript version in my possession (in the form of an MS Word document). As with O’Brien, Nutting’s irregular spelling and syntax indicate mood and tone.

173 The conflation of humans and the animals they eat, and a general fascination with both symbolic and literal consumption of flesh, are staples of Nutting’s work, so to speak. Spectators of Pig! and fans of Bronto Scorpio, the self-parodic heavy metal band in which Nutting sings, must dodge raw meat and entrails hurled into the crowd, and both The Three Sisters: ABOTA and Pig! feature cannibalism. Nutting herself is a vegetarian.
the travelling freak show troupe, who in turn plays one or more characters, as the MC explains:

**EMCEE.** Ladies and gentlemen welcome we bring you this evening’s story of three backwards girls in a backwards town leading to the inevitable Bowling Alley Blood Bath of….no sorry that was last week’s Opera. Starring the Cuddy sisters: Olga Cuddy and her traveling clothes-pins freak show, Pax Cuddy the young ingénue waiting to be devoured by all of you, and featuring the sweet styling of Mz zz Maggie Cuddy and her traveling cock-sucking carnival. Uh sorry I mean her lovely Jazz dancing. And of course the mère-père of the evening, Mz Angel Cuddy. I will star as Billy Hamm with eyes as wide as the prairie sky, and featuring Mitch Mitchell McCracken, as Mitch Mitchell McCracken....

**MITCH MITCHELL.** *(back flip)*... from the bank.

**ALL:** Welcome to our freak show, we’ll give you a good blood bath.

We know that you’ll like it, cuz people like stuff that is sad

There’s violence, Cross-dressing.

Wheat, canola and corn.

But ya can’t leave til the middle,

Cuz that’s when we show the porn.

In addition to obliterating the fourth wall and setting the black-comic tone, the MC’s patter combines doggerel rhyme and staccato rhythm to invoke the atmosphere of the carnival midway or circus sideshow, and perhaps the bygone radio soap opera presenter:
the play includes several cliff-hanger moments, punctuated by suspenseful peals from a Hammond organ. The MC’s speech also establishes the specific meaning of “Opera” in this context: not grand opera but a travesty thereof, in the tradition of *The Beggar’s Opera* (or rather *The Threepenny Opera*, given the play’s Brechtian conventions and objectives). By explicitly stating the performers’ goal (to retain the audience’s attention) and the cheap tricks they will use to achieve it (lurid content), the song, like the sisters’ lurid costumes, promises titillation while simultaneously shaming the spectator for being titillated. Stripping away the civilized veneer of theatre, the performers relentlessly remind the spectators that they have some in search of (representations of) violence, cross-dressing, and porn – set against an appropriately Canadian backdrop of “wheat, canola, and corn,” of course.

Having introduced themselves, the freaks begin the story proper by introducing three sisters who long to trade Biggar\textsuperscript{174} for better (3). The first “act,” titled “An Exercise in Denial,”\textsuperscript{175} opens on “an abysmal little farm,” on the anniversary of the father’s death and the youngest sister’s birthday – one of the few remaining direct allusions to *The Three Sisters*.

**OLGA, MAGGIE, PAX. (Song):**

We remember when our Father died four years ago today,

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{174} The real-life town of Biggar, SK (pop. ~2000), is about 100km west of Saskatoon. Although the play only uses the name of the town as a pun and does not represent it, Biggar does exemplify the kind of place suggested by the play, a dying farm town. Although the town’s web site boldly declares it a “growing and prosperous community,” the Canada Census shows that is shrank by almost 10% between 2001 and 2006, and its population of 2,033 (according to the 2006 census) is no larger than its population during the 1920s. The town’s slogan (since 1909) is suggestive of both pride and irony: “New York is Big, But We’re Biggar.” See http://tbigg.sasktelwebhosting.com/history.html and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biggar,_Saskatchewan.

\textsuperscript{175} The Brechtian scene titles are recited by the cast. One might even say, “mock-Brechtian,” because they not only draw the spectator’s attention to the theatrical frame, but also, occasionally, to their own pretentiousness. For example, while announcing the beginning of “Act Three: Expectation Unfettered Is The Nucleus of Cancerous Desire,” the cast becomes confused and embarrassed by their own jargon, “stalls” and then says, instead, “The Death of Innocence” (35).
\end{footnotesize}
On the same day, on the fifth of May, on her birthday.

It was very cold, and snow was falling. It felt like we might die.

But look, a year has gone by.

(The clock strikes eight.)

OLGA, MAGGIE, PAX. And then also the clock struck in just the same way.

OLGA, MAGGIE. I remember, when they carried father out, the band was playing, and at the cemetery they fired shots in his honor. (3)

Olga and Maggie, like Chekhov’s sisters, attribute the funeral’s poor attendance to bad weather. But Pax, exposing the “exercise in denial,” informs us that no one came because there was no funeral: “dad is living in our house right now, he’s not dead he’s flaming gay” (4). And this indeed turns out to be the case; in addition to such Chekhovian problems as rural isolation, financial desperation, and a lack of options other than marriage, the sisters must also deal with their abusive Mommy-Daddy, a.k.a. Butch Cuddy, a.k.a. Angel Cuddy.176 Like most of the characters in the play, Mommy-Daddy alternately generates sympathy and reproach from the audience. S/he is a cruel, selfish, and utterly incompetent parent, but also the victim of an equally cruel prejudice: in addition to triggering Olga and Maggie’s repressive “denial,” Butch’s switch to Angel has exposed the family to homophobic violence and ostracism (8), and prompted the family’s matriarch to abandon them.

176 Pax also hints at religious coercion (“At Jesus camp they would tell us that if you don’t love Jesus enough your heart will turn black. Jesus camp was fun” (4)), but the play has little else to say about religion in particular.
While the Cuddys’ various escapist fantasies clearly allude to *The Three Sisters*, the play’s central crisis, involving the imminent loss of the farm, is more reminiscent of *The Cherry Orchard*. A call from Mitch Mitchell McCracken (from the bank) reveals that the Cuddys are five years behind on the mortgage payments, and the farm will be repossessed in 24 hours unless Mommy-Daddy can come up the money – which s/he decides to do by selling the girls at the auction. The plan fails, though, because no one bids on the sisters, who are viewed by the community as “damaged goods.” Since only Pax generates any interest among the bidders – and then only from McCracken – Mommy-Daddy announces a change of plans: s/he “will take the girls home to be suited by proper suitors who will pay for their bride,” with the highest bidder taking “the youngest girl, the past-due yearlings and the farm.” This announcement sets up a melodrama pitting the naïve pig farmer Billy Hamm against the evil Mitch Mitchell McCracken in a battle to possess (literally, for McCracken) Pax’s heart.

“Brighter than a shit stain on Maggie’s underwear”: Chekhov Carnivalesque

*The Three Sisters: ABOTA*, like both *Mad Boy Chronicle* and Jean-Pierre Ronfard’s Shakespeare adaptations, is thoroughly permeated with “food, drinking, rampant sexuality, and references to the grotesque lower body” – and that body’s various unspeakable functions (Drouin 2). As in *Mad Boy*, the language and diction evoke a specific form of high culture discourse in order to permeate and corrupt it with obscenity. But Nutting’s target is the heightened diction typical of theatre in general, rather than

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177 The audience is encouraged to bid on the sisters. When they do, it adds to the atmosphere of communal participation, and when they don’t, it heightens the sisters’ abjection.

178 Although the two suitors stage a “duel for love,” it bears little resemblance to the offstage duel (over honour) that kills Tuzenbach in *The Three Sisters*. Not only because it is onstage and directly related to the plot, but also because McCracken and Billy’s duel is fought with guitars (18).
Elizabethan meter and pronouns. Initially, as mentioned above, Nutting sought directly to evoke and parody the stilted, dated vocabulary and rhythms of the old English translations through which many Canadians receive Chekhov, but during development this intention yielded to a more general collision between the poetic language of theatrical realism and the vulgar language of real life, which Bakhtin euphemistically calls the “language of marketplace”:

**OLGA.** Pax. I love you because you are more precious to me than anything in the world. You’re better than the blue sky in a canola field, brighter than a shit stain on the back of Maggie’s underwear. Your heart will never turn black it is pink and fresh and tender and just like you. And if my heart were a pie it would be a meat pie made of you. (5)

This strange, jarring contrast between poetic and vulgar imagery, combining a paean to one character with a scatological jab at another, is typical of the play (the imagined threat of Pax’s pink heart turning black, in particular, becomes a leitmotif). The play’s idiosyncratic language also combines at least two distinct modes of diction. When the characters are self-consciously “performing,” whether for each other or for the audience, they often affect a heightened, over-enunciated diction; but at other times, they lapse into a prairie drawl characterized by contraction and elision. The freaks’ “bad” performance techniques show the difference between “natural” and “naturalism,” exposing the genteel dialect of stage realism as affected and ridiculous. But the most powerful collisions between elevated formal language and debased content are in the numerous musical numbers, which are not parodies of Chekhov, but of other texts. When Mommy-Daddy commands the girls to sing (because “[n]othing draws a suitor better than operatic song”)

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the sisters transform Delibes’ “Flower Duet” (from *Lakmé*) into an oddly hostile lament (which ultimately degenerates into violence):

We sisters three wait patiently
For some man to take our hand and help our mommy-daddy save the farm.
Mommy-daddy dear priced us to clear
So we wait seething with hate
We really hope no one will come to harm
Gnaw off my arm
To get off this farm

**MAGGIE.** dance like a dove

**PAX.** wish for love

**OLGA.** I’d really like to learn to walk tight rope

**MAGGIE.** I’d really like to fix you with the thresher

**OLGA.** hope you choke

*(Bad ballet break)*

We sisters three  *(music starts to go discordant)*

Wait patiently
For our break to our escape from this dismal suffocating farm. (21-22)

The song creates a jarring collision between familiar high culture music,\(^{179}\) the dismal conditions described, and the hostile (and also deliberately shrill) tone in which it is delivered. The effect, of course, is not to dignify the sisters’ suffering – since they can’t

\(^{179}\) Because “The Flower Duet” has been widely appropriated in advertising (British Airways, Godiva chocolates) and popular culture (*The Simpsons, Nip/Tuck, Smallville*, films as diverse as *Carlito’s Way* and *Meet the Parents*, and several video games) the music is recognizable even to spectators who have never seen a grand opera or heard of Delibes.
even maintain their dignity through the song – but to debase high culture while reinforcing the Chekhovian desire for escape from rural isolation and boredom. A similar bathos distinguishes the sisters’ occasional poetic tableaux, which seem to instigate a serious investigation of gender before suddenly collapsing into a joke:

PAX, OLGA, MAGGIE. (canon over top of one another) They say your life begins the moment a man looks at you, or if not your life...your past

MAGGIE. my life began

PAX. my life began

OLGA. my life began

MAGGIE. the day I saw him in his blue suit looking back at me through the television

PAX. The day I saw him in his blue suit wearing our accordion

OLGA. the day I saw him looking through the window in his powder blue suit

MAGGIE. I wanted to dance

PAX. I wanted to be his forever

OLGA. I wanted him dead.

OLGA, PAX, MAGGIE. This is a prairie road between nowhere and nowhere, this is a prairie road between nowhere and nowhere. This is a

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180 The play’s two other notable musical parodies are a localized version of “America,” from West Side Story (another song celebrating the possibility of a better life in a new home, from another subversive popular culture appropriation of high culture, which has since become canonical); and Mommy-Daddy’s transformation of Peggy Lee’s “I’m a Woman” into a transgender torch song that crudely celebrates Mommy-Daddy’s (dubious) ability to straddle gender boundaries while simultaneously critiquing the original song (which creates a heroic identity for its eponymous subject by defining heroism in terms of the ability to accomplish myriad domestic chores): “I can lift the hood of the Chevy and look at the carb / I can straighten my stockings and fire up the barb / I can put on my lipstick while I pee standing up / I lift up my pinky drinking out of a cup / Cuz I’m a woman, W-O-M-A-N…” (6-7).
prairie road between nowhere and nowhere...If only I could get to
Edmonton. (8-9)

As in Mad Boy Chronicle, the language of The Three Sisters: ABOTA works both to
mock the high-culture pretensions of theatrical language and to convey the verbal aspect
of the play’s grotesque, carnivalesque imagery. For Nutting, the cultural repression of the
body is a source of constant concern and fascination, and her work relentlessly celebrates
the body as the locus and nexus of human experience. The play’s grotesque imagery
focuses on the carnal: eating, drinking, sex, and defecation, consumption and elimination,
reproduction, (re)birth, and death, often juxtaposed or conflated in graphic and disturbing
ways. For example, Angel Cuddy’s symbolic birth coincides with Butch’s symbolic death
– but given his completely unskilful transition from one gender to another, neither
process can really said to be complete, and Mommy-Daddy is fixed in an ambiguous, “in-
between” state: like the undead in discussions influenced by deconstruction, Mommy-
Daddy threatens to collapse a binary order which is vigorously policed in the play (as
evidenced by the physical violence and ostracism that follows Angel’s “coming out,”
including Mitch Mitchell’s gay-bashing). Mommy-Daddy’s solution to the mortgage
crisis, too, is grotesque: putting his/her daughters on the auction block is only one of the
ways in which the play forcibly points to similarities between the commercial and carnal
consumption, and between the consumption of animals and that of women.

Sex, reproduction, death, and food are also grotesquely conflated in Olga’s story
about the very public pregnancy and miscarriage that cemented her own status as a social
outcast.
OLGA. The only thing worse than being the ugliest girl in town is being the ugliest girl in town who is only ever referred to in the same sentence as (spoken by MOMMY-DADDY, PAX and MAGGIE) remember when she got her period? Earl Ephraim Kwaley...that was his name. The only boy. The only person who spoke to me in my school career. […] We took to hangin around the barn dance hall and in the back of barns back seats of cars tractors, playing hot dog vendor. Ok I realize some people play doctor, we played hotdog vendor. I didn't think you could get pregnant if you didn't have your period yet. I thought I could stuff as many dogs as I liked. But at the exact moment of my first ovulation, me and Earl Ephraim were stuffin a dog and, I got knocked up. By the time I figured it out, I was already four months gone. So Earl being the gentleman that he was offered to hop a train with me all the way to the east coast. […] So we got to the track. I thought that it would at least be standing still, but the trains don't even stop in Biggar so Earl hops it and he starts to disappear into the distance. So I start running to catch up and he yells, “drop the bag and jump”.

And I yells “I’m not leaving the bag”

“Drop it”

“No”

“Drop it you moron”
I just take a running jump bag and all. I fall. And I miscarry. I watch Earl disappear into forever. And in the pool of brilliant ruby redness at my feet I see the reflection of the prairie sunrise.

I couldn’t leave the wheat. I could leave everything behind but I couldn’t leave the wheat. Any sweetness that may have been in me lay in the meaty substance on the ground. I was found wandering in slough water waste deep with a suitcase of wheat in my hand trying to wash away the blood from my pants. When I got home I never let my accordion out of my sight again. (14)

Olga’s story vividly conflates various bodily experiences that we prefer to think of as unrelated. First, sexual intercourse is likened to food preparation – and vice versa: not only is human anatomy visualized as food, but the food becomes gendered in a way that is not easily forgotten the next time one contemplates eating a hot dog. Even more grotesquely, Olga’s miscarried fetus is associated with both defecation (because her body expels it) and food (both in its description as a “meaty substance,” and in connection with the wheat), a disturbing image made all the more vivid by the dissonant juxtaposition with the prairie sunset (which, complete with gradually vanishing train, invokes an iconic “Canadian” landscape).

Maggie’s confessional, like Olga’s, is structured as a flashback explaining why no one will bid on her at the auction, and it too invokes the grotesque: the most pragmatic of the sisters, Maggie’s plan to escape Biggar is financed by exchanging oral sex for bus fare. The act of fellatio, of course, grotesquely conflates sexual and gustatory imagery,

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181 At this moment in the performance, Olga’s suitcase falls open, revealing that it contains nothing but wheat.
182 Even academic discourse is not immune to moments of carnivalesque excess.
but the story is made all the more disturbing by our discovery that she has been doing this
since she was a child (“You see Pax wanted on this ride at the fair [...]. And well we had
used the whole five bucks mom dad had given us [...]. So I asked the carnie what it
would take to get Pax on that ride” (15)), her alarming productivity (“I’ve serviced 249
penises in the Biggar Saskatchewan area”), and her comically entrepreneurial attitude
(“Number 250 gets a pen”). She refuses to let the MC/auctioneer speak for her, and
insists on telling her own version of the story (through song), in which she represents
herself as the exploiter, not the exploited:

Don’t think I’m a hick
Just cuz I charge a quarter a dick.
Because I won’t be stuck here all pregnant and lame
I’ll have used them and caught the next Greyhound to fame. (16)

Of course, our respect for Maggie’s entrepreneurial acumen and determination is put in
context by her naïveté (e.g. her belief that 25 cents is a princely sum). Her story is also
upstaged by the leering MC and (in the Camrose production) male chorus, and especially
by a film of vintage pornography that plays on the upstage scrim while she speaks.\footnote{\textsuperscript{183} In the Camrose production, the sudden demise of the ancient film led to a happy discovery: offstage
members of the cast used the projector, their bodies, and some phallic vegetables to cast shadow-puppet
pornography on the screen, which was even funnier (and, as a further reinforcement of the sex/food
imagery, more carnivalesque).} As
such it is impossible for a spectator to misunderstand Maggie’s story as an uncomplicated
vindication of the empowering opportunities of sex work. One may admire her
resourcefulness and determination, but mostly one is horrified by the social context in
which her “success” becomes possible.
An even more macabre union of sex, flesh, and feasting appears in the villain, Mitch Mitchell McCracken, the murderous banker/repo man/pork whisperer. McCracken openly admits to the audience that he doesn’t want the farm or the mortgage payments but is merely using them as leverage to get to Pax. And, as he explains, his interest in possessing “the last pink heart on the prairies” (3) is not at all metaphorical:

**MITCH MITCHELL.** I believe I deserve a monologue. *(sits in chair CS)*

I am great. Mitch Mitchell Credit Union Banker and resident villain, man of appetite. Specializing in mortgages of love. The trouble is with hearts. It is hard to get a return, it’s an unstable market. Hearts are all black and brittle. Crusty numbers that are, well, uninspiring. I am hungry. I would never eat an animal, because they are forthright:

*straight shooters.* Besides, who needs to buy beef when all one need do is go down to the North Saskatchewan river to pick up this winter’s fresh kill? The spring thaw brings with it an ample supply of depressives who offed themselves during the long prairie winter months, plunging to their deaths from the Lloydminster bridge. Lil’ treats fresh from desperation to my pan. Self pity always leaves a bad taste on my palate. No, what I crave is a tasty little pink muscle, Saskatchewan born and farm bred. I prefer a meaty little flower something that tastes like hope. And I think I have found it. *(17)*

Building on the play’s (already well-established) obsession with pointing out similarities the literal consumption of animal flesh and the metaphorical consumption of human

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184 The latter designation refers not to his charismatic way with pigs, but his unconscious, compulsive, and vaguely disturbing repetition of the word “pork,” which Pax speculates is a “kind of meat Tourette’s” (42).
flesh, McCracken’s cannibalistic fantasies corrode the distinction between the two.\textsuperscript{185} McCracken’s intentions, however revolting, are expressed in a way that is all the more disturbing because it is surprisingly familiar: his relentless desire to possess and consume Pax’s heart simply makes literal the familiar metaphors and tropes of popular and poetic language, wherein the object of the speaker’s desire is imagined in terms of possession and consumption.\textsuperscript{186}

The play’s fascination with grotesque juxtapositions of feasting, sex, and flesh reaches its zenith (or nadir, perhaps) in the climax, when Olga and Maggie lay a trap for McCracken, but end up snaring Pax’s true love interest, Billy Hamm, instead. Olga recognizes him, but, threatened by his plan to take Pax away forever, says nothing. They cut his throat (spraying blood into the first few rows, if all goes well in the special effects department) and serve him for dinner, using spaghetti and edible “blood” (among other things) to make the scene both thoroughly gross and yet hilariously fake.\textsuperscript{187} The repulsiveness of the spectacle is enhanced by the sisters’ ravenous appetites (we have already seen evidence that, like all bouffons, they are truly starving – one of their games is to fantasize about baking an imaginary birthday cake for Pax, one of the few remaining allusions to \textit{The Three Sisters}). Of course, Pax soon recognizes her lover (when \textit{rigor

\textsuperscript{185} As part of her research on her subsequent project, \textit{Pig!} – inspired by Robert Pickton’s mass murder of up to two dozen prostitutes, whose bodies he then disposed of on his pig farm – Nutting determined that ground beef (i.e. for consumption as food) is more expensive than human flesh (i.e. for sexual consumption).

\textsuperscript{186} In terms of carnival structure, McCracken can be seen as a manifestation of “devilry.” In carnivalesque plots about marriage, Bristol notes the frequent intervention of a “black man” or devil disguise. The black man may act either on the part of the couple (e.g., by thwarting an inappropriate rival for the bride’s attention) or against them, as in this case. In the latter function, the “black man” may persecute one or both partners, either to protest a “bad” match (e.g., in which the proposed groom is too old) or simply “out of a general hostility to domestic sexual arrangements. […] The complex as a whole – clown, transvestite [i.e. the bride played by a man], and suit of black – constitutes a counter-festive vocabulary through which marriage is subjected to critical scrutiny and possible revision” (\textit{Carnival} 166-67).

\textsuperscript{187} Although the illusion was effective enough (or possibly just tasted bad enough) to make at least one of the performers vomit during the banquet scene in the Camrose production.
mortis causes his arm to pop up), and chaos ensues. Maggie and Mommy-Daddy attack Olga, who kills them in a fit of rage that accidentally takes out Pax as well, spraying gore everywhere. As a shocked Olga tries to reconcile her actions (“It’s never a good story until a good woman dies, right?”), McCracken steps forward to claim his prize: Pax’s heart, represented by a real pig’s heart.

“Chekhov” as a Signifier in The Three Sisters: ABOTA
The copious gore, obscenity, and verbal and visceral violence in *The Three Sisters: ABOTA* would be provocative in any context, but the Chekhovian references and the play’s meta-theatrical frame focus that provocation, telling the audience to read the play as a transgressive travesty and signifying the specific kind of theatre (and the specific cultural values) that are being attacked. After all, “outrageous” Fringe plays are hardly exceptional – it’s this play’s overt allusions to “legitimate theatre” that distinguish it from all the other plays promising violence, nudity, and provocation. Meanwhile the frame of the freak show becomes a device for attacking the spectators themselves, particularly in the opening and closing moments, when the freaks step out of their *Three Sisters* characters and promise to give the spectators what they want – which amounts to accusing them of being depraved voyeurs in search of “violence, cross-dressing, [and] porn” (2):

**PAX.** You know you stare at a car accident an even though you might see a decapitated head.

**MOMMY DADDY.** Or you watch your Turd swirl down the toilet bowl with sick satisfaction.

**ALL.** We’ll show you life’s freak show where all that happens is bad
You might say *(girls)* "It’s disturbing our show is so macabre."

We know it makes you happy, to mock a handicap.

You’re the star of our freak show, cuz deep down you think you’re crap.

(3)

Cutting to the chase – or through their comically shoddy veneer of high culture respectability, as the case may be – the freaks boldly promise just the perverse spectacle they accuse the spectators of craving. In contrast with the conventional model of “outrageous” theatre – which imagines an innocent and unwary spectator being brutally (and predictably) shocked, offended, and provoked – the “travelling freak show players of the North Saskatchewan” refuse to let the paying customers off the hook so easily, constructing them as willing, culpable collaborators who, having deliberately sought out this experience, are every bit as perverse as the performers (and indeed more so, as they’re willing to pay for it). Thus, the play’s offensive material becomes an indictment of both the spectators and the theatre itself.

Moreover, the freaks’ crude rendition of the exalted Chekhov implies that the main distinction between *The Three Sisters: ABOTA* and what might be called “legitimate theatre” is not the content, but the freaks’ lack of skill in packaging and presenting it as an appropriate, genteel entertainment. Like *Mad Boy Chronicle, The Three Sisters: ABOTA* claims to be showing us the “real” story, in all its perverse glory, which is normally concealed by the veneer of realism and the auratic prestige of the revered author (and the exalted medium of theatre). But in this case, the carnivalization works in a different direction, although through a similar rhetoric: whereas *Mad Boy* constructs itself as the rediscovery of the vulgar and barbaric (but authentic!) story that Shakespeare
cleaned up to render it appropriate for the theatre, *The Three Sisters: ABOTA* shows how the freaks take an exalted text and, through an unskilful representation, reveal the violence, cruelty, and perversion that Chekhov makes covert. The role of the polite conventions of “legitimate” theatre, it suggests, is to give a veneer of respectability so that the spectators can pretend it is enlightening (or pretend to be shocked by the transgressive content they have in fact deliberately sought out). But the freaks lack the subtlety and skills (particularly the skills of illusionistic realism) to maintain that veneer, and as such they cannot present the Chekhovian story without clumsily exposing the perversion and sadism at its core, which in turn denies spectators their customary pleasure of indulging in a spectacle of perverse cruelty while pretending to consume enlightening “culture.” But of course, if the freaks could control the violent excesses, or conceal them under a veneer of bourgeois realism, the audience would find them boring.

“Step Right Up and See Chekhov Swallow a Human Heart!”: The Three Sisters: ABOTA at the Fringe
More than any other play examined here, *The Three Sisters: ABOTA*’s reception history offers an invaluable opportunity to study the responses of spectators across Canada to a play that is strongly grounded in a particular regional perspective: the play is not “about” Canada, nor even Saskatchewan, but it does deal with how different Canadians imagine each other (and even how they imagine each other imagining themselves). And while the play was almost universally appealing insofar as it was positively received across the country, the testimonials of both the performers and their audiences indicate different
interpretations in different regions. As such, the documents of reception offer a unique opportunity to query the meaning (and usefulness) of the term “Canadian audience.”

The Three Sisters: ABOTA has also enjoyed perhaps the most consistently positive response of all the plays studied here, in spite (or perhaps because) of its profanity, violence, and disturbing content. After the Orchard, for various reasons, has enjoyed neither critical nor commercial success; Mad Boy Chronicle has enjoyed better, but still mixed reviews and not many productions; and even Harlem Duet, as the reception analysis revealed, has not always thrilled spectators as much as readers. The Three Sisters: ABOTA, however, has only ever had one bad review (in Victoria); and although Nutting and the cast had the impression that some audiences were much less pleased (particularly Ottawa and Victoria) than others (particularly Winnipeg and Edmonton), and in spite of a small but steady number of walk-outs (which can be readily spun as evidence of credibility in the fringe festival circuit), The Three Sisters: ABOTA’s reception history – including a portfolio of exuberant reviews and a history of sold-out houses – would be envied by any theatre producer.

This positive reception includes a near-total immunity from fidelity discourse, even though the play’s title clearly signals its status as an adaptation and even though it lacks the paratextual arsenal deployed by Sears and O’Brien (and, to a lesser extent, the NAC). Like most Fringe companies, Cowgirl Opera lacked the resources to print large posters or elaborate programs containing long manifestos (e.g. “nOTES oF a cOLOURED gIRL”) and playwright’s notes, nor could they depend on detailed previews in the media (although their success and “hometown favourite” status in Edmonton did

\[188\] Unfortunately, this play about life in small town Saskatchewan has yet to be performed in Saskatchewan, although the Camrose production finally brought it to a (relatively) rural audience.
earn them a front page preview in Edmonton, as observed below). Rather than elaborate publicity campaigns, Fringe companies depend on simple handbills and posters which generally try to sell the show with a striking image, a memorable title, promises of titillation, and – especially – quotations from positive reviews accumulated during the tour. Indeed, even selling a show with the cultural capital of its text or author is a risky proposition at the fringe, because many fringe spectators (including some reviewers) are inclined to view the fringe as a site for new work, and deliberately avoid productions of canonical plays. For that reason (and because of her conviction that Canadians are bored with Chekhov), Nutting had grave concerns about the title of the play. Ultimately, however, its Chekhovian references seem to have worked in exactly the way she might have wished: to pique the interest and curiosity of spectators who either saw the handbills and posters or read the reviews.

_The Three Sisters: ABOTA_’s reception is quite well-documented. With six stops on its 2005 fringe tour (beginning in Ottawa and continuing through Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Vancouver, and Victoria), plus its 2006 run in Calgary and the 2009 production in Camrose, the play has been reviewed many times. In addition, there is significant evidence from both the performers themselves and from non-professional theatre spectators. The performers formed strong impressions of the responses of spectators in various cities, impressions which, though highly subjective, are far from

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189 While productions of Shakespeare, Chekhov, and even Brecht are not unheard of at the fringe, they are not common, and many spectators will rule them out, regardless of reception, for a variety of reasons, including ideological grounds (the belief that such festivals are or should be venues for new works), aesthetic or cultural reasons (spectators who are accustomed to lavish Shakespeare productions by large regional companies will rarely seek out a low-budget production with 5 actors – particularly if they find even the former uninteresting), or other factors (e.g. long running times, summer heat, musty, non-air conditioned theatres, and distance from the beer tent). Yet spectators who shun Shakespeare and Chekhov at the fringe may also be loathe to risk their time and money on totally unknown quantities, and thus the sideshow atmosphere fringe is in many ways an ideal proving ground for adaptations, with their enticing combination of novelty and familiarity (“Come see Hamlet swallow flaming knives!!”).
incidental or random: the show relies on building a rapport with the audience, and its Brechtian style gives the actors (including Nutting, who played Olga), the opportunity to scrutinize the audience at least as carefully as it scrutinizes them. The spectators, too, weighed in with their own thoughts by posting reviews on online forums which are not only permitted but encouraged by fringe festivals in order to reinforce their image as populist and democratic (in opposition to the real or imagined elitism of mainstream theatre): the judgement of the spectators, not the theatre critics, is supposed to reign supreme at the fringe.\footnote{Ironically, of course, with scores of shows to choose from, spectators (and thus artists) still rely heavily on reviews, although word-of-mouth is also an important factor. The success of a fringe show is therefore often frighteningly random, as it depends not only on getting a good review but on getting it early (receiving a five star review on the last day of the festival is a consolation prize at best). Success may also depend on getting the right reviewer: the newspapers must recruit an army of writers in order to publish scores of reviews in time for them to be meaningful, and brilliant productions have been doomed by one-star reviews by bored staff writers on loan from the municipal politics section. In addition, few critics (journalistic or scholarly) have considered the ramifications of replacing critical acclaim with commercial success as the criterion \textit{par excellence} of excellence. Among other things, this definition of success rewards productions which focus their resources on \textit{selling} the show, as opposed to creating it: to be a fringe “success,” one needs to be at least as skilled at selling art (through pushing handbills, beer tent schmoozing, shock tactics) as at creating it.}

Of course, there are some obvious problems with using anonymous online postings as documents of reception, such as the possibility that they are posted by interested parties (e.g., friends of the performers, or the performers themselves) posing as disinterested parties. But while this risk cannot be totally ignored, it is mitigated in this case by several factors: first, since \textit{The Three Sisters: ABOTA} sold exceptionally well (selling out its entire run in Winnipeg, which drew most of the online comments cited below), its cast had little reason to stoop to shilling themselves with phony reviews; second, the people who read these forums are well aware of this possibility; and third, several of the online reviews include comments which strongly suggest a lack of “inside” knowledge (or exceptional craftiness – which, as already noted, would have been
unnecessary). In addition, newspaper reviews are hardly above suspicion themselves, since even professional critics write puff pieces. At any rate, this study is less interested in proving that everyone thought the show was good (even Nutting is as proud of having regular walkouts as regular sellouts) than in discussing how Chekhov figured in those judgments. Even to the extent that a “review” (anonymous or professional) is really an attempt to sell the show, it is interesting to note whether and how Chekhov is used to pitch it.

Insofar as the evidence of reception is quantifiable (in terms of number of stars in reviews, the number, proportion and effusiveness of positive responses, awards, percentage of seats sold, and so on), the play has done well everywhere. According to Liz Nicholls (“Love It or Hate It”), the play won Best Production awards in both Ottawa and Toronto; it also tied for Best Musical in Winnipeg (losing the tie-breaker on a random trivia question about Jimi Hendrix). The surviving reviews\textsuperscript{191} are all strongly positive (those with star-based rating systems give either four or five stars), and the show enjoyed generally strong houses across the country, although sales were slow in Toronto until Jon Kaplan’s review (in \textit{Now}) was printed (after which it sold out its remaining two shows). Ticket sales were particularly strong in Winnipeg and Edmonton, Canada’s two largest and most strongly-attended fringe festivals.

\textbf{How Chekhov Means at the Canadian Fringe (Festival)}

It is clear that \textit{The Three Sisters: ABOTA} met Nutting’s goal of exciting and arousing audiences throughout the western half of (urban) Canada. But what role did Chekhov

\textsuperscript{191} The extant reviews include one from Winnipeg, two from Edmonton, two from Calgary, and one from Vancouver/Victoria. The latter is essentially an advance review for Vancouver audiences: published in Vancouver’s \textit{Georgia Straight}, it reviews the productions at the Victoria Fringe which would subsequently run in Vancouver a week later.
play in this reception, and what specific character, if any, did that excitement take? First, notwithstanding Nutting’s fear that the titular allusion to Chekhov would turn spectators off, the play’s debt to Chekhov was made even more explicit in Cowgirl Opera’s publicity material. The play’s entry in the Victoria Fringe program reads:

Karen Hines (Pochsy's Lips) calls this high camp opera of the grotesque “a gem, a freakshow on the prairie.” “It will change the way you think about the Fringe... disgusting and good” (CBC Radio). This macabre revisiting of Three Sisters is a prairie gothic tale Chekov never could have envisioned. Featuring raw meat, live face lifts and the sweet sounds of the accordion, vegetarians beware. Coarse Language, Nudity, Violence, Adult Themes.

(http://www.caprinadesigns.com/fringe2005/shows.html?venue2)

Similar formulations appeared in other Fringe programs and in the Mutton Busting program several months later in Calgary: “Brimming with exquisite satire, coal-black comedy, and sincere pathos, this drastically re-imagined The Three Sisters is a prairie gothic tale that Chekov never could (or would) have envisioned [... ] this funny, tender, and widely-lauded Fringe hit is a shocking high camp opera of the darkest order.” Several points are worth noting: first, the play’s relationship to Chekhov is carefully qualified by such decidedly un-Chekhovian descriptors “macabre” and “prairie gothic,” reassuring readers that the play is really nothing like what they probably think of as “Chekhov.” The play is defined as a “revisiting” (implying something more radical and innovative than a mere “adaptation”), and moreover, a revisiting so distant from the original that Chekhov could not have even imagined it (a claim which both draws on and reinforces the notion...
that Chekhov is staid and conservative). Second, Chekhov is only the third most valued authority cited here: top billing in the fringe program goes to Karen Hines, the world-renowned creator of a series of darkly comic solo shows featuring Hine’s clown alter ego, Pochsy. Hines, who was originally slated to direct The Three Sisters: ABOTA, is a perennial fringe favourite, and her support would have given the show considerable cachet.\textsuperscript{192} The unlikely combination of Hines and Chekhov seems tantalizing indeed, and the positive judgment of the CBC (significantly, the name of the national corporation stands in for that of the individual, local reviewer) adds a sense of reassurance, insofar as the CBC signifies good taste and cultural credibility to most Canadians. Finally, the notice about coarse language, violence, and nudity is as much a sales pitch as a “warning”: whereas seasoned playgoers with a taste for the avant-garde will be drawn by Hines’s endorsement, and more cautious fringe patrons will be comforted by the approval of the CBC, there is also a significant segment of the fringe audience that actively seeks the thrills of coarse language, violence, and particularly nudity.\textsuperscript{193}

As observed in the other case studies, the media coverage of The Three Sisters: ABOTA tends to repeat and even amplify the messages embedded in the publicity

\textsuperscript{192} In the Toronto Fringe program description, Hines’s affirmation is reinforced by alternative performance guru and One Yellow Rabbit co-founder Denise Clarke: “The hard core politico shimmering inside the cartoons of hicks and clichés of bad karma sold under a musical banner of sweet and sad. Men are white faced clowns and women are short skirted and sexy wexy dynamos who could have you for their breakfast, if they have a bone to pick it could be your femur sir. Sometimes it is exquisite satire and often it is terribly amusing and honestly quite shocking. One thing is for sure - a potent personal aesthetic is getting distilled here and grows ever towards completing the massively talented articulation of an angry, funny, tender, and damaged world view.” Clarke’s high praise (however opaque) carries considerable weight among Canadians who have cultivated a taste for avant-garde theatre – a small crowd to be sure, but a very significant one to a small-scale show like The Three Sisters: ABOTA.

\textsuperscript{193} The promise of nudity is not really fulfilled: the only nudity in the play is the porno movie that upstages Maggie’s story. The use of such “warnings” to entice spectators with the promise of titillation is standard practice at the fringe, and the Edmonton fringe program in particular collaborates with the performers in this regard by supplying a laughably lengthy catalogue of possible causes of offense (each with its own cartoonish logo), ranging from crude language to graphic violence to loud noise warnings. Thus, a spectator in search of provocation need only skim through the program searching for the entries with the most warning logos.
materials. Edmonton theatre critic Liz Nicholls becomes Nutting’s eager collaborator, leading off a preview with a promise that “You'll either be outraged and love it, or you'll be outraged and walk out” ("Love It or Hate It"). Nicholls’s 1000-word article (which appeared on the front page of the Entertainment section on the first Friday of the festival – a Fringe artist’s dream) mentions (or quotes Nutting mentioning) Chekhov ten times, giving him far more prominence than the play itself does. The article, which had considerable potential to influence attendance,\(^{194}\) is strongly reminiscent of Martin Morrow’s review of Mad Boy Chronicle in that it generates excitement by promising an outrageous confrontation with a revered author. Nutting herself could not have written a better plug:

> Chekhov with cannibalism, incest, murder, cross-dressing? And an accordion? A screw-you to the classics. Cowgirl Opera's Kristine Nutting, who did most of the writing, says happily, “We can count on a couple of walk-outs every performance .... Half the audience cheers and stands up.

> The other half looks like they've been run over by a truck.”

Like Morrow’s review of Mad Boy, Nicholls’s preview thrills the reader with the promise of provocation while simultaneously inoculating them against it. Nicholls’s fringe-going readers, thus encouraged to identify with the half that cheers, will rush to buy tickets in the hope of seeing the other half get run over by the figural truck (and the show’s opening song accuses the audience of indulging in exactly this sort of perverse voyeurism, even

\(^{194}\) In addition to the article’s prominent placement, length, and auspicious timing, the Edmonton Journal was offered free of charge throughout the Fringe grounds during the festival, which gives its critics considerable power to influence Fringe patrons. The free weekly See Magazine also publishes a special Fringe review issue which is widely read on the Fringe grounds. With over 150 shows to choose from, fringe-goers must gather intelligence to improve their chances of spending time and money judiciously, and so a day of fringing often begins by scouring the newspapers at the beer tent. Ironically, at the very time spectators rely most heavily on the judgment of critics, the standard of criticism is at its weakest – see note 31, above.
using the same metaphor: “You know you stare at a car accident even though you might see a decapitated head” [3]). Most of the other paratexts perform similar functions, warning audiences that the show is provocative and thus pre-empting true provocation.195

After mentioning the awards and accolades the play has accumulated across the country (to the extent that her “preview” might as well have been a five star review), Nicholls reiterates her challenge to the reader (“You can play it safe at Fringe A-Go-Go. Or you can see what happens when someone like Nutting gets her mitts on Chekhov's girls”), and then she and Nutting lay into Chekhov again, playing to a readership that loves theatre but would never see a Chekhov play at the fringe:

As for Chekhov, a shrine for the theatrical pursuit of subtlety and nuance, not to mention rarefied argument about wistful characters, Nutting, 33 and originally from the 'Peg, isn't exactly awestruck.

“I find his plays boring,” she says with a grin.

“If I had a choice between Chekhov or something by Catalyst,197 I'd see Catalyst every time. […] This is very far from Chekhov... . I wouldn't do a

195 See, for example, Giroday (Rev. of The Three Sisters: ABOTA), and Nicholls’s subsequent review (“Sproule Boldly Ventures to the Fringes of Society”). The reviews of the Calgary performances at the Mutton Busting festival, notably, do not contain such warnings, because unlike the Edmonton Fringe, which works to create an aura of universal appeal, Mutton Busting, the High Performance Rodeo, and OYR construct and target a spectatorship which seeks edgy, provocative theatre (there is no equivalent for the “Kid’s Fringe” or the Telus Family Stage anywhere on the HPR bill, for example).

196 “Fringe-A-Go-Go” was the signature theme of the 2005 Edmonton Fringe Festival. Like many such festivals, the Edmonton Fringe (or rather its producing company, Fringe Theatre Adventures) creates a new theme every year, in order to maintain a perpetually fresh look in its marketing and publicity, which in turn helps ensure steady sales of Fringe-branded merchandise while creating an aura of cleverness, playfulness, and creativity (previous incarnations include “X Marks the Fringe,” “2001: A Fringe Odyssey,” and “Live and Let Fringe”). The 2009 Winnipeg Fringe acknowledged the implicit ironies of commodifying artistic genius when it dubbed itself, “Fringe Factory: Mass Producing Originality Since 1988.”

197 Catalyst is Edmonton’s premier alternative theatre company, and is known to Edmontonians not only for its high production values but also for its international success with such shows as The House of Pootsie Plunkett. Catalyst’s plays are also largely adaptations and appropriations from both literary and dramatic sources. In addition to Pootsie Plunkett, which is a covert adaptation of Electra, its repertoire includes the widely-acclaimed Frankenstein (2007, set to tour to Toronto in 2010) and Nevermore (2009), a theatrical biography of Edgar Allen Poe. Catalyst’s work often succeeds at combining popular appeal and box office
Chekhov at the Fringe. That's just mean to people. They're coming for fun!"

“This is spectacle; it plays with Chekhov and turns it into a real gong show.”

To reduce Chekhov to “a shrine for the theatrical pursuit of subtlety and nuance, [and] rarefied argument about wistful characters” is, of course, to play right into Nutting’s hands, and the article carefully prepares the spectators to see the play by telling them exactly how to enjoy it. Nicholls and Nutting use other tactics, too, such as lamenting the rarity of such spectacles in an age of “solo shows and two-handers,” joking about the actors’ imminent starvation (“Tell people to bring the actors a meal”), and emphasizing the theatricality of the show’s violence (by way of anecdotes about the impracticalities of hauling blood bags to the show on the Toronto subway), thus disarming it somewhat.

Given that the play’s title and publicity materials work hard to contrast “Chekhov” (as a signifier of conservative, “classy,” high art) with various signifiers of both the radical avant-garde (Hines and Clarke) and of lowbrow titillation (promises of nudity, gore, musical theatre) prominently, it should not be surprising to find that “Chekhov” figures in the reception. In fact, however, although the reviews almost always mention Chekhov, they never focus on the show as an adaptation of Chekhov. In addition, the responses posted online by casual spectators of the Winnipeg and Victoria festivals (14 in all, 12 positive) don’t mention Chekhov at all, even though some of them identify themselves as “avid theatre goer[s],” and several of them point out other

success with high art sensibilities, and the role of the company’s adaptive dramaturgy in achieving this rare combination of popular and elite appeal would certainly reward (and be rewarded by) scholarly examination.
influences or similarities with other plays on the festival circuit. For example, a spectator in Victoria who identifies himself as “Craig” wrote:

[A]ll the colour, spectacle, madness, darkness and craziness that *Wozzeck* (same venue!) tries to be (and fails at)... these folks are clever clever clever - listen carefully for songs brilliantly parodying many stylings and borrowing from other shows from *West Side Story* to *Lakme*... (yes!)


Another spectator (in Winnipeg) confirms the success of the marketing strategy outlined above:

I went to see this lured by the promise of accordions, nudity, and raw meat. You know, something strange, something "very fringe", (maybe something very bad). What I saw, however, was awesome. Great music, hilarious writing, immaculate comic timing.

Jonathan Harford

(www.cbc.ca/manitoba/features/fringe2005/review_thethree.html#letters)

The spectators often give evidence of being highly attentive (one singles out the “kick ass stage manager,” a rare accolade, and another notes that the opening show in Winnipeg received 3 curtain calls), so why don’t they mention Chekhov?¹⁹⁸ Probably, I suspect, because very few of them (avid theatregoers or not) are actually familiar with Chekhov, and instead commented on the elements of the show that they most strongly responded to,

¹⁹⁸ It is unlikely that anyone in *Three Sisters* would have made the unflattering comments about *Wozzeck*, which was produced by friends of Nutting’s company; the author of the second comment is another actor who was on the 2005 fringe circuit; the comment about the stage manager, Brad Goertz, may have been made by a friend, but Goertz, wearing only short shorts, 1970s-era knee socks and sneakers, and a head band, did present a rather striking figure. The comment about the three curtain calls is signed by Ruth Shead, who reviewed the show for CBC.ca.
such as the musical parodies, the “use of onstage projected porn,” and the “Dark Lord of the Piano” (referring to the silent, ghoulish accompanist, who was indeed decidedly “Luciferien”). Even the professional critics generally mention Chekhov only in passing. The five star review in Edmonton’s *SEE Magazine* describes the show as a “Chekhovian fable,” but also as a “cross between *Sweeney Todd*, *Cabaret*, and the Klondike melodrama”\(^{199}\); when the author claims it contains “everything a good Fringe play should,” those things turn out to be “humable [sic] tunes, opportunities for audience participation, […] big helpings of gore […] singing, playing various instruments, doing acrobatic stunts [and] adlibbing [sic]” (Celia Nicholls, Rev. of *The Three Sisters: ABOTA*). Even the experienced and highly knowledgeable Nicholls can’t make much of the Chekhovian allusions – which is not surprising, of course, because in fact there aren’t that many of them in the play, even though the preview article she had written two days earlier (like the play’s titles and paratexts) would lead one to believe otherwise.

It's easy to get impatient with the way things just don't happen in Chekhov (that's why productions that miss by a little, miss by a country mile). The fun of Three Sisters, Cowgirl style, is that they translate impatience hilariously into a high-style gory prairie freak show that's part circus, part hoedown. (“Sproule Boldly Ventures”)

While Nicholls’s off-hand theory about the failure of Chekhov productions serves as a reminder of her dramatic erudition to her readers, the analysis doesn’t really apply to the show at hand (which Nicholls gave four stars). The other reviews (most of which are much briefer) give even less attention to Chekhov, and at least two (Giroday and Grossé)

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\(^{199}\) This refers to the Walterdale Playhouse’s long tradition of producing an authentic 19\(^{th}\) century melodrama during Klondike Days. For the record, Nutting had never seen *Sweeney Todd*. 

don’t mention him at all, focusing instead on the show’s spectacular elements. Jon Kaplan’s brief capsule review in Toronto’s *NOW* magazine – which Nutting credits with boosting attendance significantly\(^200\) – gives the show four N’s and a “†” (the “recommended” arrow presumably distinguishes the truly exceptional “NNNN” shows from those that are merely excellent), and hits all the same points as Nicholls’s lengthy preview, mentioning the source, Nutting’s most significant “Canadian” adaptation, the tone, and the shock value: “Nutting transplants Chekhov’s play to Saskatchewan in this ghoulish, exuberant and striking musical … [it] isn’t for the squeamish or the prurient, but it’s lots of fun and the most original Fringe show I’ve seen this year.” Chekhov is used to arouse interest and curiosity, but in relation to fidelity.

The relative lack of judgement about Nutting’s treatment of Chekhov in reviews of and responses to *The Three Sisters: ABOTA* is partly a consequence of the fact that the show actually has very few Chekhovian references, but there are other factors as well. First, as observed repeatedly in this study, most spectators (even professional critics) have a limited vocabulary for assessing and discussing adaptations, beyond the familiar (and mostly negative) terms of fidelity criticism; second, fidelity discourse is most strongly triggered when the spectator has strong feelings about the authenticity and cultural value of the adapted text, and most Canadian spectators do not have strong feelings about Chekhov’s integrity, since they are much less familiar with Chekhov’s plays than they are with Shakespeare’s.\(^201\) Lacking both the instinct to defend Chekhov

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\(^200\) Email from Nutting, 30 June 2009: “Toronto didn’t [come] until we got the stamp of approval from Jon Kaplan.”

\(^201\) “Strong feelings” about the hypotext are not the same thing as “intimate familiarity.” It is possible, for example, for spectators to accuse artists of betraying an original they have never actually read or seen, simply because it isn’t faithful to the aesthetic or cultural values that the source or its author signifies to them. An artistic associate of the Citadel Theatre recently told me that she had one spectator threaten to cancel subscriptions over a production of *Julius Caesar* that *had not yet opened*, because of the rumours
(who, as a Russian, is much more tenuously connected to ideas about “our” Canadian heritage than Shakespeare) and intimate familiarity with his plays, spectators respond most strongly to what did arouse their interest: catchy music, ribald lyrics, clever satire, and outrageous spectacle.

And yet, even if responses seldom focus on the play as adaptation, and even though Nutting deleted most of the Chekhovian material, “Chekhov” remains an important signifier in the play’s reception. In particular, the recognizably Chekhovian title – and thus the saturation of publicity and media paratexts with references to Chekhov – has a fascinating consequence. The explicit references to Chekhov and The Three Sisters in The Three Sisters: ABOTA’s architexts and paratexts, combined with the audience’s general lack of familiarity with the adapted text, causes spectators to imagine that it is an extended parody of Chekhov – and respond to it as such – even though it is not. In contrast with After the Orchard, which seems to share little with its hypotext until one examines it very closely, the architexts and paratexts of The Three Sisters: ABOTA create the impression of an extensive engagement with the hypotext, and only when one looks more closely (which few spectators do, particularly if the script is not published) does one realize that there are really very few explicit references to The Three Sisters. For example, a spectator thus prepared to see an adaptation of Chekhov may (as I did) interpret the refrain, “This is a prairie road between nowhere and nowhere” (which is repeated at three intervals in the play) as a quotation from The Three Sisters, but it is actually borrowed from Canadian poet Robert Kroetsch. Similarly, a spectator who, like

that it was to be done in modern dress. Such a vigilant attitude toward Shakespeare is exemplary of the illogic of fidelity criticism, of course, for it is hard to imagine what would have satisfied such a demand for fidelity: authentic Roman dress would not be faithful to Shakespeare, either, and contemporary Elizabethan clothing would presumably be no more satisfying to the angry Citadel subscriber than modern dress.
Liz Nicholls, imagines Chekhov as “a shrine for the theatrical pursuit of subtlety and nuance,” may interpret the oddly artificial, heightened dialogue as a parody of Chekhov, but (aside from a few direct allusions in the first few scenes) it is not.

Although it may seem bizarre to discuss how audiences respond to adaptations of sources with which they are relatively unfamiliar, such a response to adaptation is actually fairly common, and occurs, for example, whenever a spectator sees a mass market film adaptation of a classic text (e.g. *Pride and Prejudice*) or a text with a limited “cult” following (e.g. *Hellboy*).\(^{202}\) And this phenomenon is certainly an important aspect of the reception of *The Three Sisters: ABOTA*: the title and paratexts encourage spectators to expect a parody of *The Three Sisters*, and once this expectation is confirmed by the central “if-only-I-could-get-to-Edmonton” joke, the spectator may continue to assume that the rest of the gags are not only gags but clever subversions of Chekhov. Thus the relatively few Chekhov references encourage spectators to interpret the play’s broad farce as urbane satire, which allows them to congratulate themselves for possessing the cultural sophistication to understand a bathroom joke as a bathroom joke about Chekhov. The fact that the play is not as clever as it first seems is actually the cleverest thing about it: as Eileen Sproule perceived when she made the cuts, very little effort was

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\(^{202}\) Other recent examples of the latter include the 2009 film version of the 1986-87 comic book series *The Watchmen*. The film was viewed by millions more people than had read the original comic series, and even the wider readership of the graphic novel’s co-incidental re-release included many people who saw the film adaptation first. Thus, the majority of the audience, though aware they were watching an adaptation, had not read the “original” and thus could not have thought that the film betrayed the original – or if they did, it could only be a judgement of whether the film was “true” to the promises made by its publicity materials. (Of course, given the cultural prejudices about anteriority and text vs. image, it is possible to experience a retroactive fidelity response: one might, for example, see a film adaptation of *Emma*, then read the book, and subsequently decide that the film adaptation betrayed the book.) Similarly, even much more familiar series such as *Spider-Man* and *Batman* are regularly followed only by a tiny fraction of their film audiences (indeed, the proliferation of popular film and televisual superhero adaptations is such that the idea of fidelity to the original becomes destabilized: Batman is no longer a fixed icon but a continuum of possibility ranging from retro/camp icon Adam West to the almost neo-Byronic anti-hero portrayed by Christian Bale, and rather than arguing which Batman is most faithful to the original, one can choose a personal favourite from a diverse plethora of Batmen circulating in cultural discourse).
required to create a strong effect, whereas a more sophisticated parody would indeed have missed the mark and gone over the audience’s collective head.

*The Three Sisters: ABOTA* enacts a similar ruse in regard to its “outrageous” content: as discussed above, the play’s numerous claims to be provocative – claims made by the publicity blurbs, repeated by reviewers who warn that this play is “not for everyone,” and even uttered directly in the text itself, when the freak show performers practically dare spectators to walk out – actually disarm its provocative potential. Many of the spectators, having actively sought out the play because of these claims, are actually hoping to see others walk out and will regard such reactions as evidence of the performers’ boldness and skill. Thus, the very small (though consistent) percentage of spectators who were offended or disturbed enough to leave potentially enhanced the experience for the rest. For this reason, the performers preferred venues like the Tarragon Extra Space in Toronto, which forced distressed spectators to exit directly in front of the performers, in full view of the audience.\(^\text{203}\) In addition, the performers’ evident desire to please the spectators tends to arouse sympathy and even a feeling of communitas. The audience is greeted, formally acknowledged and welcomed, and generally made to feel included by performers who not only acknowledge the spectators’ presence but occasionally even seem to compete with each other for their attention and sympathy. Even the performers’ acknowledgments of their purely commercial motives comes off as evidence of honesty, particularly in a milieu where spectators often complain that self-indulgent or offensive material is being peddled as “art” in order to make a fast buck. The

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\(^{203}\) Thus the performers exploited a performance space seemingly designed to discourage walkouts by denying spectators the possibility of an inconspicuous exit. Of course, some of the walkouts may have only had full bladders, as often happens during a festival which sells as many beer tickets as theatre tickets (there was a beer garden immediately outside the Tarragon, for example); but the spectator’s real motive hardly matters, since the remaining spectators will assume it was some form of disgust or outrage.
performers’ skill at creating a rapport is such that they get some of their best laughs from lines in which they seem to be mocking the audience, particularly the closing lines – “We hope you liked the carnage, cuz all your hearts are black – / And if not - too late suckah / You can’t get your money baaaaaaaaaack” – which frequently provoked standing ovations.

The Other Canadian Fringe: How Chekhov Means in Canada(s), from Ottawa to Camrose

The frequency of those standing ovations, however, did not follow a random distribution but a regional one: after opening to small and uninterested houses in Ottawa, The Three Sisters: ABOTA picked up steam in Toronto, and enjoyed larger and more vocal audiences as it moved west across Canada – until it hit Victoria, where it got its first bad review and was so poorly attended that the actors’ box office shares there were only $60 each. Although Nutting claims the spectators in Victoria were actually hostile (“It was as like they came to enjoy hating us” [Nutting, Email 30 June 2009]), they included critics from the Vancouver weekly, The Georgia Straight, who ranked The Three Sisters: ABOTA as one of the top shows. The show profited from this advance publicity and rebounded in Vancouver to close their tour with some of their most successful performances and most vocal audiences, including spectators who would participate and call back to the actors in the vein of The Rocky Horror Show (the similarities between Jason Carnew’s Mommy-Daddy and Tim Curry’s Dr. Frank-N-Furter are indeed

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204 In a similar vein, the opening song accuses the spectators of both perverted voyeurism and hypocrisy: “You might say (girls) ‘It’s disturbing our show is so macabre.’ / We know it makes you happy, to mock a handicap. / You’re the star of our freak show, cuz deep down you think you’re crap.”

205 According to Nicholls, however, the show won awards in both Ontario cities.

206 If not “larger” audiences, at least packed houses: the size depends on the venue, of course, so the show’s largest audience was in Winnipeg, where it had the benefit of a large theatre (Email from Nutting, 30 June 2009).
undeniable). The Vancouver run invoked a thoroughly carnivalesque atmosphere which blurred the distinctions between performer and spectator.

According to Nutting, however, the show’s best audiences were concentrated around the province in which the story takes place. In Winnipeg, the company sold out its run in a 285-seat house, and enjoyed what Nutting feels were their most appreciative and attentive audiences. In Edmonton, too, *The Three Sisters: ABOTA* was an unqualified hit, selling out all six shows (in a 200-seat venue), and the show’s “finale” (at least until the Camrose production three years later) at the 2006 Mutton Busting festival in Calgary also drew large crowds (Nutting reports that up to 50 extra seats were added to the Big Secret Theatre for their last two performances). The Prairie audiences were not only the most populous but also, the actors felt, the most attentive and appreciative, and the best-equipped to enjoy the show’s numerous ironic allusions to the landmarks of small-town life in western Canada. For example, the prairie audiences delighted in references to “the Saan store,” which every small town Canadian prairie refugee recognizes as a fading department store which sells cheap hardware supplies and clothing from bygone decades (and thus the one place in Biggar where one might both buy underwear [8, 33] and select a china pattern [32]); but these jokes fell flat east of Manitoba or west of Alberta, where most spectators have never heard of Saan or its inventory of superannuated polyester, and could not appreciate that how humiliating it would be to admit that one shopped for one’s mother’s panties there.

The varying reception of the play’s central joke, wherein Edmonton stands in for Moscow, reveals a more subtle, yet critical, fissure in the “Canadian audience.” “Subtle,”
because all Canadian audiences find this funny; but the quality of laughter is different in different places, and what began as Nutting’s “inside” joke was received as an “outside” joke in Ontario (and perhaps British Columbia). From Nutting’s point of view as a native of small-town Saskatchewan, “Edmonton” was in fact the destination she and her peers hoped to escape to, and the joke, when one finally makes it there, is that Edmonton turns out to be just as bleak – and populated with other such refugee/arrivistes. For Ontarians, however, who might well expect Toronto to be Moscow’s rightful proxy in a Canadian adaptation of *The Three Sisters*, the laughter is at the sisters’ expense, not Edmonton’s – the point being that they are too ignorant or imaginatively impoverished to have even heard of Toronto. For Edmontonians, who are immensely proud of their city’s cultural achievements, Maggie’s claim that Edmonton is the “cultural capital of the whole country” is not so far off the mark; their laughter derives more from Maggie’s association of success with Lawrence Welk, than from her lionization of Edmonton. Winnipeggers, Nutting claims, are perfectly positioned, culturally and geographically, to appreciate the joke. One wonders whether the play would resonate just as richly in Saskatchewan, or whether a Saskatchewan audience (perceiving itself as the butt of the joke) would be offended, but regretfully the show has never played there.208

Since the tour performed exclusively in urban centres, one could argue that it played only to those urban Canadians who, like Nutting, managed to “escape” the prairie.

Would a performance in rural Canada receive the same warm reception? Or would it

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208 In addition, the play’s parodic appropriation of Chekhov’s semiotic geography seems (appropriately) less legible to non-Canadians. When I spoke about *The Three Sisters: ABOTA* at a conference in 2009, the chair of our panel, a native of Russia, suggested that Nutting’s conceit of transferring *The Three Sisters* to Canada was inherently flawed, because while Moscow is very clearly the *only* place the sisters could wish to be, Canada has no clear symbolic capital metropolis, but instead every Canadian has a different idea about where the centre is really located. To me, and evidently to many spectators, this fact is exactly what makes Nutting’s joke funny, but for at least one Russian reader it suggested incoherence or lack of knowledge about Chekhov’s Russia.
arouse anger and resentment from spectators who sensed that they were the targets of the play’s jokes? Would the spectators of a town like Biggar be provoked and offended in a way that more urban(e) audiences (many of whom come to the fringe festival looking for something edgy and outrageous) were not? It seemed that these questions would always be hypothetical, until 2009, when the play was remounted, almost by accident, in the small town of Camrose, Alberta (pop. 15,000). Camrose is a predominantly Lutheran community, and the site of the performance was a converted church on the college campus (which was, until its recent absorption by the University of Alberta, known as Camrose Lutheran College). Camrose is a decidedly conservative community in a decidedly conservative province and the little theatre it sees is mostly of the dinner theatre, musical, and/or murder mystery variety. Even the college productions tend to be chosen from the classical and Canadian canons – recent productions before The Three Sisters: ABOTA included Spring Awakening, Ten Lost Years, Peer Gynt, Les Belles Soeurs, Godspell, and Unity (1918). Thus, The Three Sisters: ABOTA, with its Chekhovian title, may have seemed (upon one’s first glance at the marquee or poster) to fit right into this repertoire.

Because of Camrose’s conservative and relatively unsophisticated audience, Nutting, a contract instructor at Augustana, predicted that the show (both because of its explicitly sexual and blasphemous content and its spatial and cultural location in a former church on a historic Christian campus) would cause great uproar among the audience.

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209 Nutting had hoped to develop a grotesque clown adaptation of Romeo and Juliet, but had neither the human resources nor the rehearsal time required for such an ambitious project.
210 The Progressive Conservative party has ruled Alberta almost unchallenged since 1971, when it unseated the (even more conservative) Social Credit government that had itself reigned since 1935. Both the provincial and federal ridings to which Camrose currently belongs have always elected Conservative (or Reform) candidates.
She also feared that it might draw admonishment or even punishment from the college administration, possibilities she discussed openly with the cast (which was itself largely comprised of students with strong religious orientations, including at least one who refuses to utter scripted profanity). Nutting was prepared for such controversy (to the point of accepting the possibility that it could cost her a job), and yet, as the director, she put great emphasis on building a rapport with the audience. She repeatedly stressed cohesiveness, polish, commitment to telling the story, and respect for the audience, and went to great lengths to ensure that the young actors would neither get carried away with their comic business at the expense of narrative, nor confuse actual chaos and shoddiness with the polished simulation thereof. She and I (as dramaturg) also took care to frame the play, in our respective program notes, as a celebration of homegrown, local stories (as opposed to the recycling of old foreign classics), and of comic (but “deadly serious”) spectacle over dull “moral affirmation.”

As mentioned earlier, the mise en scène of the Camrose production was remarkably consistent with the earlier incarnation, but also significantly different, with an all-new and much larger cast. No longer constrained by budget or touring logistics, and now facing instead the responsibilities of the college drama producer (particularly the obligation to involve as many students as possible) Nutting split the MC/Billy Hamm part into two separate roles and double-cast each, so that four actors shared the work originally done by one. She also expanded the freak troupe by creating a chorus of

211 Only when I attended the performance did I realize that our carefully constructed paratexts would be largely ignored: very few spectators would bother to read the three single-spaced pages of edifying essays while scantily-clad and ghoulishly made-up young actors were crawling on their laps and over their seats. Nutting had conceived this introduction precisely to sabotage the usual gathering phase in which spectators quietly assemble and patiently read while awaiting the curtain, and our anxious efforts to create the perfect production notes serve as a perfect example of how one’s habitual working practices may work to cross-purposes with one’s aesthetic ideals or political objectives.
supporting freaks, who added mass to the crowd scenes and tableaux, and (much-needed) volume to the musical numbers. Most importantly, she recruited a complete four-piece band where before there had only been a solo accompanist.

Nutting’s intention, at the outset, was to use this rehearsal process to rediscover the play, and perhaps to add new shtick or re-introduce some bits that had been cut from the touring script. In practise, however, these objectives required both adequate time for exploration and actors who were up to the task of contributing new material, and the Camrose production was not blessed in these regards. The rehearsal time was very limited, and the actors, while very capable, were (like most young actors) more comfortable taking directions than making offers, particularly given their conservative backgrounds and the show’s raucous content. These time constraints and inhibitions were such that the text, mise en scène and even comic business ended up being very much the same as the earlier production. Nevertheless, the addition of the chorus, and especially the band (which was also costumed and made up as part of the freak show ensemble) made the Camrose production a considerably different – and even, musically, superior – theatrical experience.

To Nutting’s considerable surprise, the show was greeted with enthusiastic praise and virtually no controversy. It earned a rave review from the local paper praising the performers’ talent and energy. The reviewer notes that “the band was loud … and the audience seemed pumped,” and was clearly impressed with the performers’ commitment to the scandalous material: “Amanda Hill [playing Maggie] must be commended for her gutsy performance of a sister who ‘pleases’ men as a means of making money.” As with other reviews and previews of The Three Sisters: ABOTA, a strong warning about the
show’s provocative content braces readers against provocation: the review is titled “Go With an Open Mind,” and the final paragraph acknowledges that “concerns […] might be raised about the content, but the play is as advertised and certainly no one should be expecting The Sound of Music.”

In contrast with the rave reviews for The Three Sisters: ABOTA by urban critics who praise the show’s edgy derring-do, the unnamed reviewer for the Camrose Booster, although highly receptive, was suspicious of such claims:

The director’s notes state that the play was born out of disgust for stale theatre. Certainly there is nothing stale here, but one does get the idea that the play is not as unconventional as it is purported to be. There are points of reference to […] Cabaret and Chicago, and even something owing to Fellini’s 8½.

Ironically, the reviewer from Camrose – where Nutting anticipated the least sophisticated reception – not only read the program notes but also proved to be much less gullible than any of his/her urban peers, who were comparatively uncritical in accepting the show’s paratextual claims to avant-garde innovation.

In addition to the review, the paper ran a letter to the editor from a regular spectator – not demanding redress, as Nutting had anticipated, but singing the play’s praises:

My wife and I recently attended the live drama performance at the Augustana Campus Theatre titled The Three Sisters: A Black Opera in Three Parts [sic]. I wish to commend the director, crew, actors, and all persons involved […]. It was nothing short but an evening of sheer fun and
wonderful entertainment. The script, props, costumes, make-up, music, and song was a delight to watch and listen to. […] The actors, each and every one of them, did such a wonderful job and were such a “cohesive” group on stage. This was nothing short of professional acting at its finest and like an evening at “Broadway.” I believe the young actors in that performance do not realize just “how good they really are.”

Although the writer’s idiom might be consistent with an urban Canadian’s prejudices about the unsophisticated readership of the Camrose Booster, the delighted response and glowing praise (to a vulgar comedy about transsexuals and child prostitution, among other things) is not. Perhaps even more remarkably, one of the cast members reported to me that after a mid-week drop-off in attendance, the “pay-what-you-can” show on the second Saturday – rescheduled to a late start so that it would not compete with the college’s popular opera recital – took in more money than any of the regularly scheduled performances.

In other words, the company’s collective fantasies about being fired, expelled, and/or driven out of the theatre by an angry mob armed with torches and pitchforks (or perhaps, in a more Lutheran fashion, reams of theses inveighing against their obscene indulgences) did not materialize. In hindsight, this seems less surprising than it was at the time, and there are at least three convergent factors that explain Camrose’s almost disappointing lack of outrage. First, as she wrote in a piece for Edmonton’s See Magazine, Nutting overestimated the conservatism and intolerance of Camrose audiences:
Knowing the town and the campus have strong Christian roots, I couldn’t resist maybe getting into a bit of trouble, parading a story replete with porn, swears, and cross-dressers. In my fantasies, people would be outraged that I had lured the students into swearing or dressing up as “faggots.” Maybe I was hoping to get fired. (“Bringing Cross-Dressing to Camrose”)

Instead, as Nutting sheepishly concedes in the article, by assuming that the show would expose the people of Camrose as intolerant, easily affronted prudes, she herself became guilty of intolerance and class prejudice. Second – and this is the factor that, I believe, explains the show’s general failure, in all its incarnations, to trigger a significant negative provocation – the performers’ sincere and generous effort to creating a rapport with the audience greatly diminishes the potential for provocation. The audience never feels it is being attacked or mocked if the performers are successful in persuading them that, at least for the duration of the performance, everyone in the theatre belongs to the same community. Third, this sense of communitas was, if anything, stronger in Camrose than in many of the Fringe venues, because of the close cultural ties between the town and the college (which, founded in 1910, is a central part of Camrose’s cultural history and identity), and the close social ties between the performers and the general college population of which they are members (everyone knows everyone at the Augustana campus, with its student population of only about 800 and its remarkably busy social calendar). From the audience’s point of view the performers were not outsiders mocking them, but friends and family. Ultimately, then, the Camrose spectators – however religious, conservative, and unsophisticated they might or might not be – were better
positioned to enjoy the play than several of the urban Fringe audiences (notably Ottawa and Victoria). Even Augustana’s production history may have set the stage, as it were, for \textit{The Three Sisters: ABOTA}’s positive reception, as spectators grown accustomed to dutifully supporting Augustana’s comparatively dull repertory of Canadian documentary realism and staid classics were pleasantly surprised by a production that seemed devised to entertain and delight, rather than edify. It is hard to guess whether the play was effective at raising awareness about intolerance and homophobia, but the review and the letter to the editor suggest that it did meet Nutting’s primary objective: to make her audience feel visceral excitement about live performance.

Although it represents, among these case studies, the least extensive engagement with its canonical source text, \textit{The Three Sisters: ABOTA} is in some ways the most effective: none of the other plays here can boast of such a consistently enthusiastic response. Even \textit{Harlem Duet} has often received more praise for its symbolic significance, literary cleverness, political ambition, and structural ingenuity than for its theatrical effectiveness. \textit{The Three Sisters: ABOTA} may not reward close intertextual reading in the same way as the other case studies, but then very few spectators are equipped or inclined to perform such a reading during a theatrical performance. Consequently, the more intricate and elaborate intertextual strategies of Sherman and Sears, as we have seen, often go unnoticed even by professional theatre critics; and if O’Brien’s appropriation of \textit{Hamlet} is somewhat more successful in the sense that his jokes are more widely available (partly because his hypotext is more widely familiar), audiences have nevertheless failed to respond to \textit{Mad Boy Chronicle} with as much enthusiasm. And although Nutting does not subject Chekhov’s play to a serious critique, she does deploy his reputation and
cultural capital in a serious critique of her own culture’s voyeuristic lust for violence, and of the role of theatrical performance in reproducing stereotypes about gender and sexuality, among other things. And, unlike her Governor-General Award-nominated peers, she uses her canonical source to question, subvert, and move beyond the dominant aesthetic and ideological form of Canadian theatre (fourth wall scenic and psychological realism), in the hope of forging a more exciting and authentic connection with her audience. In this regard, the show has been a great success. It may be true, as one co-panelist at a recent conference suggested, that one has greater license in the context of the fringe festival – but rather than dismissing Nutting’s dramaturgy or the fringe as trivial, one might instead reconsider the value of venues where playwrights can exploit the advantages of live performance, openly acknowledge and interact with their audiences, and generally “get away” with things that spectators (often the very same spectators) might not accept in the context of “legitimate” theatre.

The extent to which Nutting achieved her goals with *The Three Sisters: ABOTA* is suggested not only by its fairly consistent box office success and critical acclaim, but also – and perhaps especially – by the consistent, enthusiastic, and enduring appreciation of its spectators. The exuberant tone of most responses, even more than the positive content, indicates the extent to which *The Three Sisters: ABOTA* performs a sort of “de-alienation effect,” dispelling the habitual perception of theatre as a dull but healthy moral corrective, and (re)awakening the spectator to the exciting possibilities of live performance. The show has also left an unusually durable impression. Although the fringe tour ended four years ago at the time of this writing, Nutting still gets comments about the show wherever she travels in Canada, and is often surprised and embarrassed
by the continuing appreciation of the show’s fans. One of the actors she hired for her new show, Pig, sought Nutting out on the advice of another person – who had himself never met Nutting but only seen The Three Sisters: ABOTA, once (in Vancouver). I, too, have witnessed excited responses when the topic of either The Three Sisters: ABOTA or its creator comes up. Nutting’s most zealous fans tend to be young female artists who, like her, aspire to do exciting and edgy work that interrogates dominant cultural values without being dull or polemic.

The enduring, visceral response to The Three Sisters: ABOTA indicates exceptional efficacy. Although Nutting herself is easily embarrassed by such responses, and has claimed that the powerful reaction to The Three Sisters: ABOTA has more to do with the show filling a void or niche specific to the cultural moment of the 2005 Canadian fringe tour (Email to author, 30 June 2009), it is clear that her fans, at least, believe in her creative genius. Whatever the reason, it is clear that many of Nutting’s spectators were not only thrilled by The Three Sisters: ABOTA and its challenge to dominant cultural values (and theatrical conventions), but inspired to do similar work of their own. One can hardly imagine a more validating affirmation of one’s work – nor a better measure of its efficacy.
Conclusion

If the major challenge facing adaptors is fidelity discourse, which can be conceived of as the readers’ desire to see and maintain clear distinctions between adaptations and originals, the major challenge in studying adaptation is that under scrutiny those distinctions disappear rather than coming into focus. Close inspection reveals how almost everything turns out to be an adaptation because, as Fischlin and Fortier put it, “everything we think, say, or do relies upon ideas, words, and cultural norms that pre-exist us” (4). Nevertheless, this study demonstrates that one can still make useful distinctions between different kinds of adaptation, based on motives and strategies. The form studied here, which I have called the dramaturgy of appropriation, presents an interesting paradox: insofar as the playwrights studied here create new plays by borrowing material from hallowed canonical sources, they seriously destabilize the imagined binary paradigm between original work and adaptation; and yet their successful reception seems to turn on the extent to which, rather than aggravating the audience’s anxiety about fidelity to the exalted source, they are able to relieve, pre-empt, or negate it. Radically re-citing the adapted material allows authors to appropriate and exploit the source’s cultural capital, and to respond to the source – even in an aggressive or oppositional manner – without being accused of betraying it.

Generally speaking, the analysis of the evidence bears out certain basic claims made at the outset of the study: first, the case studies show that re-siting and re-citing canonical works is a widely-used and potentially effective tactic for engaging Canadian spectators. Second, the case studies demonstrate the importance of an analytic framework
that focuses on understanding the processes of creating and interpreting adaptation, rather than defining the product. In light of the demonstrable cultural prejudices both for and against “adaptation,” the question of whether a given play should or should not be called an adaptation is of some interest to artists and producers (who often address the issue paratextually), but ultimately the distinction between “original” and “adaptation” is a matter of convention, not fact, a point which these plays demonstrate by blurring those conventional distinctions: each is clearly an original play, yet each is clearly created and received through processes of adaptation. Third, the case studies demonstrate that appropriation cannot be fully understood without accounting for both intertextuality and reception: each strategy of appropriation is devised with a particular performance and cultural context in mind, and no particular adaptive strategy is unconditionally effective regardless of context. It is easy to imagine how different the fortunes of any of these plays could have been (and might yet be) under different conditions.

In addition to asking how and why authors and audiences appropriate canonical sources, this investigation sought to address several related issues. First, in light of the problematic history of “adaptation” (including a lack of consensus about what the term even means), I attempted both to apply a theoretically rigorous understanding of “adaptation” to the case studies, and also to isolate a specific form of dramatic adaptation – the dramaturgy of appropriation – focusing on plays that radically and overtly revise and rewrite their source texts. Although, as is the case with “adaptations” and “originals”

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212 The reception of the 2009 summer movie blockbuster, Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen, demonstrates the collision of these prejudices. This film, belonging to the Transformers franchise (and as such an adaptation of a) a comic book, b) an animated TV series, c) an animated film, d) the 2007 film to which Revenge is the sequel, and e) the line of 1980s children’s toys that spawned all of the above) was tremendously popular with audiences, and just as unpopular with critics. David Germain claimed that the film’s reception marked the greatest discrepancy in film history between the judgment of critics and that of the popular audience, dubbing Revenge of the Fallen “the worst-reviewed movie ever to make the $400 million club.”
generally, even seemingly clear distinctions blur under close examination (e.g., is *After the Orchard* either radical or overt in its adaptation of Chekhov?), this approach has generally proven to be effective in terms of what it rules out of consideration, and rewarding in terms of what it reveals about why and how authors and audiences choose adaptation. To answer the question raised in the introduction, this study shows it is both possible and productive to distinguish radical appropriations such as those examined here from adaptation in general.

Second, in contrast with many, if not most, studies of adaptations, the case studies for this one were not (or not only) selected based on their common origin or source (e.g., Canadian adaptations of Shakespeare), but on their common motives and strategies. One of the primary challenges of this study is dealing with the overwhelming and potentially distorting volume of scholarship on (Canadian) Shakespeare adaptation: while it would be impossible to ignore this material in a study of how and why Canadian playwrights use existing sources to make new plays, it is important to put Shakespeare adaptation in context and to acknowledge that Shakespeare is not the only source for adaptations, Canadian or otherwise. Here again, the method-and-motive-based approach adopted in this study has proven valuable. Not only does it facilitate the application of Shakespeare-based research to non-Shakespearean adaptations, it also enables comparisons between Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean adaptations, revealing connections between otherwise disparate plays: *Mad Boy Chronicle* has more in common with *The Three Sisters: ABOTA* than it does with many of the other *Hamlet* adaptations in the CASP database.
Third, this study attempts to consider how material and historical conditions shape both the creation and reception of (counter-) canonical appropriations. In order to determine (insofar as possible) both the motives and methods of the adaptors and the responses of their audiences, this study considers how the plays did their cultural work in performance (rather than focusing on the kinds of readings available to a trained scholar engaged in intensive and solitary examination of the text). The reception phase of the study revealed many of the most interesting and unexpected insights discovered in this study. For one thing, as *The Three Sisters: ABOTA* reveals, widespread and intimate familiarity with the appropriated source is not a necessary condition of efficacy or positive reception; nor, as *Mad Boy Chronicle* shows, is it sufficient. In fact, these case studies show no necessary correlation between the extensiveness of an appropriation and its reception. Both Sears’s and Nutting’s appropriations are theatrically and politically effective without being extensive. Sears uses very little of *Othello*, and thus she does not risk alienating spectators who are less familiar with it, but her play has attracted a great deal of attention because of those Shakespearean references, which were likely a decisive factor in the play being chosen for production at Stratford and have certainly contributed to its generally positive reception. Nutting, too, makes only limited use of a relatively unfamiliar source, but she exploits that relative unfamiliarity, paradoxically, by convincing spectators that they are watching an extensive (and yet highly accessible) adaptation of Chekhov, when in fact there are very few direct allusions to Chekhov in the play.

In fact, the reception of *After the Orchard* suggests that extensive citation of or engagement with the hypotext may be a liability, if anything. On the one hand, spectators
who are unfamiliar with the re-cited text may miss the point or feel alienated by the mysterious allusions. On the other, those who are – or feel they are – familiar with the source may become preoccupied with the perceived fidelity of the adaptation. Responses to *After the Orchard* and *Mad Boy Chronicle* frequently exemplify the familiar assumptions of fidelity discourse, even in reviews which recognize that O’Brien is *deliberately* unfaithful to Shakespeare. The plays in this study which enjoy the most consistently positive receptions are those that seem least “faithful” to their sources. This is one of the chief strengths of appropriating relatively small pieces of a canonical text and incorporating them into a new play, as opposed to adapting the whole text (the other being that one appropriates only the elements to which one cares to respond): the clearer it is to the audience that they are watching an “original” work, the less likely they are to respond to it through fidelity discourse.

Of course, whether one sees the work in question as a “new” work or an adaptation may also depend on what one has read or been told about it beforehand. This study reveals the importance of paratextuality and architextuality in shaping the horizon of expectations. The case studies not only show how playwrights and their producers attempt to tell spectators how to read their work, they also suggest that effective use of paratextuality (and architextuality) can make the difference between positive and negative reception. This is true of theatre in general – all producers attempt to influence reception in various ways – but in the case of adaptation and appropriation, publicity paratexts play a critical role in alerting the spectators to read the work as an adaptation, telling them why a given cherished literary masterpiece has been used in this way, and thus pre-empting, negating, or subverting fidelity criticism. Perhaps the most significant
discovery of this study, in fact, is the critical role of public discourse and paratextuality in shaping reception. Responses to these plays very frequently show that professional critics will happily believe (or repeat) what the publicity kit tells them – and that, left to interpret an adaptation on their own, they will default to fidelity criticism. The influence of paratextuality becomes even clearer when we consider that the paratexts generally outlast the productions of which they speak, and may well influence future productions and receptions (theatrical and otherwise).

The four case studies examined here represent only a fraction of the possible motives and tactics of the “dramaturgy of appropriation.” There are scores of other Canadian plays and playwrights who use canonical sources in their work, whether to challenge conventional assumptions about Canada or society in general, to arouse interest and curiosity, to create a provocation, to respond or talk back to the source in some way, or some combination of these motives. Such appropriations represent the whole range of Canadian theatrical activity, from popular and alternative culture to so-called mainstream theatre and high culture. Examples at the latter sort include Margaret Atwood’s (dramatic adaptation of her novel) *The Penelopiad*, a revision of the *Odyssey* told from Penelope’s perspective, which was developed by the RSC and NAC, and performed at the latter in 2007; Robert Lepage’s *Elsinore*, a one-man *Hamlet* adaptation that toured internationally; and the aforementioned productions by Catalyst Theatre. At the other end of the spectrum, there are plays like Nutting’s *Three Sisters*, Rick Miller’s *MacHomer* (which hybridizes *Macbeth* and *The Simpsons*, as the title suggests) and Chris Craddock’s *Bash’d*, which genre blends and gender-bends *Romeo and Juliet* into a gay “rap opera.”
There are many avenues for extending this research in new directions. First, as already noted, this collection of four case studies leaves many stones unturned, particularly appropriations of sources other than Shakespeare and Chekhov and in languages other than English. There are of course appropriations in both official languages and even in “unofficial” languages: Native Earth Performing Arts’ recent production of *Death of a Chief* examines *Julius Caesar* from the perspectives of several First Nations cultures, for example, and there have been and presumably will be other inter- and intra-cultural appropriations on Canadian stages. There is already a rich tradition of *Québécois* appropriations of Shakespeare. Indeed, Shakespeare has proven much more popular as a source for adaptations than Molière or any other French author. As Jennifer Drouin explains, there are a number of reasons for this rather puzzling situation. For one thing, Shakespeare’s plays “are less locally and historically situated than those of other early modern writers, and are therefore more suitable to adaptation in other cultural and historical contexts”; for another, Shakespeare is a “big-time” pop celebrity, as Bristol puts it; and this cultural status combined with relative cultural distance means that Shakespeare is worthy of such attention but not particularly cherished – whereas Molière remains relatively “sacrosanct” (“Nationalizing Shakespeare,” n.p.)

However, there are signs that Molière is increasingly being “deconstructed” and “receiving the New World treatment,” as particularly in productions at Nouvelle Compagnie Théâtrale and Momentum, which produced Jean-Frederic Messier’s adaptation of *Dom Juan, Le dernier délire permit*, in 1990 (“Molière” n.p.).

Shakespeare still looms disproportionately large in Canadian theatre – he is the most performed and most studied playwright in Canada, and for those reasons the most
thoroughly and widely adapted. His plays offer the advantage of being the most familiar of dramatic sources, meaning that playwrights can use them with a certain confidence that their spectators will not feel excluded by such allusions (or fail to notice them).

Shakespeare is also the most exalted icon of drama and high culture, which means that audiences respond to (mis)appropriations of his name and reputation more strongly than they do to those of less deeply cherished authors. Because Shakespeare is a symbol of high culture and dominant class values, his works are particularly suitable as fodder for political and culturally oppositional appropriations.

Although similar tactics may be successfully applied to Chekhov, and presumably other canonical sources as well, few if any of the other widely-familiar sources, including the works of Chekhov and the repertories of classical Greek myth and drama, is endowed with the same cultural capital as the Shakespearean canon, nor are they as jealously guarded as a symbol of excellence and cultural standards. As such, appropriations thereof do not provoke the same reaction. Few Canadians have strong feelings about how it is appropriate to use Chekhov or Ibsen, or what would constitute a “betrayal” of Euripides. Thus, while further investigation into appropriations and adaptations of authors other than Shakespeare would be rewarding and valuable, it would probably have to consider such appropriations more broadly, rather than focus linking adaptive strategies to culturally oppositional motives. The works of Jonathan Christenson and Catalyst Theatre, for example, including *The House of Pootsie Plunket*, *Frankenstein*, and *Nevermore*, do not express an overt or coherent political agenda, nor do they explicitly address what it means to be Canadian, but they do exhibit some

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213 These plays are based on *Electra*, Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and the life and works of Edgar Allen Poe, respectively.
very interesting adaptive tactics and represent alternatives to mainstream dramaturgy and playwriting. Theatre Smith-Gilmour, similarly, is a world-famous Canadian company with a fascinating repertory of Chekhovian adaptations and appropriations created – or “devised,” to use the mot courant – with physically-based, rather than textually-based dramaturgy. But since their focus is on story-telling with and through the body rather than on using a revered source to interrogate dominant class values in Canada, TSG was, unfortunately, excluded from this study. Another promising appropriation appearing recently on stages across Canada is Brendan Gall’s *Alias Godot*, which resolves the enigmas of Beckett’s diegetic character by putting him in the mimetic space of a police interrogation room. Gall not only exemplifies a classic technique of appropriation (imagining the offstage events of a canonical masterpiece in a mimetic world of his own devising, like *Harlem Duet*), he also uses Beckett’s absurdist conventions to explore issues of surveillance and the expansion of police powers in the post-9/11 world. The widespread success of Gall’s appropriation may announce a new source of canonical material in the Canadian theatrical landscape: what better sign of a playwright’s canonical maturation than the appearance of such revisions, appropriations, and adaptations?

Several other forms of appropriation which were excluded from this study also offer potential for further research. There has been a trend toward speculative biography in recent years, plays in which the authors themselves (or their contemporaries), rather than their works, become the raw material for an original story. Both Edmonton-based playwright Vern Thiessen’s *Shakespeare’s Will* (2005), which focuses on Anne Hathaway, and Rick Chafe’s *Shakespeare’s Dog* (which premiered in 2007 but is itself an
adaptation of a 1984 novel by Leon Rooke) have enjoyed critical and popular acclaim across Canada in recent years. This fascinating sub-genre of adaptation (perhaps spurred by the critical and commercial success of the 1998 film Shakespeare in Love) uses the authors’ cultural capital without altering their text, and thus generally avoids fidelity criticism. Insofar as such plays offer insight (however speculative) on the authors’ motives, they even subvert fidelity criticism in the same way the Sears does, by positing an earlier origin to the “original” story. Although Shakespeare dominates this field as well, he is not the only subject of speculative biography in recent Canadian playwriting. Jason Sherman and Susan Coyne’s one-act play about Chekhov, The Old Business, has already been discussed above, Scott Sharplin’s one-man show Inferno Sonata (2008) tells Strindberg’s life story in a 70-minute monologue, and Catalyst Theatre’s Nevermore (2008), currently touring Canada, tells the story of Edgar Allan Poe through his poetry. This subgenre of adaptation merits further study, particularly since the adaptive strategy is quite unlike those discussed in this study: although appropriations of biography, like appropriations of plays, may seek to change our understanding of the canonical author’s work, they do not work (at least not typically) by carnivalization, recontextualizing, or approximation.

Finally, fact can be a source of cultural capital as well as fiction. Indeed, plays based on the appropriation and re-citing of historical “facts” are as old as drama itself: beginning with the oldest extant Greek tragedy, The Persians, playwrights have frequently mined history as a means of connecting with their audiences. Like adaptations of fiction, representations of history work through the paradigm of “repetition with difference,” using the audience’s common knowledge (or beliefs) about the past to suit
present purposes. Like appropriations of plays, representations of history seek to appropriate the cultural capital associated with cherished cultural memories, and may either serve as cultural affirmation (e.g., *Henry V* according to Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh) or subversion (e.g., *Henry V* according to Dollimore and Sinfield), or somewhere in between. The Canadian dramatic repertory is well-stocked – over-stocked, some might say – with plays that draw on Canadian history, both to mythologize it and to challenge such myths. For example, Sharon Pollock’s 1976 play *The Komagata Maru Incident* exposes a historic event from 1914 in order to challenge contemporary notions about Canadian multiculturalism; in recent years there has been a contrasting trend toward culturally affirmative, nostalgic reflection on Canada’s role in The Great War, including Thiessen’s *Vimy* and the stage adaptation of Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*, both of which premiered in Alberta in 2007. Appropriations of history, like those of fiction, are subject to fidelity criticism – even more so, since a perceived betrayal of history (which is ultimately a narrative we believe to be true) violates the (perceived) truth and thus has greater consequences than ruining someone’s favourite novel. It might prove rewarding to apply the methodology used in this study to look at how Canadian playwrights appropriate historical, rather than fictional sources, to create narratives that either affirm or challenge cherished and widely-held notions of “Canadian” identity.

Whatever the basis of the cultural capital thus exploited and/or contested, appropriation is a viable and popular creative strategy, and one well-suited to writers who

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214 Both *Vimy* and *The Wars* were produced by and productive of rather contradictory discourses about Canadian history and pride in its military service. In particular the ceremonies surrounding the premiere of *The Wars*, which I attended, seemed to glorify war in a way quite at odds with the novel. And in his representation of the events leading up to and including the battle for Vimy Ridge, Thiessen takes such pains to include every possible perspective (female, prairie, aboriginal, Quebecois, Ontarian, and even repressed homosexual) that the play feels rather clichéd.
wish to contest the authority of the canon, or reclaim the source from the realm of the
exalted and demystify it. If such works necessarily confirm the authority of the canon
even as they challenge it, they also put it to new uses, making it possible to see exalted
texts in new ways. And in the context of Canadian theatre, a cultural institution that
perpetually oscillates between the imperatives of re-producing old plays from foreign
canons, and inventing new works that represent local, contemporary contexts and
interests, the dramaturgy of appropriation serves both interests at once. It also thereby
serves the interests of the playwrights, for whom the strategy of appropriation is
analogous to biological adaptation, an ingenious response to a cultural environment
where living playwrights must compete with dead ones for limited resources and
spectators. As Jason Sherman suggests, in the face of such a harsh climate, the playwright
must, like any organism, adapt or die.
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