

## *A Thousand and One First Nights.* Leslie Yeo.

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PAUL O'NEILL

NEWFOUNDLAND is where theatre began in the Western Hemisphere. The first Europeans to perform in the New World were the Viking storytellers who spun their yarns to brighten the long winter evenings in the huts at L'Anse aux Meadows a thousand years ago. That brief interlude was followed some 583 years later by Sir Humphrey Gilbert's Men, a company of musicians, dancers and acrobats who performed their primitive theatricals on Kings Beach in St. John's 5 August 1583, when Sir Humphrey got through with establishing Britain's first overseas possession, provided you don't consider the Irish Sea as overseas. It was to be another 223 years before St. John's would see its first performance by a group of legitimate stage actors.

Contained in the Colonial Records for 29 July 1806 there is recorded a proclamation by the governor, Sir Erasmus Gower, "Gentlemen - The four persons named in the margin, who are arrived here from Quebec, have requested that I allow them to exhibit their Theatrical Representations in St. John's. You are to do so, so long as they shall continue to conduct themselves in an orderly decent manner." His Excellency was taking no chances the rogues might become drunk and disorderly, a common complaint about actors in those days. They were James and Mary Ormsby, Walter C. Davids and Michael Henry, who, having performed in Montreal and Upper New York state, were probably making their way home to Britain, where the Ormsbys had been employed by the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh,

before coming to Canada. From that 29 July 1806 to 3 April 1957, when the last curtain fell on the London Theatre Company, St. John's was to witness over 150 years in which endless troupes of players from England and America gave the city one of the most vibrant boom and bust eras of Canadian theatre, although almost all of it took place in the independent colony of Newfoundland.

In his recently published memoir, *A Thousand and One Nights*, Leslie Yeo gives us a deliciously irreverent requiem for the London Theatre Company, also affectionately known to St. John's theatregoers for six seasons as the London Players. The book is much more than a cogent and delightfully effortless memoir by an important Canadian actor-director from England. It records in fascinating detail the passing of the last professional repertory theatre company to visit Newfoundland at the time when the broom of confederation was about to sweep colonial St. John's society into the dustbin of history. The names of the devotees of the London Theatre Company which Yeo drops, without any pretension, tell us much about the times and the people they cultivated, almost exclusively the British-descended Bowrings, Ayres, Bairds, etc. with little mention of the Irish backbone of St. John's, the O'Dea's being the exception.

While champagne breakfasts in pajamas, with friends in their mansion on Rennies Mill Road were an undoubted delight, they did little to endear the company to the rank and file of St. John's playgoers, mainly working-class people, who trudged to the theatre week in and week out to become core supporters. At the end of the first season I met with the company's character actress, Dorothea Rundell, in England. She amazed me by saying, "Of course we played to the classes, not the masses." If this was the attitude of some of the players it could provide the answer Yeo sought as to why the town did not immediately take the London Theatre to its heart. Being of uncanny theatrical perception he did see that the way of life of Newfoundlanders was slowly tilting toward "yankeedom" and a taste for American plays, which he and his partners, director Oliver Gordon, and scenic designer George Paddon Foster, set out to fulfill.

When, in the first paragraph of the book, Leslie Yeo mentions several problems with his grandfather's backside, and in the second paragraph "the old bugger's" penchant for putting his hand inside ladies' blouses, we know we are off on an impish romp. With humour and an eye for human understanding Yeo takes us from his birth in Swindon, fifty crow-miles from London, which, he tells us with salacious merriment, was also the birthplace of Diana Fluck (afterwards the more easily pronounced Diana Dors), to 1957 when the curtain was rung down on the last performance by the London Theatre Company in St. John's and he was able to put a down payment of \$5600 on a house in Toronto. In this often outspokenly frank account of an actor and producer's life he always manages to entertain and hold our attention, as he did on stage between rabbits (the first being his debut as a child-bunny in *The Acadians*, the last, when he played Elwood P. Dowd in company with another rabbit, *Harvey*, half a century later in St. John's).

With a comedian's wit, he tells of his early days in advertizing, his stumbling into the theatrical profession in England's pre-war years, his RAF adventures as Wireless Operator/Ground, eventually making it to Instructor and Sergeant. During his RAF days in India he managed to keep his hand in the theatrical pie by staging variety performances and stag shows. These gave him the experience to become a rising young actor in England's weekly repertory theatres in the post-war years. In his gregarious existence as a member of the RAF in Chittagong, then part of India, he cultivated friendship with a Hindu *Pleader* (defense lawyer), whose wife, he candidly admits, eventually gave birth to Yeo's Indo-European daughter (with the husband's blessing). Now in her 60s, he often wonders what became of her and sadly remarks he doesn't even know her name. All of this leads us slowly and deliberately to the most insightful and fascinating part of the book, the St. John's years of the London Theatre Company.

He tellingly relates from his own experiences the differences which exist between legit and variety, and of the often scornful attitude of insecure actors when it comes to music hall and carnival performers. Yeo's discussion of this condescension gives us an insight into the minds of actors, as does his discourse on the demands of weekly rep, a form of slavery at starvation wages, in which otherwise unemployed performers, with bills to pay, thought themselves lucky to find work.

In December of 1947 excitement was created in the city with the arrival by air of the Alexandra Theatre Company from Birmingham, England, headed by director John Gabriel. It would be the revival of professional theatre in Newfoundland, which died when the English director, Florence Glossop-Harris, brought her last company to the Casino Theatre in the mid 1930s, with such well known actors as Roger Livesay, Ernest Jay and Francis Compton (brother of Fay). The Casino having become the Capitol, a Famous Players cinema, the Alexandra Company was forced to open at Pitts Memorial Hall, west of the Kirk on Harvey Road.

The choice of St. John's as a venue for the Birmingham actors was not happenstance. Eric Bowring, Chairman of the Board of Bowring Brothers, one of the city's leading mercantile establishments, had a daughter, Margaret (Pix), who was a graduate of London's leading drama school, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, and married to the gifted RADA instructor and director, John Gabriel. The Bowring firm underwrote the cost of bringing Pix and her husband's company back to her hometown for a season of plays. Yeo pays tribute to Gabriel's insistent demands for perfection as a director, especially in overcoming the enormous technical difficulties of *Flare Path*, in which he had to create the roar of bombers taking off and coming in to land over the heads of the audience. Even today, with tape recorders, discs, CDs and vibrating speakers it would be no easy task. How John Gabriel managed such effects in 1947 gets high praise from Yeo.

As a teenager having already fallen in love with such screen divinities as Delores Del Rio, Hedy Lamarr and Rita Hayworth, when I first saw the Alexandra Company's leading lady, Hilary Vernon on stage as Elvira, the ghost-wife in Noel

Coward's *Blythe Spirit*, I fell in love with my first stage divinity. In that company Leslie Yeo also fell in love with and bedded the goddess who was to become his leading lady and devoted wife until her early death. More than any actress to play St. John's in the last century, Hilary Vernon is affectionately remembered by audiences who came to adore her superb mastery of her art.

Enlisted as a member of the Alexandra troupe, Yeo soon found himself living at the Balsam Hotel in St. John's and playing the stage of the Pitts Memorial Hall with such soon-to-be-famous actors as Alec McCowan, who is today one of the most respected performers in England and only a whisker away from a knighthood. In his autobiography, *Young Gemini* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1979), McCowan refers to this stint as "a freezing repertory season in St. John's."

Following that season the Alexandra Company returned to Birmingham. Back in England Yeo tried to understand why the Newfoundland venture had been a commercial failure, and began to hatch a daring plan to bring his own repertory company from England. It is fascinating to see how the idea for the London Theatre Company was born and the many ways in which the almost penniless Yeo nurtured the dream into reality within three years. The story of this remarkable stage venture becomes the core and purpose of his book, and he does not bore, as he neglects few details in telling of the enormous work involved in such an enterprise, its ups and its downs, its successes and failures, "without sponsor or subsidy" from 1951 to 1957. How different from today, when subsidies and grants have become a way of life in the arts.

*A Thousand and One First Nights* is, unfortunately, marred by a number of factual errors that could have been avoided had someone in St. John's vetted the manuscript. For example, the merchant Eric Bowring is annoyingly referred to four or five times as Sir Eric Bowring. He was never knighted. It was his second cousin, Sir Edgar Bowring, who was knighted. Derrick Bowring's name is misspelled Derek. The Pitts Memorial Hall is referred to as "an assembly room in a Catholic girl's school," and described as opposite the Basilica (Military Road), when in fact it was a lecture hall in the old Methodist College, then the United Church's Holloway School, opposite the Paramount Theatre (Harvey Road). Yeo states "the furthest you could go out of St. John's on a paved road was thirteen miles," the distance to Topsail, yet the road was paved to Holyrood for the Royal Tour in 1938, a distance of approximately thirty miles. He speaks of the Nickle Theatre as a flea pit showing westerns. However, until the 1960s the Nickle was the cinema everyone attended to see all Warner Brothers and RKO movies, as well as English films such as J. Arthur Rank's Gainsborough productions. The flea pit was the Crescent Theatre.

Among the many telling bits in this story of the London Theatre Company in St. John's, is the fact that it was paying its actors \$45 per week at a time when the Canadian Repertory Company in Ottawa (which included Honor Blackman — later famous as Pussy Galore) paid its performers \$40 per week. The book is sprinkled

throughout with many delightful anecdotes, such as the story of the visit of the Roman Catholic patriarch, Archbishop Patrick Skinner, to a rehearsal of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It is also a lesson for those who depend on hear-say for their opinions.

The enormous work involved in organizing the mainland tours of the company to Halifax and as far west as Niagara-on-the-Lake, detailed in chapter twenty-three, speaks of tremendous dedication to art for little or no profit. Leslie Yeo was, in those days, a man of incredible energy working for an ideal in a profession that is, at best, a risky business. He, Hilary Vernon and Oliver Gordon well deserved their brief vacation at Tossa del Mar on the Spanish Costa Brava, before returning to London and plowing through “an avalanche of mail” from actors always anxious about employment. A number of those Yeo and Gordon brought to Newfoundland stayed in Canada, some gravitating to Toronto, then becoming a way-station for anyone wanting a career in the performing arts. Some became important names in Canadian theatre and television, such as Charles Jarrot, Joseph Shaw, Barbara Byrne, Gillie and Moya Fenwick.

As a CBC producer, it was my pleasure to give many of the London Players their first opportunity to act on Canadian radio in such programs as *Twelfth Night* (which starred Hilary Vernon) and *The Mill on the Floss* (starring Leslie Yeo and the Fenwicks). Working with such professionals gave local performers like Flo Paterson a rare opportunity to hone their skills, and even become internationally known. Several actors from the various seasons remained in Newfoundland, Charles Mardel, Ruth Perkins, John Holmes, Fredd Davies, Paddy and Olwyn Drysdale, and Hilary Vernon’s brother, Ken Pagniez with his wife, to the great benefit of theatre groups and audiences in St. John’s, Gander, Corner Brook and elsewhere.

British Actor-Producer Bryan Forbes says, “an actor must have arrogance, conceit...” Leslie Yeo lacked neither. His book shows he had the arrogance to think he could export English repertory to Newfoundland, and the conceit to make a success of it for nearly six seasons. However, a technological revolution reared its head and, like English repertory theatre itself, the London Theatre Company was to suffer death by television. When CJON TV went on the air in St. John’s in September 1955, it sounded more than just the death knell of the London Players. Post-television theatre in the city became mainly collective, with the emergence of numerous companies of young, generally untrained actors, who wrote much of the material they performed. London and New York hits, so popular for over a century, rarely made it to the local stage anymore.

In *A Thousand and One First Nights* Leslie Yeo is a raconteur par excellence. The story he tells is as naughty as it is funny, and laced with many moving moments of pathos and deep feeling. The book is not merely autobiographical, but is shaped to draw us into those fleeting, golden years of English repertory when the London Theatre Company gave St. John’s and other parts of Canada top-notch professional

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theatre such as we may never see again. I strongly recommend this book, not just for a nostalgic romp through a treasure house of memories, but as a perception of the anguish of dreams, of hopes and illusions, and of the savage discipline of theatre. Patrick Christopher, Artistic Director of the Atlantic Theatre Festival says “When you don’t have money it forces you to be incredibly inventive,” and incredibly inventive is certainly what Leslie Yeo, Oliver Gordon and George Paddon Foster were.