

Stars in the Sky Morning: Collective Plays of Newfoundland and Labrador. Helen Peters (ed.).

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Volume 15, numéro 1, spring 1999

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds15_1rv05

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Keily, J. (1999). Compte rendu de [*Stars in the Sky Morning: Collective Plays of Newfoundland and Labrador.* Helen Peters (ed.).] *Newfoundland Studies*, 15(1), 132-135.

Stars in the Sky Morning: Collective Plays of Newfoundland and Labrador. Helen Peters (ed.). St. John's: Killick Press (Creative Publishers), pref., introd., musical scores (Sandy Morris). xlv, 531pp., 1996, softcover, French flaps, \$24.95, ISBN 1-895387-74-4.

JILLIAN KEILEY

SINCE HELEN PETERS' *Stars in the Sky Morning* appeared at the twentieth anniversary celebrations of the Resource Centre for the Arts in 1997, I have given it as Christmas and birthday gifts, and suggested it for the bookshelves of everyone I know, and some people I don't. Now I have come to realize the importance of getting this text out to a population that I couldn't even begin to know: the high school students of Newfoundland and Labrador.

This year, Labrador high schools introduced *Who Asked Us Anyway?*, a collection of theatrical works created by Labrador students as a spin off from the hugely important Labrador Creative Arts Festival. Giving students the tools and power to create their own works through this festival and inspired by this book seems to me a fantastic way to get young people talking about their own environment, history, issues, and talking to each other. *Stars in the Sky Morning* is more than an important theatrical read; it is a wonderful collection of our history, our people and our culture.

When we were in school — I can't say I know the curriculum these days but not altogether too long ago, we learned a lot of history that was not our own: American, Upper Canadian. At the time I remember feeling special that we had a chapter in a history book on Confederate Canada. The works contained in *Stars in the Sky Morning* cover vitally important events in our past and should be critical tools in humanizing and making these pivotal events and people in our history relevant to young people today.

I can't say that I agree with Helen Peters that these are all collective works. An anomaly in the collection is the Wonderbolt Circus Production, "On Edge" by Rick Mercer and Beni Malone, performed by a cast of six. The other minor inconsistencies, "My Three Dads" by John Taylor and "Stars in the Sky Morning" by Rhonda Payne, with Jane Dingle and Jan Henderson don't easily fit into the definition of collective either. While Peters does note that the incongruous pieces were written by artists raised in the collective tradition, comparing these productions in style, rationale and cast/author relationships with such clear cut collectives as "They Club Seals Don't They," "Joey" and "Making Time with the Yanks" can make the definition of exactly what a collective is, quite elusive.

The collection opens with "They Club Seals Don't They," a genius series of interlacing vignettes, in the often formidable form of popular theatre. The intention behind this type of work is to use the theatre as a forum for performers and audience to debate important issues. "They Club Seals Don't They" is a masterpiece of popular theatre. The two story driven characters, "Maggie" and "George," begin with an overview of the history of Newfoundland according to their archetypal selves: a personal account of coming over on the boat, being addressed, sold, and bought by Kings, trading in to Confederation and living with an overtaxed cod fishery; and within this mesh, the history of the seal fishery. The edited version of this particular piece is a triumph for Peters as much as an act of brilliance from the writers. With seven actors, two musicians and a director relying on memory and clips of videotape, Peters creates an easily negotiable terrain to support the forty nine characters and five hundred year history. The accents, film notes, Sandy Morris' musical score, text, and stage directions are clear, easily imaginable, and most importantly user friendly for actors and directors for future staging.

In contrast the next script is the simply staged "Stars in the Sky Morning" written by Rhonda Payne with Jan Henderson and Jane Dingle. It is as important as a piece of Newfoundland's mostly unwritten women's history as it is an important theatrical work. To be performed by two women playing eight main characters, it is beautifully written, but may lend itself more to a wonderful read than performance, being full of long expository monologues and scenes of the women exchanging stories as opposed to creating event driven drama.

Event driven drama abounds when Jack celebrates a poverty stricken Christmas on Hamilton Avenue Extension in Sheila's Brush's "Jaxxmas." When I was blessed enough to see "Jaxxmas" in 1986, it was my first hearing of a "Jack Tale," a wonderful folktale from outport Newfoundland. The rhythms of Andy Jones as Uncle Val chanting "'No,' says Jack, 'I could never do that.' 'Yes,' says the Cat. 'You got to do that.' 'No,' says Jack, 'I could never do that.' 'Yes,' says the Cat, 'You got to do that.'" haunts me to this day. This most memorable production left me speechless, and re-reading the text brings me back and charms me just the same. Although the Household Finance Company which tries to repossess the house that Jack built on Hamilton Avenue Extension is long out of business (the play is

brimming with similar references from the mid - 80's) it still rings true: the toils and perils of living poor in St. John's, the everlasting beauty of a magical true love and the remote yet ever hopeful possibility that any Jack, fallen on hard times, might find himself crowned the King of Newfoundland, a Dominion Beer box for a crown. Reflecting on "Jaxxmas" reminds me that there is another great service in this book — those of us lucky enough to have witnessed one of these productions can read the script and remember a brilliant night of theatre.

The next two classics debuted in the 1980-1981 season and marked a high point in the Newfoundland collective theatre movement. "Terras De Bacalhau", and "Makin' Time with the Yanks," produced by Resource Centre for the Arts and The Mummers Troupe respectively, shared several of the same core writer/performers as well as similar plot undercurrents:

Newfoundlanders at home dealing with "people from away", in these cases Portuguese and American. What strikes me reading both these plays is the incredible history they contain. Although the pieces are strict fiction, they are based on Newfoundland's colourful past with incoming fleets and soldiers, and recreate the environment in which such characters and relationships can exist.

Of great import to the argument to use this book for teaching is Rising Tide's "Joey," one of several theatrical works spawned in Newfoundland theatre dedicated to our "little fellow from Gambo." Peters manages to give an impossibly unbiased breakdown of Joey Smallwood's life and his influence on Newfoundlanders in the notes before the play for anyone who wouldn't believe it true. I remember craning my neck straight up in the very front row of the Arts and Culture Centre Theatre and seeing Kevin Noble greet the great Joey, who had tears streaming down his face, at the close of the production with one thousand cheering others behind him. With forty-four characters, both fictional and real, the historical value of this script is one of the reasons that *Stars in the Sky Morning* should be a mandatory part of the syllabus and performed by and for Newfoundland High Schools.

This book is a landmark collection of Newfoundland theatrical works, the first of it's kind, and it bears the weighty responsibility of giving an overview of all significant events in Newfoundland theatre within the parameters of 1978 to 1992. However, there is a significant gap and important change of styles from "Joey" in 1981 to "On Edge" in 1989. Although Peters gives an overview of this period in her notes on the different companies, the marked change in style might justify a separate set of notes at this point in the book, for any reader going through the collection chronologically.

Wonderbolt Circus' "On Edge" was born from two actor-performers bred in the collective tradition, Beni Malone and Rick Mercer. This play is smart, saucy and remotely political but stylistically, a complete turn from any collectively written production. John Taylor's "My Three Dads," another stylistic jump, is a

brilliant script and may be a collective in that there is no separation between actor and writer. Of course it's a one man show, so naming it a collective rather muddies the definition of the term "collective."

The greatest anomaly in the book is perhaps of the greatest import in my argument for teaching this collection in Newfoundland schools. The inclusion of "Braindead" suggests that yes, you in your class with your issues or ideas or senses of humour can also create a piece of work that is relevant to you and important to your community. The Innuinuit Theatre Company and Nalujuk Players script for "Braindead," written in the true collective tradition by high school students from Nain and Hopedale, although didactic, often stereotypical and dramaturgically simple, is a brilliant shift back to the intent stated at the beginning of the book — the popular theatre structure, involving performers as provocateurs and performance as a catalyst for discussion and change. Like all the individual scripts in the collection ending on a note of hope for the future, Peters ends the book with "Braindead" to provoke, to challenge and to inspire.