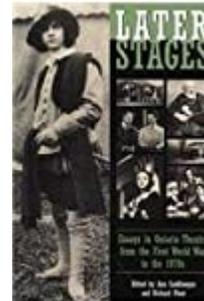




**Anne Saddlemyer, Richard Plant.** *Later Stages: Essays in Ontario Theatre From the First World War to the 1970s.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. xiii + 496 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-8020-0671-x; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8020-7624-3.



**Reviewed by** Glen Nichols (Departement d'anglais, Universite de Moncton)

**Published on** H-Canada (December, 1999)

## Theatre in Ontario: A Welcome First History

*Later Stages* is the first comprehensive history of modern theatre in Ontario. The last volume in the Ontario History Studies Series, it covers a diverse range of subjects in a complicated story and, depending on the chapter, with an often remarkable degree of detail and clarity. The work brings together a formidable array of scholarship and, despite the gaps inevitable in any overview history of a subject so large, is significant for its ability to draw together the various strains of history into a coherent and exciting chronicle. This history is an extremely important and welcome addition to the number of regional theatre histories already published from across Canada, and will be the predominant general history for this part of central Canada for many years to come.

This work is actually the second in a two-volume set covering the history of theatre in Ontario. The first, *Early Stages: Theatre in Ontario 1800-1914* (UTP 1990), was also edited by Saddlemyer and both follow a similar format. The volumes are organized topically rather than chronologically, with essays by recognized scholars in specialized fields of theatre history, each covering the full period

of the respective volume. This approach causes some unevenness in style and scholarship, but the inevitable overlapping in coverage is key to the important sense of overall cohesiveness developed through the complex volume.

Following an introductory chapter by Saddlemyer and Plant, *Later Stages* contains nine essays: "Professional Performers and Companies" by Robert B. Scott, "Variety" by David Gardner, "Summer Festivals and Theatres" by Ross Stuart, "Amateur Theatre" by Martha Mann and Rex Southgate, "University Theatre" by Ross Stuart and Ann Stuart, "Plays and Playwrights" by Alexander Leggatt, "Theatrical Design" by Eric Binnie, "Theatre Criticism" by Anthony Stephenson, and "Resources for Theatre History" by Heather McCallum.

Saddlemyer and Plant summarize the tensions in twentieth-century Ontario theatre history as a reaction to conservative attitudes in three basic areas: that "entertainment was a (frequently suspect) fringe benefit of hard work and virtuous living; [that] the local and home-grown was innately inferior to imports from New York and London; [and that] familiar forms, subjects and plays [were] preferable to (and much more respectable than)

the unusual and experimental” (p. 3). These themes reappear frequently in the subsequent essays, underlining both the extent and the endurance of these tensions and providing a unifying emphasis across the diverse essays.

The early 1970s have been carefully chosen as the terminal date for this volume. While the format of the book allows flexibility for certain essays to extend their discussion slightly beyond this time, or to end slightly earlier, depending on the demands of the different topics, this general cut-off date reflects a logical place to end such a history, coinciding with a number of significant “endings”. The intense interest in building regional theatres in Canada largely culminates with the establishment of the National Arts Centre in 1970. That year also saw the final demise of the Dominion Drama Festival, a very significant feature of mid-century amateur theatre in Canada. Likewise, the following year saw the end of the New Play Society, the grand-daddy of professional theatres in Ontario. On the other hand, the period is also noted for the beginnings of the Alternative theatres such as Theatre Passe Muraille (1968), Factory Theatre Lab (1970) and Toronto Free Theatre (1971), indicating important shifts in all levels of theatre in Ontario, new directions for producers, audiences and institutions which will be the subjects of future histories.

The authors of the OHSS Foreword to the volume make the following general observation: “For many years the principal theme in English-Canadian historical writing has been the emergence and the consolidation of the Canadian nation. This theme has been developed in uneasy awareness of the persistence and the importance of regional interests and identities, but because of the central role of Ontario in the growth of Canada, Ontario has not been seen as a region. Almost unconsciously, historians have equated the history of the province with that of the nation and have often depicted the interests of other regions as obstacles to the unity and welfare of Canada” (p. vii). The regional/national tensions in theatre history are no different; however, with a few exceptions (such as Leggatt’s admitted difficulty in writing about playwrights as “Ontario playwrights”), this volume does little to clarify the relationship between events in Ontario and the overall development of Canadian theatre. The result of this silence is a reinforcement of the “unconscious” equation of Ontario theatre history with that of Canadian theatre history.

Further to this is the uncomfortable (to this reader) sense throughout the chapters that Ontario theatre his-

tory is indeed Toronto theatre history. Mentions of events in smaller centres and in particular from the North are almost universally subordinate to those happening in Toronto. Two of the chapters (Summer Festival and Theatres, and Amateur Theatre) go some of the way to address this tendency, but overall the volume perpetuates the longstanding centricism of theatre history writing in Canada. This criticism, however, should not diminish the recognition of the significance of this excellent volume and its importance to the continuing development of theatre history in Canada.

Because of the diverse range of style and content of the different chapters, as well as the importance of the topical organization to the volume as a whole, I would like to comment on the separate essays. Each chapter consistently begins with a brief contextual section to situate the topic within late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century events. There are usually ample and appropriately useful notes, and the sections are illustrated with well-reproduced black and white photographs and drawings.

The first two chapters, Robert Scott’s “Professional Performers and Companies” and David Gardner’s “Variety”, are by far the longest in the volume, totalling more than a hundred pages each. Scott begins his chapter with a fine introduction, clearly situating the events he will be describing within the thematic terms outlined by the editors in their introduction and providing a strong overview for readers to understand the details to follow. It is a succinct and lucid explanation of the development of professional theatre in Ontario.

Scott then clearly divides his chapter into briefer periods: the war years, the 1920s, the 1930s, World War Two, 1945-1954, and 1954-1967. Within each of these he focuses on a few dominant issues, some of which are then picked up in later periods, others which are unique to that time alone. For example the first three sections each deal with touring companies (domestic and foreign) and resident stock companies. Later sections focus on significant professional companies such as the New Play Society, Jupiter Theatre or the Canadian Players, depending on the years covered. This strongly organized writing allows the reader to follow the large number of dates and names with relative ease.

More help still is Scott’s frequent generalizations where he puts the details into meaningful relationship within his chapter. For example, he ties together his explanation of a number of amateur theatre groups in the 1930s by showing how these movements were significant

in resisting the vestiges of foreign commercial touring companies in the period and for forming the basis of later professional activity.

Scott closes his excellent chapter with a fine conclusion showing how the various strains of early professional theatre developed against the backdrop of foreign products, within the real economic, social, artistic, and technological contexts of the century. He finishes by addressing the importance of public funding in this development and warning against current trends towards the corporatisation of culture.

David Gardner rises to the demands of Variety with a lively and highly readable essay. The sheer diversity of the material has made organization his primary challenge and while the text is not always entirely coherent, the strong narrative/history voice of the writer gives the chapter its overall unity. To give some idea of the “variety” of “acts” in this very theatrical essay, topics covered by Gardner include (but are not limited to) circus, clowning, minstrel (and medicine) shows, vaudeville, burlesque, revues, cabarets, and musical theatre. In addition, he has a fairly extensive section on the architectural history of six major vaudeville theatres in Toronto, several of which have been recently restored to theatrical production.

The writer has detailed discussions of nuanced differences between kinds of minstrels, burlesques and so on. The chapter is rich in detail and research, but it is not simply a long compendium of facts and names. Gardner highlights the historical “bones” of his chapter with succinct and accurate, but entertaining, stories about the people of these theatres and movements. Several of these include George H. Primrose, the Shea brothers, Walter Huston, Maud Allan and Beatrice Lillie, among many others. These anecdotal biographical accents give the chapter vitality and immediacy, and make the history wonderfully readable and memorable.

Ross Stuart’s chapter on “Summer Festivals and Theatres” makes a fine complement to the first two essays. While summer theatre combines aspects of both professional and variety theatre, Stuart’s essay makes a clear distinction and provides accurate, succinct and organized information. Also complementary is the chapter’s necessary emphasis on material from outside of Toronto, the summer theatre movement being largely one of smaller and resort centres.

After recognizing some earlier summer events, Stuart begins his history in Muskoka in the 1930s. In a very

thorough and orderly manner, the writer details a number of early groups including the Actors Colony Theatre, the Straw Hat Players, and the Red Barn Theatre. He then spends some time discussing the development of the Stratford and Shaw Festivals. For Stuart these mark a major transition in the history of summer theatre, their sheer size and predominance shifting the ground from under the resort professional theatres and leading to a new phase of regional summer companies. Description of these later establishments, such as Huron Country Playhouse, Gryphon Theatre, and the Blythe Festival occupy the final sections of the essay.

Stuart ends his essay the 1980s and 1990s with the advent of several outdoor summer theatres such as the Dream in High Park and Skylight Theatre. There is no conclusion to close the chapter, but with the fine introduction, thoroughness and clarity of the content, and the chapter’s relative brevity, this is not too serious a lack.

The Mann and Southgate chapter on “Amateur Theatre” is a sensitive interweaving of historical data, analytical commentary and personal observations. There is little in the way of introductory material to help situate the myriad of examples of amateur companies from around the province, many of which have similar names and were of short duration making it difficult to keep them all straight.

Theatre history is difficult to write due to the natural ephemerality of the subject, but amateur theatre, due to its often unofficial, fleeting, and casual nature, is particularly hard to nail down. Quite understandably Mann and Southgate have focused much of the chapter on two of the dominant institutions of amateur theatre in this century: Hart House Theatre and the Dominion Drama Festival (DDF). Indeed, in both cases, the chapter succeeds in providing a very coherent and meaningful understanding of the development and significance of these two institutions. Also, through the discussion of the DDF, considerable attention is paid to communities outside of Toronto, including the north of Ontario. This is the chapter where the balance between urban and rural, central and distant, is most effectively maintained and explained.

The extensive concluding section to this chapter is one of the finest in the volume. Mann and Southgate succinctly bring the “continuing story” of amateur theatre into the 1980s and 1990s, showing the overall relationship with significant factors of the preceding material on both a larger cultural level and on a very personal, human level.

Chapter Four by Ross Stuart and Ann Stuart on “University Theatre” is, in fact, an essay on theatre at the University of Toronto, and in particular the events at Hart House Theatre. There is some discussion of other theatre training in Toronto, such as that of the Eaton school, but information on developments beyond the University of Toronto are mostly limited to a section at the very end. Certainly Hart House has been important in the history of Ontario theatre, and this essay delivers a very cogent explanation of its growth under a series of different directors, but it would have been good to see a better balance throughout, especially given the active expansion of university theatre across the province in the post-war years.

Other than this quibble, however, this essay does an excellent job of placing the evolution of university theatre work in Ontario into larger historical models. Beyond the perpetual debate about the role of theatre in education, Stuart and Stuart also explain the relationship of Ontario examples to trends in Britain and the United States, showing both how the local events were influenced by and differed from the contextual models. This is done primarily through the careful descriptions and analysis of the contributions of the various Hart House directors from 1919 to the late 1940s.

Alexander Leggatt begins and ends his essay on “Plays and Playwrights” with apologies. He opens with his difficulty of examining Ontario playwriting in isolation from playwriting in other provinces. This seems to be a very important problem which underlies most of the volume, yet Leggatt is the only writer to comment on it. He does not, however, address the issue; he simply suggests that by focusing on the earlier playwrights the problem is less evident. A more engaged discussion of the role of playwriting in Ontario as it relates to that in other parts of Canada would have made his essay more relevant and meaningful. He concludes by admitting the troubling “white male” emphasis of the chapter. He tries to mollify this by explaining that if the cutoff date were a decade or more later the emergence of more women and minority playwrights would have allowed an apparently more balanced essay. Considering the important contributions of women in other chapters, it is surprising that Leggatt was unable to find any women playwrights in Ontario between 1914 and 1970.

The essay discusses the following playwrights in chronological order as representative of the development of playwriting in Ontario: Merrill Denison, Hermon Voaden, Robertson Davies, James Reaney, David Freeman, and David French. The descriptions of their sig-

nificant plays are detailed with strong connections made between the writers, illustrating their individual and collective contributions to the theatre of their times.

After an interesting introductory commentary about the importance of nostalgia for European models in nineteenth-century stage design in Ontario, Eric Binnie’s chapter on “Theatrical Design” is the hardest in the volume to follow. The writer seems to have given in to his own doubts that one can “really speak of an Ontario style in theatrical design” (p. 391). The chapter is very good about describing individual designers’ work, well complemented by extensive illustrations, but lacks the necessary overview or framework that would allow a clearer understanding of the interrelationships between these designers, or between them and the work going on elsewhere. Even a chronological organization might have helped, but the chapter shifts confusingly forward and backward in time.

Analysis of the impact of particular designers, such as Tanya Moiseiwitsch and Daphne Dare, and the importance of institutions like the CBC is well drawn and detailed. The assessment of their influences, whether American, British, or European, gives some contextual relief to the descriptions.

Binnie ends his essay with a significant attempt to describe characteristics which he feels “can be said to distinguish design in the province”. The ideas centre around an emphasis on the role of the larger, more well-established institutions like the Stratford Festival, The National Arts Centre and the CBC. Binnie feels that these form the foundation for new opportunities for designers in Ontario, and serve as “repositories of expert advice, superb crafts work, and new talent”. Designers, according to Binnie, generally affiliate with one or more of these artistic centres which in turn develop a kind of satellite relationship with the smaller theatres employing their former apprentices. He ends by quoting Robert A. Gaines, applying his description of Stratford’s combination of classical theatre tradition, the English repertory system and “the sensitivities and experiences of the primarily Canadian artists” to theatrical design across Ontario. Had this idea, with appropriately focused definitions, been the more obvious structural guide to the chapter as a whole, rather than only appended at the end, the important details and descriptions throughout the essay would have taken on more contextual significance and would have been more clearly understood.

Anthony Stephenson’s essay on “Theatre Criticism” is also largely biographically focused, but is very explic-

itly organized and coherent. After a succinct introduction that clearly lays the groundwork for the material to follow in the chapter, Stephenson develops a logical three-part essay. The first part describes the work of a large number of critics in the period before 1950 who, mostly non-specialists, tended not to perform their role of critic in particularly analytical or constructive ways. This section is vivid with descriptions and consideration of how their individual work fit (or didn't fit) into overall patterns of criticism in the period.

The second part of the essay focuses on the more serious and effective theatre critics beginning with Nathan Cohen and including in appreciable detail Mavor Moore, Herbert Whittaker, and Oscar Ryan. This section does a marvelous job of explaining why the post-war era saw such a professionalisation of theatre criticism.

The final section of the essay looks at how various arts periodicals such as *Performing Arts in Canada* and *Canadian Theatre Review* have influenced the development of theatre criticism. Stephenson ends his chapter by bringing the story into the late 1970s with discussions of Urjo Kareeda, Ray Conologue, and Gina Mallet. This is a finely cogent and richly detailed essay that adds con-

siderably to the volume as a whole.

The ninth and final chapter of the volume, "Resources for Theatre History" by Heather McCallum, is the briefest in the book. After a very general overview of the problems of theatre scholarship, McCallum's chapter gives a solid run-down of the primary repositories of documentation relevant to Ontario theatre history. Among these are the National Archives of Canada, the Archives of Ontario, the theatre collection at Toronto Metropolitan Reference Library, as well as several important university archives such as those of York University and the University of Guelph. She also accounts for the archival materials of the CBC and various production companies. In each case McCallum outlines the highlights of the collections, their development, and their importance to general research. This is a succinct and useful chapter that concludes the volume with an important call to governments and other organizations to recognize the importance of maintaining archival collections.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-canada>

**Citation:** Glen Nichols. Review of Saddlemyer, Anne; Plant, Richard, *Later Stages: Essays in Ontario Theatre From the First World War to the 1970s*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. December, 1999.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3635>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).