Review of *West-words: Celebrating Western Canadian Theatre and Playwriting* edited by Moira J. Day

Scott Sharplin  
*Cape Breton University*

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Collecting essays from a 2007 national conference hosted by the University of Saskatchewan Drama Department and the Canadian Association of Theatre Research, West-words purports to be “the first comprehensive study of contemporary theatre across the [Canadian] prairies” since 1977. It is certainly wide-ranging, in terms of style, subject matter, and theme; “comprehensive,” however, is beyond the reach of this scattershot anthology.

Editor Moira J. Day divides the entries according to provincial content, moving east to west like the colonists’ path across the three prairie provinces. A fourth heading, “Crossing Regional Borders,” seems to undermine the tidy geographical categorization of Manitoban, Saskatchewan, and Albertan artists; this subversion is evident in “Confidently Canadian: Questioning Canadian Regionalism,” wherein Martin Pšenička argues that “the concept of region as an entity . . . has been rendered obsolete by globalization and the electronic age.” One might welcome more such inquiries into the methodology or value of examining “Canadian Prairie playwriting” as distinct from either Canadian or Great Plains playwriting—but more such postmodernist approaches would distract from the alleged focus of the book, playwriting itself.

With respect to this focus, West-words is hit-and-miss. Many essayists use case studies to explore the production of new work, while others zero in on unconventional approaches to creation (notably Claire Borody’s case study of Winnipeg’s Primus Theatre and John Poulsen and Kathleen Foreman’s history of Calgary’s Wagonstage Children’s Theatre). Contributors also approach playmaking from refreshing angles, including scenography (Wes Pearce), publication (Anne Nothof), and audio drama (Allan Boss and Kelley Jo Burke).

Yet if the patterns that emerge reveal truths about western Canadian identity, those truths are economic and political, not artistic. “Art follows money,” declares Bruce McManus in the first essay, a refrain echoed throughout the book. Economic hand-wringing, west vs. east political posturing, and even personal attacks (as when Borody spends four pages roasting a journalist from the Winnipeg Free Press) regrettably depict Prairie artists as insecure and parochial, even when the work being critiqued reveals a confident and collaborative spirit.

The articles with greatest scholarly value survey regional theatrical histories (McManus, Don Kerr, and Mieko Ouchi). Some articles contain appendices listing or comparing production histories; more of these archival records would have helped West-words inch closer to its goal of “comprehensiveness.” Meanwhile, the book is also a fascinating document insofar as its attempts to negotiate the idea of regionalism, transcend the sphere of theater analysis, and revisit the eternal argument of (Western/Prairie/Canadian) identity.

SCOTT SHARPLIN
Department of Languages and Letters
Cape Breton University
Sydney, Nova Scotia

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