

## **REVIEWS / CRITIQUES**

Jean-Cléo Godin - Dominique Lafon, *Dramaturgies québécoises des années quatre-vingt*. (Leméac, Montréal 1999), 264 pages. ISBN 2-7609-0371-0.

Katalin Kürtösi ([kurtosi@hung.u-szeged.hu](mailto:kurtosi@hung.u-szeged.hu))

*Dramaturgies québécoises...* can serve as best example for scholars in all fields of the humanities both as regards the actuality of the topic and the freshness of its treatment. Jean-Cléo Godin and Dominique Lafon have been leading scholars and critics of Québec theatre and drama for several decades, their papers and reviews are reliable sources for the study of Québec plays and performances. The present book is a systematization of **post-Tremblay** Québec drama and a detailed analysis of four definitive playwrights of the younger generation of Québec playwrighting.

In the Introduction of the book, Godin and Lafon outline the main features of Québec drama in the 1980s pointing out that the new generation - having surpassed the mythization of East-Montréal argo (which, thanks to Tremblay, revolutionized Québec drama in the late 1960s and 1970s) - requires not only a new way of writing, but also a new concept of the theatre which uses the body of the actor more abundantly. The new plays contain many intertextual elements, and visuality became an indispensable part of performances. The language of the plays is standard French (but not Paris-French), and theatre as a whole has become more introspective, manifesting motifs like the creative process, the status of the author - and bringing up previously taboo topics like homosexuality. Finally, the Introduction points out that the process that had begun around 1980 did not stop at the end of the decade.

Before the main body of the book starts to discuss the oeuvre of four significant Québec playwrights, namely Michel Marc Bouchard, Normand Charette, René-Daniel Dubois, and Marie Laberge, in the first chapter Jean-Cléo Godin summarizes the most important features of Québec performances during the same period. The differentiation is important because the 1980s is a period of theatre history in general and of Québec theatres in particular when non-verbal performances played a crucial role in theatre-making, theatricality being the slogan of most experimenting groups. This approach makes it possible for Godin to mention the indisputable contribution of actor-metteur-en-scène Jean-Pierre Ronfard, or author-director-actor Robert Lepage and the company of Carbone 14 with its best-known director, Gilles Maheu to Québec theatre. These artists also played a crucial role in the becoming of age of the art of the theatre in Québec. Besides these, Godin underlines the role of staging plays by Shakespeare and twentieth-century German playwrights in Québec theatres. Like experimental companies and alternative theatres in other parts of the world, in Québec, too, non-theatrical texts were abundantly “borrowed”, therefore we can speak about “a strategy of appropriation and recontextualization of the whole literary and cultural corpus” (38). Elsewhere (*The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition) this new understanding of drama and theatre is called “nouvelle dramaturgie” - and Michel Tremblay, whose *Les Belles-Soeurs* marked the way for Québec drama for about fifteen years, in the 1980s also used the strategies of ‘nouvelle dramaturgie’ in plays like *L’Impromptu d’Outremont*, *Albertine, en cinq temps* or *Le vrai monde?*, proving that Tremblay himself did not halt in his first period but dealt with the same problems in his plays as his younger colleagues, including self-references, the question of theatrical mimesis and the nature of theatrical illusion.

The four playwrights chosen for analysis convincingly represent not only the new conception of drama in Québec but Québec drama as a whole before the end of millennium. M.M. Bouchard is considered to be linked most directly to Michel Tremblay, still the differences are even more remarkable. Bouchard choses to reach back to *Marie Chapdelaine* - his best-known play, *Les Feluettes ou la Répétition d'un dram romantique* (1985-86) takes place on Lake Saint-Jean and mythicizes the Northern part of Québec. In his play, the pseudo-historical event is coupled with a multiple meta-theatricality, resulting in a very complex structure which allows the playwright to put the whole theatrical process on the stage. This self-reflective aspect goes hand in hand with homosexuality as central motif, which underlines the strong negation of the family and a "condemnation of the father-figure" (96).

Normand Charette's most successful play, *Provincetown Playhouse, juillet 1919, j'avais 19 ans* (1981) expands the scope of theatrical references to the history of American theatre. Charette also connects the self-reflective aspect of theatre with the analysis of the individual, its self-definition and the definition of the sexuality. Charette's hero, in search of perfect beauty, commits the murder of a child, drawing attention to a major question of theatrical representation, i.e. the question of reality in case of stage murders. Godin seems to agree with Luis Cura who states that "the playwright theatricalizes any non-theatrical material and meta-theatricalizes conventionally theatrical elements" (109). This leads to the rejection of theatrical illusionism, but paradoxically, manifesting a theatrical virtuosity.

While Bouchard and Charette connected theatrical reflection and homosexuality in their plays, René-Daniel Dubois expanded the boundaries of language in his plays. For him questioning the limits of communication and the quest for identity come together with typically post-modern traits like cultural references (reaching from opera to the western) and a very conscious strategy of musicality in the texts. He also investigates the nature of theatrical representation - in *Panique a Longueuil* he analyses the non-existence of theatrical characters and refuses the laws of mimetic composition. In *26 bis, impasse du Colonel-Foisy* Dubois creates a meta-theatrical situation with a rich intertextuality, including several auto-referential passages. Lafon calls it an intim theatre, which follows the tradition of Strindberg and M. Duras.

Marie Laberge puzzles critics with the inclusion of the omni-scient author so familiar from novels in her plays which manifest elements of psychological analysis together with a strong female point of view. Her characters are almost exclusively women - men are mentioned mainly in the negative sense, referring to incest, impotence, violence, abuse or vulgarity. All these elements, however, very often add up to melodramatic effects and didactic attitudes, explaining the ambiguity of her reception so far.

The Conclusion of *Dramaturgies québécoises...* sums up the main features of the two dozen plays discussed in the previous chapters and put them in the context of Québec theatre life in the 1980s. An invaluable "coda" at the end of the book offers a chronological list of historical and cultural events, theatrical performances and publications of plays and papers for each year which can serve as a most useful source of basic data both for experts and for theatre goers. Researchers of theatres - and among them, of Canadian theatres - can only wish that there be a continuation of enjoyable and immensely useful studies like *Dramaturgies québécoises ...* by Jean Cléo Godin and Dominique Lafon.