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Bridging Transcultural Boundaries in Carroll Aikins's Play *The God of Gods: A Canadian Play*

Rapprochement des limites transculturelles dans la pièce de théâtre de Carroll Aikins intitulée *The God of Gods: A Canadian Play*

Krisztina Kodó

Abstract

What is a Canadian play? Does it have an established formula? Should a nation's culture and tradition provide inspiration for the kind of theatre it envisages as a national theatre? Canada is a transnational country that has incorporated the cultural identities of many different ethnicities from the beginning of its inception. Which cultural and traditional markers were considered to be more dominant and influential? The turn of the twentieth century and its first decades saw numerous endeavours in the form of modernist experimental theatres that challenged the traditional European theatrical formulas. Their aim was to create an all-Canadian theatre and perform the works of Canadian playwrights that present Canadian themes. To what extent were these aims achieved? Carroll Aikins's theatrical endeavours may be considered unique, because his play *The God of Gods: A Canadian Play*, bridges cultures through its "native" themes with its wilderness, spirituality and equality. The play dramatizes major theosophical beliefs that portray a critical view of human nature, namely, by focusing on materialism, religion and human greed. Aikins's modernist theatrical techniques and aboriginal subject matter, however, also highlight further underlying tenets that the article proposes to examine.

Keywords: allegory; symbolist theatre; European modernism; Carroll Aikins; Canadian experimental theatre

Résumé

Qu'est-ce qu'une pièce de théâtre canadienne ? A-t-elle une formule reçue ? La culture et la tradition d'une nation doivent-elles donner de l'inspiration au type de théâtre considéré comme théâtre national ? Le Canada est un pays transnational qui a intégré, dès le début de sa création, les identités culturelles de nombreuses ethnies différentes. Quels acteurs culturels et traditionnels étaient considérés comme étant plus dominants et influents ? Le début du 20^{ème} siècle a vu de nombreuses tentatives, sous la forme de théâtres expérimentaux modernistes, défiant les formules théâtrales européennes traditionnelles. Leur objectif était de créer un théâtre entièrement canadien et d'interpréter les œuvres d'auteurs canadiens présentant des thèmes canadiens. Dans quelle mesure ces objectifs ont-ils été atteints ? Les œuvres théâtrales de Carroll Aikins peuvent être considérées comme uniques, car sa pièce *Le Dieu des Dieux: une pièce de théâtre canadienne*, à travers ses thèmes autochtones tels que le désert,



la spiritualité et l'égalité, rapproche ces différentes cultures. La pièce met en scène des croyances théosophiques essentielles, portant une vision critique sur la nature humaine, car elle se concentre sur le matérialisme, la religion et la cupidité humaine. Néanmoins, les techniques théâtrales modernistes et le sujet aborigène d'Aikins mettent en évidence d'autres principes sous-jacents que la présente étude propose d'examiner.

Mots-clés : allégorie ; théâtre symboliste ; modernisme européen ; Carroll Aikins ; théâtre expérimental canadien

What is a Canadian play? Does it have an established formula? Should a nation's culture and tradition provide inspiration for its national theatre? How and why is the bridging of cultural boundaries relevant for a play to be considered Canadian? And why is Carroll Aikins, and his dramatic and theatrical innovation, important with regard to the development of Canadian theatre?

To begin with it is important to distinguish between theatrical activity and Canadian theatre, because theatrical activity does have a long and fascinating history in Canada. Canada's earliest theatrical event in a European mode shows a native presence, when Sir Humphrey Gilbert carried a small troupe of entertainers on his ship in 1583, who performed while they were anchored in St. John's (Benson and Conolly 1989, 148). With the gradual development of Canada an increasing desire for cultural entertainment emerged, within both the French and the English cultural milieu. There was a substantial growth in the number of plays being written in English from the 18th century. And numerous playhouses were opened throughout the urbanized regions of the Dominion, though mainly to accommodate American and British touring companies. Evidence shows that by the 1850s most towns had a theatre, even if it was only a long room with a raised platform (Benson and Conolly 1989, 151). By 1870 Canada was entering a forty-year peak in its development of building many stages and opera houses in larger city centres across the country: "approximately forty theatres with a capacity of 1,000 or more opened between 1873 and 1892" (Benson and Conolly 1989, 152). The incentive behind this activity was an obvious combination of "artistic impulse, civic pride and financial gain" (Benson and Conolly 1989, 152). There was a Canadian audience with an interest in artistic and professional entertainment. However, this progress hardly offered any development for Canadian drama, because the circuits and companies were "American-dominated and almost exclusively non-Canadian in their repertoire" (Benson and Conolly 1989, 152). There were of course quite a number of Canadians who achieved fame and distinction as actors (for example, Arthur McKee Rankin), but they worked out of the United States and were inevitably part of the commercial machinery needed for the circuits. The end

of the 19th century gave outlet for a handful of Canadian playwrights of distinction (Willard Mack – *Tiger Rose* (1917); William A. Tremayne – *The Secret Warrant* (1898) and *The Black Feather* (1916); William Henry Fuller¹ – *H.M.S. Parliament; or, The Lady who Loved a Government Clerk* – (1880)). These were time pieces, written very much in the vein of the popular melodramatic romances, but they had a distinctly Canadian setting, which inevitably mark them as being early experiments of Canadian drama.

The first few decades of the 20th century saw the development of a growing amateur theatre movement, including the Arts and Letters Club Players² in Toronto, a group which was inspired by the European art theatres (London, Berlin, Paris and Moscow) and the Irish Abbey Theatre. It is important to note that when W. B. Yeats was in Toronto on 2 February 1920 for a lecture at the University of Toronto, he said “the Abbey Theatre of Dublin was a real theatre for all classes of the people. [...] The plays took their subject matter from the life of the people and depicted men and women who were characteristically Irish” (Rubin 2004, 48). Many considered the idea of establishing an Abbey in Canada the ideal solution for a Canadian national theatre. John Coulter, an Irish immigrant, also said, in an article published in the *Canadian Review of Music and Other Arts* in 1945, that

by Canadian theatre we mean the dramatic activities of people in Canada. [...] In Canada the stage is all but exclusively amateur, the professional houses being now mostly dark, and kept so for commercial reasons. But amateur stage is everywhere active, [...] There are already a few Canadian authors who, with a competent stage inviting their work, could in time make the plays of the Canadian theatre not only of importance to Canada but of universal significance. It happened so at Moscow Art Theatre. And at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. (Rubin 2004, 130–131)

The suggestion, therefore, that Canada should follow the Abbey and create a national theatre was certainly strong. But Vincent Massey in his book-length 1922 essay *The Prospects of a Canadian Drama* clearly argues that if Canadian drama is supposed to display a “Canadian point of view” (Rubin 2004, 58), then this would inevitably lead to an “artificial Canadianism” instead of the creation of an original, inspired form of art. In addition, Canada’s size and geographical diversity goes against the establishment of a national theatre; rather “our repertory theatres will inevitably develop on sectional lines. The forces of geography are too strong for the growth of a national drama in the strict sense. But if we develop a Canadian style [...] it will be produced spontaneously by the artist’s conscientious performance of his task” (Rubin 2004,

1) According to Benson and Conolly in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre*, William Henry Fuller may have been an American since there are various claims to his birthplace.

2) The Arts and Letters Club Players devoted themselves to performing contemporary works, though not plays by Canadian playwrights or drama with a Canadian setting.



59). In his query he also adds that “we Canadians are not a joyous folk – we are rather serious, or sometimes even solemn without being serious at all. Whether gaiety will be characteristic of our new drama no one can say, but it is certainly one of the functions of our theatre to teach us how to laugh” (Rubin 2004, 61).

Dublin’s Abbey Theatre had its merits and served as an example worth following, but by the early 1920s there were countless amateur acting groups working within Canada. Vincent Massey mentions one particular example for an experimental theatre workshop, namely, that of “Mr. and Mrs. Aikins in the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia, who operate a playhouse of their own” (Rubin 2004, 54). The group is referred to as the “Orchard Players,” who do “everything from the writing of plays to the shifting of scenery” (Rubin 2004, 56). Massey seemed to consider this enterprise, or “centre of experiment,” as being very promising, a milieu from which “one can expect significant things to develop” (Rubin 2004, 56).

In order to clarify the above information I would like to explain briefly who Carroll Aikins was and his importance in the making of a Canadian theatre. Carroll Aikins (1888–1967) was born in Stanstead, Quebec, into a family belonging to an upper-class group that was well-situated with money and prestige. Some of his forefathers were in fact notable public figures. His maternal grandfather, the Honourable C. C. Colby, was Member of Parliament for Stanstead from 1867 to 1891, and also President of the Privy Council under Sir John A. Macdonald. His paternal grandfather, James Cox Aikins, was one of Canada’s first appointed senators, in 1867, and furthermore served as a member of Sir John A. Macdonald’s cabinet as Secretary of State (1869–73, 1878–80) before he became Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba (1882–88) (O’Neill 66). His uncle, Dr. Charles W. Colby, was a professor of history at McGill University who specialized in early Canadian history (Hoffman 1986). And Aikins’s father, John Somerset Aikins, was member for Rockwood in the Manitoba House of Assembly from 1879 to 1883 (O’Neill 2003, 66). These family connections, originating from Quebec, clearly indicate that Aikins came from an established Manitoba family of wealth and prestige, which was associated with certain class and educational privileges that were to prepare the young Aikins for a public life. Aikins went to study at McGill, but left after a year without a degree; according to the recollections of his daughter, Aikins “had too many options – he could do anything he wanted without a degree” (Hoffman 1986). The fact that he was discovered to have a spot on his lung indicating suspected tuberculosis at about this time urged him to leave Canada for Europe, where he spent the next few years studying, travelling and touring France and Germany among other countries. According to Hoffman, there are no written sources or records by either Aikins or anyone else on where he acquired his knowledge of modern European theatrical innovation. Nevertheless, the influence of Edward Gordon Craig (1892–1966) and Adolphe Ap-

pia (1862–1928) certainly seemed to help Aikins acquire a “visionary and abstract rather than a practical understanding of the theatre” (Hoffman 1986).

From roughly the end of the nineteenth century, European theatre began to move, as a reaction to naturalism, in the direction of symbolism. Major practitioners were Konstantin Stanislavski’s Moscow Art Theatre and André Antoine’s Théâtre Libre in Paris. The aim of symbolism in theatre, as in the arts in general, “sought to express mystical or abstract ideas through the symbolic use of images” (Banks and Marson 1998, 326). The very essence of symbolism was expressed through impressions, intuitions and sensations:

The symbolist aim was to “detheatricalise” the theatre; that is to strip it of its naturalism and “allow the word to create the décor.” ... The aim was to be non-specific but evocative and to bring together sensations brought alive by shape and colour; Appia and Craig went further and used light and shadow (sometimes flickering) to enhance the symbolism of their sets and to give them three-dimensional shapes. To Appia the newly introduced use of electric lighting gave fresh opportunities to create mood and evoke sensations. Craig used moveable screens (which sometimes collapsed!) to change and redefine mood during the course of a production. (Banks and Marson 1998, 327)

All these experimental theatrical innovations at the turn of the century and the early decades of the twentieth century which the symbolists created and introduced have come to be the technical equipment and materials used in contemporary stage design.

The new European theatrical reforms were intent on finding new modes of expression within the theatre and these apparently gave Aikins his inspiration, which he brought back to Canada with him in 1908. Notably, while these innovations were spreading rapidly within the major cities of Europe, such as Moscow, Berlin, Paris, London, etc., theatrical developments in the US and Canada were slow to take root. Here theatrical productions still favoured European box-office hits that ensured commercial success. Sadly the works of American and Canadian playwrights were not considered good enough. Nevertheless, dissatisfaction with the existing theatres was growing, which is evident from the numerous critical articles that complained about the “superficiality, commercialism, and arch-conservatism of so much play production” (O’Neill 2003, 67–8). At the core of the new theatrical spirit that was evidently emerging and began rejecting the mainstream theatre was an educated and prosperous middle class that ultimately established its own independent theatre. Some notable listed by O’Neill (68) are: Roy Mitchell and the Arts and Letters Players in Toronto (1910), the Washington Square Players (1914), Alice and Irene Lewisohn’s Neighbourhood Playhouse (1915) in New York, George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell’s Provincetown



Players (1916), George Brown's Pasadena Players (1918), and Maurice Browne's Chicago Little Theatre (1919).

These were essentially experimental art theatres that followed the European trends and opened up new fields of exploration within dramatic performance.

In 1919–20 Aikins built an art theatre, which he named the Home Theatre (this is the “playhouse” that Massey referred to in his previously mentioned article). This was most probably inspired by the Little Theatre Movement in the US and named after the Neighbourhood Playhouse in New York. The theatre was located on Aikins's 100-acre fruit-ranch near Naramata, BC.

The building was a combination fruit-storage area on the ground level and theatre above. The theatre was (40' by 80') wooden, with a steeply pitched roof, large dormers, and over the stage a raised fly space with dressing rooms; it seated 100 on sloping wooden pews, with a stage at floor level backed by a plaster “sky dome” and a foyer and scene shop along the sides. (Hoffman 1986)

The theatre was officially opened on 3 November 1920 by Prime Minister Arthur Meighen. The original aim in establishing this theatre was to house the Canadian Players, whose members were drawn from across the country. They were given room and board at cost, or earned their keep by picking apples in the mornings, before taking lessons in acting, dance, design and playwriting by Carroll and Katherine Aikins (Lester). In the program produced for the opening of the theatre Aikins presented an outline of his project, in which he explained:

We feel that we have reached that point in our history where we may look for a Canadian literature to record Canadian achievement; and it is in that faith that we have built this theatre for the giving of Canadian plays by Canadian actors. (Lester; qtd in Hoffman 1986)

The audience was not limited to a strictly elitist audience, because according to reports, members from the neighbouring Okanagan reserve also attended the performances, as well as the general public from Naramata, Summerland, Penticton and other parts of the Okanagan (Hoffman 1986). The critical reviews of the productions and the experimental nature of the theatre were favourable, even though the plays staged were not Canadian, contrary to Aikins's initial aim. The first production was Synge's *The Tinker's Wedding*, then the first student production to take place was in 1921 featuring a double bill by American playwrights: *The Neighbours* by Zona Gale and *Will-O'-The-Wisp* by Doris Halman. Aikins also had plans to tour with his company and perform Canadian plays, but a tour was never realized (Hoffman 1986). His aim

was to “purify the theatre of its box-office nature” by making it a non-profit venture (Hoffman qtd in Lester). However, in the Autumn of 1922 the unexpected failure of the fruit market compelled Aikins to give up his dream of creating a Canadian theatre in British Columbia.

In the years between 1908 and 1920 Aikins experimented as a playwright and wrote four plays (*The Destroyers* (1915), *The Fullness of Life* (1917), *Real Estate* (1918), and *The God of Gods* (1918)) that we know of. Only one was produced, *The God of Gods* in 1919. Why only one? And why this play in particular? The answers, though diverse, nevertheless present an interesting facet of Canadian contemporary life. Aikins’s role in the development of a Canadian theatre has been mostly neglected until recently. A critical edition of *The God of Gods* was published in 2016 edited by Kailin Wright, whose in-depth research of Aikins and the play has perhaps given the author his rightful place within Canadian theatre history.

Aikins’s experimental writing endeavoured to bring together new modernist drama with the accepted formulae of melodrama. “These plays provide some of the earliest examples of scripts written in British Columbia (and indeed in Canada) that attempted to reflect the theatrical innovations being discussed in various thoughtful journals throughout North America at the time” (O’Neill 2003, 68). The themes presented in the plays offer a critical impression of North American, and also Canadian life and its cultural trends.

Aikins’s merit rests to this day on his play *The God of Gods*, which was staged at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre (UK) in November 1919 (in a two-week run) then again in April 1920, with a set designed by Barry Jackson (O’Neill 2003, 76). There was also a Canadian production of the play at the Hart House Theatre in Toronto in April 1922, then a final one at the Everyman Theatre, London, in 1931. According to the research done by O’Neill and Wright, the productions received favourable reviews in general although Aikins’s stage directions and ideas were not always followed, whereby the Birmingham production, for example, gave some of the romantic and melodramatic norms greater emphasis, which Aikins and others would have rejected (O’Neill 2003, 80). Furthermore, Ernest A. Bendell, who read and recommended the play for a licence to the Lord Chamberlain, seems to have completely overlooked the major themes and their political sentiment when he wrote:

This is a somewhat mysterious play with its scenes laid in some mountains which are the headquarters of the Priests and Priestesses of an unseen “God of Gods” of the Indians. [...] In the setting and dialogue the Play is vaguely picturesque and quite inoffensive in its rather incomprehensible illustrations of the barbaric tenets and rites of an Indian faith. (“Lord Chamberlain’s Plays” 27 October 1919. qtd. in O’Neill 2003, 76)



Bendell obviously did not give the text enough attention, and as O'Neill also comments, this was merely a "quick read" (O'Neill 1986, 76). Perhaps if he had read between the lines and known more about North American Indigenous Peoples in depth, the play would have been most probably rejected, like Aikins's other plays. However, the "Indian" theme is basically a cover-up, which is misleading, because the play is a "loose adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* that uses 'native' motifs" (Lester).

The main protagonist of *The God of Gods* is Suiva, who is in love with Yellow Snake, a singer, but Mablo, the fat son of the tribal chief, Amburi, is jealous and desires Suiva for himself. In order to keep Yellow Snake and Suiva apart, Mablo bribes the aged high priestess, Waning Moon, to choose Suiva as the next virgin priestess. Through this deception Mablo wants to confine Suiva in the temple, to which no male has access except Mablo and his father, Amburi. However, before her vows are taken Yellow Snake manages to enter the sanctuary and begs her to leave with him; but she refuses. Amburi sees Yellow Snake and orders his son to kill him and bring his body to the temple as a sacrifice. When Suiva uncovers the body of her lover she renounces her vows, desecrates the idol and leaps into the pool, thereby drowning herself.

The play is an allegory that presents universal themes through the stereotypical images of "Indians." The well-known story of forbidden love that is sacrificed for purposes that go beyond the persons involved is a romantic and melodramatic tale that is, if considered superficially, easy to understand. No wonder the first production in Birmingham laid emphasis on the romantic and melodramatic features of the play, to which the director and musical director also added an orchestration, "that was not called for in Aikins' script" (O'Neill 2003, 80). The use of the "native" theme helps Aikins distance himself from his own WASP identity and he is able to express his own ideas through the symbolic voice of a foreign "barbaric" tribe. Through this ploy he is able to "sell his story" to a white audience, for whom, in the post-First World War period, the "Indian" was still considered an unknown, and basically an exotic, entity, simply because in general the public did not know much or hardly anything about the religion, culture or way of life of the North American Indigenous Peoples. Aikins, therefore, appropriates an indistinct native culture, which is rather vague and does not distinctly focus on one particular tribe,³ because the attributes and descriptions

3) According to Kailin Wright, however, the various objects presented in the play do suggest that Aikins was in fact referring to one particular group. "[...] the play depicts practices that resemble some key beliefs of Syilx people. [...] The Okanagan First Nations measure time by moon cycles, just like the play uses the moon to signal the priestess' age. Aikins' use of a stone idol also finds an ethnographic correlative with Okanagan First Nations, because in Syilx culture rocks are believed to be the oldest living forms and the preservers of memory. It is therefore fitting that Aikins uses a stone idol as a symbol of the reserve's all-knowing deity. [...] Yellow Snake's overarching message about the holistic nature of all living things (birds, trees, people) not only reflects Aikins' theosophical beliefs, but also expresses the Syilx's two important teachings on the elements: first, that the earth and all its inhabitants are a singular living entity, and second, that the coming together of all elements and inhabitants is what sustains us and creates life" (Wright 2016, xxv).

he provides are seemingly too general. Here again his purpose is rather imprecise. Why does he mix his references relating to the native theme? Is his intention to give greater emphasis to native culture and religion or the modern symbolist expression?

The setting at the beginning of the play is geographically vague; as its “non-descript mountainous background” (Wright 2016, xxvi), it is said to be “the edge of a grassy, pine-clad plateau overlooking a lake and a range of mountains” (Wright 2016, Aikins 7), meaning that the universal designs used for the performance focused on the modernist treatment of spatial form. The productions were in general considered to be “modern” (Wright 2016, xxvi), in which cultural authenticity was substantially lost.

In *The God of Gods* Aikins bridges cultural, religious and traditional boundaries, but his aim, seemingly, is not to present and highlight the Okanagan First Nations, but to take advantage of this foreign culture and use this as a cloak through which he can illustrate universal concepts and evoke sensations through shape and colour, especially with a focus on negative perspectives, relating to the human being, particularly that of the white man. One of the major themes featured is that of religion, which focuses on an absurd portrayal of the misuse of religion and the belief in idols, whereby religion is used to maintain influence over the benighted majority. Hector Charlesworth, as quoted in O’Neill, in his review (1922, 7) of the Hart House Theatre production in Toronto extends this argument by adding that the play

is a Voltairean fable designed to expose the methods by which ... established religion has maintained its hold over the ignorant masses everywhere... The god is alleged to speak through its priestess; ... the tribe or human herd support the established or current religion ... through inherent fear; and also for the promise of reward, starvation if the god is angry, plenty if he is well pleased. Thus the threefold elements of superstition, cowardice and greed are the foundation stone of the influence which Mr. Aikins’ “God of Gods” exercises, through his priestess, over the tribe. There can be little doubt that he intended his fable to serve as a criticism and ... his ideas have a philosophic application entirely unrelated to the romance of the North American Indians. (O’Neill 2003, 82–4)

Religion therefore becomes useless, meaningless and absurd. This non-existent and overall pessimistic mindset is an echo of the many pointless deaths, losses and destruction of the First World War. The main protagonist’s, Suiva’s, speech at the very end is a reflection of Frederick Nietzsche’s famous proclamation from his work *The Gay Science* (1882) as she exclaims:

This is not God. The God is dead. You killed him. He walked among you but you did not know him. He was God. (Wright 2016, Aikins, *Act III*, 61)



According to Lester, this last speech “humanizes Nietzsche’s aphorism,” whereby the “play can thus be read as a social critique of contemporary power structures, or as an allegory for the war, where young men died for the outdated beliefs of old men” (Lester).

The concept of materialism and greed presented within the play illustrate Aikins’s attitude about the negative path society has taken in consumerism, the lesser and greater privileges some have, and how power above and over the masses is dominated by the power elite. This is evident in the figures of the tribal chief, Amburi, who exercises power over the masses through the misuse of the god idol for his own benefit; and Mablo, the chief’s son, who is in fact a coward and a fool, who in order to satisfy his insatiable hunger eats the food placed for the god idol.

However, as in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, the only true, honest and flawless figures are Yellow Snake and Suiva, who represent Aikins’s theosophical beliefs with reference to the sacred mother earth, the universal power and harmony of nature and all the living beings. They symbolize the innocent whose sacrifice is essential, but ultimately their deeds will unearth corruption, which must inevitably bring about change.

The innovative developments of modernist art theatre are inherent in the play, which is formulated through the uses of symbolism, the evocation of expressions and intuitions. The spoken word “creates the décor” (Banks and Marson 1998, 327), which signifies that cultural authenticity comes only second. Therefore, the bridging of transcultural boundaries is only partially achieved, because the symbolism embedded in the play carries the ultimate message, which renders and provides expression for the negative tenets of Western society. Aikins’s aim is not to bridge cultures, but to voice, through a different cultural environment, the negative aspects and turns WASP society has taken since the turn of the century. Admittedly, Aikins’s views are harsh, but they are also extremely realistic; however, *The God of Gods* could not have been staged in the 1920s and 30s if he had not taken a different cultural entity from which the audience could distance itself. The spatial gap and allegorical or fable form grant the author the distance required for expressing his concerns. Aikins’s message, however, does not wholly come through and the audience is unable to grasp the essence of his visionary symbolism. But perhaps this is the reason why the play could be produced at all. The tradition of symbolism in art and theatre would gradually move on to the Beckettian theatre of the absurd (*Waiting for Godot*) and also George Orwell’s dystopian novels (*Animal Farm* and 1984) by the end of the Second World War and the end of the 1940s. Was Carroll Aikins a man ahead of his time? If so, then certainly by at least twenty years or so, for he envisaged concerns that the general public had to experience in its physical essence like the stock market crash, the two World Wars and the depression of the 1930s, in order to understand tenets (analogies) that Aikins already foresaw before the 1920s.

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