

Giving Shakespeare Meaning, Canadian

Style: *Canadian(?)* Shakespeares

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Abstract

In his Introduction to the essays in this special issue on Shakespeare and Canada, Daniel Fischlin considers the cultural role played by Shakespeare in creating and bringing into question multiple discourses of Canadian identity.

In memoriam, William Hutt

I

Invoking Shakespeare in the name of Canada or Canada in the name of Shakespeare is a tricky bit of business. Not only does the conjunction of Canada and Shakespeare in the same breath evoke uncomfortable memories of perhaps defunct colonial relations (as in, "we'll bring Shakespeare to the colonies to make them better, more like us"), but it also evokes derisory notions that Canada, the self-thinking quintessential postmodern, pluralist democratic state, should get on with it (as in, "let's get beyond this pretentious need for Shakespeare and make our own literature and theater free of that impossibly confining Shakespearean anxiety of influence"). Moreover, in the mode of high Canadian ironic discourse, a bit of an imagined national trait that apparently separates us from our more earnest cousins to the South, Shakespeare may not be quite good enough for Canada — that is, his works, brilliant, provocative, edgy, and universal as they may be, just aren't good enough as is — they need some tinkering, much in the mode of that supposed *Ur*-Canadian tendency to set off first thing Saturday morning to the local Canadian Tire to stock up on the duct tape and quarter-inch screws that will no doubt make the weekend a more productive one.

Ironic and comic discourses in Canadian performance spaces have a long history of invoking Shakespeare as the butt of our joke-making, even as we've seen fit to get on the economic bandwagon by structuring our most prominent national theater round classical Shakespearean productions in Stratford, a town that boasts both Shakespeare and swine (in the form of the Ontario

Pork Congress) as the twin pillars of its economy. Add to this our own family squabbles round interpretation, some of them given eloquent voice in this special issue, and the general newness of adaptation as an (if not *the*) emergent form of postmodern scholarly address to Shakespeare, and the scenario complicates.

If anything, adaptation becomes part of a larger strand of dominant narratives that Canadians have sought out in addressing identity issues. From Northrop Frye's "garrison," or siege, mentality (first proposed in 1943), an attitude that brings together the twin threats of the telluric and of the powerful (American) other at Canadians' doorsteps, to Margaret Atwood, Frye's student at the University of Toronto who retroped the dominant Canadian narrative (in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, 1972) as one about "survival" with the key character in the narrative being a victim, Canada has not been short on gloomy, adversarial, and inward-looking tropes that ostensibly help to define its identity. Adaptation, as a master-trope of Canadian identity, fits comfortably in the brief succession of such tropes from Frye to Atwood. But it has the advantage of being constructed less in relation to colonial self-doubt (as in, "we're victims struggling to survive in our garrison, surrounded by a vast, empty territory on the one hand and the most powerful nation on the planet, on the other") and more constitutive of an identity that will co-create its future based on making things over as we see fit (as in, "we're opening into the possibility of becoming as a creative process determined by our own imaginations and our own ability to confront our interrelated, mutating past and present realities").

Now, no doubt, using any one trope, no matter how broad and loosely defined, to define identity is highly problematic, but the history of such tropes is profoundly useful in signaling ways in which identity and community get constructed and in pointing to self-descriptive tendencies that may in fact hold a germ of truth in them. To his credit, Frye anticipated precisely such a tropological shift from the garrison to adaptation by arguing that as Canada shook off its colonial influences, both English and French, a "genuine form of cultural development" that he called interpenetration "became more obvious" (Frye 1982, 24). Now the notion of "interpenetration" as a space where community can be imagined in new forms accommodates adaptation if only because it is the key register in which adaptation is possible: anterior "sources" interpenetrate with contemporary re-workings in multiple, unpredictable ways and *voilà*, adaptations are the result.

And what Canadians have done to Shakespeare, as a global brand constitutive of yet another colonial master narrative worthy of adaptation, is instructive in this regard. To begin with, both Frye and Atwood had a history of relations with Shakespeare that may be construed as adaptive: Frye only won Canada's most coveted literary award for non-fiction, the Governor General's award, in 1986 for his book *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, a collection of lectures on the Bard (academic

adaptation). And Atwood, early in her career (and still a graduate student), wrote the libretto to John Beckwith's *The Trumpets of Summer* (1964), a piece commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation for Shakespeare's quatercentenary celebration that explicitly examined the role of Shakespeare in Canadian life (with topics such as Shakespeare in the Canadian classroom; Stratford Festival productions; academic disputes over authorship; and familiar Shakespearean motifs such as the seven ages of man and the seasons). As described in the program notes, the musico-poetic adaptation "illuminates the ways in which Shakespeare has become part of the Canadian experience."

For better or for worse, then, Shakespearean sites of production have proliferated in Canada across multiple media, diverse ethnicities, and multiple ideologies. The Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project (CASP) alone has in its database well over 500 adaptations that date from the pre-Confederation to the present. In theater alone, Canadian productions run the gamut from classical high theater, embodied in the Stratford Festival's ongoing commitment to the Bard's texts and performance practices (or at least to the prospect of making sustainable money from them), to the unconventional adaptations found in any number of fringe, community, and local theaters that take it upon themselves to appropriate Shakespeare's canonical import to their own uses: inter-cultural, counter-cultural, "wildly" adaptive, to use Mark Fortier's sly characterization of the theoretical qualities of the genre of Shakespearean adaptation, or aesthetically challenged and/or challenging adaptations. And, in all this is a recognition that adaptation, "doing things to Shakespeare," has been and continues to be part of the response to Shakespeare. Not that adaptation is in any way an essentially Canadian phenomenon, but that adaptations in Canada reflect on what it means to be Canadian in a way that other adaptations in other national sites do not.

Part of the challenge of running the Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project (www.canadianshakespeares.ca), currently the most complete website in the world devoted to Shakespeare and to Shakespearean adaptation as a highly telling mode of articulating national identity, remains keeping up with the relentless "doing" of things to Shakespeare in Canada — a full time job, I assure you. And, if the premise for such an undertaking is that Shakespeare and what gets "done" to his work — what I have called elsewhere the "Shakespeare effect" — are worth studying because they tell us something about ourselves as Canadians that is unique and (maybe) wonderful, then one can't take the ironic mode as the only register for addressing Shakespeare in Canada. Let's look at an example of this form of address that may help give readers some sense of what is at stake.

In 1988, the Québécois theater journal *Jeu* (48) published Carole Fréchette's and the editorial board's very public condemnation of Robert Lepage. The French Canadian theatrical *wunderkind*

had apparently plagiarized from Jan Kott's well-known book, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964), in published notes to his 1988 production of *Songe d'une nuit d'été* [A *Midsummer Night's Dream*]. The editorial board stated that they deplored how Lepage had appropriated both the words and the thoughts of Kott (1914-2001), the eminent Polish theater critic whose insights into Shakespeare had been formed in the crucible of the experience of totalitarian state politics.

So Kott, who had done his own thing to Shakespeare (via Ionesco and Beckett, East Bloc politics, and the European avant-garde), now had something done to him by Lepage, who was doing his own postmodern thing to Shakespeare (and Kott) via his unique directorial vision and his derivative commentary, and was in turn being publicly upbraided for his plagiarism of Kott even as the editors of the journal were doing things to set right Shakespeare's critical history via the sense of fair play that lay at the core of their denunciation. To complicate matters, Lepage never denied the use of Kott, saying that he had been pressed for time and had copied without shame (*sans vergogne*) two large extracts from the book, replacing only a reference to the Brothers Grimm with a reference to Walt Disney. The comment only underlines, if anything, how Shakespeare had been made more "our" contemporary via Lepage's updating of the Grimm Brothers to the less grim Walt Disney, an American entertainment presence that most Québécois would have been repeatedly exposed to, both in English and in translation, by the popular media.

Somehow, Kott, Lepage, Shakespeare, Walt Disney, and the Brothers Grimm (all brand makers of various narratives in their own right) were mixing it up in the arena of Shakespearean representation in Canada and in *Québec*, marked by its linguistic, cultural, and political distinctiveness from the rest of Canada or TROC, as it is often designated in Québec. To further complicate matters, Robert Lévesque, an influential critic at *Le Devoir*, the paper read by French Canadian intellectuals, took up the story prompting Lepage to limit his contact with Québécois media while telling the Anglo-Canadian media that he had little taste for following the rules of show business. Ironically, Lévesque himself was to be fired from *Le Devoir* as a result of *faute professionnelle*, or professional misconduct, for having falsified texts by Claude Corbo, then the Rector of the *Université du Québec à Montréal* (l'UQAM), and the independent journalist, Josée Blanchette. Compounded acts of plagiarism, acknowledged and not, bitter (ironic?/tribal?) battles over interpretation, citation and mis-citation, aesthetic and critical struggles all marked the long, sorry affair — again played out under the originary sign of a Shakespeare who had traveled from Elizabethan and Jacobean England to totalitarian East Europe and then to decolonized French Canada by way of heterogeneous performance practices, critical voicings, multiple languages, adaptations, and histories.

A barely one-page comment on the "regrettable plagiarism" (*regrettable plagiat*) bore witness to a typically Canadian(?) confluence of influence, counter-influence, and controversial sites of encounter and disputation — ones that brought together performance, adaptation, criticism, history, and tradaptation — the cross-cutting of Kott's Polishness with Lepage's Québécois theatrical internationalism and the editorial board's French Canadianness making for a markedly unique instance of how (not) to encounter the Bard in Canada. A tempest in a teapot, or a midsummer's bad dream — the event gets at the heart of any designation that reductively appropriates the Bard to national contexts and histories that are fluid, not as circumscribed as one might think, and extraordinarily, materially meaningful by virtue of the ambiguities that they lay bare round identity and authenticity and who gets to speak in the name of either. This, again, was the Shakespeare effect at work in a Canadian(?) context.

II

This collection of essays explores the ramifications of the Shakespeare effect in Canada across a number of pertinent contexts. First off, they address what it means to adapt something from within a perceived national context. If adaptation is to national identity as text is to theater, then there is an intrinsic link between the two that begs exploration and analysis. But what if nationalism is merely a front for competing political ideologies confined to a largely arbitrary geographical space? What if "being Canadian," a term I've used somewhat cavalierly in the opening gambit of this essay, is actually a trope under considerable pressure — as if "being Canadian" can be reduced to a common, shared denominator that all Canadians understand, recognize, and help in constructing in shared ways? This collection particulates the notion of an aggregate Canadian, and then in ironic mode asks if that isn't, after all, a quintessentially Canadian postmodern tack to take. If "being Canadian" involves taking on adaptation as a way of signaling what "being Canadian" means, and if, for better or worse, adaptation practices agglomerate around a pertinent, iconic (colonial, neo-colonial, de-colonial?) presence like Shakespeare, then this volume of essays makes a go at sorting out the nuances of any non-reductive discussion of identity politics.

Certainly, the number of adaptations and ways in which Shakespeare has been reconstructed in Canadian contexts suggests anything but a homogenous notion of self-identity. Québec, for instance, and Québécois forms of Shakespearean interpellation, do not construct a solidary, easily aggregated "Canadian" identity fortified by Shakespearean interpretation. Ditto First Nations adaptations that posit alternative histories, alternative visionings of story, and alternate performance and reception practices. Multiple examples from these two sites alone suggest a Shakespearean practice that refuses comfortable definitions, let alone theatrical practices

that put the question to what it means to recreate Shakespeare in as complex an interpretative landscape as is Canada.

So if a de-aggregated national context gives rise to multiple interpretative gestures and sites that do the same (de-aggregate) to a major canonical figure like Shakespeare, then something is afoot and worth taking stock of.

In this special issue of *Borrowers and Lenders*, it has been my pleasure to be able to gather a range of essays and reflections that adumbrate this emergent scenario. In the spirit of the usual cant about how this collection, like any other, cannot possibly hope to present a comprehensive picture of that scenario, let it be said that what this collection *does* do is address five key spaces of interpretation in relation to Shakespeare in Canada: theories of Shakespearean adaptation; Shakespeare and French Canada; Shakespeare and First Nations peoples; adapting Shakespeare from the very particular perspectives of theater practitioners (in this case, two Canadian playwrights, Rod Carley and Judith Thompson); and intercultural Shakespeare, as mediated by the formidable multicultural presencing that is giving added meaning to what "Canadianness" may mean.

The collection opens with Mark Fortier's reflections on theorizing adaptation generally, with an opening gambit that respects the need to create taxonomies, but foregrounds the unruliness of adaptation as a genre defined by exceptionalism. Wild adaptation, for Fortier, refuses reduction, refuses policing by the classification cops, and is best defined as "anything you can get away with." Fortier's position, amply given example through multiple Canadian texts, asks that we account for adaptation not by trying to compact its anarchic wildness into a critical knowable, and instead, by taking the much harder road of the unexpected as a truer path to understanding the vagaries of adaptive practices. Returning to the formulation that adaptation "is, and is not" Shakespeare (along the full continuum of what an adaptation may or may not be), Fortier radicalizes earlier work on adaptation in relation to more recent attempts to constrain its meaning and taxonomize its sub-genres.

Mark McCutcheon, by contrast, takes on issues of genderpellation and Shakespeare in the public curriculum, using an unexpected juxtaposition of Lucy Maud Montgomery's novel *Anne of Green Gables* and the pop song "Billy S.," by Skye Sweetnam. McCutcheon contextualizes "how popular cultural images of school culture represent the Romanticism of literary pedagogy through Shakespearean intertexts, thus problematizing the gender-coding of Shakespeare's canonical authority and, moreover, the gender-based division of cultural and intellectual labour in public education" in Canada. McCutcheon's close reading of Shakespearean intertexts via gender-based pedagogies performs the admirable service of laying bare formational structures of instruction and

reception operative in the public school system, structures that, moreover, have a long history of Shakespearean interpellation in the name of gender.

Jennifer Drouin examines the issue of Shakespearean adaptation in nationalist Québec, beginning, like Jean Gascon, the prominent Québécois director, with the pertinent question: Why Shakespeare? Citing the over thirty adaptations of Shakespeare written in Québec since the 60s' Quiet Revolution, in which Québec under Premier Jean Lesage began the process of rejecting its agrarian, Catholic value-systems, Drouin's essay theorizes some of the reasons why Shakespeare has become such an ample presence in the Québécois imaginary. Stuck between the rock and the hard place of Shakespearean influence and canonicity and its potential to contaminate Québécois culture with yet more English, Shakespeare's presence in Québec, as read by Drouin, involves a sophisticated interweaving of political and historical malleability that has been appropriated to nationalist causes, a piggy-backing of Shakespeare's pop celebrity-hood onto nationalist messaging at the same time as doing so constitutes a subversive attack on Anglo-Canadian culture's colonial debt to Shakespeare as a metonymy of British culture. Drouin's careful analysis leads to a reconsideration of national imaginaries and of how Shakespearean adaptations and intertexts are at stake in the real of national identity, as opposed to the imaginary of imagined community.

From the fraught space of Québécois nationalism and Shakespeare in Canada, Don Moore's essay focuses on First Nations peoples in Canada and Shakespearean adaptation as the nexus for an ethical remaking of cultural identity. Taking as its point of departure First Nations playwright Daniel David Moses's *Brébeuf's Ghost*, described by Moses as an adaptation of *Macbeth*, Moore's essay is a far-reaching meditation on Shakespearean instrumentality as worked through non-European cultural filters. In this case, adaptation gains the force of the familiar "writing back" against colonial power and domination. But Moore pushes the theoretical territory further by associating alternate historiographies, as mediated by First Nations rewritings of Shakespeare's hauntological presence, with significant movements in theorizing human rights discourses in Canada. In Moore's reading, Moses's play shows "First Nations identity . . . [to be] *itself* a kind of adaptive process irreducible to 'origins' or clichéd identity politics. His play thus advocates a more 'universalized,' yet irreducibly 'open' approach to rights and cultural recognition as a way of connecting on the level of common 'humanity.'"

In Canada, this negotiation plays out against a backdrop of systemic racism and oppression that, from the start, has had the specter of Shakespeare haunting Canada as a site of encounter. Let us not forget that Nicholas Flood Davin, the author of the infamous Davin Report that gave birth to the Residential School system in Canada responsible for destroying so many families and communities over decades and decades, himself coined a Shakespearean adaptation, *The Fair Grit*

(1876), which critiqued the Family Compact politics of Canada as a game played out by opposing sides cut from the same cloth. Americans striving to understand this situation might think of the kind of comments that generalize about Republicans and Democrats as essentially the same form of political aristocracy with, in the end, shared interests in wielding power to their advantage.

Where both Moore and Drouin are at pains to examine how marginalized, culturally distinct groups in Canada have made use of Shakespeare, Ann Wilson's essay provides a feminist reading of Vern Thiessen's play about Shakespeare's life as told through the eyes of Anne Hathaway. Wilson reads *Shakespeare's Will* as a proto-feminist meditation on the nature of desire, identity, and authenticity that de-authenticates notions of Shakespearean originality even as it promotes more spectral notions of what actually constitutes identity via the speculative narrative "telling" of a one-woman show. Wilson associates this form of privileging feminist desires and discourses with the climate facilitated by the Canadian Charter of Rights (1982), which, in its most recent impact on the law in Canada, has led to the enshrinement of the right of gay and lesbian couples to marry. Like Moore, who also references the Charter and its impact, Wilson associates the climate of improved access to rights with new interpretations of what it means to have social relations in communities in Canada. Thiessen's play, then, becomes the sign of a post-Charter *zeitgeist* in which Shakespeare's canonical centrality is displaced by a voice speaking from the margins, an empowerment that mirrors that of the Charter with respect to minority rights. This movement in turn replicates a larger movement in Canadian theater, with "Thiessen suggest[ing] that there is no need for Canadian theater practitioners — or anyone else — to attend slavishly to the cultural forefathers: there are other voices that deserve to be heard, like those of contemporary Canadians writing for the theater."

Deanne Williams's essay on Indo-Canadian novelist Rohinton Mistry and Shakespeare breaks new ground in thinking through the intercultural circulation of Shakespeare in Canada. Like his contemporary, the independent Indo-Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta, whose work also frequently cites Shakespeare, Mistry, in Williams's reading, has had a long fascination with Shakespearean allusion and adaptation. Whereas to invoke Shakespeare in an Indian context is to invoke as well the imperial relations between the British and India, Williams's essay reads Mistry as making use of Shakespeare as a "shared frame of reference and source of inspiration for Mistry as an author and for his characters." Thus, Shakespeare plays a role in the intercultural reworking of the past that is the lot of the émigré writer in Canada — a touchstone of the past perhaps, but more importantly, by way of what gets done to him, a talisman of what the future might become. For Williams, Mistry's engagement with Shakespearean presencing in his writing about India replays, in part, the scene of Shakespearean engagement in Canada: "A touchstone, paradoxically,

for both the Parsi theater's populist form of cultural hybridity and nostalgia for the lost status of the Parsi community, Shakespeare symbolizes the past glories and current difficulties facing the Bombay Parsi. The process of invoking at once the past and the present applies to Shakespeare in Canada as well, where Shakespeare's prior association with anglophone ascendancy is countered by the plentiful engagements with Shakespeare from multiple subject positions: francophone, First Nations, gay and lesbian, and allophone." The parallelism in both evoking and freeing oneself from a colonial past metonymically tied to Shakespeare is uncanny, and is redoubled as the émigré writer moves from one space of colonial intercultural engagement to another.

Williams's essay marks the end of the longer academic essays in this special issue. Following it come two essays by Canadian playwrights that address what it means to make theatrical adaptations in Canada that are either political or youth-oriented or both. Part of the project for this volume was to give Canadian playwrights a chance to speak to their own processes of adaptation, and the two essays take very different points of view in terms of self-explication. Rod Carley, a protean adapter of Shakespeare to multiple politicized contexts, discloses some of his own predilections and processes in creating a new adaptation of *Julius Caesar* set in a turbulent period (the October Crisis) of Canadian and Québécois history. By situating Caesar in Québec at a time of intense nationalist activity, one that saw terrorist bombings and murders, Carley seeks to re-tell an important phase in negotiating Canadian identity as a function of Québec's distinctiveness. Carley eloquently advocates Shakespearean adaptation as a way of knowing the present through past stories remade to suit the present. And he squarely places adaptation in the role of political commentary in examining the state. Judith Thompson, one of Canada's most recognized and lauded playwrights, by contrast, tells the story of her ongoing engagement with local schools in Toronto, creating and adapting Shakespeare for youth. In Thompson's poignant account of children daring to encounter Shakespeare, we find a surprising narrative of the range of effects produced by this encounter: transformation, healing, life-changing, language-expanding, empowering, and so forth. Too often designated as inappropriate for youth — as too challenging, too emotionally sophisticated and the like — Thompson's essay reminds us of the power of theatrical (and particularly, Shakespearean) communication to make us rethink preconceptions, rediscover lost or repressed feelings and memories, and to give us the power to heave our hearts into our mouths.

Finally, this special issue closes with a review essay by Leanne Lieblein of Canadian scholar Linda Hutcheon's most recent work, *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006). Lieblein's own work on French Canada and Shakespearean adaptation has been (and continues to be) seminal, and she begins with a useful invocation of adaptation as a "phenomenon of narrative elements overflowing

the boundaries of their generic forms, morphing into other structures, or taking up residence in new material environments." Lieblein's review focuses on how Hutcheon sees adaptations as "interpretive and creative acts that retain the aura of the adapted text and contain within them a palimpsestic doubleness." In relation to specifically Canadian Shakespearean adaptation, Lieblein notes how Hutcheon's work points to adaptation as a much broader phenomenon in which cultural identity, power relations, history, and interpretation are interpellated. The fundamental doubleness of adaptation is that it is both an accommodation to the past and a rejection of its authority — a recognition and a *clinamen* (to use Harold Bloom's term), a swerve away from a source that inevitably entails the presencing of that source in the very movement away from it. Lieblein's reading of Hutcheon highlights the rich critical discourses that continue to be made by Canadians about adaptation, as mediated by the specter of Shakespeare. And it does so by placing the voices of two prominent Canadian female critics into dialogue.

III

Finally, on a personal note, I began writing this introduction on the day that William Hutt died (June 27, 2007). Hutt was perhaps Canada's most eminent Shakespearean actor, though even that designation places unnecessary restrictions on the extraordinary range of his work. And I finished it, for what it's worth, on Canada Day (July 1, 2007). One of the first meetings I had with Dr. Hutt, with whom I had become involved with as the honorary patron of the *Shakespeare: Made in Canada* exhibit and festival that I recently co-curated, involved him fixing his glacial blue eyes on me, pausing for full dramatic effect, then in that rich baritone announcing that as far as he was concerned "adaptation" was hardly the *mot juste* to be used for what CASP was studying.

Call it "hijacking," he said, his voice lifting.

Or, now in full stentorian voice, just in case anybody was to miss the point, call it "BASTARD-ization."

Or anything else. A much longer pause now as the room filled with his presence and the aftermath of his words.

It, whatever *it* was, "was emphatically NOT Shakespeare!"

The gauntlet had been thrown down, and he serenely appraised us for a reaction to his words, knowing full well his oratorical power and the effect of his personal charisma.

A colleague had blanched. Another turned crimson.

I'll admit to a certain trembling of the knees, if not outright *frissons* of terror and self-doubt as I began to explain that my interest via the CASP project was not so much in Shakespeare's classic

texts as in how those texts had been Canadianized in hundreds upon hundreds of productions that sought to remake Shakespeare in outposts of theater and community across the country. I did not pretend that these were Shakespeare or were intended as classical Shakespearean interpretations. But they were a reflection, perhaps even a profound one, on the way in which Canada had sought to engage the Bard by making him over in the image of the multiple communities and perspectives and languages and geographical sites that one finds in Canada.

Hutt's face softened and his eyes narrowed. He had not liked how CASP had sought to chronicle his very first *Lear*, staged in a so-called "Eskimo" (now Inuit or Inuvialut) context by the Canadian Stage Company. And he had reminded me of this previously. Why remember such folly? What had it meant to be involved in such a production — out of time and out of place? But now, as we thrashed out the difference between classical Shakespeare and the Shakespeare effect, the latter an expression of pluralist engagement with the idea of Shakespeare, Hutt gave some ground.

Yes, community was important and theater a crucial public expression of community. Yes, whether one liked it or not, things get done to Shakespeare. Yes, and on this no yielding, this doing of things to Shakespeare could never BE Shakespeare. And yes, it made sense to think of cultural influences as mediated by multiple voices and sites. What point a democracy like Canada if interpretation did not allow for imaginative renderings outside the box — so long as the line was clearly drawn between those renderings and classical acts of interpretation?

The conversation moved on to Hutt's sense, given rich example in lines he recited, that English Canadian accentuation and inflection may have been somewhat similar to Shakespeare's own. From this speculation we drifted to Hutt's own biography and his coming to acting relatively late in life after having seen serious combat in WWII. He spoke movingly of looking for truth after a horrific war. Of trying to find self-definition and meaning in something greater than himself. Of love beyond words or knowing — that which compelled him, and not in any trivial or self-aggrandizing manner, to communicate via the stage. Of the burning compulsion to make and remake reality through art . . .

And then the large black limo that had been waiting whisked him away.

I left the meeting feeling strangely, uncannily unsettled and disturbed. Had I offended? Had I been too defensive? Had I not had the courage to critically rethink my own self-interested positioning vis-à-vis my own work to allow for something else? Had I really spoken my mind? What had really happened?

And that feeling, even as I write these words, has stuck with me since, as if being unsettled and doing things to Shakespeare had become profoundly interconnected.

In many ways the theatrics of our encounter — done in the spirit of disputatious challenge, grandfatherly reproach, honest skepticism, but also with a firm "let's take down this academic highbrow nonsense" — replayed the nature of the very encounters that Shakespeare has been compelled into in Canada. In the spirit of that unsettling, and invoking William Hutt's storied ability to make people feel something — discomfort, anguish, joy, and all the interstices between — may readers of this collection find their own way into the space of meaning that opens as Shakespeare is adapted into a national context that we'll call, for the moment, "Canada(?)."

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Online Resources

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