

---

stars such as Clara Morris, Julia Arthur, Margaret Anglin, Walter Huston – and after them Bea Lillie, Walter Pidgeon, Lorne Green, Raymond Burr, Donald Sutherland, Christopher Plummer – all apparent Americans.

Even our playwrights, until recently, either wrote directly in English or American or allowed their Canada-set works to be “translated,” much as today’s films shot in Canada go to great lengths to disguise their provenance.

Before World War I, one of the continent’s most prolific and widely-performed melodramatists was W.A. Tremayne of Montreal: not a single one of his fifty-odd plays was set in Canada. To Broadway of the twenties, an Ontario lawyer named Charles Bell contributed some of its raciest farces, like “*Up in Mabel’s Room*.” Mabel’s room, you may be sure, was on Long Island, not Manitoulin.

When in 1936 Mazo de la Roche’s play *Whiteoaks* was presented in London, its Ontario family turned out to be impeccably British; when Ethel Barrymore starred in it on Broadway, it was unmistakably set in New England. The same fate awaited John Herbert’s *Fortune and Men’s Eyes*, which started as a play about a Canadian prison; in Paris the prison was completely French. When published, a Canadian playwright’s work is often still listed among “American plays” in anthologies – as, for example, is Bernard Slade’s *Same Time Next Year*. When a Canadian play or novel is made into a film, its locale has nearly always been changed to the U.S.A. In a word, a Canadian actor or playwright abroad has usually been somebody else, while at home he was nobody. Anonymity was the price of his versatility. No wonder the Canadian theatre was thought not to exist. And of course the illusion was almost perfect at home, too – since it was assumed that if a Canadian performer or writer was any good he would leave the country. And if he came back it must be because he had failed abroad.

In fact our cultural history – as we are now beginning to appreciate – has been marked

by a series of pratfalls. Promising starts unfulfilled, collapsed renaissances – all feeding the illusion that the most recent is the first. We grow old slipping back from the verge of maturity.

Our native peoples had a rich civilization, especially on the West Coast, that the European settlers desecrated – because they assumed that culture was something you imported. Captain Cook, when he arrived in 1778, found a stage strikingly like that of the Elizabethans and performers of obvious high skill. But since there existed no written texts, no literary drama of the sort the newcomers were used to, the native theatre was dismissed as nonexistent. In turn, the French newcomers quickly developed a sophisticated culture of their own. Montreal had orchestras and composers while New York was still a small town; Corneille’s great epic *Le Cid* was performed in Montreal only four years after its Paris premiere. But most of this activity collapsed when the British took over.

The new cities and towns under British rule had their own theatres and troupes, but soon they became merely stops on the U.S. circuit – except for Winnipeg, where an entrepreneur named C.P. Walker turned the tables and ran the midwestern U.S. theatre circuit out of his Canadian base. But in the main, Canadians were content to wink as their best talent and brains sought more hospitable auspices elsewhere, and to rely increasingly on travelling companies from the U.S.A. and, for a time, from Britain and France.

One reason for this was simply that most of the theatres were owned by Americans. In the early part of this century, while great theatres, opera houses, art galleries and museums were being built in the U.S. by families with legendary fortunes, Canada – lacking such fortunes – allowed New York syndicates (and later the Hollywood syndicates) to build its theatres, and to fill them