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Slipping on the Verge: The Performing Arts in Canada Mavor Moore



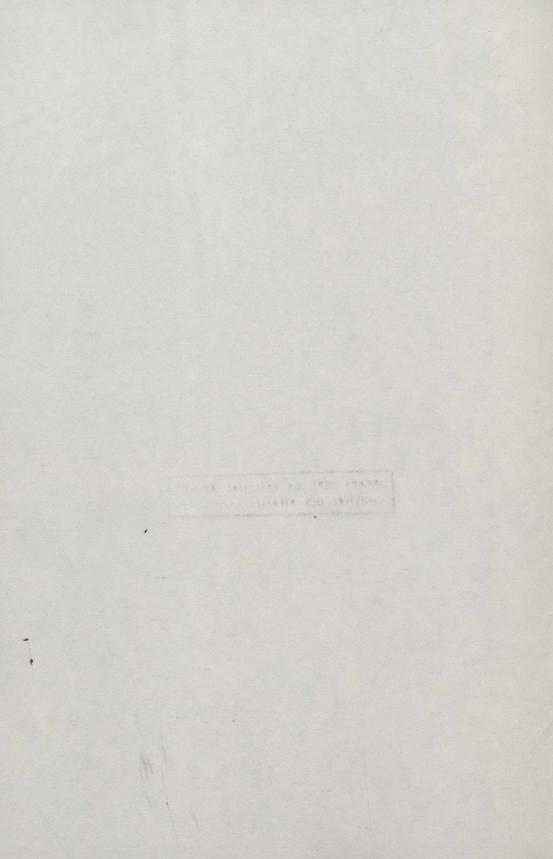
Slipping on the Verge: The Performing Arts in Canada With Theatre as a Case Study

Mavor Moore

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### Introduction

Mavor Moore is a professor of theatre at York University in his native Toronto, but he is far from being a cloistered academic.

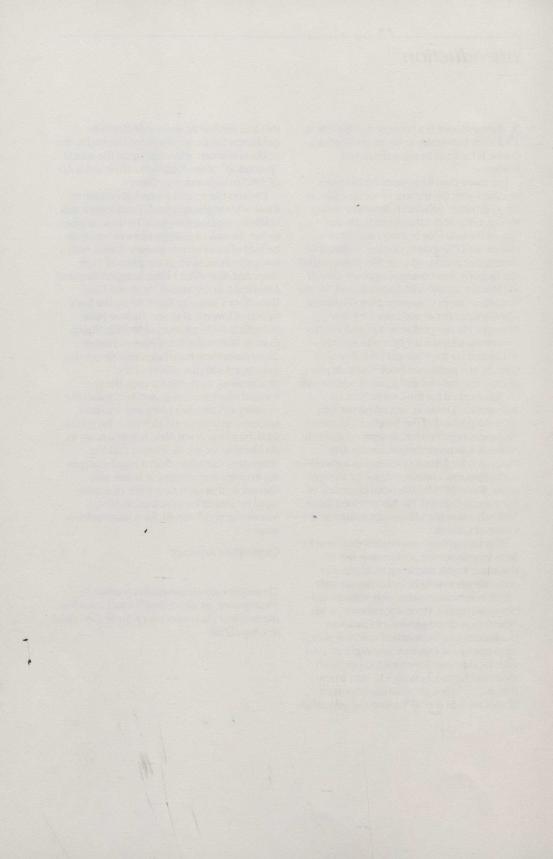
For more than forty years he has been involved with the theatre professionally, as actor, director, producer, reviewer, writer of scripts, critic and administrator. He has played the title role in King Lear, Shaw's Caesar and Cleopatra, Coulter's Louis Riel; directed or produced over fifty plays, including Gogol's Government Inspector, Dial M for Murder, Laugh with Leacock; and, for the Canadian Opera Company, Don Giovanni, The Bartered Bride and Love for Three Oranges. He has performed in and written numerous scripts for CBC radio and television and for the National Film Board of Canada. His published books include plays, poems, translations and musical adaptations. He has worked for the United Nations Information Division, served on the first governing board of the Stratford (Ontario) Shakespearean Festival, as general director of the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts (Toronto) for fifteen years and as a governor of the National Theatre School for thirteen vears. Since 1979 he has been chairman of the Canada Council. He has received three Peabody Awards and been appointed to the Order of Canada.

This background guarantees that what he has to say about the performing arts in Canada is worth attending to. Moreover, one's attention is held by his breezy style, which combines candor, shrewdness and provocativeness. Here, for instance, is his description of the genesis of Canadian Confederation: "A bunch of colonial politicians got drunk together one night in 1864 and decided they loved each other (with modified rapture) enough to start a new nation ...." Though omitting important factors such as fear of Yankee expansionism, this account has an agreeable down-toearthiness for those who have listened to the political rhetoric attendant upon the recent "patriation" of the British North America Act of 1867 from London to Ottawa.

I would like to add a word of caution to those who might approach Canadian drama solely by reading the plays. To do so is often to run the risk of disappointment - as may be said of most contemporary drama, with a few exceptions such as the plays of Tom Stoppard. But when I have dragged skeptical Americans to the Young Vic to see Barry Broadfoot's Ten Lost Years, or up the back streets of Liverpool to see Théâtre Passe Muraille's 1837 on tour, or to Billy Bishop Goes to War at the Royal Alex in Toronto. those Americans have been very favourably impressed with the vitality of the productions. As in earlier ages, the performed play's the thing. And in London the visibility of Canadian plays may increase, since entrepreneur Ed Mirvish, who revitalized the ailing Royal Alex, is going to try to do likewise for the moribund Old Vic. Nowadays, Canadian drama may be acquiring enough momentum, at home and abroad, so that each new wave of activity need no longer be mistaken, as Mavor Moore rightly observes, for a starting-fromscratch.

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## *Slipping on the Verge: The Performing Arts in Canada*

In the days when I worked at the United Nations, making radio and television programs and mucking about on the fringes of theatre and the other performing arts, we used to have to sign a paper that made us Citizens of the World – and I have never quite lost that habit of mind. In the last three years, as chairman of the Canada Council, I've had a wonderful opportunity to indulge the habit, by travelling to other countries to consult with them on cultural affairs, especially cultural exchange.

One thing I have learned from these travels is to mistrust easy assumptions, my own included, about art and society – and about the relationship between them. As the great filmmaker John Grierson said: "First comes the need, then the art, then the theory."

It is precisely the *need* that varies in each society, and thus the art through which it meets that need. In his book *The Structure of Art*, the American art historian Jack Burnham makes this crucial point:

As a rule historians [of art] try to develop analytical tools covering the broadest array of art styles; but as innovation further fragments the art impulse, and new and contradictory styles of art arise, historians are forced to adopt a variety of approaches. Not too many critics or scholars seem to be worried by this situation, although they should be. It indicates that all their efforts are directed toward explaining the physical evidence of the art impulse, rather than the conceptual conditions which make art objects possible under vastly different circumstances.

How difficult it is, then – for all of us – to study the arts as they occur in societies about which the individual observer has only a limited knowledge. And we are dealing not only with cultures, but also with *sub*-cultures and *counter*-cultures – for which the observer's conceptual grid may be the very thing *impeding* comprehension. This may be especially true in cases – like that of the United States and Canada – where the observer is close to his subject and is beguiled by some obvious similarities into overlooking significant differences. Another American art historian, Sheldon Nodelman, pinpoints the consequences:

Not only is the whole matrix of assumptions, values and usages – in which the society under study or its art is rooted – initially unknown to the outside observer, but . . . his spontaneous interpretations are founded, consciously or unconsciously, on patterns of behaviour and attitude proper to his own culture and must almost always be wrong. The reality of the [art] object consists in the full texture of all its relationships with its environment.

These warnings need not deter us from trying to study and understand each other's arts. But they do suggest we should look carefully at some of our own preconceptions. All of us need a house; but it should be obvious that we have different notions of the kind of house we need for a home. And in this respect, the Canadian experience is necessarily different from that of the United States, close and fond neighbours as we are.

#### The Canadian Perspective

To begin with, Canada is bigger than the United States. If that comes as a surprise, let me hasten to confess that its population is only one-tenth of that of the U.S.A. – and most of our 25 million people are strung out along that famous 5,000-mile undefended border that we share with you. Then we must note that the lines of communication on the continent, with the partial exception of the Great Lakes, run north and south. People in our Atlantic provinces are closer to what they still call "the Boston States" than they are to Ontario; on the West Coast, Vancouver's nearest big-city neighbour is not Calgary but Seattle. The Rocky Mountains run north-south; the prairies run north-south; most of the big rivers run north-south. Then another thing: about a quarter of all Canadians have French as their mother-tongue, and three-quarters of *them* live in the province of Québec, which sits astride the east-west anglophone line of communication.

And here's another fact of life: *our* northern neighbour is the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The shortest distance between the world's two great superpowers is not across Europe but across us. It is an exciting and challenging position to be in,, with many advantages – but I'm sure you can see that it gives us a different perspective.

And it is a difference of perspective that has been fortified by history. From the very beginning, Canadian and American histories have been intertwined – but the threads are quite different. To mix the metaphor, if *you* have been a melting-pot, *we* have been more like a salad, in which the ingredients have been encouraged to retain their own savour. And it is this promise that has held us together when every shred of common sense suggests that the continent has been carved up the wrong way.

Canada is an improbable nation, born not out of triumphant revolution, like the U.S., but out of consensus among a bunch of losers. The Indians lost to the French, the French to the British, and the British to the Americans.

One of our writers sees SURVIVAL as our common preoccupation. When Canada was born, not a shot was fired, not a single malcontent thrown into jail. A bunch of colonial politicians got drunk together one night in 1864 and decided they loved each other (with modified rapture) enough to start a nation – at the beginning there were only four provinces involved. As the country has grown to the west and the east, the principal problem facing Canadians has

always been to establish and maintain communication with each other across differing civilizations, across water, tundra, prairie and mountain - in a word, all along that 5,000-mile border. That has always been our deepest, most commanding need. Even today, Canadians are the world champion talkers on the telephone. To build their first railway and telegraph lines, linking the nation for the first time from east to west. both private enterprise and government had to work together. The same thing applied with our first airline, and with our radio and television networks, which are the most extensive in the world - eating up, incidentally, 62 per cent of all federal government expenditures on culture. In 1967, the year of our centennial, federal, provincial and municipal governments combined to give the nation, as a birthday present, its first complete chain of theatres and arts centres across the land. That was only sixteen years ago.

This had little to do with political ideology or precepts about government and private enterprise; it was simply the only way communication between us could be established and maintained. Collective action of some sort was dictated by circumstance. Despite our relatively small population, we lacked the advantage of larger European societies collected closely around cultural centres - London, Paris, Rome, for example. Instead we faced all the centrifugal headaches of countries as big as India, China or your own - just to keep in touch. It is no accident that the two most influential philosophers of communications in modern times. Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan. were Canadians. Or that our most renowned thinker, Northrop Frye, should find it entirely natural to sit as a member of our federal Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission.

I mention all this not as a kind of instant lesson in Canadian history, which I'm sure you don't need, but because without this background it is hard to begin to understand the situation of the arts in our society – especially such problems as distribution for publishers and filmmakers, touring for our performing arts and art exhibitions, launching and sustaining national associations for our artists. We have, as the writer Margaret Atwood once remarked, "too much geography and not enough demography."

Finally, I must mention another fact of life. That 5,000-mile border is one we share with the greatest arts, entertainment and education factory the world has ever known. No other country can make that boast – except Mexico, which does not, as we do, share a common language. In many ways this bonanza is something to be grateful for: we are among the world's luckiest consumers. But, as Christopher Lasch has pointed out, the freedom to consume is pseudo-freedom. There is no real freedom where the choices do not include your own brand.

Naturally, Canadians have only themselves to blame if they have been less enterprising, less imaginative, less innovative than Americans. But perhaps Americans who can cast their minds back to the early part of this century - when artists and writers in the United States were throwing off the influences of European art and beginning to find their own voices - can appreciate the stage Canadians have been going through in the last few decades vis-à-vis American culture. The concept of "nationalism" has different connotations depending on where one sits. Highly developed societies sometimes use "nationalism" as a dirty word to mock the self-realization of others, while they label the spread of their own artistic styles "internationalism." I long ago learned that when we send, for example, le Théâtre du Nouveau Monde to Paris, that is labelled "nationalism"; but when la Comédie Francaise visits Montreal this is labelled 'internationalism." But there can be no real "international" exchange unless there is something to be exchanged. Your true internationalist encourages others to contribute to the exchange. The false internationalist wants to homogenize everything,

reduce art to common forms, judged by a single standard, preferably his own. What is genuinely universal is not the forms of art, nor the standards erected by the leaders of fashion, but the *impulse* to create art – to give something to the world. And you cannot give if you have nothing to give.

I'll now turn to the Canadian experience in theatre, which makes a good exemplar of our particular challenges.

#### The Invisible Theatre

In most British or American histories of the theatre, even in the chapters on North American theatre, you will find no mention of the Canadian theatre. It does not appear on the historians' radar screens, and must therefore be assumed not to exist. It seems not to have occurred to many of them to check out the screen - even when they found it blipping over the relatively insignificant francophone theatre in New Orleans while ignoring the more salient one in Montreal. This is due, perhaps, to what New York's Louis Kronenberger called the "Mediterranean Complex." "With current high-brow culture," he once wrote in the Partisan Review, "there exists a kind of pre-Copernican cosmology in which the world seems more flat than round, with all civilization clustered about a figurative Mediterranean." As recently as 1957, the respected Oxford Companion to the Theatre described Canadian dramatic efforts as "probably no more amateur than were the first plays of medieval Europe." In fact, by 1957, our professional theatre was two hundred years old, with a respectable if mercurial record.

But even illusions have their causes – and there are solid reasons for the historic invisibility of Canadian theatre. In the past, Canadian actors went to New York, London or Paris, and, chameleon-like, became American, British or French. Not only "America's Sweetheart," Mary Pickford, was Canadian; so were Mack Sennett, the Warner Brothers and Louis B. Mayer. Before them were stage 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 Eves, 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 some-

body 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

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with their own shows. The Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto, for example, was built in 1905 largely with money from the Shubert organization - and did not house a Canadian production of a Canadian play until 1949, almost a half-century later. And vet, during the 1920s, in that same Toronto, there were six full-time stock companies running usually with American managements and English stars and Canadian spear-carriers, who had to go to New York to get themselves hired. Meantime, also during the twenties, Hart House Theatre at the University of Toronto launched a series of Canadian plays that promised a renaissance here like the one spearheaded by the Art Theatres of the U.S. I need hardly tell you what happened to that renaissance. With the simultaneous arrival of the Depression and the talkies in 1929, it came to an abrupt end. The illusion this time was almost perfect: indeed there was no such thing as Canadian theatre. And most people refused to believe there ever had been.

The 1930s brought vast changes to Canada. Industry, not agriculture, was becoming the majority occupation; people were moving from the country to the cities. National politics, business and labour unions became increasingly important to everyone, and there was an obvious need for better communications, and a yearning for some sort of self-image. In other times and other places, one might have expected the theatre or films to provide this self-image, as they did in Europe and the United States. But our theatre was moribund and our film industry, after several false starts, almost nonexistent. Instead the job was assumed by radio, which seemed tailor-made for the Canadian problem - so few people strung out so far. Canadian radio drama, especially during its zenith under the producerdirector Andrew Allan, not only succeeded in linking Canadians together but achieved front-rank international status, for the first time, for our actors and playwrights. At the same time, our public affairs programs such as Citizen's Forum and Farm Forum played to the largest organized listening groups in

the world. But you all know what happened to radio.

The next renaissance occurred just after World War II. The necessary critical mass for a reborn professional theatre was brought together from three sources: the skilled craftsmen of radio drama, veterans returning home from years of performing in service shows and determined to pursue careers in the theatre, and the corps of old theatre veterans who had managed to survive the drought. By the late forties, professional companies were again active in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Calgary and Vancouver – and *inter alia* they were producing new plays by our own writers.

#### The Massey Commission and its Aftermath

In 1949 the Canadian government established a Royal Commission on the Arts, Letters and Sciences - it always establishes a Roval Commission when it feels a groundswell but doesn't know what to do about it under the chairmanship of Vincent Massey, brother of the actor Raymond and subsequently our first Canadian Governor General. The Massey Commission, as it was called, recommended federal funding for the arts and letters, and the entry of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation into television. These proposals were less to prime the pump than to cope with an existing flood. Both Winnipeg and Toronto already had ballet companies, symphony orchestras were proliferating, opera was being performed, and new plays were being produced with longer and longer runs. Moreover, we had found an extremely successful theatrical vein to mine: the topical satire - and it happened at the same moment that Americans under the rule of McCarthyism were being denied their own satire. If Canadians were not sure what they were, they began to have a collective sense of what they were not; it began to dawn on them that fate had handed them a license to mock

their betters. Without international political clout (or, consequently, responsibility), they were in a perfect position to harry those blessed with both – rather like the court-fool function of the Irish with the English. In both French and English Canada we had some very successful revues – and the tradition was extended, when Canadians masterminded such television shows as *Laugb-In*, *Saturday Night Live* and now *Second City*. Nobody can carve up the family as well as the family – or next-door neighbours.

After the Massey report things moved very quickly. Within two years we had the National Ballet Company (based in Toronto), le Théâtre du Nouveau Monde (Quebec's leading theatre), les Grands Ballets Canadiens (also in Montreal), the Canadian Opera Company (with a young Jon Vickers in one of its opening productions), and the Stratford Shakespearean Festival in Ontario. Soon we had the National Theatre School and the Canada Council and many more theatre groups across the country – by now more than 160 of them.

The Stratford Festival became, at long last, the hoped-for breakthrough of the Canadian theatre onto the world stage. It has often been mistakenly thought of as the commencement of our theatre. But we should remember the vision that brought Tyrone Guthrie to Canada, not for the first time. He came here, he said, not to recreate the tired old traditions from elsewhere, but to build new ones. He saw the opportunity that Canada provided, precisely because of its long but *discontinuous* theatrical history, of making innovations on an artistic base of trained artists and sophisticated audiences.

Within a very few years we had other festivals (I think we got the idea of the summer potlatch from the Indians) – the Shaw Festival at Niagara, the Vancouver International Festival, the Charlottetown Festival with its Canadian musicals – and many new Canadian ballets, operas and plays. As we celebrated our centennial in 1967, it seemed as if nothing could stop the momentum of the arts in Canada.

But pride goeth before a fall. The federal and provincial governments' building spree had been welcomed in the sixties by a theatre community convinced that proper housing was the necessary step toward a Canadian theatre that could compete on even terms with the rest of the world. But in the seventies it became apparent that companies saddled with huge operating costs could not be kept in the style to which they had so recently become accustomed. The established groups were prudently shelving their plans for more and bigger Canadian works and falling back on "safe" attractions the old diet of classics and fashionable European and American hits. That left the path clear for those with little to lose: the shoestring theatres. With the major regional theatres providing mostly Canadian productions of plays from abroad, the pocket theatres now found their mission: the mounting of original plays. As a direct consequence, we do now have at last a considerable list of successfully produced Canadian plays, in both French and English. But will they play in Peoria? (which I guess is a lowest common denominator) or make it on Broadway? (which we may suppose is the highest common factor).

I think I first became aware of such preconceptions in 1949, when Gratien Gélinas' play Tit-Coq, after an unprecedented success in both French- and Englishspeaking Canada, opened in New York. What bothered me was not that the critics didn't take to it, or even that they could not recognize what to me were its virtues. It was that they turned its virtues into vices. What I knew to be deadly accurate about life where I live, they assumed to be theatrically contrived - like modern Judge Bracks uncomprehendingly crying, "People don't do such things!" Next I noticed that a good many Canadians believed they must have made a mistake in liking the play, because, after all, in New York they know a theatrical

contrivance when they see one. A decade later, when our Stratford Festival had established our theatrical competence, the company travelled first to New York and then to Britain. In both places the productions were admired. But I noticed that the American critics praised our actors for their 'style' (in which they felt American actors were then lacking), while the British critics praised them for their 'vitality' (a quality in which, it pleased them to think, British actors were then deficient). In other words, the compliment in either case did no damage to the *amour propre* of the giver.

### **A New Renaissance?**

If our theatre is to be judged by its compatibility with forms approved by Good Housekeeping, then any attempt to be original runs the risk of being seen as a failed attempt to be à la mode. There is, after all. not one set of values and practices in art, but many. We should be not richer but infinitely poorer if the Peking Opera were to duplicate the repertoire of the Met. Homogenization is the death of creativity, and those who counsel it - not the believers in variety - are the real narrow-minded zealots. It may very well be that in time to come, the most valuable aspect of the Canadian theatre may turn out to be that it is not the same as the American theatre; that it may offer the world not only an alternative North American theatre but also a model for greater diversity in general. Certainly the world is, like Canada itself, a pluralistic society. Like Canada, to survive, the world must make capital out of its cultural differences

In a recent speech to U.S. scientists, Canada's Northrop Frye said this:

The arts and sciences have a common origin in social concern. In proportion as they follow their own inner structures, they become specialized and pluralistic. This is simply a condition of civilized life: they have to do this, and the degree to which an art is allowed to follow its own line of development is of immense importance in determining the level of a society's culture and, ultimately, the leveling of the life of its citizens.

What is that level in Canada now? Well, we are in the midst of our most recent renaissance. There is more theatre going on in Toronto, and in Montreal, than in any North American city except New York – yet it is still difficult to find common denominators; it is an exceedingly varied theatrical fare. From Newfoundland to Alberta – both provinces newly rich with the promise of oil, and bursting to be listened to – we are getting plays and productions that really do manage to present us to ourselves and in original ways. We can only hope they may be of interest to others.

On the other hand, we may once again perform the astonishing magic act we have perfected from long practice: pulling the rug out from under our own feet while standing on it.

#### (This essay may be freely reproduced.)

This paper was delivered in February, 1982, to the Center for Inter-American Relations in New York, with whose permission it is reprinted.

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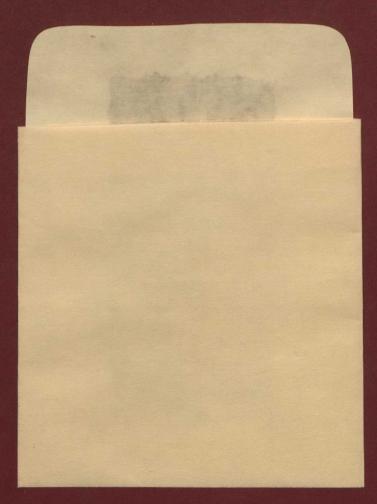
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