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Canada, a Place of Shifting Sands: George F. Walker and His Play *Baghdad Saloon*

In 1973 when George F. Walker wrote his play *Baghdad Saloon* Canadian theatre was on the search for its Canadian identity. The issue had been already extensively discussed by Canadian poets and fiction writers. In the late 1960s that important debate moved onto the stage. In the early 1970s Canada was implementing the policy of multiculturalism and the literary discussion on the issue had already had its short history (Cardozo et al.) So, obviously the new theatre had to consider various multicultural perspectives. The authors, the producers and the actors were challenging then the validity of such terms, as Canadian play, Canadian playwright and Canadian stage.

It should be noted, however, that professional theatre in Canada aside from British and American shows began rather late, i.e., with the creation of the Canada Council and the founding of the Stratford Festival in 1953¹. By 1960s the most important theatrical institutions were established, among them the Manitoba Theatre Center, the theatres in Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Montreal, Fredericton and Halifax. These theatres typically produced a season comprising one or two Broadway hits, one or two West End hits, a classical play (Shakespeare or Moliere) and a contemporary classics, such as Chekhov, Pinter, Durrenmat, Miller or Brecht. Yet, only occasionally did these theatres produce original Canadian drama, and by 1970, many began to note the absence of any sustained Canadian playwriting movement, despite almost two decades of well-subsidized professional theatre. The reason was quite obvious: Canada's colonial past had been translated onto its stages. The theatre directors were English, the festivals were presenting British and American plays. It was also widely believed that Canadian audience had become comfortable watching British plays and felt self-conscious about references to some Canadian features.

¹ Refer to a recent interesting survey on the development of Canadian drama and theatre (Rubin, 391-413).

The revolution in Canadian theatre came not from any government commission or state subsidized structure but rather from independent warehouse theatres that sprang up almost spontaneously in Toronto in the very early 1970s. These new stages, namely The Factory Theatre Lab, Theatre Passe Muraille, Tarragon Theatre and Toronto Free Theatre introduced European experiments of 1960s and undertook the task to create new Canadian plays. As Martin Kinch said:

It was an exciting time, a time of experiment and an exploration [...] and perhaps the most important, however, there existed a definite bond between the theatre and the audience; an audience that was characterized by long hair, beards, bells and babies in front rows of the outrageous plays (*Modern*, 16).

Together, these four theatres formed the alternate Theatre Movement (Johnson, 87-90) that spread its influences across the country. The audience was enthusiastic about these new experimental ventures and almost overnight the Canadian theatre changed forever. The Factory Theatre Lab, founded by Ken Gass in 1970 became “the home of Canadian playwright” (*Modern*, 17). Gass was convinced that there were Canadian playwrights just waiting to be discovered. His idea of new theatre paid off almost immediately with a string of notable new plays, such as David Freeman’s *Creeps* and Herschel Hardin’s *Eske Mike and his Wife, Angiluk*.

George Walker² personal turf was East End, working class Toronto. He was driving taxi in 1970 when he read a flyer on a lamppost soliciting scripts for Ken Gass new Factory Theatre Lab. The play he submitted, namely *Prince of Naples* was not only his first attempt at writing drama, but when he attended its opening in 1971 it was only the second play he had ever seen. Despite his inexperience Gass made Walker playwright-in-residence from 1971-76. His career has been unprecedented in English Canada. Walker has two Governor General’s Awards and many other prestigious prizes. He has written more than twenty stage plays, many radio and television scripts, he is often a director of his own productions. His works have been translated into several languages and staged in many countries. If Walker’s plays have been a rich source of material for actors and directors, they have posed somewhat more of enigma for the critics who do not always know how to

² For the playwright’s biography see, for example: George, 498-500, and for Walker’s reflections on his own theatre you may refer to: Wallace, 23-33.

interpret this mixture of serious political and philosophical thoughts, bizarre, even grotesque theatrical forms, cartoon characters and cinematic techniques. In another words, how to read his plays that, as Walker said, exist along “that fine line between the serious and the comic” (*Modern*, 257).

The play *Baghdad Saloon* even from its title appears to be quite intriguing. It is a *theatre of the absurd*³, a bawdy sprawling collage of short scenes, music and *coup de théâtre*. In this play explicitly subtitled “a cartoon” Walker continues to broaden his vocabulary of anti-realistic devices, while moving closer to Canadian roots. The action takes place in an unknown, illusionary Arabian desert. This specific setting, a place as far removed from Canada as possible, becomes a metaphor for Canada itself. Walker gathers here a few strange personalities of different cultures and rather surprising outlooks and behavior. Among them celebrities: Gertrude Stein⁴ and Henry Miller⁵, an American gunfighter Doc Holiday, a Barbie type woman Dolly with her son, a young enthusiast Mitch, a fame-obsessed Ahrun and Alladin, an older man, a type of a folk story teller from the East whose enigmatic personality brings a blow of a fresh, inspiring air and whose appearances somehow unify the play.

The people seem strange and very different. However, they have something in common. They all feel alienated, confused and uncertain. While engaged in apparently strange situations and conversations they are trying to overcome their anxieties and fears and discover the real sense of their existence. Together they are in the process of creating a *saloon*. They come and go, bring strange requisites, give speeches and sing songs. They pose a lot of questions that remain unanswered. In a chaotic way the characters attempt to discuss a large variety of problems while spontaneously changing the topics. They talk about loneliness, death, morality, racism, famine, rebellions, reflect about their past experiences and wonder about the possible challenges of the twenty first century. However, our attention is focused here on something else, namely on the issue of Canadian identity in the light of

³ About the influence of the *theatre of the absurd* on George Walker’s plays you may read: Johnson (90-103).

⁴ Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), a famous American writer. After World War I she was active in Paris literary circles.

⁵ Henry Miller (1891–1980), a famous American writer who protested against modern moral standards and social conventions and their influence on culture.

a newly implemented multiculturalism. The question here is: How to make unity out of diversity? In other words, how to promote and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve unity of all Canadians?

Creating a *saloon*, i.e., *Baghdad Saloon* in the middle of an Arabian desert becomes for Walker a pretext to unveil all the difficulties related to the process of forming Canadian identity. First, the author refers to some old, still existing problems. He reminds us of the natives and points out the need for mutual understanding between the old and the new world: “Look, there are some things I can read and some things I have to learn how to read. [...] It’s all a matter of *what yacallit*. The gradual. No, the relative. Yeah. It’s all a matter of the relative” (Walker, 64). He also brings back the tensions and unresolved conflicts between the British and the French: “You know I don’t understand French. So, talk English or don’t talk at all” (Walker, 56).

Then the author warns about the threat caused by an uncontrolled influx of American culture. According to Walker this culture, as symbolized in the play by Stein, Miller, Dolly and Holliday, doesn’t have its firm identity and struggles with its own problems. Therefore, it cannot and should not become a model for different people in different environment. Stein says: “People – thinking me wise – have always wanted something from me. They still do. [...] What do they want of me, that wanting nothing they get less and wanting less, still get nothing... On, I am crippled by my own perception” (Walker, 41). She admits her lack of engagement in the national cause: “My emotions have survived in a neutrality of sincere indifference. For my country, which I left when I was young and returned to when I was younger still, I feel nothing except an obligation to confuse its citizens” (Walker, 62). And her confusion concerning her own national identity:

I have never been an American; I have never been a Parisienne.
Likewise I have never been a Jew or a woman or a human being.
I always have been an artist. [...] I don’t ask much more anymore.
Not because I don’t want to ask but because I have no place to
put anything. After all this time, I find that I’m homeless (Walker,
63).

Finally, Walker presents the most important element forming Canadian identity that is multiculturalism, the policy adopted by Canada in the early seventies (shortly before the play was written).

We have to note that over the past fifty years Canada's population has changed considerably. In 1960's more than four out of five immigrants came from Europe (including Great Britain) the United States, Australia and New Zealand. By the 1980s, only one of three immigrants came from those countries: two out of three came from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin, Central and South America. On the eve of the twenty first century almost forty percent of the population had origin other than British and French. This percentage was likely to rise during the past years (*Multiculturalism*, 29). Canada is a mosaic of different cultures and religious beliefs. Since the late 1960s a large number of immigrants who have been coming to the country are the followers of Islam. The Muslim population in Canada has been growing rapidly reaching almost four hundred thousand today (Yazbeck-Haddad, 71-100).

We may notice that long before Samuel Huntington (Huntington) and some others, George Walker with a great wisdom, in his play *Baghdad Saloon* have addressed the issue of the Eastern and the Western encounters with the possible clash of both civilizations. The author introduces the problem from the very beginning of his play. In the very first scene he brings an Eastern character Alladin. Then, in the second scene a Western man Mitch suddenly says: "And now a moment of reflection. All great nations or cultures eventually assimilate the best of other cultures. The Oriental and Mid-Eastern ways of life have been knocking on our door for sometime. We have decided to let them in" (Walker, 9). Later Mitch continues: "The Oriental influence is running rampant. Things have changed for better. [...] We are fast approaching the twenty first century. And life of our great nation goes progressively on" (Walker, 10).

Alladin comes back again and again. At first he seems very confused and homesick and people cannot understand his old language. However, gradually he engages himself in conversations with Western characters. Doc Holliday trades Alladin's passport for his own's wallet and convinces him to put on trousers. Alladin offers Doc the elixir he has been trying to sell all over the world. The thirsty Doc without hesitation drinks too much of it and gets sick. The action continues, Alladin comes back playing the pipes. This nice music brings a blow fresh air. The exchange of thoughts continues. Both Alladin and the Western characters refer to the matter of the East and the West. While arguing with Stein about different theories and personal beliefs Ahrun, an old fame-obsessed man says:

One of my theories is that the remnants of all dying cultures have come to place like this to live out their lives. [...] And also a theory – a theory that the most obvious remnants of – of a culture are its artists and folk heroes. [...] And – one of my beliefs is that – if these remnants were brought to places like – to people like me – then, well, they could be observed – to – to see what went – wrong [...] (Walker, 57).

According to Walker both the Eastern and the Western people have to get to know each other better and he encourages them to do so. Alladin says:

Don't say you don't wonder, you don't know, you don't care, you ain't got clue, or so help me [...] Why won't you cooperate?... I've thought it over [...] I'm an honest man basically [...] I can tell you. I'm getting old. Look at me [...] I think I'm very close to death [...] Something went wrong [...] Let me put it this way. My father, my grandfather, his father, Damn. One of my relatives was Alladin of the Magic Lamp (Walker, 73).

Furthermore, the Eastern and the Western people have to discover that they are not so different as they think, and realize that the dialogue, the cooperation and, finally, the peaceful coexistence are really possible. Stein says:

I've just come from the desert [...] I was waiting for the universe to straighten up its act... for the irrational to become rational [...] I was visited by a family of gophers. We conversed. They invited relatives [...] Further conversation. A bit of preaching on my part, a bit of theirs. Much dialogue and inter-action between me and them [...] Good news! The world is not arbitrary. Everything is motivated. Those are Muslims [...] they have a doctrine! [...] I'm a visionary. Things are occurring in pairs. Flash. Two insights. Flash. Two truths [...] I'm going back onto the desert to die and be reborn. If I return you'll know I've failed (Walker, 83).

The play *Baghdad Saloon* was written in 1973, i.e., more than thirty years ago. What are the conclusions we could come to while reading it now in 2005? Canada is still on the path to define its national identity (Saywell). The sands are still shifting. More and more Eastern immigrants have been coming to the country. There are more and more inter-actions, dialogue and cooperation between the Eastern and the Western ways of life. We may say

that the Canadian multiculturalism is a great solution to ease the tensions of our today's world. We may also say that Canada found its own, unique way to deal with these differences, so that they wouldn't cross the unity. Finally, we are rather convinced that George Walker, *the great Canadian playwright* would certainly agree with Tawfiq al-Hakim⁶, *the great Egyptian playwright*, who more than fifty years ago, said: "East and West are nothing else but two halves of the very same apple created to form a *unity*" (Phabé, 75).

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⁶ Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898–1984), the founder of modern Arabic drama and theatre.