

Small Town Montréal: Critical Preconceptions and the (mis)Interpretation of Michel Tremblay's *Hosanna*

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In 1981, the Birmingham Repertory Theatre undertook the production of a play by French-Canadian dramatist Michel Tremblay as part of Birmingham's Canadian Days celebration.¹ It played in the Rep's Studio Theatre before transferring to the New Half Moon in Stepney Green and was, as some reviewers noted, a somewhat unusual choice (Chaillet). There were a number of other Canadian plays being performed in England at the time, most notably *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, but they largely emphasised Canada's rural mythology, and were universally written by Anglo-Canadian dramatists. Tremblay's *Hosanna*, however, provided a very different perspective on Canada. Translated from the original French – or more accurately, *Québécois* – it is the story of a transvestite hairdresser from Montréal's east end and her humiliation at the hands of her lover. The play turns its back resolutely on the archetypal conventions of both Anglo-Canadian and French-Canadian drama, foregrounding instead a section of society far removed from Mounties and maple syrup: urban, gay, working class *Québécois*.²

From a certain perspective, the Rep's choice made perfect sense. Since the production of his first play, *Les Belles-Soeurs*, at Montréal's Theatre du Rideau Vert on 28 August, 1968, Tremblay had been the most successful playwright in either French- or

¹ Although there is no doubt that the 1981 Canadian Days Festival took place, there is very little information available about its organization or purpose. While such information surely exists, it has not yet come to my attention and will require further research.

² Both Anglo- and Franco-Canadian drama had largely attempted to follow the theatrical structures of their European parents. The overwhelming thematic emphasis was on life in a rural setting, particularly in Québec, where French-Canadian identity was still very much attached to the pastoral roots of *Nouveau France*.

English Canada.³ *Les Belles-Soeurs* is widely credited with beginning the era of authentically *Québécois* drama and was the first of his plays to be performed across North America to widespread successes. New productions of Tremblay's work were consistently the highlights of both the Montréal and Toronto seasons. That being said, the Rep was still taking a significant risk, as Tremblay remained largely unknown in Europe, and *Hosanna* was the first production of a Tremblay play by a non-Canadian performance company in the UK. While *La Compagnie des deux chaises* had toured Tremblay's *À toi, pour toujours, ta Marie-Lou* (*Forever Yours, Marie-Lou*) successfully in 1979, they had had the advantage of significant government funding and the publicity that goes along with it.⁴ The Rep's choice to perform Tremblay's work indicates a realization that Canada is an artistically – as well as politically and ethnically – diverse country, and that the elements which resonated with Tremblay's *Québécois* and Canadian followings (resistance to hegemony, the need to challenge repressive norms) were equally relevant to an English audience. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that on 10 July, 1981 (less than two weeks after the close of the play in Birmingham), the first of the Handsworth race riots broke out.⁵

In spite of this retroactively dramatic illustration of how topical Tremblay's choice of themes remained, the initial response to the Rep's gamble was mediocre at best

³ The production of *Les Belles-Soeurs* at the Théâtre du Rideau Vert set off a firestorm of controversy. It challenged the dominant conceptions of dramatic art, of language, and the relationship of Québec to Canada, England and France. Separatist, populist, and relentlessly realist, *Belles-Soeurs* was one of the triggering events of Québec's Quiet Revolution.

⁴ *La Compagnie des deux chaises* was a Montréal-based company begun by Tremblay's agent, John Goodwin. The name alludes to the uncomfortable position of being between two chairs, on neither one nor the other; a metaphor for Québec's position between its French roots and its Canadian present.

⁵ The Handsworth riot of 1981 (and those in 1985 and 2005) was ignited in no small part by discrimination similar to that faced by the *Québécois* (not to mention homosexuals). The violent reaction of the Birmingham public to a system that predetermined their options has parallels in *Hosanna's* reactions within the play.

in terms of critical attention. Reviewers, by and large (although with some notable exceptions dealt with below), viewed the play somewhat patronizingly as a technically well executed but ultimately outdated curiosity. Their analyses of the show tended to focus on the themes of homosexuality and relationships, rather than the more subtle commentary on identity politics which made the original performances of the play – in 1973 at Montréal's Théâtre du Quat'Sous in French and in 1974 at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre in English - so relevant to their audiences.⁶ Birmingham's *Hosanna* crossed boundaries of language, culture, and nationality and it is with this in mind that I aim to examine the production and reception of the 1981 performance.

It is worth noting that the Rep's production was unfailingly faithful to Tremblay's stage directions as included in the 1974 English-language edition of the play published by Talonbooks. The playwright has stressed repeatedly that *Hosanna* is a political play designed to expose the danger of adopting socially constructed personas at the expense of one's own identity.⁷ As he says,

Hosanna is a man who always wanted to be a woman. This woman always wanted to be Elizabeth Taylor in Cleopatra. In other words this *Québécois* always wanted to be a woman who always wanted to be an English actress in an American movie about an Egyptian myth shot in Spain. In a way, this is a typically *Québécois* problem. For the past 300 years we were not taught that we were a people, so we were dreaming about being somebody else instead of ourselves. So *Hosanna* is a political play. (Tremblay qtd in Gilbert 263)

From a staging perspective, the 1981 production seems to have both represented this conflict and to have gone to great lengths to invite the audience to examine the relevance

⁶ Both the Théâtre de Quat'Sous and the Tarragon are known for producing new work, but their audiences are nevertheless markedly different. The Quat'Sous is known for promoting specifically *Québécois* theatre while the Tarragon is aligned firmly with Toronto's Canadian Federalist sentiment. Both houses, however, have long associations with Tremblay's work.

⁷ In the specific instance of the *Québécois* productions of the play, it is understood to be specifically directed at the French-Canadian population, although this aspect is of less importance in foreign adaptations.

the play held in relation to their own lives. From the very beginning, the auditorium was made a part of the stage through the heavy scent of perfume that was liberally sprayed throughout the seating area. Equally significant was the fact that *Hosanna* did not begin when the stage lights came up, but rather when the auditorium lights went down, leaving only the intermittent light of a neon sign from outside Hosanna's window to brighten the darkness. These relatively simple strategies ensured that from the moment it entered the auditorium, the audience was encouraged to identify closely with the play's protagonist. The shared sensory experiences of the heavily scented apartment/auditorium and the darkness that is alleviated both on stage and off when Hosanna turns on the apartment lights emphasise the fact that there is a direct link between the story being played out in performance and the lives of the individual audience members. These devices attempt to blur the line between the imaginary space of the playworld and the reality in which the audience members live. What the character sees and smells is not conveyed to the audience through representative action or expository dialogue, but through actual shared experience. Similarly, choosing to set Hosanna's entrance in almost total darkness made manifest one of the key elements of Tremblay's drama: the audience was quite literally unable to tell who was coming on to the stage. As the stage lights come up, this neutral figure is revealed to be a man dressed in the full garb of an Egyptian queen.⁸ Through the course of the play, this costume is removed, leaving an ordinary man whom the audience is once again encouraged to identify with.

Following the logic of semiotics, the combination of these elements should have served to suggest a reading quite similar to that described by Tremblay above, and one that subsequent notes in the prompt script indicate director Bill Pryde intended to convey.

⁸ Although, as Tremblay directs, "*infiniment plus cheap*" (Tremblay, "Hosanna" 144).

Both Tremblay's dialogue and Pryde's direction are littered with incongruous juxtapositions of personality and action which simultaneously go to dramatic extremes and touch the audience close to home. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is Cuirette, Hosanna's lover, a paunchy, leather-garbed biker whose arrival is heralded by the roar of his motorcycle, but who defaults to the role of homemaker, cleaning up after Hosanna as "her" Cleopatra outfit is slowly scattered across the stage. At one of the most significant moments of the play, in which Cuirette attempts to goad Hosanna into jealousy by defiantly claiming that he is going to find someone else to sleep with, Hosanna smashes a bottle of perfume on the stage. This brought Ian Gelder's Cuirette up short, and the prompt script indicates a pause as he struggled to decide whether or not to clean up the mess. In spite of the extreme stereotypes of gendered performance that both characters adopted – Cuirette the tough biker, Hosanna the extravagant queen – Pryde's staging emphasised the fact that those poses *were* adopted in response to the demands of the society the characters live in.

To this end, the production made extensive use of the mirror on Hosanna's dressing table. Under Pryde's direction, both characters are at various times captivated by their own images and struck by how odd those images seem to be. The climax of the play comes when both Hosanna and Cuirette come to recognize that their respective personas need to be laid aside. Hosanna takes off the last of "her" Cleopatra costume and declares simply, "I'm a man" and that Cuirette will have to get used to this (Tremblay, *Hosanna* 94). This does *not* indicate an end to Hosanna's days as a transvestite, however. Instead, he will cease to adopt an exotic persona while he does it. Hosanna's whole tragedy, after all, comes about because of his obsession with *being* Elizabeth Taylor. His dressing up

has been a way to escape who he is. At the climax of the play, he recognizes the need to acknowledge the fact that he is a man who likes to wear dresses and sleep with men. His adoption of the Taylor persona has been a denial of this.

All of this suggests that the 1981 production followed earlier Canadian productions of the play closely in its staging and use of theatrical devices. It differed markedly, however, in terms of its reception. As mentioned above, the critical response to the British premier was lukewarm at best. Nicholas de Jongh, writing for the *Guardian*, led the charge of those who panned the play by asking of the production's run at the New Half Moon: "is this a course of gay aversion therapy, disguised in the seducing form of a play and smuggled into East London from that country of compulsive dressing up and wearing of uniforms, prairie-land Canada?" (de Jongh). For him, as for several other reviewers (Francis King of the *Daily Telegraph*, Marion Ellis of the *Evening Standard* and Jim Hiley of *City Limits* are notable examples), Tremblay's play is "a chunk of gay *déjà- vu*, full of self-loathing and *deja-nu* in which a youngish male transvestite hairdresser and his lover, a paunchy and leather-garbed freak, clichéd and stereotyped to the last, engage in squabbling repartee" (de Jongh). King, Ellis, and Hiley join him in decrying Tremblay's treatment of gays and convey the vague impression that the play's conclusion is somehow a denial of gay identity. These reviewers, however, seem to be so concerned with the fact that the play portrays a flawed and (largely) unsympathetic gay couple that they fail to consider the broader issues that have created their problems. Hosanna and Cuirette are not unhappy because they are gay – they are unhappy because society has made it virtually impossible for them to be themselves.

The concerns that these reviewers express over the play's portrayal of gay domesticity are given weight by an overtly right-wing review by Jack Tinker, of the *Daily Mail*, who wrote that *Hosanna* "tells us very little that we do not know either about the tawdry world of mis-named Gays or about anyone who will spend three weeks getting ready for a party" (Tinker). Tinker interprets the play as a celebration of a gay lifestyle which he obviously finds abhorrent, and takes advantage of the dysfunctional aspects of Hosanna and Cuirette's relationships to confirm his preconceived notions. None of these writers mention the fact of Tremblay's own homosexuality, however, which raises the question of whether or not they were aware of it – or if it would have made a difference to their reviews. Certainly this knowledge should have encouraged a reading that at least considers possibilities beyond self-hating vitriol. I am doubly surprised that such possibilities were not raised by these critics given the reviews of Douglas Orgill (*Daily Express*) and Rosalind Carne (*Financial Times*). Orgill's review recognizes that the confrontation between the two lovers is "a moment of terrible truth, when what they are, and the hollowness of their fantasy lives, must be faced" (Orgill), and while Carne still emphasizes the homosexuality theme, she makes a point of discussing the ways in which the play "both explores and trashes destructive role-playing, without a hint of mockery or scorn" (Carne).

How can we account, then, for the discrepancy between these reviews and those of the other critics? It is simple (and fair) to point out that a dozen reviewers can come up with a dozen interpretations of any given performance – and indeed, often do. The striking similarity of the interpretations of Orgill and Carne to that suggested by Tremblay, though, and their marked difference in emphasis (on identity and performance,

not simply sexuality) from the other reviewers suggests that there is more at work here. This becomes even more apparent when one takes into account the fact that Orgill is the only reviewer (with the exception of John Elsom at the *Listener*, whom I will discuss below) to refer to Tremblay as a *French-Canadian*. The others, when they bother to mention the author's nationality at all, identify him simply as Canadian. Should this matter?

In most instances, the answer would be no. Tremblay's works carry well beyond the society of Québec because the specificity of his writing allows audiences to recognize situations which genuinely resonate with their own experience. If it were necessary to have a complete historical understanding of the *Québécois* socio-political position to appreciate the works, there would be little point in performing the play outside Tremblay's home province. But in this particular instance, it is clear that preconceptions of Canada have shaped the reviewers' responses.

The play takes place in Montréal, the second-largest French-speaking city in the world after Paris, second at the time it was written only to New York City as a gateway to North America, and with a population of 2.8 million at the time of this performance.⁹ Nevertheless, the stereotypical conception of Canada as a country of small communities and sweeping wheat fields has clearly influenced the reading of some critics. De Jongh claims that "Tremblay [. . .] is writing of a small town milieu and that location's resonances are not altogether apparent in Geoffrey Scott's design [...]" (de Jongh).

⁹ And incidentally more than 2300 km from Manitoba, the nearest of the prairie provinces.

De Jongh himself has told us that he is reading against the grain of the set design¹⁰ and he is not the only one to do so, as Ellis asserts that the play is set in “a seedy flat in a small town...” (Ellis). We can see then, that the reviewers’ perceptions of the play are not being guided by what they actually see on stage, but rather by their impression of Canada, or in some cases of Québec, which may be even more troubling. John Elsom of the *Listener* wrote that Tremblay “is today’s most imaginative and accomplished French-Canadian dramatist, *but he doesn’t like his work translated into English*. This accounts for the long delay in bringing *Hosanna* to Britain, and explains the very dated treatment of a gay couple who work through their fantasies and disappointments to find true love” (Elsom, emphasis my own). Let us be clear that Tremblay has no problem with his plays being produced in English – indeed, this has been his bread and butter. This idea of Elsom’s seems to have come from the fact that Tremblay refused to grant the rights for English-language productions *in Québec* until November 15, 1976 when the Parti Québécois won the provincial election and formed a government for the first time. His objection was not to having his plays produced in English, but to the way that Anglophone interests had dominated the province for so long.

In his brief comment on the topic, Elsom manages to suggest that Tremblay would object to the social makeup of his current audience, and that *Hosanna* is a play strictly about sexuality; passé and irrelevant to the current climate. What is more, it suggests that Tremblay objected to the play’s translation and actively sought to stop it. In 1981, as today, Québec was little thought of in England; a forgotten corner of a country whose status within the rapidly dissolving empire was ambivalent, both closer to and

¹⁰ Which was “a tatty, cluttered, heavily perfumed boudoir, overshadowed by a painted Christ, one of Cuirette’s early artistic efforts” (Carne) which “smells like a perfume factory” (Barber).

further from its English roots than many of the other countries of the Commonwealth. It is not difficult to see, then, how the clichéd image of Canada as a rural paradise covered with a liberal sprinkling of sled dogs, bears, and farmers who say “about” came to colour some of the reviewers’ readings of the production. It is, however, worth considering *why*.

In his *Reading the Material Theatre*, Ric Knowles has outlined a theory of production and reception that takes systematic account of the material circumstances in which theatre is both created and performed, and the elements that he identifies can clearly be seen to have made an impact on the critical reception of *Hosanna*. According to Knowles, the experience of a production begins long before the actual performance. The promotional materials, the experience of buying tickets, and the trip to the theatre are all integral factors in the theatrical event and contribute to what Knowles describes as the “public discourse” of a production (Knowles 91). Clearly, these factors *did* impact the critical reception of *Hosanna*. After all, the one thing that the reviewers did unanimously mention was that the play is Canadian – in spite of the fact that the word Canada is not uttered once in the entire play, nor is the city in which Hosanna and Cuirette live identified as Montréal anywhere except in the programme. Indeed, the only significant changes to the text made by Pryde were the alteration of place names and turns of phrase that were specifically *Montréalais*, even though the actors spoke with French accents. For instance, the *jurons* and *sacres* (French-Canadian curses) were uniformly Anglicized – “*câllice*,” became “Fucking Mary,” (Prompt Script 25) “*sacrament*” became “Jesus,” etc. (Prompt Script 35). It can only be from the programme then, or from the promotion of the play as part of the Canadian Days celebration in Birmingham, that Nicholas de Jongh drew his assumption that the play was set in the prairies. What is more, John Elsom

seems to have based his argument that Tremblay dislikes the translation of his plays into English on the playwright's blurb in the programme which says "Tremblay initially refused to allow his plays to be produced in English translation in Quebec [sic]" (Programme 4).

It is safe then, to acknowledge the fact that the readings made by these two influential critics, at least, were affected by the context in which the play was presented. What is unclear, however, is how the knowledge that the play was Canadian (or at least *Québécois*) equated to rigid declarations of setting and of the author's personal attitude towards translation. While we cannot know what, if any, experience the reviewers had of Canada or Canadian theatre before reviewing *Hosanna*, it is safe to say that they did have certain preconceptions about what to expect. Christopher Balme has argued that "first encounter or contact situations are located in a liminal space between *imprévu* and *déjà vu*, between wonder and recognition" (Balme 19). On the one hand, those involved are captivated by the otherness of an experience, but on the other, they attempt to "integrat[e] the foreign culture into pre-existing matrices of response" (19). This is a largely unconscious process, but one which has far-reaching implications, as it risks, in the theatre at least, reducing the performance to a signifier of itself. *Hosanna* becomes not a play written by a Canadian, but rather a play to be judged on its success in evoking *Canadian-ness*. What is more, the criteria for evaluating what is Canadian are established not by the author or the production company, but rather by the critic or audience member.

It is in this way that de Jongh comes to see the lack of small-town touches to be a failure on the part of the set designer, and also, I would argue, in this way that the play comes to be construed as a piece either for or against homosexuality. In attempting to

view the play not as a piece of contemporary theatre, but rather as a performance of a perceived Canadian identity, one also places an inevitable distance between oneself and the action on stage. The dramatic devices intended to create a sense of fellow-feeling between the audience and the characters are defeated, and a whole set of possible readings is shut down or severely limited. In objectifying the play, one also isolates it, divorcing it from its present surroundings and reducing it to a self-contained unit. What one is left with in the case of *Hosanna* is a play in which two gay men are extraordinarily nasty to one another. To de Jongh, this seemed to be an unrealistic and defamatory image of gay relationships which would reinforce negative opinion, while Elsom saw the play as being performed after its time thanks to the perceived antagonism between Canada's "two solitudes".¹¹

This sort of fetishization of the play as Other was not inevitable, however, as shown by the reviews of Carne and Orgil. The fact that they found the play relevant and topical suggests that, to them at least, the Rep's staging was effective. In spite of the ways in which the production had been promoted, these reviewers were able to access and activate readings that transcended the play's Canadian origins and made them relevant to a British audience – not as a piece of British theatre, but as a play that dealt with issues relevant to both British and Canadian subjects.

The widely varied critical reactions to the 1981 production of *Hosanna* are, I would argue, the result of much more than simply different critical tastes. A play by a separatist *Québécois*, billed as Canadian and performed as a part of a Canadian cultural festival, it offers a remarkable opportunity for further study into the creation of meaning

¹¹ While there has been – and remains – significant tension between Canada's French-speaking minority and the rest of the Federation, this played little or no part in this production, as I have stated.

in the theatre. The peculiar mix of colonial condescension, defensive responses on behalf of both those for and against homosexuality, and thoughtful inquiry from the critics offers us an opportunity to gain a more complex understanding of the interaction between the performance company and their critical audience.

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