

***Shakespeare Made in Canada: Contemporary Canadian Adaptations in Theatre, Pop Media, and Visual Arts.*** Edited by Daniel Fischlin and Judith Nasby. Guelph, ON: Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, 2007. Pp. xxvi+150.

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This remarkable collection of essays is the catalogue for an exhibition of the same name held at the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre in Guelph between January and May 2007, itself part of Daniel Fischlin's Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project (available for viewing on the Web at [www.canadianshakespeares.ca](http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca)). The exhibition, book, and website showcase not only "the playwright's cultural influence on Canada"<sup>1</sup> but also the seemingly infinite possibilities for adaptations of Shakespeare, including theatrical designs, paintings, photographs, new plays, musical compositions, graphic novels, and even computer games. Many of these are reproduced throughout the book in both colour and black-and-white illustrations.

Fischlin's opening essay provides an overview to the various facets of the project, including the website and the exhibition itself. He begins by briefly discussing the universal cultural appeal of Shakespeare and his plays before progressing into the more specific questions of "the Shakespeare effect"<sup>2</sup> at work in Canadian cultures – English, French, Aboriginal, and Afro-Canadian alike – all of which are discussed in greater detail elsewhere in the

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Fischlin and Judith Nasby eds., *Shakespeare Made in Canada: Contemporary Canadian Adaptations in Theatre, Pop Media, and Visual Arts* (Guelph, ON: Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, 2007), xv.

<sup>2</sup> Fischlin eds., *Shakespeare*, 4.

book. For Fischlin, adaptation is a major factor both in the survival of Shakespeare's works and influence in cultures far removed from his own and in the development of those cultures from the models of those that have come before them. He defines adaptation as "anything you can get away with in the name of another artist's influence."<sup>3</sup> His essay discusses the history of Shakespearean productions and adaptations in Canada, giving some prominent examples from the early English colonies to the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as well as the history and purposes of the Canadian Shakespeares website.

The first two essays following Fischlin's introduction both deal with artistic representations of Shakespeare the man: the first, Nick Craine's account of the making of his graphic-novel biography of Shakespeare, *Parchment of Light*; and the second, a history of the Sanders Portrait, believed to be the most authentic extant portrait of the playwright, as recounted by the portrait's current owner, Lloyd Sullivan. Craine's brief essay, accompanied by sample drawings from his text, discusses the graphic novel as the ideal format for a Shakespeare biography because of the blending of 'popular culture' and 'high art' of which Shakespeare was an undisputed master and that the genre of the graphic novel also entails. Sullivan's essay discusses empirical and scientific analyses of the Sanders Portrait meant to prove its authenticity, as well as how the portrait came into the possession of his family.

It is the plays and modern Canadian readers' reimaginings of them, however, that are the focus of the remainder of the book. Dawn Matheson's "Tongues in Trees" discusses her work teaching Shakespeare to adult literacy students, eight of whom were recorded for the exhibition, each reciting a favourite passage. The students who participated in Matheson's project chose their particular speeches for various reasons, but primarily because each represented, to its respective reader, a triumph over personal adversities: "With each exploration of Shakespeare's monologues, they responded, 'been

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<sup>3</sup> Fischlin eds., *Shakespeare*, 6.

there' and 'got through that'."<sup>4</sup> Pat Morden offers a history of theatrical design at the Stratford Festival Theatre, probably the best-known venue for Shakespearean productions in Canada; and Djanet Sears' delightfully unconventional essay on the creation of her play *Harlem Duet*, an adaptation of *Othello* set in inner-city New York, illustrates the transformation of the essay form as academic discourse as well as the transformation of the play as cultural artifact.

The essay that is central to the book, both physically and figuratively, is Pat Flood's "Possible Worlds: Designing for Shakespeare in Canada." This informative and beautifully illustrated essay not only examines and presents the broad spectrum of Shakespearean set and costume designs in Canadian productions, but also calls attention to a key idea behind adaptation: the creation of one possible world (in this case, a production) out of the raw materials of another (the play text). The designs show the vast array of possibilities for Shakespearean productions: from historically-informed recreations of the times and places mentioned in the plays to farther-ranging, cross-cultural designs influenced by, among others, Native Canadian and African designs. The illustrations to the essay also expose the reader to various techniques of theatrical design "rarely seen outside of archival collections."<sup>5</sup>

Sorouja Moll's essay on her play "girlswork," written under Fischlin's supervision, hearkens back to his definition of adaptation as "anything you can get away with" and offers a few definitions of her own: "Adaptation is process....disobedient....blasphemous....what we know – with a surprise."<sup>6</sup> Moll's play, reprinted as part of the essay, features a conversation among the female characters of *Romeo and Juliet*, breaking them out of their constrained positions in Shakespeare's original text to provide voices denied to them in the

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<sup>4</sup> Fischlin eds., *Shakespeare*, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Fischlin eds., *Shakespeare*, 86.

<sup>6</sup> Fischlin eds., *Shakespeare*, 93-94.

original. Moll's reinterpretation of these characters against the backdrops of English literature and Canadian popular culture demonstrates her statement later in the essay that "Adaptation can both destroy again and heal again."<sup>7</sup>

The three essays following Moll's are clear demonstrations of the simultaneous destructive and therapeutic powers of adaptation identified in her essay: Leonore Lieblein's "Pourquoi Shakespeare?" offers a history of French-Canadian productions of the plays; while Yvette Nolan's *Julius Caesar: Adapted to Death* and Marion Gruner's "What Means All This Shouting?" both examine a single cross-cultural adaptation: *Death of a Chief*, an Aboriginal version of *Julius Caesar* that at the time of publication of this book is still a work in progress. The principal focus in Lieblein's essay is on Québécois productions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially those that were produced during the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s as acts of resistance to English cultural domination using English literary forms vividly translated and transposed. In many ways these adaptations also helped to define Quebec against its French heritage as well as against its English influence, both in the use specifically of Québécois French as the language of translation and in its use of English literary forms to define a French-speaking society. Nolan's essay discusses the appeal of *Julius Caesar* to Native Canadian audiences as a play "about band politics"<sup>8</sup> and her decision to cast actresses in many of the male roles, thus breaking down gender boundaries as well as racial ones. Marion Gruner, co-director of a film on Nolan's production, further discusses the cultural concerns expressed as "First Nations artists...[turn] the canon on its head to explore the realities of their communities in complex ways,"<sup>9</sup> beginning from the fact that Shakespeare and British culture in general were historically used as instruments of colonial repression, yet displaying genuine respect and admiration for the playwright and his work.

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<sup>7</sup> Fischlin eds., *Shakespeare*, 93.

<sup>8</sup> Fischlin eds., *Shakespeare*, 112.

<sup>9</sup> Fischlin eds., *Shakespeare*, 116.

The last three essays return to artistic depictions of Shakespeare, but where the book began with portraits of the man, it ends with representations of his works and themes. Lorne Bruce and Lorna Rourke provide a brief outline of the University of Guelph's collection of Shakespearean theatrical designs from every aspect of the dramatic process. Judith Nasby's essay "Finding Shakespeare in Contemporary Portraiture" reveals the often-hidden Shakespearean themes in portraits and abstract works commissioned for the exhibition. At first glance many do not look recognizably 'Shakespearean' at all; however, these artworks, many of which are reproduced in the book, reveal yet more ways in which Shakespeare's life, times, works, and themes can inspire creative and far-ranging reinterpretations. The final essay in the book is Jim Hunt's examination of anamorphic art, a popular art form in Shakespeare's time as well as in our own, in which distortions of perspective are used to encode hidden images and, often, messages within a work of art. The book's final image, on the last page of Hunt's essay, is an anamorphic recreation of the Sanders Portrait of Shakespeare, designed for viewing as a reflection in a cylindrical mirror. It is a fitting final image for this book: the essays and the artworks described in those essays demonstrate, as this image does, how altering one's perspective on a familiar work leads us to see not only that work, but our own culture and that in which the work originated, in new and different ways.

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