

In Memory of David Fennario (1947-2023)

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How can I remember my favourite playwright? When Elizabeth Johansen, David's wife, wrote to me the sad news, I painfully realised that the wheelchair warrior's struggle was over. And yet, he had never given up, until the end. A lifelong battle to become an artist and show to the world that a proletarian from a working-class English-speaking neighbourhood in Francophone Montréal, Canada, had a lot to say about what theatre should be and which characters should come to life.

Many are the achievements of this gifted author, foremost is *Balconville* (1979), a "play, produced the world over, [that] has come to symbolize a time and place in Montréal history", as Alison Darcy, Maurice Podbrey's daughter, said on the 50th anniversary of its premiere at the fabled Centaur Theatre. Crystal clear was David's dramaturgic choice of a technique from the start: he privileged an "anti-illusionary style of performance and script", while he summarised his message as "my celebration of resistance from the ground up".

Bilingualism as the essence of Pointe-Saint-Charles, the mythical/real locus of David's epic/Brechtian reversal of the colonial pyramid, with the Catholic *les peasoups* confronting the Protestant Anglos in the rundown apartment building where they all have to live, spending their summer "on balconies". The canteen near the docks on the river where *Joe Beef* (1991) organises the workers on strike; McGill University as the stage where the Dead Founding Fathers of the Canadian Anglophone past are symbolically put on trial by a choral assembly of characters, like the Indian servant girl, Nati Mascou,



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stabbed to death by a powerful Scottish merchant, a crime covered up by *Doctor Thomas Neill Cream* (1993), whose career in evil terminates in Victorian England as a Jack the Ripper suspect.

David's art becomes complete and eerily wonderful in *The Death of René Lévesque* (2002), where five characters impersonate the rising hope and the sweltering fall of an utopia, a socialist and democratic enclave in North America, a dream that is shattered as soon as the idiosyncratic René enters into "the lions' den" with his blue wallabies and the eternal cigarette butt on his lips, speaking a dirty language that challenges English=US hegemony.

Very close is the link between David and Italy, through the plays I have translated and the books I have written on his political theatre, two are the trips in the late 1990s he made to Rome and Venice to present and witness some of his work being rehearsed by Italian actors on stage. *Balconville*, in my translation, was performed with *Quartieri dell'Arte* and Gian Maria Cervo in Caprarola in 2005, Giulio Marra had *Joe Beef* in his translation performed at Teatro Goldoni in Venice in 2000, defining it "un'opera artisticamente esemplare" (an exemplary work of art).

But David was much more than all of this, a militant and an activist for social change, and as such he took no easy byways to make the audience remember the terrifyingly unequal and discriminatory world we live in. His dialogues are powerful, raw and gritty, spoken by unsubmitive subjects who want to deliberately shock the public into awareness. In *Bolsheviki* (2012), WWI veteran Rosie Rollins recalls when - coming from Griffintown slum where everything "stunk of beans" - he was sent to Flanders where hell on earth took the shape of a trench: "That's a trench?... looks like ditches like the kind ya dug for a sewer pipe only there was no pipe, just the sewer up to the knees and - move on - MOVE ON-ON - ... ". Soon Rosie notices that the troop "sitting out in the rain" - "nose cold ears cold feet cold dicks cold" - are neatly separated from "the officers nice and dry in the deep dugout", and when francophone union agitator Rummie Robidou joins in speaking his "hostie de tabarnac de crises de câlce de Français", a new awareness hits the audience like a punch in the stomach:

Yeah, yeah, Vimy-fucking-Ridge. I was there. 'Birth of a Nation' they called it on TV, but I didn't see nobody getting born, just a lot of people dying so we could sit there on top of another shithole of mud with Captain Rutherford still pushing for that DSO or the MC or the MCB or the YMCA with Triangles ... just give him a fucking medal, will ya?...

For all his honest anti-Imperialistic, anti-colonial, anti-bourgeois, anti-mimetic, brilliantly bilingual theatre, David Fennario received

very little recognition from the academic world, and so did I. Still, the Québécois love him, and a little piece of Italy mourns the loss of a genial author of our times.

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