Chapter 4

Cultural Expressions of Difference: A Short History of Newfoundland Theatrical Performance

The roots of the Stranger theme in the theatrical performance history of the island of Newfoundland can be traced back through parallel lines of development, roughly divided into urban and rural traditions. In a small population of homogeneous ancestry, overlaps between the two traditions occur, but nevertheless some insight may be gained through this initial delineation.

Newfoundland's urban theatre tradition is recognizably British in origin and orientation, featuring a history of dedicated or adapted facilities, established scripts and a strict separation of performer and spectator. In contrast the theatrical tradition of the outports is rooted in British and Irish folk culture, utilizes non-dedicated facilities, and consistently, throughout its development, blurs the lines between performer and spectator. This last distinction bears to some degree upon ideas of the Stranger and the Necessary Outsider in local culture.

Elements of theatrical performance can be traced to the account of Captain Edward Haies' report, published in Hakluyt's *The Principall Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589), which refers to the presence of "Morris dancers, Hobby horsse and Maylike conceits to delight the savage people" on board the Golden Hind, the ship Haies piloted in the expedition led by Sir Humphrey Gilbert to Newfoundland in 1583 (qtd. in Gardner "Analytic" 114-5). For the two hundred and twenty-five years which follow there are no available records of theatrical

performance. Based on the evidence of oral accounts in the outports and references to the practice of mummering as a tradition by 1861, it is plausible to surmise that mummering took place during all or part of this period.

After 1800 the degree of activity increased both in St. John's and in the outports, as population began its first modest swell. The institutional presence in the capital contributed to the form of its theatre, though the nascent Newfoundland theatre cannot itself be said to be institutional. The strongly pro-British presence of an emerging merchant class, and the presence of the Crown in the form of the Governor and elected legislators, created a colonial version of a small British city and within this, the context for a colonial model of theatre.

In post-colonial discourse, arguments rage regarding the appropriateness of using *any* element of colonial culture in the development of indigenous cultural expression. It can be argued, however, that cultural independence is achieved by confronting the colonialist influence through the appropriation of its methods of discourse; for example, by using the language of the colonial culture in new and distinct ways, or by creating a discursive environment which focuses on themes particular to the emerging national culture, with some alteration in inherited structural forms. In Newfoundland both of these approaches can be found within the emerging use of a regional dialect, employed by a secondary character in Grace Butt's *The Road Through Melton* in 1945, and more notably in the early 1950s with the success of Ted Russell's *The Holdin' Ground*. By incorporating folk and popular forms, cultural expression in a settler society transforms from an inherited and derivative form to one that acquires elements of local ownership.

4.1 Mummering and Strangeness: Three Aspects

It is unknown how long mummering has been practised in Newfoundland. Chris Brookes, the co-founder of the Mummers Troupe, argues for its presence in the lives of the second wave of European settlers in the sixteenth century, but this remains conjecture (23). Its origins are similarly unclear, though with respect to its practice in Newfoundland it is evident that mummering arrived with the West Country and Irish settlers; there is no alternative demographic thesis to pursue. This would indicate that the folk ritual was present in Newfoundland life perhaps as early as 1700. It can be surmised that mummering was prevalent by the 1720s, when the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel began to send out missionaries to counteract the godless influence mummering would have represented to such an institution. This informal performance activity likely predates "official" theatrical activity in St. John's by at least eighty years.

Mummering takes several forms, as described by Herbert Halpert in the social anthropology text *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland*. All these forms share the following commonalities: individuals of the community disguise themselves in grotesque costumes, usually of the opposite sex, and confront other community residents, in their houses or on the street, during the traditional Christian holiday of Christmas (26 December to 6 January). Often, but not always, the focus of the interaction involves the guessing of the true identity of the mummer, who may perform a signature dance or song, or answer questions in an oblique manner with a disguised voice. Thus the central feature of mummering is the familiar (community residents) made Strange (into mummers), and rendered familiar again, all taking place within a controlled environment, that is, the social context of the community.

For a specific, agreed-upon period of time, Insiders who are not typically noticed within a community become noticeable, and individuals of note (should they choose to participate as mummers or receive the mummers in their homes) are temporarily deprived of their community status. Shorn of their gender identification and the history and deeds associated with their personage, mummers become Strangers. This process takes place with the consensual agreement of the community and within its borders. It therefore represents a sanctioned exception to its norms. The aspect of the Strange is successfully neutralized and the community's demarcations of Strangeness are reinforced.

In his typology Halpert enumerates three types of mummering, in particular, which bear upon future forms of theatre performance in Newfoundland. The first type is based around the performance of a text or performance script, called the Mummers' Play or Hero-combat play (57). A group of mummers demand entrance to a dwelling. Their arrival may involve the ingressive voicing of a ritual phrase, "Any mummers allowed in?" If invited to enter, the leader of the mummers, usually the Presenter or the individual playing the King, demands that a space be cleared for the performance. The performer-spectator boundaries of this performance space will be transgressed throughout the performance, just as the establishing of the space itself has broken the sanctity of the familial home.

The characters of the play introduce themselves or are introduced by the Presenter, one after the other. This naming process possesses significance in the context of otherness; the mummers are *Strangers*, but the process of demystification of that status has begun. The characters may then increase this sense of familiarity by *vaunting*, telling something of their background in boastful terms. Combat ensues between the two

antagonists, typically King George and the Turkish Knight, and one or the other is wounded and falls. The Presenter (or sometimes the victor) laments the terrible deed and calls for a doctor. A self-aggrandizing Doctor steps forward and initiates comic argument over his fee. The exchange recalls those of the *dottore* character in the Commedia dell' arte. At this point audience members may be conscripted into performance roles, and direct address is often employed. In the *regeneration* scene which follows, the wounded combatant is revived. Calm and order have been restored, and the house may once again be left in peace. The Strangers have been identified and the threat they represent has been neutralized. After more comedic interaction with the audience, the play ends with one of the performers taking up a collection, and a parting song or instrumental tune by the Mummers.

A second form of mummering which can be linked to modern Newfoundland performance practice, and its accompanying use of the Stranger figure, is that of the "Informal" or "House" visit. According to accounts gathered in outport communities across the island in the 1960s by social ethnographers, the House Visit was considered a tradition in most outports. The House Visit involves mummering, without use of the Hero-combat form, but still within an indoor setting. Mummers enter, having been invited in after knocking and perhaps announcing their presence. The door knock employed by mummers represents a powerful symbol in tightly-knit outport communities, where typically only those unfamiliar with the people Inside – Strangers – employ a knock.

One example of this form of demarcation is found in Ted Russell's *The Holding' Ground*, first produced for radio in 1954:

Sound effects: entry and door closing.

LIZ: Oh, it's Joe Irwin. Good evenin' Skipper Joe.

JOE: Evenin' Grandma. Evenin' Grampa. Oh. Sorry. I didn't know you were havin' supper.

BEN: That's all right boy. Come. Sit in and have some. (13)

The knock employed by mummers adds to the signification of their Stranger status, heightening the effect of their appearance, and increasing the need, once having entered, for the hosts to initiate the demystification process. The role of the hosting family is to ask questions, in an attempt to guess the identity of each mummer and render them familiar once more. The Mummers do not reveal their identity unless it is guessed, although they can answer questions (or choose not to), dance their "special step" while dancing, or provide other clues. Their behaviour in the house may range from still and silent to absolutely uninhibited. In each case the purpose is to guess the identity of the Strangers and demystify them. If they cannot be identified, they soon depart. As noted, the twelve days' ritual functions within the community as a release of social tensions through the inversion of status roles and the elimination of established identity. Thus a Transgressive Insider may, for the duration of the Christmas period, enjoy a kind of parole from the crimes he or she is perceived to have committed, and, through approved performance of the mumming ritual, enact a form of remediation with the object of regaining unqualified Insider status.

A third form of mummering, the "Informal Outdoor Movement", also plays a role in the evolution of modern performance forms and dynamics in Newfoundland. Groups of mummers, usually close in age, rove from house to house without entering,

occasionally bursting into song or dancing. In between house calls they may accost people on the roads. This informal march or "parade" of the mummers forms a possible link to the modern day performance of the pageant, a mobile historical tour popularized by the Summer in the Bight Festival and first created in the 1970s by Grace Butt, whose *Newfoundland Pageant* toured throughout the province in 1974.

Distinctions between professional and amateur practice in Newfoundland theatre have not always been clear, marked by performers who work in both spheres and, until the 1980s, the absence of professional theatre training programmes on the island. This may be seen as an outgrowth of the mentality which governed the practice of mummering, which functioned for years as a form of cultural expression in less formalized or evolving communities. The performer-spectator relationship was essentially egalitarian; performers were ordinary members of the community who might take the role of spectators (hosts) the following evening. Many people, accustomed to performing at informal "kitchen parties", possessed excellent skills in singing, fiddling, and dancing. The need to make and sustain contact with such an audience of peers, through such elements as direct address, episodic and non-narrative elements such as singing and dancing, and the blurring of performance boundaries, is no longer a predominant aspect of Newfoundland theatre, but remains within the performative cortex of its artists. This intimate relationship, and the various means employed within it, may offer some explanation as to why more conventional—and formal—institutional forms, such as the Canadian professional regional theatre model, have struggled to achieve a stable presence within Newfoundland society.

4.2 Necessary Outsiders and Performance: The Community Concert

The roots of the performance medium known as the community concert cannot be traced with certainty. The concert incorporates a wide variety of pre-existing aspects of cultural expression: song, recitation of established texts, and a form of what is now called sketch comedy, based on local contemporaneous events. As such, the concert can be hypothesized as having existed in outport culture nearly as far back as the establishment of the outports themselves. The practice became more clearly identifiable as a distinct form, however, in the mid- to late 19th century. Organizations such as fraternal lodges sought to contribute to the cultural life of their communities and to help the struggling families who relied on the fishery and the local merchant.

The concert also served the intangible but significant need to provide a forum for the gathering and promotion of shared values. While mummering appears to have remained popular in the outports even after the legal ban enacted in 1861, the organization and performance of the community concert represents an attempt at a more orderly and regulated form of entertainment. Concerts often stressed, in some of the material used, the particular values and didactic intent of the organizations sponsoring the performance. As efforts increased on the part of competing religions to establish proprietary presences in communities, and the first steps were achieved at bringing basic levels of education to the outports, there arose a small educated class. The organizational requirements of the community concert fell within the range of skills offered by this sub-group of individuals. These two institutional presences—religious and educational—played a major part in the success of the community concert. Church halls often served as

the venues for this activity, and schoolteachers were often drafted to organize the concert and gather the material needed.[1]

There are similarities in the social function of mummering and the concert. Status inversion features in both forms, more noticeably in the costuming and antics of the mummers, but also present in community performances in the form of skits and songs that poked fun at community members. Both forms signaled a temporary release from the toil of working life in the communities, an opportunity to gather informally, and to reinforce the notion of the community's identity and its viability as an entity. Another similarity lies in terms of the sustained personal investment required by community members in the execution of these activities.

A distinction between mummering and the concert, within the terms of reference used in this dissertation, involves the participation of Necessary Outsiders. Preachers and teachers were likely to be new arrivals to the community, or perhaps to be a returning voluntary Exile. A person identified primarily through the exercise of these two professions would be considered a Necessary Outsider, that is, an Insider who has abrogated his or her status through voluntary Exile (in the case of the returning local resident), or a Stranger who is accorded a level of mitigating status (in the case of teachers or pastors of non-local ancestry).While it is plausible that such persons of mediated status as teachers and parsons may have participated as mummers over the twelve days of Christmas, their position, within the rubric of the community concert, is more clearly integral. In helping to organize and carry out a community concert, both of these Necessary Outsiders perform a mitigating function with at least the subconscious

objective of increasing the balance of social currency in their dyadic account and, in the long run, perhaps facilitating a transition from Necessary Outsider to Insider.

As a community-centred activity, the concert represents a clear advantage over the practice of mummering. While mummering played a role in social regulation, and its performance would be considered a community tradition, the variety format of concerts provided more flexibility in the manner in which they could educate a community in its traditions and practices. The form of the Mummers Play which has survived demonstrates to some degree a reassuring continuity in its practice. A group of mummers might comprise different community members each night, and with each new Christmas the cast and sequence of actions would certainly vary. By virtue of their disguise, however, the mummers remained essentially the same..

A key function within the community concert was that performed by the Master of Ceremonies, or "Chairman". Ches Skinner notes that this role was generally performed by a well-known community member, that is, an Insider, rather than a Necessary Outsider such as the schoolteacher. The ability of the Master of Ceremonies to link the various episodes of the concert together, through both introduction and repartee, and to reiterate, when necessary, the function of the concert itself as a community-building activity, requires an Insider with established community ties and a knowledge of the daily interaction between individuals that a Necessary Outsider might not possess. The importance of this role is underlined by the intimacy of the performance. The "stage" could be anything from a raised dais at a community hall to a series of wooden desks pushed together in a classroom (Skinner 99). Even halls built with concerts in mind were not large, and the relationship between spectator and performer remained intimate. A

performer who forgot the lines to a song or a sketch might be called back and given a second chance. “Aunt” or “Uncle” characters telling tales replete with local references would interact directly with spectators. The Chairman of the show had as one of his main functions the reining-in of an often rowdy audience (110).[2]

While some disorder was tolerated, and perhaps expected, the community concert, like mummering, was a socially reifying activity. No challenge was made to existing orthodoxy; beliefs and traditions were celebrated, and new legends and histories invented. Strangers remained a fundamental part of this identifying process, mentioned in cautionary terms in poems and recitations, and through the vicarious Strangeness of the acting process. An approving spectator might note that a performer was “not acting like himself” (194). Respected citizens took their turn on stage and served as the butt of raucous humour (180). Gender switching, as with mummering, was typical, with an accent on broad-based caricature.

The tone and content of a concert was often determined by its sponsors. The most useful spaces for a performance in a town were the halls owned by the church, the school, or one of the fraternal lodges. Many communities were divided along sectarian lines, or isolated from neighbouring communities. An “Orange Lodge Concert” would feature English folk-songs and, if the local Protestant church was involved, “hymns and dialogues with a didactic intent” (21). The “Catholic concert”, so advertised as to ensure the appropriate audience, featured Irish songs. Groups like the Society of United Fishermen might be able to gather a more denominationally-mixed crowd.

The primary elements of the concert were music and text. *Dialogues*, often purchased by mail-order from publishers in the United States, were short dramatic scripts

for two or more actors (105). Sometimes entire plays would be staged, but this was less practical in many respects. Within this amateur tradition are therefore found what might be regarded as both conservative and subversive approaches to the sanctity of text. While the stage directions might be followed assiduously, the text was often adumbrated or adulterated to include local issues. The dialogue was the most formal aspect of the performance. Although its established structure demanded prior rehearsal and some form of adherence to the text and stage directions, the dialogue may be regarded as liberating in the same way that mummering presented community members in roles demonstrably different than those of their daily lives.

The oral traditions of the community, celebrated in *recitations* and sketches, were a popular and accessible feature of concert presentations. A recitation, sometimes referred to as a monologue, might make use of a published poem, but more often it promoted the specialized verbal and narrative skills of a community member. The Newfoundland recitation remains an integral part of community life in smaller outports, and has been made famous by such storytellers as Ray Guy and the *Pigeon Inlet* stories of the radio broadcasts of Ted Russell featuring the character of Uncle Mose.

A third component of the community concert was musical in nature, involving tunes played on fiddles, spoons, and accordion, or songs. The practical aspect of the musical component was that it could be inserted into a concert programme on the spot when needed (128). Every house in an outport had its repertoire of songs ready to be sung at public at gatherings. A spectator could become a performer simply upon having been invited to “sing us a song” by the Presenter.

The lighting did not differentiate the performance space from the spectator space. The entirety of a hall might be used for different aspects of presentation, and there was often no separation made between performer and spectator, and therefore no true "neutral" space. The paraphernalia of the host organization was displayed prominently through the hall (146). In contributing to a tradition featuring an absence of a bordered or neutral zone, the concert helped to create a set of receptive expectations which may be glimpsed in the recent work of Newfoundland theatres such as the Gros Morne Theatre Festival and Rising Tide Theatre.

4.3 Amateur Theatre in St. John's, 1806 – 1949

The first record of more formal theatrical activity in Newfoundland involves a visiting quartet of actors from Québec in 1806. Governor Gower issued a decree permitting their performance in St. John's "as long as they shall continue to conduct themselves in an orderly and decent manner" (CO 199/46: ff112). The centuries-old stereotype of the actor as a rogue and vagabond—a Stranger—appears to have been prevalent in the government's thinking at the time. As such, the desire to regulate the appearance of such Strangers would have seemed a natural exercise of the Governor's responsibilities.

Further evidence of activity appears in 1817. The empty premises of Row's, a Water Street business, were utilized for a charity performance of *The Fair Penitent* on March 18, and on April 8 there followed a performance at the same venue, now called

"Theatre St. John's", of a melodrama, *Point of Honour*, followed by a play, evidently a comedy, entitled *Bon Ton, or Life Without Stairs* (O'Neill 169).

These performances were mounted by the officers and crew of His Majesty's Navy, and organized by the Society for Improving Conditions of the Poor in St. John's. Even though the actress Mary Ormsby had been a member of the Ormsby troupe which had visited in 1806, establishing a precedent for female performers, women did not feature in these performances; the sailors essayed both women's and men's roles. The performances appear to have been successful, as the colonial form of theatre was growing in popularity by 1818 (170). One of St. John's many Great Fires appears to have wiped out the Row premises in that year, or at least damaged it. A contemporary document, Capt. Elliot's *Naval Sketches*, suggests that a new theatre structure arose from the ashes of the fire:

> The metropolis not being able to boast of even a barn, which from time immemorial has been conceded, by even saintly magistrates, as the privileged tenement of heroes of the sock and buskin, it became necessary that a 'regular built' (for so they termed it) theatre should be erected on the shores by the sons of the sea, the expenses of which, including decorations, scenery, stoves, property, puffing, wigs, wardrobe, lights, scene-shifters, theatrical tailors, and midshipmen's milliners, were entirely defrayed out of the profits of the first month's performances. (30)

The new Responsible Government adopted its first laws regulating audience behaviour in 1824 (GN/PANL 1824 1:116). Cheering or calling out the names of the performers was cause for expulsion or for the performance to be stopped. Shouted requests would not be entertained for songs, and children would be charged for attendance. The implicit objectives of such regulations are in opposition to the spectator-

performer relationship which had already evolved in the outports. There, at concerts and Times, the success of a "show" was adjudged to some degree by the boisterousness of the spectators and their proprietary call-and-response relationship with the performers. At a community concert in a small outport all were likely to be Insiders or at least known to each other. In the St. John's of 1823 the likelihood of a spectator having any true acquaintance with a performer was considerably less.

Formal theatrical performance remained confined, for the most part, to the capital throughout the 19th century, creating a second, parallel line of development.[3] By the 1880s the formal divergence of conventional theatre in St. John's and popular, folk-based forms of performance in then outports was rendered vividly through the musical parodies of street balladeer Johnny Burke. Burke authored hundreds of songs, composed satirical verses based on local productions, and appropriated music from the popular offerings of the day as well as Irish and English folk tunes. Burke's work marks an important shift in the development of Newfoundland theatre, from the unquestioned urban acceptance of colonial material to a form of localized appropriation already in practice in the outports. In 1880 he took a well-known local incident, the resistance of housewives in Foxtrap to the building of the railway through their community, and featured it in *The Battle of Foxtrap*. Colonial work became local work: *The Runaway Girl* became *The Runaway Girl From Fogo*; *The Geisha* became *The Topsail Geisha* (Major 344).

In the undeveloped micro-community of St. John's theatre, Burke represented a bridging element. His work can be seen as assisting a transformation in perspective, as work written outside Newfoundland, performed in the accent of the colonizing entity, became Strange and local versions appropriated the Inside. This process would not have

been evident at the time, and took place over a much longer period. Settler-based Newfoundland theatre cannot be said to exist in a truly distinctive form until the early 1970s. Nevertheless, Burke represents a blending of outport and urban approaches to the performance of theatre which is distinctively homegrown in orientation. *The Topsail Geisha* opened at the T.A. Hall in 1897 and its success outstripped its progenitor. The Stranger had begun to move Inside. Burke's influence in present-day theatre in Newfoundland far surpasses that of the colonial theatre of his time. His life and influence are celebrated in the 1976 Mummers Troupe production *The Bard of Prescott Street*.

The playwright Grace Butt may be said to represent a bridging influence as well, though where Burke's work was profoundly populist in orientation Butt's inclinations were guided by the middle-class sensibility of the St. John's bourgeoisie. The St. John's Players, an amateur theatre organization founded by Butt in 1937, promoted communitarian values in its practices which extended the company's influence beyond the practice of providing entertainment in colonial form. Despite the company's resolutely British orientation in selecting and producing plays, Butt still may be considered something of a pioneer. She was the leader and driving force behind the innovations of the most popular theatre organization in the largest city in Newfoundland.

The group's high-profile community presence had the effect of bringing a new generation of spectators into the theatre. Moreover, the St. John's Players produced plays written by Newfoundlanders—in 1940, a one-act play entitled *Proud Kate Sullivan* by F.R. Emerson, followed by *The Road Through Melton,* written by Butt herself, produced in 1945. *The Road Through Melton* ranks as a signal event in Newfoundland's theatre history. Although the play itself is derivative of Rattigan in form and style, its setting is a

Newfoundland outport, and its characters are Newfoundlanders. The play's Strangers come primarily from beyond the borders of the community, but there is a recognition that Strangeness can be found within the community polity as well. Furthermore, the play's themes of protecting community values from the predations of interlopers and weak (Transgressing) Insiders remain resonant in a context where cultural survival continues to be a matter of public discourse.

An integral part of the theatre scene in St. John's until the early 1970s, the St. John's Players formed a bridge linking colonial theatre, the prototheatre of the outports, and the post-1972 generation which can be said to have founded the indigenous professional Newfoundland theatre tradition.

4.3.1 Newfoundland and the Dominion Drama Festival, 1950 – 1972: the Stranger-Insider dynamic in transition

The advent of Confederation brought Newfoundland into a new macro-community, as one of ten provinces in the Canadian federation. As a provincial government, the region worked within the parameters of federal-provincial responsibilities established under the British North America Act of 1867. While political integration was established quickly under the Smallwood government, social integration remained a more elusive prospect. The fact of Newfoundland's geographical isolation from the centres of urban Canadian society and its distinctive history ensured that, to some degree, the region's culture would remain a product of its insularity. Some elements of cultural practice were, however, quickly assimilated and welcomed. One of these was the Dominion Drama Festival and its regional competitions. The thriving amateur theatre

scene in Corner Brook, Grand Falls, Gander, and St. John's which developed in the 1950s and 1960s was largely due to the presence of regional competitions, and the local coverage and approbation they engendered.

The adjudicators for the Newfoundland Regional Drama Festival were experienced British and Canadian professional artists. Generally they attempted to be gracious and constructive in their remarks to each cast, which were given immediately after the performance, before the public. They did not shy away from blunt assessments, however, which were dutifully reported in the papers the next day.

David Gardner served as adjudicator in 1961. A well-known actor, later head of the Canada Council theatre section, and a cultural nationalist, he took strong issue with the formulaic programming of Newfoundland's regional drama festival. No adjudicator prior to Gardner had advocated for the inclusion of Newfoundland (or Canadian) plays into the drama festival. Reporter (and festival participant) Sylvia Wigh noted in her festival report in the St. John's *Telegram*:

> A great exponent of Canadian plays, Mr. Gardner said he would like to see more Canadian productions by amateur groups. "There are some very fine plays that would have a kinship with both audience and actors," he said. It was odd that few amateur players chose their own Canadian plays. He suggested the groups write the Dominion Drama Festival headquarters in Ottawa or the Canadian Theatre Centre, Montreal, for lists of such plays.[4] (CNS 13.03.001)

On Mar. 23 Gardner viewed *The Playboy of the Western World*, the latest in a string of Irish dramas presented by Neala Griffin and her Northcliffe Drama Club troupe. The Northcliffe club members were, at this point, royalty on the community theatre scene. The St. John's Players enjoyed the status of a longer lineage, but the Grand Falls

troupe were renowned as a result of their numerous winning entries under Griffin's direction in the 1950s. Gardner's reaction to the production was scathing. Sylvia Wigh's article in the St. John's *Telegram* noted it the following day:

> Mr. Gardner said the emotional value of the play had been missed by the cast… he was disappointed in the direction by seven time winner Neala Griffin. The singing poetry was missing from the production, the tempo was even, the costumes and settings were good. The settings looked rather too much like a stage scene, and he criticized a bedroom door which had been used for stage entrances….Individual actors came in for much criticism. (13.03.001)

The incident, seemingly trivial, excited editorial reaction and letters for a week afterward. This reaction serves as a marker where the end of colonial theatre's dominance in Newfoundland comes into view. Notice had been served that higher standards of originality and cultural integrity would be applied to local amateur work in future. That this was no misstatement on Gardner's part is clear from the entry he later published in the Canadian Encyclopedia on the Dominion Drama Festival: "[The Dominion Drama Festival] has been accused of perpetuating social and colonial values and retarding the evolution of the professional theatre that supplanted it" (612).

Cassie Brown, herself a writer and an active festival participant, noted Gardner's agenda in the *Daily News*:

> "Playboy" is a wonderful play, Mr. Gardner said, and he should have liked to have seen a Newfoundland play. He hoped to have the opportunity to read Mr. Red (*sic*) Russell's "The Holdin' Ground" before leaving the province. A Newfoundland play would not have sounded so alien to our ears.[5] (13.03.001)

A following editorial in the *Daily News* of Mar. 28 stated:

> In his summary on the last night of this year's Provincial Drama Festival, the adjudicator, David Gardner, conceded the existence of a great deal of talent but was severely critical of its employment. This comment related principally to the choice of plays…A national drama festival has as its aim the encouragement of artistic experimentation. But can the average Little Theatre conform to this aim? […] Mr. Gardner has raised the provocative question of whether this limited aim fulfils the whole purpose of the amateur theatre…The amateur theatre exists to give certain satisfaction to those who share in its work, to give scope for some experimentation with the special excitements and educational benefits that go with trying something new, and to give pleasure to those who form the audience. These aims may be better fulfilled by the avoidance of the unequal competitive influences that are part of entry into a national festival.
>
> […] There is no limit to the work that may be attempted. There is no reason, at all, why a theatrical group should disdain even an essay into the kind of burlesque of which Johnny Burke's "Cotton Patch" was an example. Ted Russell has provided some delightful and folkish character portrayals in his "Holdin' Ground". Grace Butt has written two plays of local interest…We could have more of all of this.
>
> The fact is that the Dominion Drama Festival may have produced a certain amount of special incentive on a competitive basis that may have impaired other and more important aspects of the amateur theatre … [6] (13.03.001)

That the spate of editorial umbrage which followed Gardner's criticisms influenced Mrs. Griffin and her many supporters is demonstrated by the fact that in 1962 the Northcliffe Drama Club submitted a new Ted Russell play, *Groundswell*.

In many ways, 1961 marks the beginning of a decline in the prominence of the community theatre movement in Newfoundland. The 1960s brought strong currents of cultural nationalism in both Newfoundland and Canada, culminating in the "all-Canadian" mandate of the Dominion Drama Festival of 1967, and with it the addition of several new voices to the Newfoundland theatre scene. Michael Cook had arrived on the island in late 1966 and garnered attention with his performance in *A Man For All Seasons* at the provincial drama festival, winning an award for best actor (CNS 180: 18.03.001). The next year he directed Gratien Gélinas' *Bouseille et les justes* in English. He also

sounded a clarion call in the *Evening Telegram:* "To give people of talent a play without guts is criminal."[7]

The occasion of the Canadian Centennial gave rise to a spate of Canadian plays, including pieces by James Reaney, Patricia Joudry, and local writers Ted Russell and Tom Cahill (19.01.001).[8] Cook was teaching in the extension programme at what is now Memorial University, and within months was creating a stir with articles, plays, and plans for a new theatre company devoted to Newfoundland works. In 1971 the "Open Group", featuring Clyde Rose, Richard Buehler, and a very young Robert Joy and Kevin Noble, presented Cook's vivid depiction of late 18th century St. John's life, *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust* in Corner Brook. His competition consisted of Pinter, Coward, and Robert Bolt. Though the production received strong notices and was hailed as a landmark event, it failed to win the best production award. Cook, and those who followed him, had outgrown the concept of the provincial drama festival.

4.4 Professional Theatre in St. John's, 1947-56

Before the rise of this independent theatre movement, there had been activity of a professional nature for a six-year period in the 1950s. The London Theatre Company represented in some ways the quintessential colonial Stranger presence in Newfoundland society. The core of the company first visited from England in 1947 with the touring Alexandra Players. The full company arrived, led by actor-manager Leslie Yeo in 1951. The company never used Newfoundland actors in any roles of consequence. In his memoir *A Thousand and One First Nights* (1998) Yeo states, "we also had to be wary of

large cast plays. Anything over twelve would call for local casting and there was no professional talent pool in St. John's in 1951" (117). While strictly speaking this was true, the statement betrays Yeo's lack of interest in developing one.

When looked at from the viewpoint of the British macro-community, the peripatetic troupe—they performed 107 *different productions* in just six seasons—had the appearance of consummate Insiders, welcomed in a subset of their home community for their evident expertise.[9] In the years following Confederation the British influence in Newfoundland had steadily diminished, as the British government withdrew from active participation in its affairs. The work of the London Players, as they were known, likely acted as a palliative to the not-inconsiderable number of British sympathizers who had voted against Confederation, and who now regarded themselves as an estranged micro-community.

Within this examination of the role of The London Theatre Company/London Players the intent is not to draw binary distinctions between purveyors of colonial fare and those supporting new, local work. In Newfoundland, these distinctions blurred in the late 1960s. The St. John's Players and the London Theatre Company contributed significantly to the development of a theatre audience in St. John's. The amateurs, through their appearances at the regional drama festivals, also performed this function in smaller urban centres across the island. In addition, the St. John's Players produced a base of actors and behind-the-scenes personnel. Although the conventional theatre's commitment to indigenous drama can best be described as intermittent—and in the case of the London Theatre Company, nonexistent—the two productions of plays by Grace Butt in the 1940s represent a tentative first step

necessary in the later fruition of such local work. That this intermediate stage perhaps retarded the development of local artists and work, by employing those who might otherwise have struck out on their own, is an attractive thesis but not a persuasive one. There is no record of any active attempt to establish a theatre company based upon Newfoundland plays and performers in the 1950s.

By contrast it can be argued that locally-produced professional work in fact required a context, something to react against which a later generation would define itself, at which point the older generation would choose either to cease their activity or to shift it to the new paradigm. The citizens who supported the London Players and the thriving community theatre scene in Newfoundland in the 1950s presumably did not intend to retard the development of a new home culture. It is more persuasive to argue that these avid theatre enthusiasts were responsible for the establishment of a new cultural paradigm, once its basic outline had been introduced. Evidence for this interpretation can be found in the contribution of the amateur Playmakers troupe in forming the core of Theatre Newfoundland Labrador's volunteer and audience base in the late 1970s. The professional company founded by Maxim Mazumdar was initially colonialist in orientation, but has since developed a closer affiliation with local writers and subject matter. Its core base of former amateur theatre enthusiasts surely have played a part in this shift in orientation.

The London Players manifested no such desire to alter their approach to programming or its attitude towards the development of local theatre artists. Some members of the company remained after its demise in mainland Canada—one, John Holmes, in Newfoundland. The brief period of its existence gives some indication of the

Strangeness of the company's presence: presumed Insiders welcomed into a community, who gradually lose their status as that community, and its criteria of belonging, transforms. This is not to say that the demise of the London Players was due to anything more than sheer exhaustion, after years of intense activity. Nevertheless the fact remains that despite their efforts professional theatre of a colonial type did not take root in the province, and the company remained in precarious financial straits from its first year until its last. While the indefatigable Yeo constantly promoted his theatre to St. John's crowds—it is notable that the company's tours were exclusively to the mainland and avoided outport Newfoundland—the company failed to undertake the grassroots development which might have led to a final victory for the colonial theatre model. For all its frantic activity, the Players never commissioned a Newfoundland play.[10] No new directors were trained at the company. No young local actors were given their first professional experience, even as apprentices. The legacy of Yeo's company—a tolerance for four day rehearsal periods, stock acting, actors who resided in the city for the season and then disappeared, and a tacit belief in the superiority of Mother Empire—was to leave no lasting mark on Newfoundland culture.

4.5 Theatre in Newfoundland, 1967 – 2002

By the year of the Canadian Centennial, the fabric of Newfoundland's theatre culture looked to have come apart at the seams. The Regional Drama Festival marked 1967 as a high point of activity and then began a rapid descent into cultural irrelevance. The single resident professional repertory company in the provincial capital had long since departed. Mummering had largely disappeared from the outports, existing at the

fringes of memory of the elder citizens interviewed by the anthropologists working for Memorial University's Folklore department. The community concert continued, though altered in form and significance by the advent of asphalt roads and television. The question was not who constituted the Insiders and the Outsiders of Newfoundland culture, but whether there was a Newfoundland culture at all.

Cultural nationalism, of the variety taking root in mainland Canada, had yet to flourish. The local vision was rent by a social and aesthetic crevasse separating town and bay. Premier Joseph Smallwood was a fervent Canadian nationalist who knew little about the theatre except that its lobby spaces provided opportunities for the promotion of local political initiatives. The theatre in this respect could function as a means to an end. Thus it is no surprise that the early achievements of Joseph Smallwood's government in the arts came in the form of large institutional structures, rather than support for the development of local art and artists. The Arts and Culture Centres constructed in St. John's, Gander, Corner Brook, Stephenville, and Grand Falls between 1967 and 1975 feature proscenium stages with an orchestra pit which adds to the distance between spectator and actor. The stages are too large to support the kind of small-cast work which is now, as then, a staple of Canadian theatre. Thus such stages have seldom figured in the plans of the growing indigenous theatre movement which sprung up in St. John's around 1970, made up of poorly funded artists whose plays typically featured small casts.

Smallwood's obsession with building monuments to his government's tenure had one salutary effect on the development of a theatre focused on, and performed by, the people of Newfoundland. His committed support of Memorial University created an environment where students of the late 1960s, aware of campus movements sweeping

North America, could meet, become politically aware, and organize. Much of the credit for the birth of Newfoundland's first indigenous professional theatre can be traced to individuals who taught or trained at Memorial, where the vision of a national theatre (albeit in what Canadians would call regional terms) found its first champions.

Out of this cauldron of nationalist and socialist thought came the Open Group, a company organized by the newly arrived Michael Cook with Richard Buehler and Clyde Rose. By 1971 the Open Group was producing in St. John's—the first "alternative" theatre in the region. The label is problematic because it implies the existence of an established mainstream professional theatre against which to define itself, such as occurred in Canadian regions at the same time. In this regard the London Theatre Company, already extinct for sixteen years, may ironically be assigned a contributive role in addition to its audience-building function. The Open Group's three productions of new plays by Cook—*Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust* in 1971, *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* in 1973, and *Jacob's Wake* in 1974—created, through their subsequent publication and Cook's growing celebrity, a groundswell of credibility for the emerging theatre culture of the province.

During this time, Chris Brookes returned from studies in the United States and participated in the Eastport Theatre Festival with his partner Lynn Lunde in 1971. Brookes represents the beginning of a new trend amongst Newfoundland's theatrical apprentices, that of actively seeking professional training, and in many cases seeking it as a voluntary Exile, in order to return bearing the influences of other cultures. Like the voluntary Exile Christopher Simms in *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*, who returns to take up a teaching post in his home village, Brookes' newly acquired expertise was not

universally welcomed. Cook, arriving three years before Brookes' return, had taken up a position just as dyadically tenuous, as a Stranger hired by an institution of higher learning. The fact that he did not endear himself to other cultural or political elites in the province, while choosing to write about issues of contemporary relevance in Newfoundland with passion and a measure of critical objectivity, effectively ensured that throughout his career as a writer Cook would constantly be in a state of transgression with one micro-community or another in Newfoundland.

By the fall of 1972, the Mummers Troupe came into existence, shortly followed by Dudley Cox's Newfoundland Travelling Theatre Company and CODCO in 1973. The founding of these companies represented a tide of momentum building in favour of an independent home-grown theatre scene. Throughout the 1970s there evolved in St. John's a style of theatrical performance, preparation, and structure which utilized aspects of both urban and rural traditions brought over by settlers and elements, such as collective creation, taken from other sources. This emerging Newfoundland performance style mixed broad comedy with truthful psychological realism, and added popular/epic techniques such as episodic narrative, direct address narration, songs, film and slide projections, visible costume and character changes and a blurring of physical boundaries between spectator and performer, combined with a disdain for the primacy or sanctity of text.

4.4.1 Strangers Allowed In? The Mummers Troupe of Newfoundland

From the beginning of his work with the Mummers Troupe, Chris Brookes states that one of his objectives was to find or create "an indigenous acting style" (45). Brookes canvassed young people eager to involve themselves in both theatre and the community and began to work eight hours a day, with week-end and evening workshops given for community members in Quidi Vidi, where the rehearsal space was located. Influenced by agit-prop and other forms of political theatre, the exercises used in Brookes' rehearsals were designed to create thinking actors who created with an awareness of the political implications of performance. The emphasis was on process. Brookes' work shares a close affinity with the contemporaneous work of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed and Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre, positioning itself in opposition to an "other"—the established cultural and governing elites of society. In essence, the Mummers' implicit intent was to render the predominant colonial narratives and performance style Strange, and to institute a new style and type of text, cobbled together from ethnographic sources, to take its place as a cultural Insider.

Brookes had learned, through George Story and members of the Folklore department at Memorial University, of the tradition of a Newfoundland Mummers Play, and was anxious to see if within it lay the seeds of an "indigenous" performance style.[11] His actors fanned out into outport communities to undertake the research necessary to bring the performance style back to life. They found a few surviving Newfoundlanders who

had lived during a time when mummering was a vital part of community life (46-7). The

first true convergence of rural and urban theatrical influences had begun.

The key to the Mummers Play, as noted, lies in its elimination of neutral space. There is no safety zone for spectator, no place to hide for the performer. The performance is raw, unrefined, bordering upon (and often tipping over into) the offensive and the invasive. One doesn't buy tickets to a performance of the Mummers' Play—in effect, one is ticketed. The performance comes to the spectator and determines the spectator's positioning within the performance matrix. Where the hilltop Arts and Culture Centres remained isolated symbols of a distant culture, the Mummers were performing in halls and on the streets. That the Mummers Troupe might ever have been considered foreign within the culture of Newfoundland theatre now seems odd, given the company's resolute commitment to the development of original work focused on the issues of daily life in the region. In retrospect, the Mummers, estranged from the traditional merchant-class supported theatre culture of St. John's, were, like their forebears of the same name, knocking at the door and demanding entrance to the houses of their own community.

The performance of the Mummers Play became the central element of the artistic life of the Mummers Troupe, a touchstone they would return to again and again each Christmas. The performances featured several talented young performers, including Donna Butt, but its playing style required nothing more than passionate commitment to the moment. The company soon began to move towards more complex forms of theatre, working from the exercises taught by Brookes. The collective theatre movement in Newfoundland was born with the company's production of *Newfoundland Night* in May 1973. Notable amongst the subversive elements of the production was the playing of the *Ode To Newfoundland*, a song sometimes considered to be the "national anthem" of

Newfoundland and one which can evoke a strong partisan response. The Mummers undermined this reflex nationalism by inter-cutting it with a tape of an old fisherman relating the tribulations of the truck system.

Newfoundland audiences were becoming accustomed to seeing their lives portrayed on stage, in a manner lacking the nostalgia of Ted Russell or the melodrama of Fred Emerson. This shift in tone to a keenly observant and unpatronizing approach is also evident in the work of Tom Cahill, a director and actor from the Corner Brook and St. John's theatre scenes whose adaptation of a Harold Horwood novel, *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*, appeared at the Dominion Drama Festival in 1967.

The Mummers' work is distinguished from that of Cahill, Horwood and Michael Cook, by their use of humour, an element often associated with the Newfoundland character. The Troupe's work is notable, beyond its self-conscious polemical tone and scathing depictions of capitalists and other exploiters, for its comedic style, a mixture of slapstick, music hall caricature and commedia *lazzi*. In 1973 they were joined on the independent theatre scene by the collective creation troupe CODCO, whose comedic sophistication, in relative terms, supplanted that of the Mummers as a cultural herald for the province and its people.

The subject matter of many of the best-known works of the Mummers is saturated with a sense of Insiders who have been marginalized or excluded from their rights and position within Newfoundland society. The reasons for this may be traced to Brookes' own experience as a returning voluntary Exile and cultural nationalist, a student of the political left who came home to a culture still firmly rooted in divisions based on class. There is also the fact that the Mummers worked outside the provincial capital and gained

what they regarded as useful, non-St. John's-oriented perspectives as a result. Two of the Mummers' most notable works were created, and first performed, in rural communities: *Buchans a Mining Town* and *Gros Mourn* contributed political documentation of the issues at play in these communities. In theatrical terms the productions are equally significant as examples of independent, indigenous theatre practiced beyond the boundaries of the provincial capital. The troupe's work on *Gros Mourn* was documented by Brookes in an article for *This Magazine* (Brookes 1974: 3-7), and later in his book *A Public Nuisance* (1988). *Buchans a Mining Town/Company Town* was documented by Alan Filewod in *Collective Encounters* (1987), establishing, along with scholarly interest in the work of Michael Cook, a critical acknowledgement of such pioneering work. For *Gros Mourn* the company members set up in the peninsula settlement of Sally's Cove to interview local residents, and turn their stories into transformative theatre.[12]

By 1974 Brookes was under pressure, at least in fiscal terms, to ally his company with the more conventional Newfoundland Travelling Theatre Company of Dudley Cox and the surging CODCO troupe. The Canada Council, having already dismissed them as an "alternate" theatre—and there is certainly merit to this term, if one ignores, as mentioned, the absence of any established theatre it is *alternate* to—now wished for these companies to form a triad organization that would administer a federal subvention. Cox, a schoolteacher with a far less radical (though no less sincerely committed) approach to theatre development, put his case in this way:

> I suggest that if one-third of Newfoundland theatre is presenting a carefully-conceived, adventurously and skillfully played theatre programme to schools, and the remaining two-thirds of the company is engaged in producing traditional proscenium theatre, with a cautious leaning towards indigenous works, then here

> is the way to begin professional theatre in Newfoundland. (Filewod, *Collective* 115)

Cox was overlooking the fact that professional theatre, by any definition bar that of federal funding, already existed in the province. His recommendations for a programme heavy on non-indigenous plays produced on conventional proscenium stages, so much at variance with the alternative work being done in Toronto at the same time, indicate a preference for the "old Inside"—a colonial theatre, to be enacted by the colonized rather than colonialists. It should be noted, however, that Cox's Travelling Theatre was in fact a significant incubator of Newfoundland theatre talent throughout its existence.

The production of *Buchans* in 1974 proved to be a watershed for the Mummers Troupe in many ways. The scale of the project, and the constant instability in company membership, forced Brookes to recruit cast members who were not Newfoundlanders. There is perhaps no clearer marker of Insider-Stranger status in micro-communities such as a theatre collective than that of dialects and accents. The issue has traditionally been a volatile one in Newfoundland, dating back to the sectarian conflicts of the 1700s and the fact that foreign accents, British, French, and Canadian, were associated with authority figures visiting the island to cure its ills or exploit its resources. As well, the company would be parachuting into the community of Buchans, a mining community in Newfoundland's interior, to interview the locals. Brookes notes that the company's Strangeness was an unavoidable issue:

> But with luck, I thought pragmatically, we might be able to make our "outsiderness" work like Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*: the "alienation effect". Placed in the right context, the cast's accents would distance Buchaneers from

> their reflected portraits onstage. This could encourage the audience to analyze what the play was saying about their community's history, instead of getting sucked into sentimental identification with character. (114)

A range of issues soon presented themselves. The mining company, having given permission for the Mummers to live and work on their premises, exercised tacit control over the content. The actors, though trained, more or less, in Brookes' approach, could not help identifying with the subjects they interviewed, lived, and ate with every day. Their characterizations became increasingly based on emotional or Insider identification rather than a critical or analytical ("Stranger") sensibility. Filewod notes that this led to a lack of "expressionistic content", and that "the implicit self-censorship of the process and the lack of political consensus resulted in a performance that was necessarily sentimental in its appeal" (125).

The miners were already politicized by the time the Mummers arrived, having endured two bitter strikes in the past three years. The Insider-Stranger issues in the community were starkly evident. Nevertheless, the Mummers struggled to find a coherent way to express what they were learning. The cast split over Brookes' working methods. Where in *Gros Mourn*, Filewod states, "the actors admitted their status as outsiders in the performance because of their overt intervention in a political crisis" (125), in Buchans the immediate crisis had passed and the goals were different. In doing the quotidian work of assimilating into the community, getting to know people and sharing their stories, the actors coöpted the world view of their characters. Brookes was left to provide critical perspective and to keep the show from sliding into sentimentality. Filewod, who documented the process, notes the Insider-Stranger tension which marked the

performance: "the final structure of *Buchans* is a synthesis of Brookes' tendency to think in terms of issues and political relations, and the actors' inclination towards the representation of sympathetic personalities" (127).

Brookes had been caught between theories of alienation and its practice. Though he was one of the few Newfoundlanders involved in the project, Brookes was identified as a Stranger by two different micro-communities: the community residents, which might have seemed inevitable, and members of his cast, who logically would have been expected to form a "home" micro-community, but who functioned instead as a circle of affiliation with much less unanimity of purpose.

Throughout the 1970s the Mummers weaved back and forth on a tortuous road of financial and infrastructural instability, but the provocations they created through works such as *Gros Mourn*, *Buchans*, *They Club Seals, Don't They?* and *I.W.A.* were entirely in keeping with the Stranger image Brookes cultivated. Under Brookes the Mummers could never be accused of being coöpted by the forces of bourgeois theatre. By the time the Mummers fractured in 1978, the battle for a homegrown Newfoundland theatre had been largely won. It is perhaps ironic that this was done at least partly through the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, which, as Brookes notes, began to dispense funding for local troupes at almost the same time that his application for touring funds for *They Club Seals* was denied (210). In essence the Ministry of Culture had bowed to the obvious; a homegrown theatre community had established itself. A victory had been achieved, however Pyrrhic it proved for the Mummers.

After relative success producing shows on the IWA Strike of 1959 and the life and career of Johnny Burke, amongst others, the Mummers produced the show they are

perhaps now remembered for most vividly, *They Club Seals, Don't They?* With *What's That Got To Do With The Price of Fish?* the troupe had toured Canada with a broadside depiction of the state of the fishing industry, a show critical of the Canadian role in the mismanagement of the fishery but devoid of any real animus. *Seals* represented something entirely different. In defending the Newfoundland seal hunt the Mummers positioned Canadians as Strangers, through their support of international organizations like Greenpeace which opposed the hunt. Few Canadians were likely persuaded to change their views, but the play is notable for its unapologetic and vigorous defense of the working outport fisherman. Though Brookes decries, in his description of the Mummers' break-up, the advent of a "simplistic political analysis" in its use of Newfoundland nationalism (170), productions such as *They Club Seals* run perilously close to that line.

Theatre companies, and individuals who followed the Mummers in Newfoundland—particularly those who have made use of the Mummers' eventual home, the LSPU Hall—owe a debt to the depth and scope of the Troupe's efforts to link theatre practice to the community, to bring theatre to all corners of the island, to bring the history of the island's people to life, and to train a young generation of theatre workers in a wealth of theatrical techniques which have entered the vocabulary of Newfoundland theatre.

4.4.2 CODCO, 1973 – 76: Laughing Your Guts Out With Total Strangers

Descriptions of the era of the 1970s in Newfoundland theatre cannot conclude without mention of the stage work of CODCO. The iconic status of the company's core members is well-deserved; each has made a fundamental contribution to Newfoundland theatre. CODCO's most famous members have become consummate Insiders in the contemporary theatre context of St. John's, as writers, producers and directors. Their emergence as cultural spokespersons began in Toronto, where their otherness was defined and acknowledged by Paul Thompson, then-Artistic Director of Theatre Passe Muraille. The first work associated with CODCO was produced in 1973 under the auspices of this alternative Toronto theatre. Cathy Jones, Greg Malone, Diane Olsen, Paul Sametz and Mary Walsh had already gained experience in the nascent Newfoundland theatre scene with Dudley Cox and the Newfoundland Travelling Theatre Company. All had left for Toronto to further their careers, a process of "goin' down the road" which had never occurred on this scale before in Newfoundland theatre.[13]

Thompson auditioned Olsen and Sexton for *Them Donnellys* (Peters 1992: xi). He immediately noticed their *otherness*; they could not be considered "Canadian" actors. Encouraged by a grant from Thompson, the two Newfoundlanders soon joined with their four expatriates in creating the collective work *Cod on a Stick*. This production marked the birth of CODCO.

Cod on a Stick establishes a thematic throughline in the work of CODCO in its focus on depictions of the otherness of Newfoundlanders. The play, a sequence of sketches, is told from the vantage point of a Newfoundlander in Toronto, or, to use the imagery common to Newfoundland, of a "fish out of water". Capitalizing on the success

of the show in Toronto, the CBC brought the actors back to Newfoundland to record the show for national radio broadcast. This patina of national approbation persuaded the artistic administration of the St. John's Arts and Culture Centre to rent out one of their theatres for a re-mount of *Cod On A Stick*. The theatre made available was not the 1100 seat main auditorium, but the 90 seat basement theatre. Still, this act fulfilled the symbolic function of inviting CODCO where the Mummers had never been welcome.

One reason for this may be that CODCO's performance style, while not dissimilar to that of the Mummers, lacked its overtly adversarial quality. A link can plausibly be drawn between CODCO's use of sketch comedy, direct address, and local perspectives on current events with the age-old tradition of the community concert, and the atmosphere of social bonding the concert engendered. The link is tenuous, but intriguing nonetheless. The Mummers Troupe, taking their cue from the rougher and more subversive tradition of mummering, were subject to consistent obstruction on the part of government agencies at all three levels of government. That there was some awareness of this delicate balancing act in a heated climate of emerging national identity is demonstrated by Brookes. Neither company preferred to call their productions "plays", that word having acquired, in local culture, a connotation of cultural elitism:

> One of the basic publicity lessons which the Mummers Troupe learned early on was: *never call it a play*. In many Newfoundland communities, putting up posters for a *play* will net you an audience of teachers, merchants, and the local clergyman: the community elite. A *show*, on the other hand, is considered to be quite a different matter. Miners go to see shows. Fishermen go to shows (35-6).

Without using the word, Brookes here refers to the tradition of the community concert or Time. Both companies then, operated from a position of otherness with regard to Newfoundland's established mainstream culture. The Mummers advocated change and empowerment, a re-drawing of community definitions of identity, and remained consistently marginalized throughout the Troupe's existence. Through the political orientation of

their work, the Mummers confined their Insiderness to a loyal micro-community of supporters in St. John's while almost inevitably alienating larger and more influential groups of citizens in both St. John's and Canada.

CODCO advocated less change and presented less threat. While the subsequent contributions of CODCO members to Newfoundland culture demonstrate a passionate commitment to independent theatre development in the province, the company did not alienate cultural conservatives, because its work can be considered as essentially reifying. Where The Mummers aggressively agitated for change, a CODCO evening was more likely to produce a form of catharsis. A further element of the group's popularity in their home community can be traced to its successful tours of mainland Canada. On the mainland CODCO represented themselves as Strangers, heightening the sense among Newfoundlanders of their separate identity. In *Cod On A Stick*, the Newfoundland characters are not imaginable as Canadians.

Sketches from *Cod on a Stick* provide many examples. In "Newfoundland the Happy Province", a group of Newfoundlanders gather in a kitchen. One mentions that "MacLean's (*sic*) magazine" has described Newfoundland as "The Happy Province" (Peters 1992: 25). Another mentions that it reminds him of the slogan on provincial

license plates (which is identical). As each declaims on how happy they are—"I'm a wonderfully 'appy person, h'individually", "I'm as 'appy as the day is long", "dreadfully 'appy"—the tone of the scene shifts to mordant satire. More and more details of the hardships of Newfoundland life emerge (CODCO 1992: 25-32). A clear semiotic marker of difference lies in the fact that none of the characters says the word "happy" in the way it is pronounced in Canada, dropping the aspirated "h" at the word's beginning. The characters cannot even say the word "happy" in accordance with the standards of Canadian society, by which their lives are otherwise judged. Other scenes in the play serve to accentuate the distinction between Newfoundlanders and Canadians, and to underline Canadian misunderstanding or disregard of the issues which dominate life in the province.

This distinction made between the two companies regarding the style and impact of their work is not clear-cut. CODCO, too, experienced problems in the blurring of Stranger-Inside identities and in particular with perceptions of their depictions of the stereotypical "Newfie". As Peters relates in her foreword to *Stars In The Sky Morning – Collective Plays of Newfoundland and Labrador* (1996), a British nurse in St. Anthony enthused to dismayed CODCO performers that their portrayal of Newfoundlanders was " … wonderful. I know exactly what you mean. You know, I have to work with them every day (xiii)."

The process of collective creation itself, borrowed from other theatre cultures, serves as a metaphor for Newfoundland's sense of itself as a collectivity struggling against real and imagined "others". While the Mummers' collective was, as Brookes admits, always hierarchical—one of the factors that led to its implosion in 1976—

CODCO maintained a fractious egalitarianism. Of the two methods, it is CODCO's which has clearly resonated within Newfoundland theatre culture, not only in the continued success of ex-CODCO members, but in the methodology undertaken in the work of various companies which succeeded them, from Corey and Wade's Playhouse (featuring Rick Mercer), Sheila's Brush Theatre Company, and the recently formed Dance Party of Newfoundland, which features Steve Cochrane, Phil Churchill, Dave Sullivan and Jonny Harris.

Perhaps the greatest virtue of the work of CODCO in the 1970s was to introduce Newfoundland culture to a wider audience on its own terms. The Mummers, as well, deserve credit for this. Both companies seized on a cultural fixation with the figure of the Stranger and legitimized it as a form of cultural expression: the Mummers through the performance of the Mummers Play, and CODCO through shows such as *Laugh Your Guts Out With Total Strangers*. Both groups acknowledged Newfoundland's status as a foreign entity grafted onto the Canadian federation, linked it to a history of estranged status, and began to explore how that status had created fissures and cracks, Inside-Outside pressures, within Newfoundland society itself. In so doing, they changed the performative paradigm in their home society, by utilizing techniques which were either of longstanding practice on the island or those which were complementary to such practices.

4.4.3 The New Inside: The Rise of Conventional Indigenous Theatre, 1978 -

The founding of Rising Tide Theatre in 1978 can be seen in many ways as a reaction to the alternative theatre movement which had developed in the city since 1967. While retaining a common belief in the primacy of material by and about

Newfoundlanders, featuring local performers, and some commitment to a process of collective creation, Rising Tide was a more populist venture. The company has never manifested an overt political agenda in the manner of the Mummers Troupe and, in contrast to the touring CODCO, has steadfastly centred itself within the Avalon Peninsula, moving from St. John's to set up the Summer in the Bight Festival in Trinity Bay in 1993 (Peters "Summer" 76). Desiring a larger audience than was reached by the alternative, potentially divisive, dialectical theatre of the Mummers, they began a "partnership"[14] with the administration of the Arts and Culture Centre in St. John's and became its first local tenant in 1984-5.

Rising Tide's commitment to homegrown work was strong, though hardly exclusive. Their 1984-85 season features three Newfoundland shows offered out of five; 1985-86, two of five; 1986-87, two of five; 1987-88, two of five; 1988-89, two of five (CNS Coll. 124: RTT). Like other young theatre companies such as Factory Theatre Lab, Passe Muraille, and Tarragon in Toronto, Rising Tide quickly manifested a desire to move from alternative status to the mainstream. The company offered subscriptions, solicited corporations and foundations for money, and pressured provincial and federal agencies with a nationalist pitch. Unlike the Mummers and CODCO, the initial Rising Tide seasons were not preoccupied with experimentation in form or originality of content.

A programme of new play workshops proved to be a beneficial initiative of the company when they were instituted in the 1991-92 season. Such an initiative was long over due.[15] It can be said that Rising Tide brought Newfoundland plays to a wider cross-section of people, and a far more numerous audience, than any of its predecessors.

The work of bringing the social and political history of Newfoundland to life on its stages remained in the hands of its young homegrown theatre companies as the 1970s came to a close: Rising Tide, the fading Mummers Troupe, and the new tenant of the LSPU Hall, RCA Theatre. A pervading sense of cultural nationalism which swept through the province's artistic community (and which echoed similar movements in Canada and Ireland, amongst others) had much to do with a desire to rediscover and recreate the past. While contemporary issues offer a sense of immediacy, the past can act as a filter in theatrical presentation, helping to create a sense of cultural identity without reference to immediate divisions or inconsistencies. Michael Cook's *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust* and *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* possess an astringent aspect of self-examination in dealing with the distant and recent past, respectively, but these plays are exceptions to a pattern of depiction which has tended toward nostalgia. Under Rhonda Payne's direction, the Mummers produced *Makin' Time with the Yanks*, a musical about the influx of Americans during the Second World War. Rising Tide produced *Daddy, What's a Train?* and *Joey*, a recounting of the life of Joseph Smallwood. RCA Theatre produced *Terras de Bacalhau* (Land of Cod), a musical melodrama about Portuguese fishermen and their lives in Newfoundland. Like *Makin' Time with the Yanks*, *Bacalhau* makes use of Strangers from without, rather than within, to buttress its promotion of a distinct local identity.

The most vivid aspect of virtually all of these productions is not their subject, but the music produced for each play. Local musicians such as Sandy Morris, Jim Payne, Robert Joy, Terry Rielly, and Paul Steffler brought traditional Newfoundland folk tunes to new life and new audiences. The music is perhaps the most influential legacy of these

works. The tendency towards romantic and nostalgic depictions of past days continues as a regressive underscore to the more adventurous works produced in Newfoundland.

4.4.4 The Playwright in Newfoundland Theatre, 1980 –

Plays were being written in Newfoundland at least from 1940, when the St. John's Players produced *Proud Kate Sullivan*. A steady trickle continued to appear in the years between 1945 and 1980, led initially by Grace Butt. Her conventional style of playwriting was emulated by Tom Cahill, who began to write plays as a member of Corner Brook's Playmakers in the 1960s, notable for their *Home Brew* reviews. Humourist and storyteller Ted Russell's *The Holdin' Ground* paved the way for another satirist, Ray Guy, to enter the field in the 1980s with *Young Triffie's Been Made Away With*.[16] Poets like Al Pittman and, later, Des Walsh found in the new theatre a new forum for their work. CODCO, though a collective, produced, in the individual work of its members, particularly Andy Jones, Cathy Jones and Tommy Sexton, a context for anarchic comedy which ultimately produced the monologic playtext of Rick Mercer, Torquil Colbo, Pete Soucy, John Taylor, Jonny Harris, and Jones himself. The work of Cathy Jones is particularly influential in breaking the ground for women playwrights like Janis Spence, Berni Stapleton, Elizabeth Pickard, Sherry White and Ruth Lawrence. Female directors such as Mary Walsh and Lois Brown have acted as an inspiration for the innovative work and artistic leadership demonstrated by younger women artists like Danielle Irvine and Jillian Keiley, who have in turn encouraged an increasingly sophisticated form of work and playwriting, exemplified in the work of their frequent collaborator, Robert Chafe.

Several possible reasons underlie the gradual shift from collective creation to a

playwriting-based theatre by the end of the 1980s. The successful collectives of the 1970s, the Mummers and CODCO, were spent forces as theatrical entities.[17] Work at the LSPU Hall involved a motley collection of theatre practitioners who came together in different groupings for various projects and who, as board members of RCA Theatre, promoted a policy of accepting play proposals in selecting its season. Rising Tide Theatre became increasingly interested in seeking out other sources of theatrical material as its core members spent ever greater amounts of time on administration and fund-raising. The theatre community was increasingly confident and diverse, its practitioners trained not only at Memorial's St. John's campus but at a new theatre programme located at its Corner Brook campus, and, increasingly, at institutions and conservatories on the Canadian mainland. There was now more than one generation of performers active in professional Newfoundland theatre. Young theatre practitioners formed groups for single productions and moved on to other groupings and projects.

All of these factors have contributed to a rise in individual-generated work in the theatre. Collective creation continued to take place, but increasingly individual writers took to writing plays based on their own experience of the culture. In so doing, a new sub-strand of the Stranger motif comes into view in production: the playwright as Stranger. Works such as John Taylor's *My Three Dads* and Elizabeth Pickard's *The ALIENation of Lizzie Dyke* are almost obsessively self-absorbed and focus on issues of personal estrangement. A long line of Newfoundland monologists takes a more objective approach to personal observation but deals no less with the individual as Stranger: works such as Andy Jones' *Out of the Bin*, Rick Mercer's *Show Me the Button, or Charles Lynch Must Die*, and Jonny Harris' *Out of the Bog* are emblematic of this trend.

A new generation of trained directors also plays a part in developing the forms which these explorations of personal and national identity are taking. Through their work with Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland, the company they co-founded in 1995, Jillian Keiley and Robert Chafe collaborate (often with Petrina Bromley as musical director) on productions which offer more theatrically sophisticated examinations of estrangement. The company's 1997 production of *Under Wraps* was an arresting visual presentation, involving a set of performers concealed throughout the performance underneath a white sheet which covered the stage, who took various forms (chairs, cars, screens for silhouettes) while the protagonist (Chafe) played out a tale above the sheet involving his experience of being a closeted gay man looking for love in a homophobic society.

Keiley and Chafe collaborate outside of Artistic Fraud as well, in more conventional environments. Their production of *Tempting Providence* for Theatre Newfoundland Labrador ranks with the most successful productions in Newfoundland theatre history, and was still touring worldwide in 2006, four years after its première at the Gros Morne Theatre Festival. *Tempting Providence* celebrates the life of Myra Bennett, a Stranger character who transforms her status to that of Necessary Outsider to (perhaps) Insider throughout the course of her service as a nurse and devoted member of the Great Northern Peninsula community of Daniel's Harbour.

While *Tempting Providence* returns to the nostalgic treatment of historical subjects, the wave of individual playwrights who have come on the scene since 1990 has influenced the nature of the subject matter featured on stage. Increasingly there is a concentration on contemporary issues, as can be seen with *Under Wraps*.[18] Plays like Pete Soucy's *Flux*, Taylor's *My Three Dads*, and the stream-of-consciousness work of

Berni Stapleton (*Woman in a Monkey Cage, The Pope and Princess Di*) remain distinctively of the society in which they are written, without reliance on old semiotic symbols such as fishing, colourful dialects, or historical adversaries.

Having traced the elements of the Outsider mentality and figuration of the Stranger which connect Newfoundland's performance history with its social, political, and economic past, one may observe that the dramatic literature produced between 1945 and the present day represents the emergence of a written expression of these socially unifying motifs. In the following chapter a variety of plays in the emerging Newfoundland canon will be analyzed with regard to various aspects of the Stranger-Insider dynamic.

Notes

[1] For this section on the community concert I am indebted to Prof. Ches Skinner, whose unpublished PhD dissertation, "Theatre in Newfoundland: The Community Concert" is, to my best knowledge, the single source available on the topic.
[2] Although women played many significant roles in the community concert, it appears that the chairman was always a male, if only for the perception of physically-enforced order he might represent.
[3] The child performer Miss Davenport visited Harbour Grace in 1841, where she performed her one-person version of *Richard III*. This is the first recorded instance of a formal theatrical performance taking place outside the confines of the capital. This was followed, in 1842, by the visit of a "Corps Dramatique" from Halifax to Carbonear and Harbour Grace. See O'Neill, *The Oldest City*.
[4] *Evening Telegram*, Mar. 23 1961, p.11.
[5] *Daily News*, Mar. 25, 1961, p.6.
[6] *Daily News*, Mar. 28, 1961, p.4.
[7] *Evening Telegram,* May 23, 1967.
[8] Cahill's play, an adaptation of Harold Horwood's novel *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*, featured a young David Ferry and Dudley Cox, future Artistic Director of the Newfoundland Travelling Theatre Company.
[9] The number depends on how one tallies, given the yearly revues. Helen Peters gives the number as 107 (Peters "Newfoundland" 237-44), which matches Yeo's tally in the appendix of his history of the troupe.
[10] Even its *Screech* series of revues were essentially British Music Hall performances adapted to a local setting, without the performers even bothering to adopt the local accent.
[11] Although this term is often used within the discourse of Newfoundland theatre and drama, it is advisable to note that it should be applied within the context of the region's second-wave European settler culture.
[12] While the process may have had some cathartic effect, this Aristotelian product is not what the company was seeking. The residents took an active role in the project and were galvanized to the point of attending the park's opening ceremony in hopes of disrupting it. In this they failed miserably, being otherwise totally unprepared by Brookes and company for the exigencies of spontaneous political protest. Brookes is

disingenuous in relating the impact of the show to changes in federal policy in the Maritime provinces where the troupe toured. He is more forthright in admitting the deficiencies of an approach where a group of sympathetic Outsiders enter a community, absorb the issues, appropriate its voice, and then leave, without sufficient follow-up (1988: 94-5). Filewod observes that the company approached the Sally's Cove problem "emotionally rather than critically" (1987: 118). He concludes, "*Gros Mourn* was a landmark in Canadian political theatre, but it was more significant to the later development of the Mummers than it was to Sally's Cove" (118).

[13] Murray Anderson was a performer and impresario who made his career in New York in the early 20th century. In other arts, a notable example was Marie Toulinguet (an abstraction of her birthplace, Twillingate), who made her name as an opera singer in France, Italy and the United States in the late 1800s. She is now the subject of a new work by the playwright Robert Chafe, entitled *Nightingale*.

[14] Quoted in the 1988-89 Rising Tide Theatre season brochure.

[15] By 1991 Playwrights' Workshop Montréal, a national new play development centre, had been in operation for twenty-three years, and companies in every region of the country had been experimenting with various forms of new play workshops since the mid-1970s.

[16] Dr. Helen Peters has noted that the correct title for this play, cited here, was not used in Dr. Denyse Lynde's anthology *Voices From the Landwash*, the standard text where the play is now found. I have elected to use the original title.

[17] CODCO continued, through its work on television, first with their own eponymous show and then through their participation in *This Hour Has Twenty Two Minutes*. Their theatrical work continued only through the work of individual members such as Andy Jones, Cathy Jones, Tommy Sexton and others.

[18] This is not to say that plays on contemporary issues did not exist before this time. Cathy Jones' performance piece *Outport Lesbian*, produced in the 1980s, can be said to mix the two genres, and there is a body of neo-feminist work by Lois Brown, Janis Spence and others dating from that time. (Clarke "Downtown Views" CTR 43 (Summer 1985): 119-26).