Conclusion

Newfoundland drama is a relatively young field of study, but the notion that social identity is essentially based on drawing distinctions is as old as recorded history. Strangers (both native- and foreign-born), Necessary Outsiders, Transgressive (and qualified) Insiders, voluntary and involuntary Exiles figure in every place where people gather to create a micro-community. The notion of macro-communities, made up of micro-communities which themselves comprise smaller micro-communities as well as circles of affiliation, can be utilized as an effective means of analyzing plays which portray individuals and groups struggling to establish and maintain their identities.

The fact that Newfoundland culture—in particular the fields of popular music, fiction and poetry—is rife with explicit references to "the Stranger" indicates that a study of this figuring is germane to an understanding of how Newfoundlanders view themselves. Strangers are entities which are, or have become, foreign. As such they represent potential danger to the body politic. They must be disarmed or demystified. The mythology of the Stranger, however, must remain intact. It is a necessary form of subject gaze-oriented surveillance and enforcement.

To further this exploration, the concept of the Outsider as a median level of estrangement placed between Strangerhood and Insiderhood has been introduced here as a closer parsing of the aspects of otherness which define social units. This concept is especially practical in determining how all those who reside as Insiders within a polity may, at some point, through transgressions of behaviour or custom which are adjudged of serious import, become estranged. With the commission of transgressions considered

sufficiently Strange, Insiders shift outward on a line of alienation which denotes the status and esteem levels of community members. Transgressions of an extreme, irremediable nature shift individuals further outward on a trajectory towards Strangerhood.

Transgressions which can be remediated through voluntary or involuntary gestures, or mitigated due to dyadic influence, may cause the micro-community member to be viewed simply as a Transgressive Insider. Insider status may become qualified on many levels, depending on the gravity and number of transgressions and their reception in the community, and the level of esteem and social value the Insider possesses. It may also be possible for a foreign-born Stranger to complete an inward shift from Stranger to Necessary Outsider to Insider, as Robert Chafe proposes in *Tempting Providence*. It is more likely that a Stranger may be allowed to remediate their status only so far as to achieve an accepted, but Outside, status within the community.

The social and political history of Newfoundland provides many reasons why Stranger figuration, and the variants described herein, feature so consistently in the dramatic literature of the region. The fluctuating political status of the island, and its function as an extractive commodity source for the markets of various nations, served to impede economic and social development as an independent entity. The future of the region as, variously, a colony, country or province has always lain in the hands of another power, with the exception of the period of Responsible Government between 1855 and 1933. A pattern of consistent disenfranchisement could not fail but to create a generalized resentment with regard to the influence of Outside forces in Newfoundland daily life.

Within Newfoundland, a scattered coastal population dependent on a single industry found itself for much of its history at the mercy of the commercial interests which dominated that industry. Planters, bye-boatkeepers and other prospective settlers were discouraged by legislation sponsored by Bristol and London fish merchants to the Crown. Natural disasters of startling number and variety preyed upon the security of each community. Armies came and went: British, French, American, Canadian. Some were murderous, some proprietary and some, such as the Americans who populated military bases on the island and Labrador through the 1940s to the 1960s, expended considerable money and cultural influence only to leave, as had the previous armies, when Newfoundland had served its purpose. As a result of these various factors—natural and man-made—outport
communities remained, until deep into the 20th century, self-contained political and dyadic units only occasionally sharing contact with each other.

Within this insular environment there developed a culture based equally on dyadic principles of reciprocal value and social debt on the one hand; and on codes, customs, and demarcative criteria founded on residence, religion, ethnicity, and shared Insider knowledge on the other. The criteria of communicative competence enabled Insiders to distinguish Strangers. Its wider application, however, was directed towards the identification of Strangeness, the commission of acts by either Strangers or Insiders considered transgressive. Such received knowledge existed generally within the macro-community of Newfoundland, but manifested itself differently in each outport. Beyond the specific varieties of dialect and accent, such competence involved aspects of social, cultural and spatial proximity, governing the behaviour and attitudes considered

appropriate in public spaces and inter-member interaction at all times. Micro-community members bore an implicit responsibility to conduct surveillance and enforce these precepts and to exact extra-juridical punishment when necessary (i.e., when formal structures were either inadequate or absent). Women possessed proportionately equal or greater influence in the execution of these informal structures of information-gathering and values enforcement.

Within communities divisions arose between its members based on status criteria such as age, gender, education, skills, and wealth. As well, contact which involved shared interests or commonalities of experience or background created circles of affiliation, support networks which overlapped not only each other—a resident could be a member of several such circles—but also the various micro-communities of the community polity, such as family units. An individual within an outport would normally be a member of a primary micro-community (a family unit) and perhaps several secondary micro-communities (as a relative or the member of an intimate network such as a church sect) and participate in numerous circles of affiliation for dyadic purposes, such as clubs, the workplace, school or groups of friends. In this way informal networks and patterns of social behaviour were formed in each community, creating a webbing of interaction and forming, when combined, a macro-community able to regulate itself not only through shared mores, but also through a shared attitude toward those who did not form part of the community.

For a large part of their history the outports have existed largely without overt institutional political or regulatory presences. In the 20th century Newfoundland entered into Confederation with Canada after more than 70 years of Responsible Government. As

a micro-community within the British Empire, Newfoundland's status could be compared to that of a Necessary Outsider of the Demystified Stranger subset. The level of esteem in which it was held rose when its fish, seal oil and skins, its men of military age or its nearness to Europe (for military installations) were valued. When these factors were absent, or of less compelling importance, Newfoundland shifted outward along the line of alienation towards Stranger status. Newfoundland never achieved unqualified Insider status as a prospective member of the Commonwealth or as a British colony. It remains an open, and interesting, question as to what status the province is accorded within the Canadian federation, itself a polity made up of regions which are distinct in culture and orientation. Perhaps this status will shift inward as increasing oil revenues fuel an economic resurgence.

With regard to the history of theatrically-related performance, the larger cultural parameters of the British, North American or global communities begin to narrow into those of urban and rural Newfoundland in the 1970s. The colonially-inspired conventional theatre of St. John's in the late 19th century[1] left a legacy of a strong amateur community theatre in St. John's throughout most of the 20th century. In the outports, popular and folk performance influences brought over by working people from southern England or Ireland evolved into the mixed-fare format known as the community concert. Another tradition which was employed in outport and town alike was mummering, a form of social regulation which occasionally spiraled out of control and which was proscribed in 1861 as an anti-Catholic measure by the Newfoundland government.

Following these strands of theatrically-related performance, and the short-lived and almost wholly inconsequential tenure of a British stock repertory company, the London Players, in the 1950s, an indigenous theatre developed in the early 1970s[2] in St. John's. This movement competed with the amateur theatre, overlapping individuals who performed in both spheres, but as the Dominion Drama Festival waned in importance, the amateur theatre gradually was overtaken by the predominance of a new and vigorous professional theatre scene. Collective creation, as practiced by the Mummers Troupe and CODCO, was the dominant approach to theatrical production during the 1970s. Collective creation combined elements of the concert tradition, including raucous and direct spectator-performer interaction, songs and comedic sketches, with elements of the traditional theatre, such as serious themes, script development, and technical proficiency. The Mummers revitalized the mummering tradition and in so doing brought urban and rural performance modes together for a short time. Their influence extends into the present day, both in the occasional use of the collective model, but also in the inter-disciplinary work of theatre artists such as Jillian Keiley and her company Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland. CODCO's influence also persists. The company's members made major contributions to the development of RCA Theatre and Sheila's Brush, amongst other ventures, and many of its individuals continue to act, write and direct within the Newfoundland theatre community. The emergence of such companies as Dance Party of Newfoundland, a quartet of young artists for whom Andy Jones has acted as a mentor, demonstrates the impact of CODCO.

CODCO and the Mummers Troupe could be characterized as adversarial in their approach to performance, albeit in differing contexts. Where CODCO played the

Outsider role beyond Newfoundland's borders, the Mummers played the far riskier role of addressing perceived inequities within their own micro- and macro-community. Both groups can be said to have contributed materially to an ongoing definition of cultural identity within Newfoundland. CODCO performances addressed stereotypes and issues of self-definition in a manner that proved to be widely popular within their home community (and with mainland audiences, as well). The impact of the group's *œuvre* is minimal, in terms of promoting social change, and extensive, in terms of inspiring succeeding generations of performers to aspire to their success. The profile of Newfoundland as a separate culture within the Canadian federation has significantly expanded in the past twenty years. CODCO has played a key role in this expansion. The Mummers' effect has been harder to gauge. Few theatrical movements in North America can be said, in recent years, to have produced any measurable impact on social policy. The Mummers Troupe produced significant successes in highlighting current social issues in such plays as *Gros Mourn* and *Buchans a Mining Town*, but no social policy changed as a result. Perhaps more successful, in both cultural and social policy terms, was the link to a tradition of social activism the Troupe established between Newfoundland's past and present. Shows which took as their subject matter the I.W.A. strike of 1959, or the career of balladeer Johnny Burke, demonstrated to local audiences a continuing history of populist activism. In so doing the Mummers reaffirmed that their society was a system of micro-communities which seldom, if ever, worked in harmony, but which could yet produce harmonious results and deserved to be treated as a unity.

The Mummers, like CODCO, produced more than theatrical presentations. From their casts and crews came the second generation of indigenous theatre artists, able to

work in cultural ground that had been broken and tilled. As importantly, the methods of collective creation employed (differently) by both groups have influenced this next generation. Collective creation remains an active aspect of Newfoundland theatre, mixing with the legacy of the community concert and aspects of mummering performance to create a singular approach to theatrical creation.

Convention-based commercial theatre resurrected itself in the late 1970s with the founding of Community Stage (later Rising Tide Theatre), and the Stephenville Festival and Theatre Newfoundland and Labrador (TNL) on the west coast of the island. Rising Tide employed collective creation techniques for more purely commercial objectives than did their predecessors. Perhaps the company's most significant contribution to Newfoundland theatre has been its steady rate of commissioning new plays, and the consistent employment it has provided local actors through its move to Trinity Bay and the establishment of the Summer in the Bight Festival. TNL, formed in Corner Brook in 1979 based on the regional model found on the Canadian mainland, discovered, with the establishment of the Gros Morne Theatre Festival in the late 1990s, a new *raison d'être* in a summer theatre festival devoted to indigenous plays and featuring native-born performers. The Stephenville Festival, established in a former army-base town as a summer festival featuring mainly musicals, has also begun to incorporate more locally-generated material, where previously it was a venue almost solely for mainland fare.

In light of the existence of more mainstream theatres such as TNL, the Stephenville Festival, the touring arm of the Ministry of Culture, and Rising Tide, the St. John's theatre scene based out of the LSPU Hall can now rightfully be termed alternative. The LSPU Hall and its resident theatre company, the Resource Centre for the Arts, have

tended to cast themselves in the Outsider position inherited from the Mummers and CODCO, who were instrumental in the creation of the Hall and of RCA. However, performers and artistic personnel migrate back and forth across this imaginary border, as work dictates.

The Hall also programs plays produced by small independent companies. It is there that the move to a playwright-centred theatre took hold in the late 1980s, with the commissioning of plays by Ray Guy, new plays by former collective members such as Janis Spence and Bryan Hennessy, and exciting performer-playwrights such as Berni Stapleton, Andy Jones, Cathy Jones, Ruth Lawrence, Sherry White, Elizabeth Pickard, Torquil Colbo, and Robert Chafe. Grace Butt, who may fairly be called Newfoundland's first playwright, paved the way for the resurgence of this approach to play creation. Notable contributions to this genre were made by Tom Cahill, Michael Cook and Al Pittman in the 1970s and 1980s. The Mercer plays of David French, while of demonstrated impact in promoting the awareness of a Newfoundland diaspora, are of little influence in Newfoundland theatre at present, beyond the commercial appeal of *Salt-Water Moon*.

Questions arise when one compares the controlled anarchy of the community concert performance model and the playwright's theatre which is currently ascendant in Newfoundland theatre. The concert utilized text but did not valorize it, either in terms of the amount of text used or the way in which it was treated. Performers adumbrated and otherwise altered text for local consumption. The performances were episodic and presented in non-narrative sequence. Any pretense to narrative continuity was shattered

by the intervention of unrelated songs, recitations and commentary from the Master of Ceremonies.

The Mummers Troupe and CODCO made use of many of these elements of popular theatre, the Mummers in the tradition of agit-prop and CODCO in highly politicized sketch comedy. The spirit of a CODCO performance was communal, utilizing an Outside target—usually the Canadian government, but occasionally the provincial government or other Strange entities such as Greenpeace—which served to unite spectator and performer, whether or not the spectator agreed with the political orientation of the material. The Mummers retained a more adversarial position throughout their existence.

The work of playwrights from 1945 through to the present day has, by contrast, been marked by the use of more traditional narrative techniques. Perhaps, as Denyse Lynde writes in describing Robert Chafe in the introduction to *Two Plays*, the playwright is a "storyteller" (iii), part of a tradition of Newfoundland storytellers, including the humourists Ray Guy and Ted Russell. Other cultures, however, include more varied forms of narrative in their cultural expression. Michael Cook attempted a mixture of a text-centred, neo-Aristotelian narrative with Brechtian (or community concert) elements in his Newfoundland Trilogy. The results are generally regarded as uneven but highly theatrical, and the plays remain the most critically acclaimed in the body of Newfoundland dramatic literature. Elizabeth Pickard's *The ALIENation of Lizzie Dyke* was a successful foray into multimedia theatre in the late 1990s, but it is the more notable for its singularity. Storytelling can be embodied in post-structuralist or deconstructive narratives as well. Theatre is a dialogic enterprise. It is useful to ask if the artists choose

to tell their stories in a conventional manner, or if they instinctively believe the Newfoundland public has given some indication of resistance to non-realistic forms. There is little evidence to support such a claim.

What connects the playwrights of past and present in Newfoundland, however, is not their manner of storytelling but the use of the Stranger and other figures of alienation. Although there are many plays where such figuration is not consciously employed, the thesis of this study is that strong figures of alienation—the Stranger, variants of the Necessary Outsider, and qualified Insiders—are a central feature of virtually all the significant plays of the Newfoundland canon. No study can hope to analyze the entirety of such a body of work; the plays studied herein are a representative sample. In each the shifting margins of alienation are employed, consciously or unconsciously, by playwrights whose cultural sensibility reflects this Outside gaze.

In Grace Butt's work the Stranger is a clear and present danger, usually a foreign-born individual who has parachuted into a community to impose his or her will. The Stranger acts as a comparative which assists in supporting and reaffirming the established values of the polity by provoking a defense of those values.

Tom Cahill's work is as resolutely nationalistic, if not more so, than that of Butt. His Stranger and Outsider figures, however, come from the Inside. This internal figuration of principal characters represents a mature sensibility which regards both Inside and Outside as arenas which produce potential threats to a community. In Cahill's work there is more movement amongst individuals along the line of alienation than can be found in Butt's work. Con Hartrey is an Insider who gradually alienates all around him in his obsessive demonization of Canadian Confederate forces; while Canada may be the

Stranger to Hartrey, it is possible to glimpse, in the character of Mel, the perspective of an Insider of relatively low status who feels the more malignant Stranger resides in Hartrey's ego-driven disregard for the community mores of consideration and fair play for all.

Michael Cook's Newfoundland Trilogy takes this development and extends it to its logical extreme. In *Jacob's Wake* the Inside is the source of all Strangers, a confused, frightening and unceasing movement towards the margins for all but Rosie. Skipper Pete of *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* is an Insider who formerly enjoyed authority and influence within his community. As the rituals and attitudes upon which he depends vanish from practice in his community, he removes himself from it, retreating to his splitting room with Uncle John to play out the delusion of the cod's return. Through his callous and fatal disregard of the community's present, in the form of the drowning boy, he passes from indicter to indicted and becomes, at last, a Stranger, heedless even of the call to be answerable to the residents who gather before his shack.

In *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust* the Inside is a shifting set of boundaries which alienates all who strive to survive within it. The garrison exists as a separate entity within the polity of St. John's, but the citizens of the town are hardly welcome or comfortable there. The soldiers of the garrison cannot wait to return, through voyage or death, to their home across the water. They wait for an inevitable conquest by the opposing army, which they will then supplant. The townsfolk will kill occasionally and lie forever at the mercy of the merchants who slip from allegiance to allegiance with ease. Cook raises the question of whether an Inside can be said to exist when the principles which govern it have eroded beyond recognition.

The trend in figuration takes an outward turn in the work of David French, Al Pittman, and Ted Russell. French's Mercer plays present the quintessential Exile figure in the form of Jacob Mercer. Jacob is never comfortable in his own skin except when he is in Newfoundland, courting Mary in *Salt-Water Moon*. Even as a boy of 16 in *Soldier's Heart*, he is presented as a liminal figure, waiting at a train station, caught between places. The older, Toronto-based Jacob has soured in his inner-self, invoking nostalgic images of a Newfoundland where men are men, families are united, and people stick up for their own. The failure of his son Ben to live up to these imported precepts guarantees the schism between the two. Their mutual alienation from each other is based upon conflicting notions of what constitutes the primary macro-unit of the Mercer micro-community, Canada or Newfoundland. Mary exists uneasily in a border space, adapting to the requirements set by each family member. The boys are Canadians whose lack of knowledge of Newfoundland infuriates their father. Perhaps one of the saddest moments in the Mercer plays occurs when one quintessential Newfoundland Insider, Jacob Mercer, rejects the agency of another, Jerome Mackenzie, in *1949*. Fearing that he is inadequate to compete with Jerome for Mary's affections, Jacob turns on one of the only characters in the plays who feels as passionately about his origins as does Jacob.

Al Pittman's characters are Exiles of a different sort. In *A Rope Against the Sun* they are the Exiles-to-be of a community frozen in time, slowly dying. The Stranger is the teacher Michael, who fails to persuade the locals out of their superstitious rituals and who never remediates his status. He despairs of ever being able to depart, and in so doing ensures his despair. In *West Moon* the risen spirits are the Exiles of a vanished community, unable to connect or experience their home but by a steadily fragmenting

memory. Their cemetery now lies untended. Unlike French's Jacob Mercer, their nostalgic reminiscence cannot recreate any physical semblance of their past identity.

The cemetery is well-tended in Ted Russell's *The Holdin' Ground*, an elegant paean to the virtues of community and its principles of loyalty, respect and remembrance. Russell's Michael is an Exile who returns briefly and who dies in Exile. His parents are reverently remembered, however, and through his family affiliation and the sincere conviction with which he carries out his remediation, Michael is welcomed back by the extra-juridical authorities of Pigeon Inlet, Grampa Walcott and wife Aunt Lizzie.

The social conservatism of these elegiac plays is condemned by Ray Guy in *Young Triffie's Been Made Away With* and Des Walsh in *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*. Guy's *Triffie* is a savage indictment of moral rot in the outport community of Swyers Harbour. While it can be observed that the prime transgressors are Strangers from away, such as Pastor Pottle and Dr. Melrose, the portrayal of the town's Insiders is no kinder. Aunt Millie uses her position as Postmistress to gather information which she uses in a manifestly biased manner. Her son Vincent is a sexual predator. The town's lower status citizens gather to redress their grievances under the spiritual guidance of the monstrous Pottle. Sheep are mutilated, alcoholics perform fatal abortions, a boy commits unknowing incest with his developmentally-challenged half-sister, the doctor's wife pops pills and mocks her neighbours, and a Pastor stabs a doctor before his hand is nailed to a table. The Stranger Ranger Hepditch is the only character who escapes the wrath of the playwright.

Walsh's anger is no less manifest in his adaptation of Harold Horwood's *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*. Where Guy employs satire, Gothic extremes of action and a style of playing that veers towards *grand-guignol*, Walsh's play seethes with inner

tension. Once again an outport is presented where many of the townsfolk are in thrall to a crazed, perverted cleric. The hope for the future of the community, as represented by the youthful Eli, is seduced by the priest and ostracized from the community as a result of his friendship with the town teacher. Walsh's point can be found in the coming departure of Eli from the community. The Inside must be abandoned when it has rotted; it is not eternally valid; it must transform, adapt, or be rendered irrelevant.

Robert Chafe and Torquil Colbo look at the Inside and decide to transform it rather than abandon or be judged by it. In *Tempting Providence* and *Beyond Zebra* the assertion is made that the Stranger or Necessary Insider can shift inward to Insider status through maintaining, rather than altering, their identity. Both plays make a clarion call for a tolerant, inclusive Inside where difference is celebrated and its contribution to the evolution of a stronger communal entity is acknowledged.

The Stranger and other figures of alienation remain actively in play in the rural Newfoundland society depicted by its playwrights. Perhaps this will change as plays centred in heterogeneous urban environments become increasingly predominant in Newfoundland theatre, in the same manner as urban St. John's dominates the provincial theatre scene. Outports are ever at risk of becoming vessels of nostalgia. They are more accurately portrayed as cauldrons where identity is forged.

It is likely that Newfoundlanders will continue to manifest the perspective of Strangers, even as they incorporate themselves within more and more macro-communities. Geographically separate from both the Britain of their past and the North America of their future, their history, rich with examples of domination by Outside influences, continues to influence theatrical manifestations of the culture. As approaches

from around the world are assimilated, and young theatre artists increasingly range afield for their education, the performative range of Newfoundland theatre will continue to develop in range and scope. The substantial growth within the past thirty-five years of a viable, varied and respected theatre culture in Newfoundland demonstrates the potential of the theatre to play a leading role in developing new forms of expression which will further examine and define the codes and customs of Newfoundland culture.

Notes

[1] The use of the word "conventional" here denotes the theatre of conventions rather than the more colloquial sense of the word.
[2] The word "indigenous" is employed consciously by various scholars with respect to the evolution of a native-born theatre culture in the region, rather than making any claim to First Nations status.