

Michael Devine
Acadia University, Nova Scotia, Canada

**THE ENEMY IS US:
Shifting Definitions of the Outsider in Newfoundland Drama**

In this paper I intend to address the *outsider*, or *stranger* figure as it is depicted in contemporary Newfoundland drama. This figure is a subject of much fetishization in Newfoundland culture, and is a primary aspect of the region's traditional modes of self-identification.

The stranger figure is present in post-colonial cultures, often replacing the dominant, departed culture and retaining many of its identifying markers. More than anything, however, it exists as a necessary determinative of interior and exterior geography. Post-colonial cultures like that of Newfoundland, in struggling to define and clarify an identity of their own, use the stranger as a means of identifying the familiar and the safe in contrast with that which is foreign and therefore threatening.

While elements of this identity-based use of alterity exist in all cultures and are a primary tool in the discourse of survival, enabling us to order and discriminate, in an orphan-society like that of Newfoundland its role is carries greater immediacy and a correspondingly increased local currency. Where survival is a more prevalent daily issue, and the omnipresence of the ocean exists to negate any human fantasies of immortality, otherness becomes the coin of the realm.

Sara Ahmed states that “the stranger allows Law to mark out its terrain” (Ahmed, 23) conjuring up ideas of the Old West in America, or perhaps of dogs at a street corner, warily eyeing each other as they raise their legs. This is the creation of a “visual economy” (24), one where the stranger has no space, but acts in delineating the home territory of natives, those who “belong”. The term “CFA” – “come from away” has long been ascribed not only to visitors to Newfoundland, but to those who have been resident for twenty-five years or more. They are welcomed, but in the most essential analysis, such residents do not belong.

This distinction is relatively benign until a community comes under duress. The history of Newfoundland is replete with duress, of both a quantity and variety that would tire the Seven Horsemen of the Apocalypse: tidal waves, town-consuming fire after fire, a generation of young men lost in ill-advised military action, the collapse of the fishery, the Smallwood government's resettlement programme, the predations of the British merchant class and the sectarian violence of Catholics and Anglicans, the subtle sadness of young people lost to the thriving mainland. As entire communities disappear due to economic or demographic collapse, the island, seemingly, grows larger and larger. The 15th largest island in the world, Newfoundland has only around 550,000 people. Historically isolated from each other in outport settlements accessible only by boat, Newfoundlanders are today much more in

contact with each other but find their numbers falling. A point in the future where a demographic tipping point is reached is foreseeable.

An island community necessarily breeds a sense, etymologically, of *insularity* (with apologies, I leave aside, for the moment, the even more remote and isolated region of Labrador). But there were many other factors, remarkable perhaps for the fact that Newfoundland has been courted, or at least ravished, by no less than three and possibly four colonial cultures, depending on one's definitions and terms. In fact Newfoundland has *never* been regarded never been regarded as an integral part of any of the nations which have served as their overlords, in spite of islanders' wholly perverse affection for England. An island, 1700 nautical miles from Europe, and with its main port placing the colony's back to mainland North America, Newfoundland has traditionally been perceived as nothing more than a commodity. In a report to the British House of Commons in 1793 this attitude was precisely summed up:

the island of Newfoundland has been considered... as a great ship moored near the banks in the fishing season, for the convenience of English fishermen. (Prowse, *xix*).

In the midst of what once were the world's richest fishing grounds, the land, resources, and economy of Newfoundland have been dominated, at various times, by the French, the Americans, Canadians, and the English. Save for a brief period of independence in the early 20th century, Newfoundlanders never been able to regard themselves as anything but "others". The British government legislated repeatedly against colonization on the island in order to protect the interests of the West Coast merchant fishery, crippling the settlement of Newfoundland from until 1700; despite two centuries of resource privateering, they refused to recognise Newfoundland as a colony until 1824, starving the small knot of settlers of infrastructure and essential services (Halpert and Story [eds], 26). An Order-In-Council of 1671 enjoined settlers to set up their fragile houses, or "tilts" no closer than 6 miles to the shoreline, effectively eliminating their ability to make a living from the sea (Halpert et al, 14).

This restriction signaled an opening for the French, whose Catholic beliefs required a steady diet of fish, to found settlements on the west coast of the island. Disputes over these and other North American territories led to incursions from the end of the 17th century to the end of the 18th century by the French army, burning and razing settlements on the English side of the island and thus discouraging the idea of any increase in migration until the disputes were arbitrated in the early 19th century (Major, 155).

The British did not even bother to designate a Governor for the island until 1729; no Governor would reside there full-time until 1817 (Major, 153,197). This left the justice system, such as it was, in the hands of the first three ship's captains to reach the fishing grounds each spring (71). Settlements, called outports, were small isolated from each other, and dominated by the local merchant and the *truck system*. Under the truck system, the local merchant, a man in the service of the Water Street fish merchants of St. John's, would provide equipment and staples to the fishing families of an outport in exchange for their catch. The advantage lay with the merchant: he set the prices of the goods he advanced to the families at the beginning of the season; and also set the prices of the fish at season's end.

Thus was created a cashless system where the fisherman was constantly held in debt from one season to another, as the amount garnered by the catch never equalled the debt incurred.

The truck system was in large measure responsible for the creation of an ill-educated, poverty-stricken, disenfranchised citizenry until its grudging abandonment – and that only in the 1940s. Certainly the development of an indigenous culture was retarded by this repressive series of colonial actions. Settlers from the English West Country and Ireland managed, however, through the slow growth of low-cost social functions like the *kitchen party*, the *community concert*, and, above all, the tradition of *mumming*, to transform the songs and stories of their native cultures into something clearly identified as being of, and about, Newfoundland.

The social divisions created by the class-based, anti-Catholic tendencies of the fish merchants have now diminished to some degree, but are still more apparent than in mainland Canada. The tendency for a Newfoundlander to define herself in opposition to another has remained as its legacy. By the time of Confederation with Canada in 1949, outport *baymen* voted massively for the union while the affluent *townies* of St. John's massed support against. The centuries-long mistrust of outsiders – the English merchant, the French military, the Portuguese and Spanish pirates who illegally trawled the Grand Banks, even the Canadian Confederates of 1869 – had now been placed as secondary to islanders' mistrust of each other.

It is with this commodification in mind that we can recall the term *Newfie* and its casual condescension. In Canada it has been used – one must add by Newfoundlanders, themselves, as well – to describe a kind of *Harlequin* or jester character, a sly, good-natured rube with a coarse accent and a love of music and rum. The term has at last begun to fall out of usage in Newfoundland; but the stereotype persists in Canada, and certain tourist industries in the region persist in presenting this image of the *rubber-boot Newfie* to meet tourist expectations. Newfoundlanders are acutely aware of their status as outsiders in Canada, just as they were, to a somewhat lesser degree, whenever they appealed to Whitehall for assistance throughout the long period of British mercantile dominance.

It can be no surprise, then, that Newfoundland's dramatic literature consistently features an oppositional equation, what might be called the *us vs. them* motif. What makes this rather pedestrian paradigm more remarkable is the shifting nature of who constitutes *otherness*. Within the tight-knit community of a Newfoundland outport is a complex web of dyadic relationships which not only intertwine and provide a fabric for community life, but which feature the fissures in that life, providing, if you will, the definition and terms of censure for belonging.

Outsiders seldom choose to be outsiders. When this status, or lack of status, has been so designated, however, perhaps the most positive response, in terms of the discourse of survival, is to call yourself an *insider*. This creates the need for *others*, those who can aid a people in demarcating their ethnic, social or geographic boundaries. Nowhere is this more clear than in studies of life in Newfoundland outports – whose very nomenclature indicates their otherness.

Nothing in an outport is more dangerous than a *stranger*. The earliest manifestations of Newfoundland theatre - again, distinct from those of Canada - were entirely devoted to ritualized depictions of strangers. The aim of *mumming*, which has now nearly disappeared from the outports where it was most prevalent, was to disguise *insiders* as *outsiders* as a means of social regulation. Members of the community dress up (generally in the costume of the opposite sex), disguise their faces with pitch or crudely made paper masks, and walk from house to house in a village on nights during the twelve days of Christmas. The behaviour of these *mummers* changes from one community to another but always begins with a knock on the door. In a rural society where members of the community simply enter each others' houses with a verbal salutation, this is a clear signal that outsiders are demanding entry (Halpert and Story [eds], 67). The fact that the Mummers are actually members of the community creates a dyadic obligation for the hosts; the door must be answered.

Mummers then announce, in a frightening, ingressive voice, "Mummers allowed in?" The Mummers enter and sit silently while they are asked questions, until their identity has been successfully ascertained (Halpert et al, 33). At other times they may dance their "special step", giving a further clue to their identity. Nonetheless they remain vaguely threatening. In northern outports the family children have been threatened with "if you're not good the Mummers'll come and take you away" (123).

Reports indicate that, even though each family is well aware that the mummers are members of their community, there is a good deal of unease at allowing these grotesque, strange-talking, nearly silent entities into their homes (70). For good reason; in some communities mumming has been used as a means of settling scores, where the threatening nature of the ritual, with its *feast of fools* quality of the low-status individual temporarily acquiring status over people with *airs*, becomes palpable.

The entire Mumming ritual centres around unmasking the stranger and eliminating the danger a stranger represents. For, while the Mummers, once unmasked, are the most sociable of insiders, and in fact represent the *cooptation* of the outsider, the ritual lays bare the truth which underlies my analysis of Newfoundland and its drama – that the outsider is a fixed figure, which remains regardless of who is chosen to inhabit it; there will always be another stranger, another danger. Mumming lays bare, in its curious way, the implication that the insider in an outport is always at risk of losing his insider status.

Let me introduce a dramatic example of this mentality with one that bridges the macrosocial and microsocial definitions of outsidership.

The two most famous of Newfoundland's playwrights are David French and Michael Cook. Both are regarded as "outsiders" in Newfoundland – French, because while he was born there, moved away when he was six years old; Cook, because he came to the island as mature adult. Interestingly, in recent years it is French, who in every way except actual birth is a Canadian playwright – developed through Tarragon theatre and the Canadian system, a lifelong mainland resident, who has been re-adopted by the burgeoning Newfoundland theatre festival industry as a *native son*. This may have much to do with the fact that his plays

are sentimental reiterations of a mythologised version of Newfoundland history, featuring a hard-done-by people who struggle bravely and with outsized good humour against all manner of off-shore evil, and whose affection and natural generosity are used and abused by others.

Cook, who in his lifetime contributed far more to the actual working life and development of an indigenous Newfoundland theatre (as a playwright based in Newfoundland, a theatre company founder, and a critical essayist of national acclaim), is produced far less frequently. He is regarded with suspicion, primarily because his plays are unsentimental and often brutal depictions of a less attractive trait; Newfoundlanders' predilection for placing blame away from themselves. The plays are not unsympathetic, and are filled with an acute observation of people that can only come from a lifelong passion for a land and its people. However, revealing as they do Newfoundlanders self-mythologisation as a victimised people, they place him, effectively, in an objective position. This exteriorizes Cook and his work – his sense of distance is acknowledged and returned – he is an outsider.

Finally, I will give an example of a single play from the emerging Newfoundland canon, one which places many of these insider-outsider distinctions in full view. That is Young Triffie Been Made Away With by Ray Guy. The fact that it has not been produced since its debut in St. John's by RCA Theatre in 1985 has, perhaps, something to do with the baring of this mode of survival in naked view.

In Triffie, an outport community is torn apart by the discovery of a young girl's body. Ray Guy's principal achievement lies in the savage humour with which he dissects the prejudices and moral rot in an insulated community. Fashioned in the manner of a well-made whodunit, the play mercilessly depicts parochial attitudes and the corruptive nature of tribalism. Triffie stands as a marker of the schism between the urban attitudes of St. John's, where the play was produced, and the outport communities it satirises.

More importantly, Guy's play portrays a Newfoundland society at war with itself - where virtually every character is an outsider. The central trope of the play is that of *the stranger*. A figure common in the social discourse of rural communities across Newfoundland, the stranger is the silent rover, the figure glimpsed – or created – in the area and remembered after any disastrous event has taken place. As I have mentioned, the stranger (in the form of mummies) is used as a means of social control over children, the retribution of being taken from the community in his bag.

In the play's first scene we are introduced to the village doctor and his wife. Both are from mainland Canada. Partly to cope with their confirmed status as outsiders in Swyers Harbour, Dr. Melrose is a confirmed alcoholic; his wife Millie pops pills. A mysterious rash of sheep maimings takes place. The Doctor describes the reaction of the town's postmistress:

Anyway, lordy, but Aunt Millie Bishop was a sight to behold. Couldn't blame her, I suppose. She'd gone out around her henhouse to look for one of her pullets and this...this thing hit her square in the face. It was hanging by the neck with its one unbroken leg pointing straight up at the sky like the finger of doom or something. "The

Stranger” shrieks Aunt Millie. “It was the Stranger done it. I knowed it. I knowed it. I seen him. (Lynde, 108)

Then he adds,

Yeah. The Stranger. Every place comes equipped with a stranger...Lots of people have seen his footprints in the sand or the snow or the mud. But few claim to have ever seen him. (108)

The Pastor of the community, Pastor Pottle, heads an evangelical sect of believers. Another outsider who has come to the outport from away – in this case the next outport up the coast - Pottle has created his own club of “insiders” to combat the ostracisation of the community authorities. Pottle and his flock had targeted Old Man Washbourne as the probable killer of the sheep, and have been barely prevented from storming his isolated hut.

Pottle has a daughter, Tryphenia, who is developmentally delayed. Triffie, by nature of her condition, is also an outsider. She has a single friend, Billy Head, a local boy ostracised not for his unwillingness to speak or his constant desire to shoot things, but for his friendship with the town eccentric, Old Man Washbourne. Washbourne, interestingly, is a local resident – but one with an education and an ascetic streak who has moved his cabin to the edge of town, a physical talisman of his status in the community.

To top off this initial list of outsiders, Ranger Hepditch has been called in to investigate the sheep maimings. Like most members of the provincial Constabulary, he’s based in one town and makes calls as needed to surrounding outports. Hepditch is the only outsider in the play who is nearly free of the constrictions associated with the effort of portraying oneself as an insider. The spectator’s gaze is thus directed through his eyes.

Billy discovers Triffie’s body in the landwash and concludes that she didn’t make away with herself, that “she been made away with”. This discovery accelerates the play’s central action, begun with the news of the sheep maimings. That action revolves around the desperate fight for insider status and the need to identify, and vilify, outsiders as the root causes of evil and unhappiness, as manifested in Triffie’s death.

A new outsider is introduced: the provincial government, based in St. John’s. Melrose dismisses the relevance of the provincial government in a place like Swyers Harbour:

Inform our so-called welfare system? Contact that farce of an orphanage in St. John’s? Pardon me, Sergeant, but lodge a complaint with you? Fine. In six months, perhaps a year’s time, perhaps something might be done. Might. Might. (114)

In this way the outside world is epitomised as an indifferent, benignly malignant entity, a referent for the festering insularity of the outport. Problems will be identified within the community, solutions enacted within the community. The outside world is not relevant to the daily dynamics of Swyers Harbour.

The list of outsiders within the community continues to grow, as, with Triffie's death added to the sheep maimings, panic spreads in the community. In scene four we're introduced to Aunt Millie, the postmistress, who blithely gives her list of possible suspects to the naïve Ranger. The postmistress can be seen, of course, as a guardian against the outside world, formalising and regulating communication, and acting in a censorial capacity. In the play this is exactly how Millie enacts her role. She holds back the Pastor's package of pornography, having checked its contents herself.

But this quintessential insider's status in the community is put at risk by the off-stage presence of her son, Vincent. He is heard, not seen, swearing violently at each of Millie's gentle remonstrations. Vincent has been damaged irrevocably by outsiders. He has returned from the Second World War shell-shocked. Millie keeps him safely away from prying eyes – the kind of judgment which would undermine her insider status. Having become an outsider to her son, whose only words to her are "Fuck Off!" she is desperate to retain her dyadic status in Swyers Harbour.

News arrives that Pastor Pottle has been bugging the children at the orphanage in nearby Whitbourne for years, and Ranger Hepditch goes to the church to pick him up. In a curious and dramatic scene Guy reveals his conscious use of the insider/outsider as the defining motif of the play. Ranger Hepditch enters the church. He sees a man sweeping the floor angrily, muttering to himself, and asks the man if he is Pottle. It is, but Pottle denies it. He is not interested in evading the law, however, so much as his own identity, for in a profane, incoherent rant filled with obscure biblical references, Pottle reveals himself.

Pottle has become an insider of one. Separating himself from his spiritual flock, bleating like a sheep, over and over, he is led away, like a lamb to the slaughter.

The list of suspects matches the expanding number of outsiders. Vincent has run away; it's revealed that Triffie was pregnant, from Billy, who, it turns out, is actually her brother. The imposition of themes of incest and child abuse on top of the other degradations attributed to the characters of Swyers Harbour makes the dramatic structure of the play unwieldy. This especially evident in the finale of the play, when two characters are killed in rapid succession.

But, at least in part, this is Guy's purpose; to take all the recognised conceptions of rural Newfoundland life – not so very different from, say, those attributed to the folk of the Appalachian mountains – and pound them into a mash where no one prejudice rises above the others. Because it's not about prejudice, or justice: it's about who can be culled from the community for its sins. In Swyers Harbour, everyone is guilty and no one admits it; by imposing clichés of rural behaviour Guy appears to be indicting the audience in a similar manner. The objective spectator catches himself nodding at the familiarity of the clichés and, perhaps, distancing herself from them. If they are inappropriate as dramatic structure they are surely inappropriate as measures of any community. In this respect Guy acknowledges, reifies, and heightens the place of the spectator as the outsider. Only as outsiders, in Guy's view, can we gain a measure of objectivity in viewing the actions of others, and ourselves.

The last words of the play, fittingly, belong to Aunt Millie, the inside/outsider:

Oh, Mr. Washbourne, sir, what a goin' on. What a goin' on. And that's the God's truth. Do you think, sir, when them American's goes back home where they come our little community will be the once-tranquil place it used from that...that to be? (141)

In truth, of course, Swyers Harbour, with its mix of strangulating dyadic cords and codes of inclusion, has, like the rest of the island society it represents, never been tranquil. In viewing this example of Newfoundland drama, I hope that in some way we can begin to understand the uniqueness of an insular culture which is, at once, its greatest strength and its most destructive aspect.

Since Confederation with Canada in 1949, Newfoundland has produced a staggering creative output unrivalled, in per capita terms, by any other province or territory. Its theatre, while young, has gradually evolved from the predictable colonial models and narratives to a body of work that continues to define itself and its people in ever more specific terms. As the *Newfie* recedes and the *Newf*, or Newfoundlander, takes his place, a new confidence in artistic expression grows. We may look for cultural signals that this singularly creative people have become less dependent on mythologizing their otherness as a means of survival.

Michael Devine
Nova Scotia/Belgrade, October 2003

Works Cited

1. Ahmed, Sara. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London: Routledge, 2000.
2. Halpert, H., and Story, G.M. (eds.) *Christmas Mummings in Newfoundland*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969.
3. Lynde, Denise (ed.) *Voices From The Landwash*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 1997.
4. Major, Kevin. *As Near Heaven By Sea*. Toronto: Penguin, 2001.
5. Prowse, D.W. *History of Newfoundland*. London: MacMillan, 1895.