

## Theatre Research in Canada Recherches théâtrales au Canada

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**YVETTE NOLAN AND RIC KNOWLES, eds. Performing Indigeneity: New Essays on Canadian Theatre, Volume 6. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2016. 400 pp.**

Bethany Hughes

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pursuit. Perhaps a future volume, or volumes, might fill more holes, or dive deeper into further specific aspects of such an abundant catalogue. For now, the book serves as an excellent overview and resource.

## Notes

- 1 Bak offers that the study of biofiction is “the creative representation of a real person’s life—the auto/biographical works that recount truthful stories in narrative- and dialogue-driven formats; in short, tweaking fact with fiction to make emotional sense of life” (210).
- 2 Bak further illuminates his terms: “Biofiction functions as a narrative historiography that reconstitutes, reorders or reconstructs [...] the biographèmes of a person’s life, those individual moments or photographic impressions that represent discrete fragments of a larger truth” (211).

**YVETTE NOLAN AND RIC KNOWLES, eds.**

***Performing Indigeneity: New Essays on Canadian Theatre, Volume 6.***

Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2016. 400 pp.

BETHANY HUGHES

As part of a series “on Canadian Theatre” and a “companion” to the two-volume anthology of Indigenous plays *Staging Coyote’s Dream*, *Performing Indigeneity* plays its assigned roles well. It situates the specificity of First Nations theatre within a temporal and spatial setting called Canada. It also deepens engagement with the plays and playwrights found in the anthology. But it is not a study guide to Indigenous plays or an exposition on the subject of First Nations theatre. It is part of a constellation of literature that creates, sustains, and imagines a different way of working, a different way of being. Read the book to learn about Indigenous theatre in Canada, but know that in reading it you are invited to take on responsibility for its knowledge and its call for “how we should always work” (Beagan 130). The book becomes what Marrie Mumford (Métis-Chippewa Cree) exemplifies in her essay, “Kippmoojikewin”: the thing(s) we carry with us.

Yvette Nolan (Algonquin/Irish) and Ric Knowles have curated a collection of essays and provided an expansive structure that results in a rich and complex invitation rather than a clearly defined answer. The essays, all written by Indigenous artists and scholars, range from short, personal pieces that trace individual histories within Canadian theatre to lengthy, scholarly analyses of performances, and quite a bit in between. Taken together they are unconcerned with creating a linear history, conveying an Indigenous stamp of approval on any specific play/playwright/theatre, or informing non-Indigenous readers about what to do as allies or advocates. Instead, these essays summon readers into what Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō) calls in the first essay of the book, the “relational operations of responsibility for knowledge” (7). Robinson supplies readers with the opportunity to rehearse and analyze their

own positionality and responsibility as participants in Indigenous sovereignty. A few pages into his essay he simply states, “If you are a non-Indigenous [...] reader please stop reading by the end of this paragraph [...] The next eight pages are sovereign space, written for Indigenous readers” (7). This powerful moment demands readers engage with their own expectations for access, entitlement, and relationship to Indigenous resources. If, as Robinson illustrates, writing and reading can be structured as acts of sovereignty, then *Performing Indigeneity* is an act that claims and defines Indigenous space while inviting readers to participate in its decolonial project.

Some might take this invitation as a prompt to better understand and articulate the relationship between First Nations artists/theatre companies and mainstream Canadian theatrical processes and productions. Essays by Marrie Mumford, Jani Lauzon (Métis), Carol Greyeyes (Muskeg Lake Cree), Tara Beagan (Ntlaka’pamux/Irish Canadian), and Andréa Ledding (northern hemisphere) will be particularly helpful for those whose responsibility for this knowledge will be lived out in classrooms.

Others will live out their participation in a rehearsal room, a production office, or the writing of a grant. For those, the collected wisdom of what it means to work and think and create as Indigenous artists will be of much use. Essays range from what radical shifts are needed for Indigenous actor training (Michael Greyeyes, Plains Cree), why Indigenous comedy is essential (Drew Hayden Taylor, Curve Lake First Nation), what Indigenous-led arts organization best practices might look like (Tara Beagan), to how collaboration/conversation/creation is informed and invigorated by Indigenous artists and Indigenous thought (Starr Muranko, Cree/Métis/German; June Scudeler, Métis; David Geary, Maori/European; and Michelle Olson, Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in). This spectrum of essays provides examples, challenges, and motivation to create a new way of working alongside the creation of new works.

*Performing Indigeneity* also calls readers to a deeper understanding of Indigenous theatre’s impact and import. Tracing Indigenous-created or -led productions, contributions by Jill Carter (Anishinaabe/Ashkenazi), Starr Muranko, Jason Woodman Simmonds (Métis), Michelle La Flamme (Métis/Creek), and Michelle Olson provide thoughtful, nuanced, and complicated analyses of Indigenous performances. Subjects deeply important to First Nations communities — such as creation stories, missing and murdered Indigenous women, the corruption of power, and the disruption of colonial structures — ground these performance analyses and inflect them with the high stakes always present in Indigenous theatre.

The book also stretches an ongoing conversation on the relationship of spirituality to theatre and performance. Ceremony, healing, and spirituality are themes woven within the design of individual essays as well as across the fabric of this book. Rather than seeing essays by Jani Lauzon, Falen Johnson (Mohawk/Tuscarora), or Daniel David Moses (Delaware) as discrete expressions of an Indigenous understanding of performance’s spirituality, the reader is challenged to see how spirituality imbues every performance on individual, communal, and national levels. Theatre is largely, as Andréa Ledding explains in her essay, “the realm of the spiritual and the ceremonial.” It is always an act of diverse people coming together to be “part of something greater than themselves” (144). *Performing Indigeneity* invites theatre artists and scholars to envision and to embrace the spiritual act of theatre, to understand its presence, to respect its power.

This collection of essays is a model of writing Indigenous sovereignty in a way that always attends to the complexity of Indigenous life and always commits to an Indigenous future. The inclusion of multiple artists, multiple nations, multiple perspectives, and multiple essay formats speaks to the diversity that is belied by the unitary term “Indigenous.” This diversity also points to the interconnected though distinct relationships that comprise a web of relations. *Performing Indigeneity* displays and creates connections among its contributors and with its readers. It calls readers to care for, to sustain, to carry with them its knowledge. It is good medicine for it demonstrates and “makes community” (Nolan 2).

## Work Cited

Nolan, Yvette. *Medicine Shows: Indigenous Performance Culture*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2015.

**MARIE-CHRISTINE AUTANT-MATHIEU AND YANA MEERZON, eds.**

***The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov.***

London: Routledge, 2015. 433 pp.

DASSIA N. POSNER

In the words of editors Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu and Yana Meerzon, *The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov* is “an astonishingly comprehensive assessment of [Chekhov’s] life, work, and legacy.” Indeed, this beautifully conceived, expertly written work brilliantly illuminates the significance and development of Chekhov’s art and innovations. Not only is the book edited by two of the world’s leading Chekhov experts, it brings together many of today’s leading voices in Russian theatre and acting pedagogy, focusing on “theatre scholars and practitioners from countries where Chekhov lived and taught” (Russia, Germany, France, Lithuania, the UK, and the US) and “where Chekhov’s ideas are well known and taught today” (Finland, Italy, and Canada) (1).

The twenty-five chapter collection takes a multi-perspectival approach: it aims “to present a comprehensive picture of the historical, theatrical, and cultural contexts” (2) of Chekhov’s acting system and legacy in order to more fully reveal the depth and sophistication of his innovations. The book ably demonstrates the relevance of his teachings and creative work to theatrical experimentation that extends beyond psychological realism. Chekhov, after all, deals in those aspects of theatre that are intangible yet essential: atmosphere, the imagination, energy, the soul. Chekhov’s psychophysical system both replenishes and draws from the actor’s spiritual and imaginative wellspring; in the words of the editors, it “free[s] the mind and body, opening [the actor] up to experiment and the joy of creativity” (11).

The book is thoughtfully arranged in four sections. The first, “Michael Chekhov in context: theory, practice, pedagogy,” illuminates Chekhov’s central influences and ideas, ranging from his First Studio origins to anthroposophy to the psychological gesture. The second, “Michael Chekhov on stage: collaborations and encounters” features several chapters that