

Theatre Research in Canada Recherches théâtrales au Canada

Ric Knowles “Performing the Intercultural City”

Charlotte McIvor

Volume 40, Number 1-2, 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1068267ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068267ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama, University of Toronto

ISSN

1196-1198 (print)

1913-9101 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McIvor, C. (2019). Review of [Ric Knowles “Performing the Intercultural City”].
Theatre Research in Canada / Recherches théâtrales au Canada, 40(1-2), 172–175.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1068267ar>

ongoing legal case of bone repatriation involving the Kumeyaay nation and the University of California, San Diego. In juxtaposing these performances, Burelle relies on Chadwick Allen's trans-indigenous methodology to show how Indigenous practices of ancestor repatriation echo each other across the continent. From this analysis Burelle develops the concept of "performative repatriables," a trans-indigenous performative strategy through which remains as well as living bodies render visible Indigenous mourning, presence and epistemologies.

The encounters analyzed in the book expose the current conditions of settler-state violence—be it objective, subjective or systemic—that sustain Canada's and Quebec's colonial projects. While Burelle avoids any hopeful optimism, many of these case studies "labor to imagine an alternate future that is predicated on decolonization" (17), and in her analysis, Burelle offers a concrete (and cautious) example of how to participate in decolonial projects as settler scholars.

KNOWLES, RIC

Performing the Intercultural City.

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017, 274 pp.

CHARLOTTE MCIVOR

Ric Knowles' eagerly anticipated *Performing the Intercultural City* continues and expands the work began by his succinct but enormously impactful 2010 *Theatre & Interculturalism*. In it Knowles issued a clarion call for scholars and practitioners to reimagine intercultural performance practices as emerging most importantly "from below" (79) and driven by artists of colour from migrant and diasporic backgrounds living in urban centres, not by elite (white) Western auteur practitioners.

In retrospect, *Theatre & Interculturalism* was the tipping point into a "new" wave of intercultural performance theory which emphasizes the processual and centralizes migrant, diasporic and/or artists of colour as the key grassroots drivers of constantly evolving hybrid performance practices which test and politicize the evolving and contested nature of "cultural" identities of individuals and/or groups. *Theatre & Interculturalism* was indeed swiftly followed by Knowles' 2011 co-edited special issue of *Theatre Journal* with Penny Farfan on "Rethinking Intercultural Performance" which extended this turn through the voices of other scholars including Daphne P. Lei, Leo Cabranes-Grant and Diana Looser among others whose influential articles in this issue further cemented the proliferation of methodologies and theoretical frameworks associated with this new intercultural turn. Since then, book-length studies pushing at the limits and possibilities of Knowles' new interculturalism have consistently appeared including Royona Mitra's *Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism* (2015), Leo Cabranes-Grant's *From Scenarios to Networks: Performing the Intercultural in Colonial Mexico* (2016) and my own, *Migration and Performance in Contemporary Ireland: Towards A New Interculturalism* (2016).

Nevertheless, Knowles' book-length realization of his vision for a new interculturalism which illuminates the work of a thrilling range of theatremakers of colour and/or from

Indigenous backgrounds significantly advances the developing debates catalyzed in large part by his concise 2010 vision. In addition to his incisive yet accessible theoretical and materialist rigor throughout *Performing the Intercultural City*, Knowles also has the advantage of working with one of the world's most deeply embedded and vibrant racially and ethnically diverse body of theatre practitioners (most from backgrounds of migration) in Toronto, an advantage and opportunity that he uses to scaffold the book's methodological approach.

Building on *Theatre & Interculturalism's* final turn towards the work of Toronto-based artists, Knowles' *Performing the Intercultural City* performs an even more comprehensive mapping of what he terms the "performance ecology" of Toronto: "the complex ecosystem that is constituted by a city's shifting network of 'actors'-performers, performances, institutions, artists, administrators, and audiences-organised variously into companies, caucuses, committees and communities" (5). Knowles acknowledges Toronto as both exceptional and indicative of contemporary globalized experiences of identity. As he outlines, Toronto is claimed to be "the world's most multicultural city" and the "first country in the world to legislate, however problematically, a policy of official multiculturalism" as well as "the third most active theatre centre in the English-speaking world" (2). But although Toronto may be able to claim so many distinctive attributes, the widespread racial and ethnic diversity and often mixed backgrounds (racially, ethnically *and* culturally) of its residents do more widely index what Ted Cantle has named as a contemporary global condition of 'superdiversity' in his own UK-based 2012 study of interculturalism within civil society. Knowles therefore uses the microdynamics of Toronto's unique performance ecology over time (as well as the experiences of individual artists and companies within this setting) to argue for the methodological tools and theoretical perspectives necessary today for an examination of the intermeshed and unstable relationship between culture, nation, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, indigeneity, diaspora, and postcoloniality under the designation of interculturalism.

Furthermore, by using "performance ecology" as a framing device, Knowles not only maps the longitudinal post-1980s efforts of Toronto-based theatre artists of colour from an array of cultural backgrounds (including Filipino Canadian, Asian Canadian, Caribbean Canadian, African Canadian and/or Indigenous) but provides a compelling methodological framework that can productively be extended to other future contexts of study. Knowles' unavowedly materialist approach also carefully indexes collaborative relationships and partnerships that develop between individuals and companies over time, even outlining these in two comprehensive appendixes which serve as an invaluable resource to readers: "The Intercultural Performance Ecology of Toronto" and "List of Artists." It is also a "multi-sited ethnography" (3), drawing on Knowles' professional work as a dramaturge with many of the companies that he builds his case studies around including Aluna Theatre, Cahoots Theatre Company, Carlos Bulosan Theatre, the Chocolate Woman Collective, Factory Theatre, fu-GEN Asian Canadian Theatre, and Modern Times Theatre and extensive interviews with theatre practitioners, as well as a deeply rigorous understanding of Canadian law and arts policy and funding structures over time.

The book is divided into three sections: "Contexts," "Dramaturgies," and "Mediations." In "Contexts," Knowles makes the case for how the intercultural productively reworks what he views to be the atomizing and backwards-looking effects of official multicultural policies in Canada. For Knowles, one of the major differences between the multi- and inter-cultural is the latter's potential to make visible how "individual gendered, raced, and classed subjectivities and community

identities within the multicultural city are not just reflected in, or given voice by, but are *constituted through* performance” (24). But Knowles’ faith in the performative as a site for the reconstitution of individual and group identities is always balanced by deep material analysis of how official Canadian multiculturalism’s funding, policy, and capitalist trends, such as “appropriating multiculturalism in the service of globalization” (36), limited and shaped the aesthetic approaches that have been most compelling in terms of artists’ consideration of the sustainability of their companies and practices and the overall reception of their work over time. A move away from multiculturalism towards *interculturalism* according to Knowles rejects “protection and preservation” in favour of the dynamic “growth and development of minoritized cultural practices” (44), an argument he defends through examples from the work of South Asian Canadian playwright/performer Anita Majumdar, Filipina Canadian playwright Catherine Hernandez (working with fu-GEN Asian Canadian Theatre Company) and Moroccan Canadian playwright Ahmed Ghazali (working with Modern Times Stage Company and Cahoots Theatre Company). The “Dramaturgies” section features Knowles revealing the deep processes and negotiations involved in forging intercultural dramaturgies in the rehearsal room between company members of the Filipino Canadian Carlos Bulosan Theatre Collective, and individual productions including Guna/Rappahannock playwright-performer Monique Mojica’s *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*, Mojica and Choctaw artist and scholar LeAnne Howe’s *Side Show Freaks and Circus Injuns*. In contrast, he follows the trajectory of individual African-Canadian artists Cudjoe, Spencer, mandiola and d’bi.young antirika over time, focusing on the development of dub theatre as an “evolving, womanist Afro-Caribbean tradition in Toronto” that is “empowering, ‘womban-centered’ and ‘revolushunary” (2017, 126). The final section, “Mediations,” takes a fully company centered approach in each chapter covering Modern Times, Aluna Theatre and Cahoots respectively. Knowles approaches “mediations” as firstly, a term that can refer to aesthetic frameworks (Modern Times’ critical and non-Western centric engagement of modernist theatrical genealogies and Aluna’s intermedial “signature production” *Nobayquiesepa* (*No One Knows*)) (152) and secondly, discursive interventions as he traces Chinese Trinidadian Canadian Beverley Yhap’s leadership in diversity debates within and beyond Canadian performance ecologies as founder of Cahoots.

Ultimately, *Performing the Intercultural City* comprehensively rehearses the possibilities of new interculturalisms from below through an invaluable detailing of an incredibly rich contemporary performance archive and set of living practices. And beyond its implications for intercultural performance theory, this is a work that serves as a crucial object lesson for our field in the methodological depth, flexibility and rigor that should be more widely practiced in the study of contemporary performance practices. I make this claim not only because Knowles spends significant time interviewing, observing, and in many cases working as a dramaturge with the companies he writes about over decades, but also because of the deep ethical reflexivity that he practices throughout the book and which undergirds the project as a whole. Central to this is his conviction following Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson’s “Indigenous Research Paradigm” that his research must “benefit the community” (16). Knowles’ centralization of Indigenous research ethics and methodologies is an approach that should be productively taken up more widely within theatre and performance studies albeit with the dialogical care and depth that he practices here.

Finally, while *Performing the Intercultural City* primarily focuses on what new intercultural theatre practice should look like in process, context and over time, it is important to stress

that the visionary contributions of the aesthetically and formally diverse theatremakers, playwrights, performers, administrators, scenographers and/or artistic directors profiled in this book should register as significant not *only* because they help us understand new interculturalism. Rather, *Performing the Intercultural City* also makes a rich archive of reflection and analysis on these Canadian theatre practitioners available to international audiences. I can only hope that this book's impact indeed concretely benefits the community depicted within these pages as Knowles envisions, leading to more well-deserved opportunities for touring, dialogue and sustained scholarly study for these intrepid theatre practitioners.

**MAKARYK, IRENA R.,
AND KATHRYN PRINCE, EDS.
*Shakespeare in Canada: Remembrance of
Ourselves.***

Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2017, 270 pp.

WES D. PEARCE

As noted in the introduction, “[t]his collection is the final fruit of a [University of Ottawa] project marking the four-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare’s death,” (11) and this collection of essays was primarily drawn from the Shakespeare + Canada symposium held at the University of Ottawa in April 2016. It is not surprising that the essays within, approach and situate both Shakespeare AND Canada from a wide range of disciplines, critical lenses, and theoretical positions. While the organizational structure is not always clear, *Shakespeare in Canada* is an approachable and engaging collection that demonstrates the deep connections between Canada and the Bard of Avon.

Not surprisingly, Stratford, Ontario and The Stratford Festival (or The Stratford Shakespeare Festival or The Shakespeare Festival or The Stratford Shakespearean Festival) plays an important role in about half of the essays. Like the anthology itself, these essays are diverse in content and approach and range from Ian Rae’s revisionist look at the history of Stratford (pre- Tom Patterson) and especially the importance of J. D. Barnett and his massive library, to essays by Kailin Wright and Don Moore that critically explore the fictional New Burbage Festival in CBC’s popular “Slings and Arrows” television series and Troni Y Grande’s close reading of the role of the mythic Canadian Stratford (and Shakespeare Festival) in Alice Munro’s “Tricks.” Although vastly different in subject matter these essays speak to aspects of Stratford and/or the Stratford Festival as part of the public imagination. A number of essays are focused on close readings of productions: C.E. McGee’s analysis of a number of productions of *The Merchant of Venice* (with special attention to the ever-changing portrayals and meanings of Portia, Shylock and Jessica) and Robert Ormsby’s critical examination of Leon Rubin’s intercultural productions. Peter Kuling’s insightful essay in this vein examines how