

Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia

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Canadian Theatre History

The First Theatre

Aboriginal peoples were performing rituals and dramas as part of ceremonies and celebrations hundreds of years before Europeans came to the shores of the "New World." Indeed the [Aboriginal Theatre](#) we see today, such as [Tomson Highway's](#) plays, is often based on Native mythology.

First European Theatre

Theatre historian, [David Gardner](#) believes that European theatre came to Canada with Sir Humphrey Gilbert and "a little company of mummers" in 1583, predating Marc Lescarbot' production of *Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France* on November 14, 1606. Samuel de Champlain, in Port Royal (in what is now [Nova Scotia](#)) organized a social club called L'Ordre de Bon Temps and it was through the Ordre that Lescarbot mounted his entertainment, performed by members of the French colony disguised as natives and mythological beings. The purpose of the event was to celebrate the return of the colony's founders from a dangerous expedition. The site of the colony and the production was abandoned in 1607 and there is no other mention of theatrical activity until 1640, though it is more than likely that light-hearted entertainments were presented as a part of colonial life.

The Neptune Inn, Quebec City, in the 18th century; the kind of gathering place which served as this country's earliest theatrical venues (National Archives)



The Neo-Classics in the New World

It is impossible to separate cleanly the rise of English-language and French-language drama in Canada, as the theatrical traditions are similar, and sometimes the English performed in French and vice versa, as is still the case in Canadian theatre to this day. What can be said absolutely is that the writers who were beginning to have an effect in Britain and France had an effect on the early theatre in Canada. They were, specifically, [Molière](#) and [Shakespeare](#), but also Corneille and Racine. The literary styles, too, were reflected in early Canadian drama: the heroic epic, for instance, appeared in early works immortalizing the Battle of the Plains of Abraham.

What is also clear is that Canadian theatre was born of amateurs. It was not until decades after the founding of the colonies that professional actors began to arrive from Europe and the thirteen colonies. By then a tradition of performing entertainments and theatricals had been established in both the English and French colonies. The early productions were acted by a wide cross-section of the two societies, from soldiers to tradesmen and merchants. The earliest production of an original play in English, *Acadius; or Love in a Calm*, took place in Halifax in 1774. The Halifax garrison had plays as early as 1788 with Sheridan's *School for Scandal*; the cast included officers and boys in the women's roles. The garrison had a theatre building in 1789 with *The Merchant of Venice* as its first outing.

The clergy soon stifled the growth of French language theatre in the New Land. This is ironic as the schools, controlled by the church, had performed plays as part of the curriculum and as a way to maintain ties to the motherland and language. Much more powerful in the colonies than they were in Europe, the clergy had no difficulty in banning

performances of works by Molière, especially for his attacks on the clergy in plays like *Tartuffe*. In one famous incident in 1693-94, Governor Frontenac was bribed by Bishop Saint-Vallier not to perform this infamous work. Saint-Vallier went on to ban theatre across the board.

After the British Conquest, Molière was once again staged in the New World, in French, by British soldiers! This was also the beginning of the theatrical societies that saw soldiers and civilians working together to mount productions. By the 1780s, two groups, Allen's Company of Comedians and [Les Jeunes Messieurs Canadiens](#), were performing in Canada. Both were performing Molière, and Allen's Company was mounting Shakespeare as well. In the 1789-90 season they were co-ordinating dates.

Grand Opera House, Dawson City (source: Chad Evans. *Frontier Theatre*. Sono Nis Press: Victoria, 1983; Yukon Archives)

Building Theatres

The Protestant and Catholic churches were still not supportive of theatre; they likened the theatres being built to brothels. However, in Central and Atlantic Canada, plays were performed wherever they could be, including in taverns, usually with all-male casts. In Halifax, the soldiers built the New Grand Theatre which opened in 1789 with a production of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. Charlottetown had a theatre soon afterwards, as did Saint John.

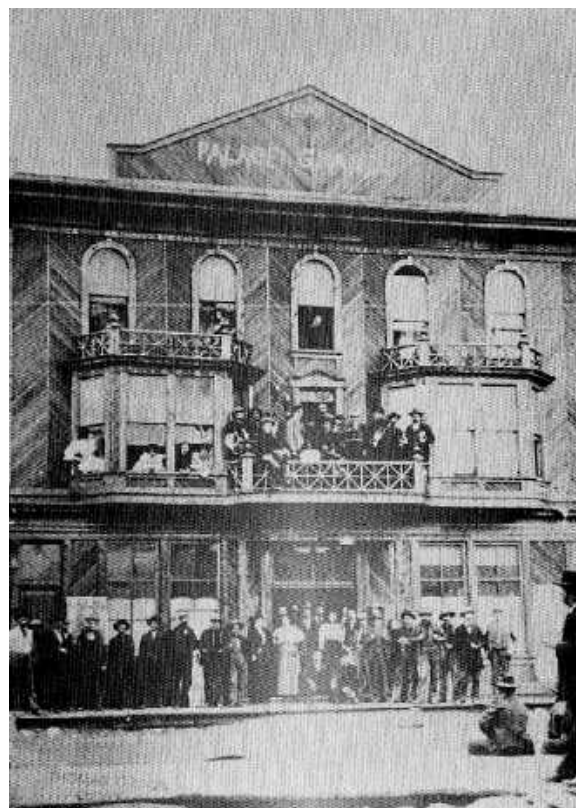
The first buildings devoted to performing arts in Central Canada were the [Theatre Royal](#) in Montreal and the Royal Circus - soon renamed Theatre Royal as well -- in Quebec City (both built in 1825). Almost immediately travelling companies from France were making their appearance and piquing the church. With the building of railway systems, it became more and more viable for foreign troupes to visit Canada, and a kind of cultural imperialism (coupled with élitist snobbery) kept the rising of a distinct, national theatrical character in abeyance.

Style of Plays

Along with European artists came the European political dissenters, and soon the influence of the clergy was weakening even more as the theatre was becoming a tool of politics, as was also the case in Europe. It now had three broad categories: religious/instructional, political and entertainment. The first category was maintained more in the expanding francophone religious school system, especially among the Jesuits (who were always slightly more liberal than other Catholic orders). Political drama -- again mostly francophone -- also came in the form of speechmaking; tracts would be published in the political journals, sometimes in dramatic form, and were meant to be read aloud at meetings (as, it is estimated, only 5% of the population could read). Entertainment arrived (as it still does) from the United States in the form of travelling troupes performing melodramas and circuses like American John B. Ricketts' troupe which played Montreal and Quebec City in 1797 and 1798.

Playwrights

Whether writing for those who feared God, for the politically astute, or for the broad masses, local dramatists owed much of what they wrote to European tradition and the Bible: Eliza Lanesford Cushing's blank verse Biblical drama, *Esther* (1838), and [Charles Heavysege's](#) *Saul* (1857); [Louis Frechette's](#) patriotic epic *Félix Poutré* (1860). However, political dissent was alive and well in French and English with Frechette's play about Papineau and satirical works like Hugh Scobie's *Provincial Drama Called the Family Compact* (1839).



Amateur actors became dissatisfied with the neo-classical repertory and began to engage more local writers. There was one notable case, Félix-Gabriel Marchand, who actually went on to become Premier of Quebec (1897-1900). His best-known play, *Les Faux Brillants*, set in Quebec of the 1880s, was performed to great success and revived several times. French boulevard farce was also imported and adapted for Quebec audiences.

In English Canada, the end of the 1800s saw more and more subjects that pertained directly to the audiences. Although going to the theatre was still an elitist activity (more so than in Quebec), the plays began to focus on local events and persons, including Tecumseh and Laura Secord as well as the Sieur de Roberval. William Wilfred Campbell, still heavily influenced by Shakespeare, wrote about Dollard des Ormeaux.

Even though foreigners were still coming to show Canadians how it should "really be done," they sometimes acted as a catalyst for local ingenuity. For example Sarah Bernhardt's tours at the end of the century vitalized the nascent star-system, and inspired many writers who had not considered writing for the stage before.

Theatre was still a mostly polite affair with some interesting exceptions: an 1860 race riot in Victoria when Blacks pushed their way into seats reserved for whites in Victoria's Colonial Theatre (See [Documents of Interest - Theatre in Victoria, c. 1850](#)); and a performance in High River, Alberta in 1902 that ended with egg-throwing from the audience. It was anomalies like these that the churches seized upon. The bishops of Quebec railed against Bernhardt, the reverends of Ontario talked about the scenes they were seeing on the boards that would, said Rev. J.P. Silcox in 1883, "cause even the Sodomites to blush, and stop their ears for shame." Despite the venom, the social elite like Lady Dufferin and Earl Grey supported the theatre in the form of contests and sponsored entertainments.

Earl and Lady Grey attend the theatre (National Archives)

The late 1800s saw a boom in theatre construction in cities across the country; forty theatres with a seating capacity of over 1000 were opened between 1873 and 1892, now linked by a rail system. These theatres hosted productions by companies working a theatre circuit, particularly the Walker circuit, which originated in Winnipeg. Professional residential stock companies were also established in cities like Edmonton and Winnipeg.

In [Quebec](#) at the end of the century, unperformed plays began to be published. From 1868-1900, of 116 plays published, only 40 had been performed.



The Golden Age

Though theatres were very active at the beginning of the twentieth century, hosting foreign actors and companies, and even some local actors, it took two world wars, radio and television for Canadians to begin to insist on a vision of themselves in the theatres. Though there was activity in community theatre across the country, much of this was in the form of productions of plays from abroad. However, theatre artists like [Merrill Denison](#) were working in Canadian radio dramas (and later television) while they worked for free in the community and university theatres (like [Hart House Theatre](#)) in the evening.

It was in these community theatres and drama competitions like the [Dominion Drama Festival](#)) that Canadian theatre was established through the training of actors and writers who would go on to champion a true made-in-Canada theatre. Theatre activists initiated drama programs in the universities, and toured productions to smaller centres -- notably [Elizabeth Sterling Haynes](#), for whom Edmonton's theatre awards, the [Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Awards \(Sterling Awards\)](#) are named, who also co-founded the [Banff Centre for the Arts](#). [Gwen Pharis Ringwood](#)'s first play, *The Dragons of Kent* was produced here in 1935.

Theatre educator, [Herman Voaden](#), introduced what he believed to be a style of theatre which expressed the spirit of the Canadian "North" --"symphonic expressionism". Other artists also worked towards the creation of an indigenous

theatre: [Dora Mavor Moore](#) founded the [New Play Society](#) with actors and playwrights [John Coulter](#), [Lister Sinclair](#), [Mavor Moore](#)).

In Quebec, [Père \(Father\) Émile Legault](#) founded [Compagnons de Saint-Laurent](#), with [Jean Gascon](#), [Denise Pelletier](#), and [Jean-Louis Roux](#)); and a strange little character in a Montreal Canadiens sweater was heralding the birth of yet another kind of theatre: [Fridolin](#), a creation of [Gratien Gélinas](#), begot [Tit-Coq](#) (1948), which is considered by many critics to mark the birth of modern Quebec theatre. The Montreal theatre company, [Comédie-Canadienne](#) also hosted the works of playwrights like [Marcel Dubé](#) and [Françoise Loranger](#)). [Le Théâtre du Nouveau Monde](#) , Quebec's leading classical theatre, was founded in Montreal in 1951.

The [Stratford Festival](#) began in a tent in 1953 with a mandate to produce the works of Shakespeare, and morphing into a multifarious producer of musicals, and more recently of Canadian works.

Regional and alternative theatres

By the late 1950s and 1960s regional theatres were established in major urban centres across the country – the [Manitoba Theatre Centre](#) (1958), [Arts Club Theatre](#) (1958), [Neptune Theatre](#) (1963), [Vancouver Playhouse](#) (1963), [Citadel Theatre](#) (1965), [Globe Theatre](#) (1966), [Theatre New Brunswick](#) (1968), [Theatre Calgary](#) (1968).

[Alternative and experimental theatres](#) sprang up in English Canada: [Toronto Workshop Productions/TWP](#) (1959), [Theatre Passe Muraille](#) (1968), [Factory Theatre](#) (1970); and in French Canada ([L'Égrégore](#), [L'Équipe](#)), focusing on the development of new Canadian plays, often using documentary form and [collective creation](#).

Canada's Centennial in 1967 spurred more support for Canadian playwriting and production, including plays by [George Ryga](#), [James Reaney](#), and [John Herbert](#). In 1968, [Michel Tremblay's](#) [Les Belles-soeurs](#) premiered in Montreal, introducing joul to Quebec theatre.

In the 1970s, small theatres with a mandate to develop and produce Canadian plays appeared in every province. [Tarragon Theatre](#), founded by [Bill Glassco](#) and his wife Jane in 1971 supported individual playwrights, such as [David French](#), [David Freeman](#), [Michel Tremblay](#) in translations by Glassco and [John Van Burek](#), [Carol Bolt](#), [Sharon Pollock](#), [Erika Ritter](#), [Allan Stratton](#), [Judith Thompson](#), and [Jason Sherman](#). Also in 1971, [John Gray](#) and [Larry Lillo](#) founded [Tamahnous Theatre](#) in Vancouver; [Toronto Free Theatre](#) began producing experimental works by [Tom Hendry](#), [Martin Kinch](#), and [John Palmer](#); and [Andras Tahn](#) and other graduates from the University of Saskatchewan founded [25th Street Theatre](#) in Saskatoon. In the Maritimes in 1972, [Chris Brookes](#) and [Lynn Lunde](#) began the [Mummers Troupe](#), and [Evelyn Garbary](#), [Tom Miller](#) and [Sara Lee Lewis](#) founded the [Mermaid Theatre](#), a puppet theatre for Young Audiences, in Nova Scotia. That same year, in Alberta, [Douglas Riske](#) and [Lucille Wagner](#) founded [Alberta Theatre Projects](#) as a theatre for young audiences, which evolved into a thriving regional theatre, developing and producing new works in its [playRites](#) festival. Calgary's [Pumphouse Theatre](#) was created from the remains of an historic municipal pumphouse. In 1973, the [Manitoba Theatre Workshop](#), which became [Prairie Theatre Exchange](#) began producing new works; and the [Blyth Festival](#) launched a summer season in a small Ontario town. [Théâtre populaire d'Acadie](#) was founded in New Brunswick in 1974. The following year witnessed the opening of several companies: [Théâtre Expérimental de Montréal](#) (later [Nouveau Théâtre Expérimental](#)); [Theatre Network](#) and [Northern Light Theatre](#) in Edmonton; [Belfry Theatre](#) in Victoria; [Great Canadian Theatre Company](#) in Ottawa; [Carbone 14](#) in Montreal. 1978 saw the beginnings of [Theatresports](#) in Calgary, [Workshop West Theatre](#) in Edmonton, [Rising Tide Theatre](#) in St. John's, and [Nakai Theatre](#) in Whitehorse.

Social action popular theatres have also played an important role in Canada's theatre history, underscoring a strong socio-political preoccupation in Canadian plays. In 1977, [Catalyst Theatre](#) was initiated by graduate students from the University of Alberta and Professor David Barnet. [Ground Zero Productions](#) (1984) has worked with organized labour and community organizations to effect social change. In 1979, [Nightwood Theatre](#) introduced a strong feminist portfolio of plays; and [Buddies in Bad Times](#) a queer agenda.

Canadian plays scored major popular successes across the country in 1978 and 1979: *Billy Bishop Goes to War* enjoyed a national tour and several revivals with the original cast and creators, [John Gray](#) and [Eric Peterson](#); *Maggie and Pierre*, conceived and acted by [Linda Griffiths](#) brought the story of Canada's Prime Minister Trudeau and his wayward wife to the attention of the world.

By the 1980s, plays by [George F. Walker](#) and Sharon Pollock were produced across Canada and abroad, as the plays which represented the new alternative have moved into established regional theatres and into theatres in Britain, Europe, the United States and beyond. Companies such as [Necessary Angel](#) (1981) and [Théâtre Repère](#) (1982) experimented with productions in found spaces, and with innovative theatrical forms. *Da da kamera* (1986) brought [Daniel MacIvor](#)'s extraordinary monologues and psychological conundrums to the public eye.

In Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver, theatres dedicated to the development of works by and about Canada's diverse cultural population were founded, such as [Black Theatre Workshop](#) (1972), [Teesri Duniya Theatre](#) (1981), [Cahoots Theatre Projects](#) (1986), [Obsidian Theatre Company](#) (2000), [fu-GEN Asian-Canadian Theatre Company](#) (2002), and [Newworld Theatre](#) (1994). Visible minority theatre artists dramatize their distinctiveness through their stories of origin and immigration, exploring their interaction or collision with mainstream society.

[Aboriginal theatre](#) is also reaching a wide audience in Canada and abroad through the works of [Tomson Highway](#), [Monique Mojica](#), [Daniel David Moses](#), [Drew Hayden Taylor](#), [Marie Clements](#), [Kenneth T. Williams](#), and many others.

The [Fringe movement](#), a hotbed of new play development originating in Edmonton, has spread across the country.

Every year, new indie theatre companies are created by graduates from Canada's theatre programs in colleges and universities, most with "cutting edge" mandates, and courageous, talented actors, directors, and designers. Canadian drama has many forms, styles, and stories.

Other history articles in the Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia on the WWW: [Alberta](#), [British Columbia](#), [Manitoba](#), [New Brunswick](#), [Newfoundland](#), [Northern Territories Theatre](#), [Nova Scotia](#), [Ontario](#), [Prince Edward Island](#), [Quebec](#), [Saskatchewan](#).

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