



Visiting Newfoundland/Photo credit: Nell Leyshon

Is my foot wet? The New Found Lands Project

Introduction

Between 2005 and 2007 Forest Forge Theatre Company (FF), an Arts Council England funded rural touring company based in Hampshire, UK, and Theatre Newfoundland and Labrador (TNL), a company with a base in Corner Brook which produces an annual summer theatre festival, organized a series of artistic exchanges called *New Found Lands*. These exchanges involving directors, designers and writers culminated in the commission, and world premiere, of two thematically linked one-act dramas. The plays *Winter*, and *One Foot Wet* written by award winning playwrights Nell Leyshon (UK) and Robert Chafe (Canada) were performed in both countries, and were the playwrights' responses to the communities they *visited* rather than their homelands. In addition to the two commissioned works FF also produced the European premier of Chafe's supernatural drama *Butler's Marsh* (2004) whilst TNL presented a rehearsed reading of Leyshon's exploration of the

legacy of BSE, the so called ‘mad cow’ disease, in her play *The Farm* (2003). This paper explores my view as a participant within this collaborative arts project, in my role as Artistic Director of FF.

The research methodology used to underpin the interpretation of events is qualitative and based within the model of phenomenological inquiry, an approach through which “knowledge and creation come from the moment of doing” (Kozel, 2010: 142). Phenomenological inquiry respects the assertion that “what we think, what we have read, what we generally hold to be true, all bump into the moment of encounter with life, and with other beings breathing, moving and speaking in the world” (Kozel, 2010: 142). The commissioned plays are also subjected to close reading which offers the definition “to guess or otherwise extrapolate by conjecture or speculation” (Wolfreys, 2000: vii). The interpretations are consequently both personal, and subjective.

Shared histories/ lost narratives

Stuart Hall suggests in his essay *The local and the global: Globalization and ethnicity* that the English suffer from a “process of historical amnesia” (Hall, 1997: 173). During the era of the British Empire, when gazing upon what he refers to as the “colonized other” (1997: 174), the “all encompassing English eye” (1997:174) was able to see but did so without achieving self-awareness, and the lack of recognition that British colonialists did so through the lens of ethnicity. He goes on to suggest that Englishness as a cultural identity during this period defined itself in the negative, by what it was not, as much as by what it was. Yet filtering the English identity through the narrative of emigration, and mixing in the issue of birth outside the mother country, swiftly blurs these certainties. Flash forward a few short generations and we, understandably, find that the ancestors of English emigrants to Canada have for the most part succumbed to Herman Voaden’s acid test of identity outlined in a planned article for the *Canadian Forum* in 1930:

The unifying thing in Canada, in Canadianism, is our background. When our people belong to it, where they accept it and live from it, where they are content with it and do not yearn for other lands, be they England, Ireland, Russia they are our people. They are Canadians. (Cited in Wagner, 2004)

Yet in spite of this comforting, and perhaps somewhat complacent, assertion there are additionally within the North American continent regions and/or peoples who for linguistic, historic, or other reasons see themselves as heterodox, as running counter to the accepted cultural hegemony. Indeed to a degree one might apply Hall's identity by negation, or opposition, to Canada itself since its nationals so often identify themselves as not being from the USA.

Although, as Voaden states, Canadians may no longer yearn for other lands, many remain connected via familial narratives to countries with different traditions, languages and histories. It is almost as if these immigrant Canadians themselves are living palimpsests containing the ghost image of their point of cultural origin. This individual historicity explains the desire evidenced by many North Americans to identify, and retrace, the paths their ancestors followed. The retracing of familial experience can be seen as the emigrant's counterbalance to the aforementioned amnesia Hall identifies in those who have remained in the 'mother country'. In 2004 I was made aware of my own blinkered vision in this regard as a consequence of attending a performance of Robert Chafe's *Tempting Providence* during its tour to the county of Dorset in England's West Country¹. This exceptional play, celebrating the life of Nurse Myra Bennett (known as the Florence Nightingale of the North), has carried Newfoundland's TNL theatre company around the globe offering audiences perceptive and moving insights into this island's people and culture. However, it was only following a conversation in the bar with one of the actors, whose family had roots in the Dorset area, that I discovered our two regions share historical, and cultural connections going back almost five hundred years.²



Playwright Robert Chafe/Photo credit: Nell Leyshon

What had been apparent to me whilst watching the production were the remarkable similarities between the dialect spoken by the actors, and the native speech patterns of my native West-Country. Somerset, Dorset and Hampshire's local dialects share late West-Saxon antecedents rooted in the language of the court of King Alfred the Great, and owe more in some respects to standard German than standard British English. The sound of these influences in the mouths of Canadians was as unexpected as it was intriguing. The TNL actor told me that over eighty percent of the English emigrants to Newfoundland were drawn from the West-Country, and that most of them passed through the ports of Christchurch in Hampshire³ or Poole in Dorset on their way to the 'New World'. I also discovered that the accent and the islanders' rural lifestyle have often made them the subjects of pejorative ethnic stereotyping. The same is true of England's West-Country its modes of speech have long been the subject of 'humorous' objectification in caricatures of foolish farmers and lusty swains strewn throughout the literary and dramatic canon. As someone who suffered from this metro-centric prejudice early in my acting career, and was forced to conceal the vowel sounds natural to the county of my birth, this commonality of experience made me determined to recover

from my own ‘historical amnesia’ and to attempt to find out more about Britain’s first overseas colony and its inhabitants. It was a later conversation with Dorset based playwright Nell Leyshon which provided a mechanism to do so. Leyshon has done more than any other contemporary British playwright to challenge metropolitan attitudes towards rural society. Her first stage play *The Farm* was described by the *Daily Telegraph* as “a plea from the heart of the countryside” (Spencer, 2001) whilst *Comfort Me With Apples*, which won the Evening Standard Award “effectively punctures pastoral myths [with its] dark, poetic, intensity” (Billington, 2005) and provided Londoners with the first serious drama to feature actors using Somerset accents/dialect.

Whilst visiting FF, in her capacity as the company’s Literary Manager during this period, Leyshon mentioned to me that she was considering writing a drama based around West Country emigration to Newfoundland. Six months later we found ourselves in the restaurant of the Shallow Bay motel in Cow Head sitting opposite Robert Chafe, and TNL’s Artistic Director Jeff Pitcher, eating fisherman’s brewis⁴. The visit, which we quickly dubbed our theatrical blind-date, was the first in a two part exchange which would subsequently see the TNL team visit FF, and was supported by joint bids to our respective arts councils to explore the potential for future artistic collaboration. Cow Head, a hamlet on the West Coast of Newfoundland, is home to the Gros Morne Theatre Festival which takes place annually throughout the summer months and is managed by TNL. FF is located in Ringwood, a small county town on Hampshire’s border with Dorset that provides the base for the company’s touring circuit to small villages throughout the South West of England. Although the Gros Morne Festival relies on the influx of summer visitors as the core of their audience, the primary focus of their dramaturgy is drawn from their local community. The same is true for FF. We were all determined at the outset that there should be some genuine synchronicity in terms of mission, audience, and outlook between our two organizations before embarking upon a collaboration, as too many of these programs founder on the mismatch between the principals’ artistic objectives. Both FF and TNL work closely with established and emerging regional artists as writers, directors, and performers and both organizations consider it important to operate youth theatres to allow local young people to work alongside professional practitioners. These elements, together with the companies’ shared identities as rural based community-oriented arts providers made the match seem genuine rather than a contrivance.

Re-discovery

The initial visits allowed us to drink Screech rum around a driftwood fire and tell ghost stories in Newfoundland, and to trek along the Jurassic Coast and sink a few pints of scrumpy cider in Dorset. These visits also provided us with a shared understanding upon which to build the foundations of a project. Fortunately we quickly discovered that we liked each other, respected one another's work, and that we had established a rapport which we could use as a tool to underpin a collaborative working process. Pitcher comments that "once we liked each other, the world of creation opened up for all of us."⁵ Mark Dunhill and Tamiko O'Brien offer some interesting insights into the implications and issues which this form of artistic practice present suggesting that they offer "an implicit critique of the idea of the artist as a figure that stands outside of society engaged in an internal singular dialogue" (Dunhill and O'Brien, 2005). Perhaps as the result of a subconscious rejection of this idea, both writers very quickly agreed that they did not wish to work on a single jointly authored text, but instead preferred to develop two one-act dramas which shared thematic links. Viewed independently they would be complete, but when seen together echoes and reflections of the other text would be revealed. Both Pitcher and I liked this proposal, seeing within it a metaphor for the occluded historical and cultural relationship between the two partner regions subliminally present but only revealed under very specific conditions. Leyshon and Chafe were both certain that they wanted to write about the country they were to encounter, rather than the one they lived in, despite the obvious complexity of ensuring the authenticity of voice and setting. This for them was the challenge.

Following this introductory meeting Robert Chafe undertook a two month placement in the UK at Forest Forge through the Arts Council England South East's programme of residencies for International artists. The purpose of this residency was to allow for an organic period of interaction between Robert and the core staff of FF, allowing him to spend time with the company and to get to know the region but, at this point, not to impose a direct writing outcome on the residency. Robert took part in a 'creative jam', a series of workshops with local performing artists, and additionally led workshops with writers' groups and young people. Towards the end of the residency FF produced the UK premiere of his supernatural play *Butler's Marsh* (first written and performed in 2000 and subsequently published in 2004) as well as a rehearsed reading of a new work *Apply Direct Pressure*.

The selection of *Butler's Marsh* for public performance was made because of its cultural relevance. Although the play is set on Newfoundland's Bell Island in a small patch of wet woodland known by the play's title, it could just as easily have been written to be located in the New Forest, the district in which FF is based. The New Forest contains the largest tracts of heath land and forest within the densely populated South of England, and closely matches Chafe's description of Bell Island as a place the physical beauty of which is "matched only by the wealth of stories that have walked its shores and tunneled its earth" (Chafe, 2004: 2).

The introduction to *Butler's Marsh* (2004: 2) points out that, "pretty much every Bell Islander, at one point in their lives, was told to stay out of Butler's Marsh" although it is located in the heart of the most populated area of the island. The reason relates to the "now near famous fairies of Newfoundland" which he acknowledges are a "social phenomena hailing from our deep Irish and English roots" (2004: 2). These are a breed of fairies that are distinctly not benign and are held responsible for repeated tales of "people vanishing for days, even weeks at a time" (2004: 2). The New Forest is also notorious for its links with the supernatural, and since the early 1700s as a centre for the practice of witchcraft. The forest is credited with being the home of

Shakespeare's Puck, a veritable being, who causes the Forest colts to stray. This tricky fairy, so the Forest peasant to this hour firmly believes, inhabits the bogs, and draws people into them, making merry and laughing at their misfortunes. (Wise, 1892: 174)

It is the individual misfortunes of life which Chafe's play addresses, masking its shocking plot line with the mythology of disappearance and abduction. Chafe presents us with self-reliant individuals willing to go to extremes. Bell Island is a place that protects itself from intrusion and, although its landscape is managed and appears controlled contains much that is dangerous to the uninitiated. The self-protective supernatural reaction of the land is tangentially related to its abuse by settlers, those who would seek to tame it. Naively Nora, Chafe's protagonist a young woman who has made a pilgrimage to the island to resolve a personal crisis, suggests that she might try to buy a plot of land. Her boyfriend swiftly sets her right.

Tim: You assume that it would be for sale. That it could be for sale.

Nora: Tim I'm just saying that it could be an investment.

Tim: Sure, you're right. I'm sorry you're right. Let's buy it. This land. Bell Island. The whole place.

Nora: Tim.

Tim: Gotta be cheap. Let's buy it all. You could build a bungalow. A little yellow bungalow with hedges and flowers and concrete garden gnomes. (Chafe, 2004:19)

Arguments relating to the use and experience of countryside are equally as important to the New Forest, and explain the UK government's decision to make the area Britain's newest National Park in 2005. Yet for the inhabitants such external interference is problematic. The forest has traditionally been managed by a system of governance which dates back to the time of William the Conqueror and any externally imposed change is seen as unwelcome. The park authority is often criticized for not understanding the area's heritage and people. This theme of protecting or liberating the natural environment, and the continual threats to traditional ways of engaging with it, are the central themes of Leyshon's play *The Farm* which actors from TNL's summer stock company undertook as a rehearsed reading in Cow Head.

Both sets of actors made no attempt to alter their native accents in order to conform aurally to the locations mentioned within the texts. The Newfoundland characters in *Butler's Marsh* were unmistakably British in this performance, those taking on *The Farm* resolutely Canadian. Accents alien to the performer, unless delivered seamlessly, generally produce a form of unintentional *verfremdungseffekt*⁶, stepping the listener away from engagement with the material, and the subject, by producing a sense of falseness. As previously stated, the linguistic patterns of the two regions have strong resonances of one another, though of course both are completely distinctive. This stylistic choice was enhanced by these echoes in intonation and inflexion and offered the audience a bifurcated vision of the plays' intended locations.

The Farm draws on the experiences of West Country dairy farmers following the BSE crisis in the 1980s when herds of cattle and, consequently, livelihoods were destroyed. But this terrible disease

was really just the last straw. Leyshon described in an interview for the *Daily Telegraph* (Spencer, 2007) the way in which farming has declined in recent times:

Just after the war, there were 21 farms in the village. When I was living there as a child there were 14. Now there are one and a half, and it has become a dormitory village. It seems shocking that no one noticed. Everyone noticed the shipyards going, everyone noticed the coal mines going. Nobody noticed what happened to farming.

Following the afternoon reading of the play in Cow Head, attended by around 100 local residents, I bumped into a middle-aged woman in the theatre car park. She was crying because she had been profoundly moved by the piece. She told me “the story could have been set here” (in Newfoundland) explaining that “the cod fishing has gone just the same way for us.” What had affected her was not the mechanics of the tragedy, powerful though they were, but the taciturnity, acceptance, and qualities of endurance that the characters within the drama had exhibited. These she identified as Newfoundland characteristics. Observation drew me to similar conclusions, and my experiences in Newfoundland led me to agree with the protagonist of Chafe’s *Tempting Providence* that “they are a charming people, they will give you the clothes off their back. They will sleep on the floor as to give you their beds” (Chafe, 2004: 84). Yet an evening spent at a mussel boil on a beach late one night provided me with an insight into two additional aspects of the Newfoundland character that seemed remarkably familiar from my West Country upbringing. Newfoundlanders belong within an essentially oral tradition expressed through their love of story telling and singing. The unaccompanied voice of one of the actresses singing a traditional folk song wove a haunting web of longing and loss around us as we stood on a bleak peninsula whipped by the wind. An enormous thunderstorm burst overhead, forcing us to retreat into a dilapidated wooden boathouse. Around fifty of us crammed into a tiny space, which erupted into one of the most emotionally uninhibited parties I have ever attended. People were shouting, crying, arguing, laughing, dancing, and arm-wrestling. The evening ended with TNL’s admin director Gayleen Buckle grabbing Jeff Pitcher and challenging all comers to a drunken piggy back race down the deserted main street of Cow Head at around 4.00am. Pretty much everybody fell over. I remember lying on my back looking at the stars and feeling that somehow in this remote sparsely inhabited region I was experiencing a Dionysian wildness, similar to the spirit I always associate with the county of Somerset where I grew up, and

where eccentric madcap escapades are part of the county's zeitgeist.⁷ In *North of Everything* (2002) which offers a critique of English-Canadian film since 1980, authors Beard and White—discussing the independent Newfoundland comedy *The Adventures of Faustus Bigood* (Jones and Jones, 1987)—suggest that what they term a “wild nihilism” (Beard and White, 2002: 49) beats at the heart of the film, and by implication in the heart of the native Newfoundlander. This characteristic stems from “a profound suspicion of political systems of any kind and a contempt for the pretences of false collectives” (2002: 49). They go on to assert that,

the force of the film's critique is driven by a conviction that regulatory systems (of church and state) eradicate difference which in the local sense takes the form of eccentric behaviour, unconventional responses, creative responses, and alternative sexuality, queer and otherwise. (2002: 49)

This unpretentious celebration of difference and of independent thought at the core of the Newfoundland character is shared by the inhabitants of England's West-Country, long known as a centre of non-conformism within Great Britain. The unorthodox is also evident in attitudes to gender. Leyshon's West-Country and Chafe's Newfoundland are matriarchies inhabited by strong, independently minded women. They celebrate women's strength in the face of adversity, and make much of their practical capabilities. As Chafe tells us in *Tempting Providence* (2004: 81) “women round here got skills, do anything. Knit a house they could.” The identification of women's significance within Newfoundland society is not just a conceit of Chafe's. TNL explored this issue further in their production of Rhonda Payne's *Stars in the Sky Morning* (1996) a series of monologues and scenes recording the experience of several generations of Newfoundland women, and their impact upon society.

Play-making

In entering the second phase of the process, the production teams worked closely with the two writers to determine some of the logistical and philosophical considerations of the commissions. We knew that most of all we wanted the plays to have a genuine sense of place. We also knew that we wanted to use Newfoundland and West Country actors working together as part of an ensemble, and that at least some of these actors should appear in both plays. In addition, we knew that we wanted

time to be an important element within the composition, though how this was to be made manifest we were less certain. As producers we found ourselves reliant upon the writers' ability to synthesize their experiences into a dramatic form that would respond to these preconditions. Yet a collaborative approach to performance-making obliges the participants to engage with processes that are "contingent, ephemeral, and improvisational" (Kester, 2010). During our second visit to Cow Head Leyshon, Chafe and I all moved into a family room at the Shallow Bay Motel which we christened 'Car Park Cottage' since it looked out onto the parking lot. Our relationship quickly came to mirror the dynamics of a family with myself as surrogate father. Much of our time was spent in playing board games, swimming from the nearby beach, drinking tea, and talking. But through a process of cultural and social osmosis, impressions and narrative strands began to draw themselves out of the formlessness of our approach. Leyshon and I visited a wooden fisherman's cottage on the coastline towards Sally's Cove one afternoon and spent some time walking around a tiny cemetery next to the building looking at the simple graves, wondering about the hopes and aspirations their residents had once had. The view through the window of the cottage looking out on bare grey rocks on the shore, captured in a photograph, became almost totemic - our window on the project.

Leyshon found her play relatively quickly. She appeared on the beach in Cow Head one evening with the characters and the majority of the plot fully formed in her brain. "All I need to do now is write it down", she confidently announced. For Chafe, the process was more complex. Their respective dramaturgical journeys seemed to reflect some of the issues touched upon in the earlier part of this paper. Leyshon's development of a psychological connection to the Newfoundland landscape and people came without the baggage of a known personal history. She knew that she wanted to place her play amongst the early settlers, and to imagine how a middle-aged woman from her own region (Elizabeth) might respond to the demands of Newfoundland coastal life in the middle of the nineteenth century. Following the death of her fisherman husband by drowning (inspired by the graveyard) her central character is left alone with two teenaged daughters, Mary and Sarah. They have come with the intention of staying but the issue of their status on the island is as yet unresolved:

Elizabeth: Gets cold back there too.

Mary: Back home?

Elizabeth: Back there, I said. (Leyshon, 2006: 4)

The family subsequently encounters an enigmatic young Newfoundlander, John, who affects the outcome of this dilemma. This is a familiar narrative of exploration in which the ‘old’ world encounters the ‘new’, and is transformed by the experience. However in Leyshon’s hands it was to become a poetic visionary disquisition on the nature of belonging.

Chafe’s response was to show the reverse journey, to investigate in what ways the ‘new’ world might impact upon the ‘old’, and as such his fictional narrative was inextricably linked to his own personal one. This manifested itself in the form of a three-day pilgrimage in search of inspiration to the West-Country villages where his family had originated. We spent a day together in a community on the border between Dorset and Cornwall walking around another graveyard and, after much fruitless searching, eventually knocked on the door of the vicar’s house to ask questions. Unfortunately we learned that the records relating to the period in question had been mislaid and could not be found. That evening we resorted to buying drinks for the oldest man in the village pub to encourage his reminiscences, but were gradually forced to accept the fact there was nothing left to learn. No evidence remained and there were no records to help Chafe in his quest to retrace the path that he knew, anecdotally, his ancestors had travelled. The experience of being presented with a tabula rasa, a blank page on which he could write himself a new history seemed to offer a form of poetic symbolism that he seemed to find both liberating, and frustrating, in equal measure. It was strange but I actually felt guilty for the fact that there were no traces of his family’s origins to be found, and that my country’s historical amnesia had permitted his ancestors to be wiped from the record. It made for a slightly uncomfortable return journey to Ringwood as we both felt disappointed and I in some strange way felt responsible, as his host, for the failure of the mission.

Unsurprisingly given the circumstances of its gestation in *One Foot Wet*, Chafe’s half of the commission, the sense of decay and the need for change is palpable. The play’s location, a “modest bed and breakfast” (Chafe, 2007: 2), is filled with glass jars to catch rainwater which is leaking though the ceiling in rivulets. Chafe’s story is one of loss and of yearning, as is Leyshon’s, but in Chafe’s world connections are fragile, tenuous and the world is seen through a misty haze of rain. A

young Newfoundland girl, Sophie, is on a visit to the West-Country to trace her family tree following the death of her father. The author obliges us to consider that attempting to connect oneself to a shared cultural narrative in this way is ultimately futile. Sophie's landlady Ellen insists that the very stones of the buildings will conspire to resist such regressive sentimentality.

Ellen: This house was built in 1687. This house is older than your country.

You and your father, and the long sad face. You want to think for one second, one second about what these walls have seen. You come here for a week, and you're going to get that? This place is older than you know. (Chafe, 2007: 38)

Sophie attempts to justify her quest by insisting that "a place is not the place but the people" to which Ellen responds archly "the people here are older than you know" (Chafe, 2007: 38).



Stephen Middleton and Melanie Caines as Ollie and Sophie in *One Foot Wet*/Photo credit: David Howarth/Forest Forge
This is not a comfortable visit, and although Chafe would be the first to admit his personal affection for the West of England, his dramaturgy reveals very clearly the ambivalence he feels towards a place his ancestors were forced by economic or political circumstances to leave. Or, to look at it another way, who were dynamic enough to risk everything by leaving. He questions the motivation of these early emigrants using the voice of the young workman Ollie, who is failing rather spectacularly to fix the leaking roof, and cannot summon the courage to go to Canada with Sophie

Ollie: Guess it's like you say. Your crowd, leaving here, to go over to America, Canada. You coming here. Only two things can drive a person to take on uncertainty like that. (*She looks at him, waits.*) Desperation. Or hope. Guess I've never felt either. In any measurable quantity. (Chafe, 2007: 22)

In hindsight Pitcher tells me that he slightly regrets not encouraging Chafe to unpack further such a rich dichotomy of feelings within his dramaturgical process.⁸ Leyshon's (2006) script, titled *Winter* (appropriately for the Newfoundland climate which I was told could see snow in any month of the year), suggests, like Chafe, that location informs identity. But Leyshon takes this further anthropomorphizing the physical landscape to make it into an additional character, one that can respond or remain mute:

Sarah: Been talking to your beloved nature? Well? Did it answer back?

(Leyshon, 2007: 7)

It is the topography, the land itself that has mysterious powers of seduction, as Mary discovers:

John: So it's the land you like.

Mary: Is it, yes.

John: Shape of it.

Mary: Yes.

John: I thought so.

Mary: Is it what you like?

John: You know it is.

(Leyshon, 2007: 7)

Leyshon introduces another form of seduction to her drama through her clever use of dramatic convention, having John tell variations of the same story three times to beguile each of the women, Elizabeth and her two daughters.



Maggie Tagney and Darryl Hopkins as Ellen and John in *Winter*/Photo credit: David Howarth/Forest Forge

Contrasts between the underlying meanings of the two dramaturgies, however, are significant. Chafe highlights the inertia of the ‘old’ world, which is defined by age and continuity, whilst Leyshon’s impetus is toward action within the context of the ‘new’, which is self-determined. Elizabeth tells us

Back home a life happens to you. Here you make it happen. You have to fashion it as though it’s a piece of hot metal on an anvil. You create your life. (Leyshon, 2007: 28)

These are of course familiar tropes. What rescues them from the traditional perspective is that both authors recognize the flaw in the premise that terms such as ‘old’ and ‘new’ could have any real empirical meaning when related to geography or to humanity. What the plays explore is why we seek to make a life anywhere, and whether or not at a deep level our sense of a cultural identity actually really means anything at all. Is a Newfoundlander an Englishman, Irishman or Frenchman who never went home? Or does the land somehow effect a transmutation within the individuals’ psyche, fracturing it and reformulating it over time? Mary’s love of the Newfoundland coastline is echoed by Sophie’s plea to Ollie that she “doesn’t want to go home” at least not without “seeing the rest of your beautiful country.” Both plays contain hints that cultural identity is an existential choice, influenced by an emotional response to natural phenomena; rocks, trees and coastline.

The two authors also temper their interrogation of the old/new - inertia/momentum debate with teasing light-hearted insights into their own, and each other's, cultural reference points, identifying shortcomings in both. The inhabitants of both communities are shown to be parochial and resistant to change:

Sarah: Were you born here?

John: I was.

Sarah: (*surprised*) And you like it?

John: Wouldn't live nowhere else.

Sarah: You been anywhere else? (Leyshon, 2006: 11)



Rebecca Whitbread and Darryl Hopkins as Mary and John in *Winter*/Photo credit: David Howarth/Forest Forge

The two plays were eventually performed in their chronological order with Leyshon's opening the evening and Chafe's ending it. Towards the final part of *One Foot Wet* Chafe's young heroine Sophie, in a conversation with Ollie, tells him that, "they say wherever Newfoundlanders go in the world, we never forget where we came from. One foot in the

ocean”(Chafe, 2007: 49). She then asks him, without any sense of irony, “do you guys say that here?”(Chafe, 2007: 49) She seems unaware that the only reason she is in England at this point is because her family did not forget their origins, yet she now carries the one wet foot of her new found land with her, the cultural palimpsest I proposed at the beginning of this discussion; a prismatic ever-expanding belongingness, which increases with every new emigration of subsequent generations who will also *never forget where they come from*.

Both Pitcher and I wanted to direct the shows, but felt that although it was in the format of two one-act pieces we needed a coherence of vision, and style, for the production as a whole. We were both happy to let the other direct the whole thing, but neither of us was willing to sacrifice the other’s chance to do it. So, veteran Canadian director Bob White from Alberta Theatre projects (ATP) in Calgary was invited to direct.

Two British actors, Maggie Tagney and Stephen Middleton traveled to Newfoundland, whilst Melanie Caines and Daryll Hopkins made the reverse journey, rather appropriately as both of the Newfoundlanders had been in the original production of *Tempting Providence* I referred to at the beginning of this paper. The exchange of performers was also approved and facilitated by both British and Canadian Actors Equity. For the audience there was a tangible expression of the links between character and location within the plays through the cross-casting of West Country actress Maggie Tagney. Tagney played the roles of both Ellen and Elizabeth, the two matriarchal figures at the centre of both plays. Watching this “magisterial performance” (Morris, 2007) one could not help but make the connection between the widowed mother who when her husband insisted they emigrate “saw the only thing to do was work at it, make it work” (Leyshon, 2006: 28) and the elderly spinster who insists that she is “constant as the weather” (Chafe, 2007: 43). Significantly both characters share a powerful sense of *personal* rather than collective identity.



Sean Aita on CBC Radio discussing project/Photo credit: Jeff Pitcher

Over 2,500 people in Hampshire, Dorset and Newfoundland attended the performances and audience response evidenced by the Forest Forge Theatre Company's audience comment book was generally very positive "a lovely production, beautifully acted" and "moving" being typical responses. Critical reaction in the theatrical and local press for the plays was more mixed and somewhat less effusive, though the individual performances were complimented. This was slightly painful for all of us, as we had hoped for a ringing endorsement of our endeavors from everyone who saw the piece. It gradually became apparent through casual conversations that people who had seen the two plays tended to have a favorite though this was by no means consistently the same one. I genuinely loved them both, perhaps because I had been so intimately involved in their gestation. Perhaps on reflection there is something about the one-act play as a format that is unsatisfying, it teases the palate but does not quell the appetite fully. It is perhaps significant that neither of the writers had really chosen to explore this format previously. Jeremy Fox in an online (2006) review of *Eros*, three short films produced as one event, describes how if the assembled

parts of linked shorter works “are sufficiently integrated by time, place, or character so that the individual stories resonate off each other” they can suggest “richer meanings.” The echoes and resonances the authors placed within the two plays of New Found Lands gave the works greater depth and power for me⁹ but it appears they were not sufficient for all spectators. Korzybski's dictum (cited in Kendig, 1990: 299) “the map is not the territory” springs to mind.

Final thoughts

Theatre is by its nature an ephemeral art form lasting only as long as its audience's living memory. Photographs, documentation, reported description, all provide some fragmentary insights into the actuality of the event, but can never hope to capture the thing itself. As the actress Maggie Smith said when interviewed in *The Guardian* (MacKenzie, 2004), “It's like a ghost, it's there then it's gone.” The image of a phantom returns to my mind when I consider Ellen's words from *One Foot Wet*, quoted earlier, about the impossibility of grasping the essence of a community in such a short space of time. As a collaboration between the two theatre companies, the task we set ourselves of reflecting one another's worlds was challenging to say the least. Although the performance element of the project was important to the project, in that it provided a locus for our interaction, and was successful in attracting a positive response from audiences, at its heart this project was never about outcome, but about process. There is something about the hopefulness inherent in the shared desire to explore one another's cultural viewpoints from a sympathetic and supportive perspective that speaks of what Jill Dolan identifies as the *utopian performative* (Dolan, 2001: 455). This utopian impulse allows us as theatre artists to make work in order to “establish and exchange notions of cultural taste” (2001: 455) and makes spectators “go to see performance because they want to learn something about their culture that extends beyond themselves and the present circumstances of our common humanity” (2001: 456).



Actors from TNL with Sean Aita and Nell Leyshon at Cow Head/Photo credit: Jeff Pitcher

Here is a snapshot of impressions drawn from our exchange: Rocks and rain on an eleven hour drive across the province from St John's to Corner Brook; Robert Chafe asking me if there was anything in the woods that could eat us during a walk in the New Forest; sharing a beer with Deep Cove Dave, a local fisherman in the bar at the Shallow Bay motel, and finding I could understand him perfectly when most Canadians can't follow his accent; eating a seal flipper; seeing a sign explaining that I could be killed in a collision with a moose; playing soccer with Jeff Pitcher's son on a patch of grass behind their cabin; picking up a piece of Precambrian rock; being asked to stand the other side of a white line to smoke a cigarette, and finding that it put me in the middle of the road; singing a Karaoke duet of Bohemian Rhapsody with Robert Chafe; turning the wrong way to go home one night and not seeing the Northern Lights which were behind us.

The opportunity for our companies to spend three years working together, although periodic rather than consecutive, allowed us to plant seeds that have taken root and continue to grow. The production teams and writers have met on many occasions since the project officially ended in 2007 and stayed in one another's homes. Practical developments of this relationship have seen TNL's production of *Stars in the Sky Morning* tour to a festival in the UK with the support of FF and Leyshon's completion of a full-length version of *Winter* which had its premiere at the Gros Morne Theatre Festival in July 2011. On a personal note, as an attempt to cure my historical amnesia, the collaboration between FF and TNL has proved transformative. It has had an emotionally and psychologically profound effect on me. I do now feel connected somehow to the community of West-Country settlers who made their way across the Atlantic Ocean. I now have strong links with writers, directors, actors, designers and theatre-makers within Newfoundland and more broadly within Canada. The project has caused me to reflect not on where I come from, but where I am going.

NOTE: Playwright Robert Chafe was awarded the Governor General's Award for Drama in 2010 for his play *Afterimage*. In the same year Nell Leyshon became the first woman playwright to be commissioned and produced by the Globe Playhouse in London.

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The Farm: Nell Leyshon (précis)

Although their farm is running at a loss dairy farmer Vic will not face up to its inevitable failure. Set in the aftermath of the BSE crisis three generations of the same family are obliged to come to terms with the changes in the way in which food is produced and how the land is used. Vic is finally forced to accept that his son will not be able to carry on in an industry which has transformed in scale, and can no longer accommodate the individual small producer in the age of the supermarket. The play reflects on the decline of traditional approaches to farming, and the development of intensive forms of agribusinesses.

Butler's Marsh by Robert Chafe (précis)

Thirty years ago Nora's mother vanished in a small patch of woodland on Bell Island in Newfoundland. She was eventually found, but has been traumatized by her experience, she was covered in blood and could not describe what had happened to her. Her daughter visits the same location at night in the company of her enigmatic boyfriend Tim, determined to discover the truth. As the evening progresses Tim becomes less and less accommodating and Nora realizes that she has no idea how to get back to their car. The play culminates in a deeply disturbing climactic moment which is simultaneously revelatory and deeply ambiguous.

Winter by Nell Leyshon (précis)

Elizabeth an English woman in her late thirties has moved from the West Country to Newfoundland with her two teenaged daughters Mary and Sarah to join her husband, a cod fisherman. Their plans for the future are thrown into disarray when he is drowned shortly after they have settled in a remote outport community. The three women consider whether they should return to England or make their lives in Newfoundland. Sarah, the older sister, is convinced they should leave what she considers to be a bleak and empty place with little to recommend it. Mary and her mother are far less certain both have formed connections to the land already. Their deliberations become intimately connected to the presence in their house of John, the handsome young nephew of a neighbour, who offers to undertake some casual work to help them out.

One Foot Wet by Robert Chafe (précis)

Sophie, a twenty year old Newfoundlander, visits England after the death of her father. She hopes that she will find evidence of her family's history in the West of England. She is disappointed in her quest, but finds herself attracted to a local labourer Ollie who is doing some roofing for the eccentric landlady of her Bed and Breakfast Ellen. But Ellen appears to have a complex relationship with Ollie herself, causing Sophie to dig deeper into the past than might be wise.

¹ The West Country is a region which traditionally includes the counties of Hampshire, Dorset, Devon, Somerset and Cornwall. Its central region was also known by the name Wessex.

² There is some evidence to suggest that West Country fishermen knew about the rich fishing banks off the coast of Newfoundland before Columbus' official discovery of the 'new world' in 1492. What can be asserted with more assurance is that having become England's first colony outside the British Isles, by the 18th century the islands were drawing thousands of fishermen from the West Country to take part in the seasonal 'Newfoundland Trade.' In spring men and boys flocked to take passage as sailors, craftsmen, fishermen, or servants in the trade. Although most returned to their homes in England in the autumn many stayed on and made lives for themselves on the island. Of the known English immigrants who eventually settled in Newfoundland through the 18th and 19th century between eighty and eighty-five percent were drawn from the 'West of England with the majority departing from the Dorset port of Poole or the Hampshire port of Christchurch.

³ Now within the county of Dorset since a boundary change in 1974.

⁴ A delicious mixture of hard bread, cod and pork scunchions.

⁵ Email sent to the author October 19th 2011

⁶ The so called alienation effect identified by Bertold Brecht which distances the audience counteracting catharsis.

⁷ Nell's brother Bill was notorious for them and on one occasion allegedly managed to appropriate a fibre-glass carnival Dolphin, attach it to his car, and drive home four miles across fields of crops!

⁸ Email sent to the author October 19th 2011

⁹ Sophie is related to Elizabeth through her father, and retains one cup of a tea service which we see in the first production. Words and phrases repeat within each play. Ollie and John are both outsiders who work on a house inhabited by women.