

On Canadian Drama: An Interface with Allison Mc Wood

(For the Students of MA English, Semester IV: Canadian Literature)

By

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Allison McWood is a full-time, multi award-winning playwright, screenwriter and librettist from Ontario, Canada, who takes a particular interest in farce and satire. Allison holds an honours degree in English Literature from York University in Toronto, with a specialisation in Renaissance Drama. She also spent two years studying Playwriting and Dramaturgy through York's Department of Theatre and received a diploma from the Institute of Children's Literature. To date, she has written more than 30 plays and more than 20 feature screenplays, with a character count of more than 1000. Her plays have been produced across Canada and have received national and international acclaim, both theatrically and academically. In addition to playwriting, she has also worked for multiple seasons as a production dramaturge for Canadian, Shakespeare companies. Her book, Scribble Guys, a children's story about racism, was published in 2005 and endorsed by the ERACE Foundation (Eliminating Racism and Creating Equality). Scribble Guys was also featured at the 2005 Martin Luther King Day Celebration in Franklin, Tennessee. Currently, Allison is working with film producers from Hollywood, Paris, London, Toronto and New Delhi.

R.P.Singh: If we talk about Canadian drama, it seems that the Radio drama has its unique contribution, how do you rate radio drama towards making of dramatic literature here?

Allison McWood: I am so thrilled that you asked me this question because Canadian radio drama is a very special and distinctive aspect of Canadian art and culture. CBC Radio, (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) is a unique radio station that features many facets of Canadian culture. Some may suspect that radio drama extinguished with the rise of television, but CBC has kept the radio drama tradition alive with an eclectic repertoire of Canadian works. Canadians take pride in this tradition as audiences are given the unique opportunity to absorb the beauty of the text without the distraction of visual effects. Canadians, you will find, have a distinct sense of open-mindedness and creativity. Radio drama gives us the ability to flex our imagination and visualize the characters more cerebrally than if the story was being told to us visually. In addition to radio drama, CBC Radio also features Canadian storytellers who read more prosaic works. Storytelling is another longstanding tradition in Canada, perhaps inspired by the many Irish and Scottish immigrants who settled in Canada during the Potato Famine. Stewart McLean is arguably the most prolific oral storyteller in Canada, who often reads from his witty collection of prosaic stories on a CBC Radio segment called *The Vinyl Café*. Although prosaic, McLean's stories read very much like drama with their clever dialogue and fast paced action. Radio drama indeed made an impact on me while I was studying Playwriting and Dramaturgy in University. I wrote several radio plays and musical parodies for the York University Radio Station. Our team of radio drama enthusiasts who participated at the station were largely inspired by the dramatic works of CBC Radio. Many Canadian Dramatists in Toronto have grown up listening to radio drama, and several of my playwriting colleagues are involved in the CBC radio drama series. In Toronto, the theatre industry and the radio drama industry heavily influence each other.

R.P.Singh: The 1960s was a decade of great effervescence in theatre in Canada. Many new vistas are seen, and many iconoclastic moods also appeared. What do you think on it?

Allison McWood: In the 1960's, there was indeed somewhat of a shift in how Canadian Theatre was mandated. That was the decade in which the focus shifted to creating a distinct voice of a "Canadian Playwright." That is to say, in order to portray a plethora of different perspectives, specific theatres would mandate very specific kinds of creative voices. For example, one theatre might have a mandate to produce First Nations playwrights, while another may produce plays written by French Canadians, immigrants, feminists, working class writers, or artists of a particular sexual orientation. Much of that tradition still exists today.

R.P.Singh: You have written many screenplays and experienced in other genres, please tell us about your writing.

Allison McWood: I write in a variety of different disciplines, but my area of focus is Playwriting and Screenwriting. I have written more than 30 full-length plays and several one-act plays which have all been produced with acclaim across Canada. My most frequently produced one-act play is called *The Lyfsux Theatre* which has won multiple awards. Canadians enjoy this play as it takes a sardonic perspective on the dark elements of Canadian plays. Possibly my most acclaimed play is *It Was Kit: The TRUE Story of Christopher Marlowe* which was originally intended for my honours thesis on Marloviandrama, but eventually won awards, was published twice, taught in Universities and produced in multiple venues to sold out audiences. I write plays mostly in the Farce genre, with satirical notes. I have also written more than 20 feature screenplays and have worked with film producers from Hollywood, New York, Paris, London, Toronto and New Delhi. My screenplays are mostly Comedies, however, I also dabble in the Drama and Psychological Thriller genres.

R.P.Singh: A writer writes in a tradition, and makes herself/himself different with individual talent, how can we apply it on you, Allison?

Allison McWood: Canada is strongly influenced by the Literature of Great Britain, so perhaps the zany sense of humour Canadians are known for has something to do with British Farce. Personally, I was influenced by *Monty Python*, *Fawlty Towers*, *Black Adder* and the works of *PG Wodehouse*. Perhaps these British influences on Canadian artists have something to do with the thriving presence of Farce and Satire in Canadian television. Programs such as: *Royal Canadian Air Farce*, *This Hour has 22 Minutes* and *The Rick Mercer Report* are classic examples of long running television shows that showcase Political Satire with a farcical twist. My writing follows the tradition of British inspired Farce, (and ultimately Canadian Farce) however, I infuse my own personality and interests into my works to give them an original flair. For example, I am passionate about Renaissance Drama, therefore Renaissance themes and characters often manifest in my writing. William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, Robert Greene and Ingram Frizer, are just a few of the historical figures from the world of Renaissance Drama who have appeared as characters in my plays. To take this a step further, I often write these Renaissance characters in a somewhat modern context to make them accessible to contemporary audiences. This is a unique technique that many have come to expect from my work.

R.P.Singh: Your play “Shakespeare’s Brain” is my favorite. I want to know more about its making.

Allison McWood: *Shakespeare’s Brain* is special to me because it was originally written as a wedding gift for my best friend. I was going to buy him a salad spinner, but he insisted that he wanted me to write him a play that would be performed at his wedding reception instead. The play was something of an in-joke because my friend and I were both Renaissance scholars. We had met in a Playwriting class in University where my friend started a rumour around campus that I was William Shakespeare in a previous life. (Which, to the best of my knowledge, is not true) He even called me “Will” as a joke, and in response, I referred to him as “Kit.” At any rate, my friend told me he wanted me to write a play that reflected our friendship. So I thought what better way to tribute our friendship than to write a play about William Shakespeare? At the time, I was studying Renaissance Drama and my friend was studying Shakespeare in Performance. We often talked and joked about how University classes over-analyze Shakespeare’s plays, dissecting the story, point and enjoyment right out of the plays when all Shakespeare really wanted to do was entertain us. We often wondered what Shakespeare would do if his ghost ever walked into a Shakespeare lecture – what would he think of how we rip his work apart for academic purposes? These conversations are what inspired me to write *Shakespeare’s Brain*. What started as a simple wedding gift turned into an award-winning play which had several hit productions and two publications.

R.P.Singh: What are your in hand and future projects, Allison?

Allison McWood: Currently, I am working on a television series for children about a quirky Shakespeare company. This project is taking place in London, England and will hopefully gain traction in the next year or so. I am also working on two musicals for the stage: one is a contemporary spin on the *Dr. Faustus* theme and the other contains traditional Irish music and is loosely based on my family’s history. In addition, I am working on several screenplays which are currently in the development stage. One project I am particularly excited about is a film I am writing for the New Delhi Film Festival. I am only in the early stages of this project, (more specifically I am conducting interviews to ensure authenticity to the story) but this is a project that is very close to my heart.

R.P.Singh: And finally, how do you visualize the future of drama in coming years?

Allison McWood: I am hopeful that Canadian Theatre will improve and flourish in the coming years. The new Prime Minister of Canada, (who used to be a Drama teacher) has promised to invest more in the artistic ventures of Canadians. More Theatre grants will be issued and he has promised to restore and protect the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, which was severely gauged and threatened under our previous government. Canadian artists depend on the CBC for inspiration, platform, promotion and employment. We are thrilled that the CBC is here to stay. Prime Minister Trudeau is also pushing for Canada to be more inclusive and to celebrate diversity which could be an exciting move in terms of the new art we will generate in the coming years. Perhaps we will hear new and different voices and everyone will have a chance to be heard. Of course, we can never know for sure how things will be in the future, I am holding on to

the hope that Canadian Drama will move forward in an intriguing direction and have a chance to be recognized on a more global scale.

While Canadian Drama strives to create distinctive voices of very specific cultural and social margins, I visualize Drama on a larger scale to eventually penetrate cultural boundaries and become a universally relevant art form that appeals to our collective sense of humanity. The world is becoming smaller and cultures, lifestyles, philosophies and artistic expressions are all influencing and inspiring one another at a rapid rate. In years to come it will be more crucial to appeal to one another's similarities rather than marginalize ourselves. Distinct cultures and mindsets are an important part of individual identity and make the world beautifully eclectic. However, art is something that is shared so I see future Drama as being a gorgeous mosaic composed by all of mankind collectively.

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