

FOREWORD

This book provides a history of the Saidye Bronfman Centre Theatre from its inception in 1967 to the present day. It does not purport to be the definitive story, since archives at the Saidye have not been a priority. Documentary material has been sorely neglected. Records covering the years from 1967 to 1985, except for the odd paper, have been lost or destroyed; in the late eighties some data were stored but in no particular order. Fortunately I was able to obtain material for the missing years from other sources and I have conducted close to sixty interviews in person, e-mail, and telephone, most of which have been very helpful. In addition I have conducted research at the Grande Bibliothèque du Québec in Montreal, Concordia, University of Guelph, and York University archives. I believe I have gathered sufficient data to paint a reasonably accurate description of theatre at the Saidye. The years 1972 to 1980 when I was Artistic Director are unavoidably richer in detail than the subsequent years.

A history of the whole Centre and its multi-disciplinary activities is beyond the scope of this book. In the case of Performing Arts, because of the wealth of programs offered over the years, I have simply referred to the myriad of music, dance and drama courses and programs; I have devoted one chapter to Dora Wasserman's Yiddish Theatre. Jean-Marc Larrue's book, *Le Théâtre Yiddish à Montréal, Yiddish Theatre in Montreal*¹ provides a more complete study, and my Masters thesis offers extensive details of her drama teachings with children.²

Motivation for the book came primarily from Dr. John Ripley who not only urged me to tackle the project, but also handed over to me files compiled by one of his former students. These documents covered theatre productions presented under Marion André's tenure from 1967 until 1971. Files from my era, 1972-80, were assembled by Esther Fineberg, my excellent secretary, and presented to me by the Saidye staff when I left my post. When I set out to write this history and discovered the SBC's serious archival limitations, the importance of these contributions magnified. Hopefully official archival policies will be established, and the remaining documents will eventually be properly preserved and archived. Although I have made every effort, together with archivists Nathalie Blanchard and Annie Murray at Concordia, to provide complete references for each and every article quoted in the book, I have not altogether succeeded. For example, a substantial number of Suburban newspaper editions were destroyed in a fire; numerous articles in my possession have incomplete notations, their originals non-existent in the libraries.³



Finally, as in all history, biography, and other forms of non-fiction, the writer relies on the memories and perspectives of those involved blending them with her own point of view. In my case, I have attempted objectivity. However, having been intimately involved in running the Saidye theatre and Performing Arts department for an eight-year period, there is the danger that my view in some instances may appear to be subjective.

The book is divided into two parts. Part One, “Professional Theatre in a Jewish Community Centre” consists of seven chapters which cover the birth of the Saidye Bronfman Centre, its operational structure as a cultural branch of the Young Men’s-Young Women’s Hebrew Association (YM-YWHA), also referred to as “the Y,” and its struggles, within that structure, to maintain and enhance the rich diversity of programs it offered. The Saidye’s Main Stage subscription series productions are highlighted. Part One also chronicles the roles of patrons Alvin and Leanor Segal over a ten-year period of financial and moral support, the re-naming of the theatre to The Leanor and Alvin Segal Theatre, and the gradual transition of the Saidye Bronfman Centre, under their leadership, from a multi-disciplinary institute to the Segal Centre for the Performing Arts at the Saidye.

Part Two, “Theatres Within a Theatre,” describes the adjuncts to the subscription series, such as Second Stage, Yiddish Theatre and Theatre for Children, and includes a separate chapter on translations of Québécois plays produced on the Main Stage.



INTRODUCTION

In 1965 there were fewer than a dozen professional theatres in English Canada; who could have imagined that ten years later there would be well over a hundred. How did this expansion come about?

Canada's Centennial year heightened our national awareness in several areas: we had existed as a people for 100 years, we had earned the respect and even the envy of other countries in the world and what remained was a desperate need for a cultural identity. By 1967, French-language Canada, particularly in Montreal, had already developed its own cultural identity. New plays were being performed in French-language theatres, both in the older establishments such as Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, Théâtre du Rideau Vert, Théâtre de Quat'Sous, and the newer ones such as Théâtre Populaire du Québec. These productions were welcomed by the French theatre-going community who turned out in droves to enjoy the plays, now often being written and performed in their own Quebec idiom.

In contrast, English-language professional theatre companies were scarce. However, Centennial year government funding allowed the construction of a large number of new theatre buildings across the country, such as the St. Lawrence Centre, Manitoba Theatre Centre, and the Charlottetown Festival Theatre. It was during this Centennial year that the Saidye Bronfman Centre building was completed, and commenced operations. The building was a gift by Saidye Bronfman's children in honour of their mother's seventieth birthday and designed by their architect daughter, Phyllis Lambert.¹

A number of books have been written on Canadian theatres (e.g. Stratford, Shaw, Neptune, Centaur, La Poudrière, Toronto Workshop Productions). Several of these works have been penned by the former Artistic Directors of the Companies. As one of the key Artistic Directors of the Saidye Bronfman Centre Theatre, I felt it incumbent on me to contribute to the growing documentation of Canadian theatres by telling its history, the story of a unique regional theatre housed in a cultural centre, itself an adjunct of a Jewish Community Centre. From its outset, The Saidye Bronfman Centre was dedicated to building closer relationships between the various ethnic groups in Montreal through the cultural and performing arts. The theatre, particularly in the period 1967 to 1980, innovatively contributed to the Canadian theatre scene. "Its balanced repertoire of international and native scripts, its support of Canadian artists, its bilingual and bicultural experiments, and its commitment to drama education, make it a dynamic regional playhouse and a treasured national resource."²



The years 1967 to 1972 cover the Artistic Directorship of Marion André followed by my tenure from 1972 to 1980. These were the years which saw policies and philosophies formulated, and audiences developed with the predictable accompanying agonizing struggles to create a viable and enduring program. During André's term the subscription series grew to five plays a season on the Main Stage with emphasis placed on socio-political context, the blending of entertainment and enlightenment, and an attempt to introduce to Montrealers works from other countries which had not yet been produced in Canada.

When I held office, I continued André's policies but also committed the theatre to include in each five-play season at least one Canadian play, one French-Canadian (Québécois) play in translation, one play dealing with a Jewish theme and the two others from the vast repertoire of European and American plays. In addition, with the theatre flourishing, a Second Stage was introduced to present non-commercial or large-cast plays not financially feasible for the Main Stage. The Second Stage ran for several years in the Y auditorium with the emphasis on hiring actors who were recent graduates of Montreal theatre schools. It was also early in my tenure that the Yiddish Drama Group under Dora Wasserman officially became part of the Saidye Bronfman Centre Theatre.

From 1980 to 1982, Artistic Director Per Brask continued some of these policies, but unfortunately attendance decreased, with a resulting substantial deficit. In the fall of 1982, the YMHA and NHS (Neighbourhood House) "regretfully" closed the professional theatre to a tumultuous outpouring of rage from the theatre community. From 1983 on there was a struggle to revive it, first under the independent Encore Theatre, then under a succession of short-term Artistic Directors and/or producers (Harry Gulkin, Andrès Hausman, Joe Martek). During this period the theatre was principally a roadhouse for outside productions and there was no continuity of staff.

Eventually, in 1992, Cecil Rabinovitch, Executive Director of the Saidye Bronfman Centre; hired Nathalie Bonjour as Artistic Director, a position in which Nathalie stayed for five years. During this time the theatre began to produce some of its own shows, and tried to recover from the fits and starts of the former years. Since 1998 Bryna Wasserman, who took over the Yiddish Theatre³ when her mother, Dora, was incapacitated by a stroke, has been running both the Yiddish Theatre and the English-language theatre at the Saidye Bronfman Centre. This continuity, so essential to a theatre's development, has helped the theatre to regain the recognition of its earlier years.



The story of the Saidye Bronfman Centre Theatre is relevant to the knowledge and history of the discipline. It was one of two predominantly Anglophone theatres operating in Montreal at a time of intense political and social change, a time in which cultural institutions were obliged on almost a day-to-day basis to redefine their roles in relationship to the community they served and the wider society in which they functioned. The Saidye Bronfman Centre Theatre was able to successfully meet the challenges posed by social change. Its innovative programming achieved an enviable reputation for high artistic quality, political sensitivity, and social responsibility. Its innovative responses to cultural stresses deserve to be highlighted and recorded as a part of the ongoing evolution of Anglophone theatre in Quebec.

The Saidye Bronfman Centre Theatre's contribution to the recent theatre scene is important because, until now, there has been little written about the recent history of the Anglophone theatre in Quebec. Over the past several years, a history of the Centaur Theatre by its Artistic Director Maurice Podbrey, and memoirs by Jeanine Beaubien, founder of La Poudrière, have offered substantial insights into two major theatres offering English repertoire in Montreal. Until now, the history of the third and no less significant house, the Saidye Bronfman Theatre, has gone largely unrecorded.

Multicultural activity currently assumes an important role in national cultural policy and its implementation. As a major multicultural experiment in which a serious and largely successful attempt was made to interpret English, French, and Yiddish theatre, one to the other, at a time of profound social and political upheaval in Quebec, the Saidye Bronfman venture has important insights to offer. The recording of this history is important and urgent. As Herbert Whittaker says in *Setting the Stage*, his comprehensive book of Montreal theatre 1929-1949, "Canadian theatre resolutely continues to lose track of its past."⁴ Although Whittaker was referring specifically to the deterioration of the Brae Manor building in Knowlton, Quebec, his observation is applicable to Canadian theatre in a broader historical context, encompassing loss of archival material and lack of sufficient recording of its past. It is a statement which should not be ignored.

I had originally hoped that Marion André, the founding Artistic Director, would record his era.⁵ However his illness incapacitated him and that sad circumstance reminded me of how important it is to collect and preserve information about the theatre while most of the participants in its evolution are in good health. As a Saidye principal Artistic Director, and an academically trained



theatre historian, I undertook this project. It represents a unique opportunity to add a firsthand account of this remarkable experiment to our growing national theatre history narrative.

In addition, the book may be instructive for future administrators to identify the factors which contributed to its success, and also those which led to its collapse in 1982, and to learn of its struggle over the last twenty-five years to regain its position as one of the two major Anglophone theatres in Montreal.

When I began this project, I thought it would be completed by 2007 in time for the fortieth anniversary of the Centre. I did not foresee that the joyful celebration would be magnified by the birth of a new era in its history – the transition from a multi-disciplinary cultural institution to a Performing Arts Centre. I was unaware at that time of the deep love and dedication which Leanor and Alvin Segal were pouring into both Dora Wasserman’s Yiddish Theatre and the English theatre, and the impact that would result from their generous involvement. In the Saidye’s association with the Y, the forty years presented a host of challenges on both sides – in terms of finances, ideology, and in the daily operations – challenges now alleviated as the Centre becomes autonomous from the Y and assumes its role as a separate agency of Federation Combined Jewish Appeal (Federation). With “angels” to make it fly, a regenerated, visionary Performing Arts Centre can serve the Montreal community and inspire artistic centres around the globe.