

2015

## **LMDA Conference Keynote Addresses, 2015**

Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas

Ken Cerniglia

Richard Wolfe

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## Keynote #1: Ken Cerniglia

Thursday, June 25, 2015

Thanks, Tim. It's an honor to be in your company, along with Michelle and Richard, to address all of you at this milestone celebration of our field.

One of the things I cherish most about LMDA is this dynamic network of dramaturgs – at all stages of career and life – who generously mentor and inspire one another. Although I still very much feel like an ECD, I suppose I'm now approaching what some would call “mid-career” – that vast expanse of time where you're so immersed in doing the work that you don't realize how much time is passing. Now, taking a moment to look up, and look back, I can trace every significant professional break I've had to members of this organization.

While I was pursuing an M.A. at Catholic University in the '90s, professor Mary Resing invited Cathy Madison, then-literary manager of Arena Stage, to her dramaturgy seminar. As Cathy spoke about her work in a literary office, I lit up, and immediately applied for an internship at Arena for the following season. While there, I felt my spine straighten – from student to emerging professional – as production dramaturg on two mainstage shows. I benefitted from the incredible openness of directors Doug Wager and Michael Kahn to my tentative, then more confident, contributions.

I attended my first LMDA conference in 1999 at the University of Puget Sound, during which I stood in awe at the assembly of icons of our field – all so warm and accessible and lovely. (I also remember an incredibly passionate debate about whether or not to form a union, which I observed with mouth agape – but that's a reminiscence for the conference bar.) After I finished a theatre history degree at the University of Washington, Geoff Proehl and John Wilson, whom I'd met at the conference, not only gave me my first teaching gigs but also took me under their wings as master dramaturgs and educators. Their faith in me has been, and continues to be, a priceless gift.

And this very conference in Chicago twelve years ago, the inimitable Greg Gunter tried to convince me to consider applying for a crazy job helping him develop musical theatre for Disney on Broadway. (I was like ???) But for reasons still somewhat of a mystery to me, I landed the job, found last-minute replacements for my classes, and once again moved my ass across the country. What was supposed to be a short detour from my intended academic career turned out to connect to deeply held values, fulfill lifelong dreams, and blossom in ways I couldn't have imagined. I've been able to work on projects that have impacted millions of people. My colleagues and collaborators are incomparable artists, thinkers, producers, and friends. It's amazing what you can do when you are surrounded by good people with a desire to make great things. Among other gifts, this job has opened doors to guest seminars at colleges around the globe; freelance gigs at cool places like the Kennedy Center, Berkeley Playhouse, and New York Theatre Workshop; and even opportunities to employ my fellow 'turgs. Saying yes to a call from left field can be a powerful thing. Although I've certainly worked my butt off, I feel tremendously lucky – every single day.

Speaking of left field, as president-elect of LMDA, I'm excited by this chance to give back to the organization and its members who have meant so much to me. This does not mean I'm not sweating bullets. But I suppose in order to grow, you've got to move towards that thing that scares you – as we sometimes advise the writers with whom we work. Thank God, I've got a year to shadow the indomitable Beth Bickers, and I'll have the sage counsel of Brian Quirt and the rest of the Board to catch me when I inevitably stumble.

Despite challenges of definition and employment, our field has come a long way in the past three decades. We're still here, and growing. We believe in the work, which we execute in innumerable ways. We are not afraid to morph and innovate. And we have each other's backs. It's a remarkable thing, this community. Because there's no good reason to be a dramaturg. I mean, who in her right mind would put in this much work for other people's glory? But I truly believe it's not a choice. We're born this way. It's a calling, or rather a recognition – and ultimate acceptance – of who we're meant to be, how we're meant to move through the world and make art. It's a love of craft and process and possibility that transcends any particular project, job, or career path. It's a way of connecting to people and ideas that crosses national, linguistic, and disciplinary borders. I'm profoundly grateful to be in your midst, among my tribe, once again today.

I'm a naturally optimistic dude. (I suspect that may be why a day job at Disney has suited me for over a decade.) I'm also pretty ambitious when it comes to possibility and people. I like having a big crazy vision then finding smart allies crazy enough to tackle it with me in practical ways. I'd like to see us stand firmly on the legacy of these past thirty years, and challenge ourselves to imagine something new. What if the value of a dramaturgy degree weren't tied to landing a scarce job in a theatrical literary office? What if we assertively recruited our counterparts in television, film, and other mediums of dramatic and creative development to join our fold? There are thousands of executives who work with dramatic writers and have no idea we exist – or that there are other, perhaps more productive, ways of working and being. What if we became a home for like-minded individuals in other fields who have no trade organizations of their own? What if their training and experience in other disciplines helped us break new ground in the theatre? What if we took the hemispheric impulse of our name change seriously and pursued active artistic, institutional, and organizational relationships with collaborators south of the Rio Grande? What if we went global? What if we dared to unleash the power of our unique intergenerational nexus of institutional, academic, and freelance workers beyond that which feels comfortable, parochial, and safe? What if...? I'm sure you have some answers, or at least more, and better, questions.

During my president-elect year, I plan to do some serious, and seriously fun R&D – to become aware of some of what I don't know that I don't know. And I'll start by hosting a series of "What if?" salons. If you're interested in walking toward the thing that scares you for the chance of discovering something remarkable, come find me.

I look forward to great things in this gift of an opportunity to serve you. Thanks.

## **Keynote #2: Richard Wolfe**

**Thursday June 25, 2015**

**Dear Canada:**

I'm on the verge of walking away from our relationship. I confess, that I was going to go until LMDA President Beth Blickers, ever the diplomat, told me she was concerned that perhaps I hadn't expressed my feelings properly. That I hadn't sorted out our story. She suggested I that if I wrote my thoughts down in a loving letter to you, and then read the letter out loud to my friends at LMDA, maybe we'd find a way to stay together.

Sometimes I feel we'll never know each other because, quite frankly, you just don't know yourself. This has been bothering me for a while. I've suggested therapy, but you keep claiming you can work out these identity issues on your own. It hasn't happened yet and I'm beginning to wonder if it ever will.

Who are you Canada?

In a 1967 television interview the Canadian visionary Marshall McLuhan said: you're the only country in the world that knows how to live without an identity. Echoing his sentiments somewhat, the poet Irving Layton said, "A Canadian is someone who keeps asking the question, "What is a Canadian?"

I think he was confusing Canadians with Dramaturgs but anyway, you get the idea.

For as long as I can remember, you've defined yourself in opposition, by talking about what you are aren't rather than what you are. And topping the list of what you claim you're not is – American.

Maybe you knew yourself back in the beginning. Back in the early 1600's when you were one of the four colonies of New France and the terms Canada and New France were interchangeable. But after the French ceded you to Britain in 1763, at the end of the French and Indian wars, when New France became part of the British Empire, your sense of self began to slide. When the United States was successful in their revolutionary bid to eliminate British rule from the 13 colonies, the areas of the former New France that stayed part of Great Britain, were regrettably given the names of Upper Canada and Lower Canada.

I'm not a psychiatrist, but it sounds like the beginnings of Dissociative Identity Disorder to me.

It might have seemed like it was all going to work out when England passed the British North America Act in 1867. It was Canada's confederation.

You were quite the talker then, convincing the home country to let you go without firing a shot. You seemed to be reborn as an independent nation. Although parts of the BNA act

allowed the Governor General (the Queen's representative in Canada) the power to strike down laws enacted by the Canadian parliament within three years of their passage.

American identity stories are so clean. Maybe that's why you're so eager to adopt them. Take the Puritans and the Mayflower, for example. That story is so well packaged that you've introduced Puritan symbols into your own thanksgiving celebrations, even though the Puritans had nothing to do with Canada. In the early 1600's, while the Protestant Puritans were arriving on the shores of New England, you, dear Canada, were welcoming the Catholic Jesuits to New France.

Truth be told, I've always preferred the French Canadian Voyagers to those stuffy tight-assed Puritans anyway. The Voyagers sang. They partied. They dressed in flamboyant clothing. It's like comparing the people of the Upper East Side to the people of Williamsburg.

I also love the fact that the fun-loving fur-trading French Canadian Voyagers didn't see themselves as "kings of the wild frontier". Their worldview was more in-line with the native peoples with whom they worked. They saw themselves as a part of nature, not as the rulers of it. I like to think that's an important part of who you are. And maybe it's true. I mean it certainly was for those guys who started Green Peace in Vancouver back in 1971.

I love your images of Jacques paddling down the Saint Lawrence River singing French songs - stopping just long enough to get married.

I love that you called the offspring of these French and First Nations peoples the Métis. It's got a nice ring to it.

Okay, so you may have identity issues and a little anxiety, but at least you're a good planner. You remember the 1870's, when the US was randomly blasting its way through the Wild West? Your biggest railway company was planning its own incursions by drawing towns on maps, spacing them 7 miles apart along the railway-line and naming them - in alphabetical order.

Fenwood, Goodeve, Hubbard, Ituna, Keller, Lestock, Punnichy, Raymore, Semans, Tate.

Now that's dramaturgy.

Back in those days your law enforcement was well planned too. Even so, I can't help but envy those great chaotic stories from the American west, where men were hard and their whiskey was harder. Where federal Marshals stood their ground in front of the setting sun to dollop out big helpings of frontier justice to those stupid enough to take a seat on the wrong side of the law.

In contrast, you, dear Canada, created a police force, trained them in the east and then sent them westward - to control the American whiskey smugglers and the towns that were still waiting to be built.

You remember when you thought you'd spook the Americans into thinking there was an arms build up happening on their border if you called this force The Northwest Mounted Rifles like you'd planned? So you called them the Northwest Mounted Police instead. That was very polite of you.

A hundred years later, in 1994, the Disney Corporation was given a five-year contract to handle the marketing and licensing of RCMP iconography. Control of the trademarks had been given over to Disney when the RCMP hired the company to promote their image and protect them from being abused in the commercial marketplace.<sup>1</sup>

Let me get this straight Canada.

Your federal police force went to Disney for protection.

I just can't see J Edgar Hoover in bed with Mickey Mouse. That said I have trouble picturing J Edgar Hoover in a dress. Anyway, the whole thing makes me nervous.

Margaret Atwood once said that "If the national mental illness of the United States is megalomania, that of Canada is paranoid schizophrenia."

Most people in Canada probably think that if the United States has a mental illness, we should have one too.

Luckily it's possible to treat both Paranoid Schizophrenia and Megalomania with drugs. By the way Canada, did you know you're the second largest per-capita consumer of pharmaceutical drugs in the world? But guess whose first?

Canada, you've really got to try harder.

Pierre Trudeau, one of your most flamboyant and storied Prime Ministers, a guy who sometimes channeled the Voyagers in his photo-ops, and the man who repatriated our Constitution in 1982, said: Americans should never underestimate the constant pressure on Canada, which the mere presence of the United States has produced. We're different people from you and we're different people because of you.

Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.

He also famously said, after he decriminalized homosexuality in 1969, "there's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation".

Still, if you're seeing elephants in your bed Dear Canada, I suggest you try Seroquel.

John Raulston Saul, one of your brightest public intellectuals, claims our roots of accommodation came through close working contact with the aboriginals, and the development of the Métis culture. He believes that the often ignored role of the natives as full partners in the

military, civil and commercial affairs of the “Canadas” for the first 250 years of their existence is a huge problem when it comes to trying to articulate a national identity.<sup>2</sup>

Saul’s premise is that, unlike the US, whose foundation of statehood came out of the European Enlightenment, Canada’s foundational culture is more aboriginal, embracing values of negotiation, tolerance, inclusivity and accommodation.

What Saul sees as a Métis view of living could be perceived to be Socialist. I’ll be reading this letter to my American friends and I don’t think I can use the word Socialist in the United States.

(Well, maybe in New York City.)

Saying the word Socialist, over the phone at least, could put me on the Department of Homeland Security’s watch list. Socialism is so depraved the very word is almost unspeakable in the US.

Better to talk in terms of the 99%.

Or income inequality.

Or the wealth gap.

I grew up in the province that was the birthplace of social democracy in Canada and I’m proud of it.

(I wonder if I’ll be taking a bus back to Vancouver when my flying privileges are revoked.)

Tommy Douglas and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, later named the New Democratic Party, was elected on June 15, 1944. They formed the first socialist government in North America.

As a Baptist Minister and the leader of the CCF in Saskatchewan, Tommy Douglas brought his province North America’s first arts council; a regional library system; an increase in the minimum wage; a workweek capped at 44 hours, a guarantee of two weeks paid vacation for all workers and an increased education budget.<sup>3</sup>

The list goes on, including free health care for pensioners. Free psychiatric hospital treatment for the mentally ill. And a balanced budget in the first four years of his mandate. Eventually his work resulted in a Canada wide guarantee of universal Medicare.

In Douglas’s own words: “I felt that no boy should have to depend - either for his leg or his life - upon the ability of his parents to raise enough money to bring a first-class surgeon to his bedside and that people should be able to get whatever health services they require irrespective of their individual capacity to pay.”

He also said: “... a nation’s greatness lies not in the quantity of its goods but in the quality of its life.”<sup>4</sup>

If it's one thing that holds us together Canada, it's the idea that the tax base works to support the health of everyone in your family. There's something fundamental in that proposition.

Today, for the first time in history, the NDP is your official opposition party in the federal parliament, and the party that just won the recent provincial election in Alberta.

Alberta.

That's the largest oil-producing province of the country that sends the United States more oil than anywhere else in the world.

Alberta is a jurisdiction that, up until two months ago, had the same Conservative party in power almost as long as the former ruling party in Egypt, which held power there for 49 years until the Arab Spring brought it down.

Voting NDP in Alberta is like voting for Ralph Nader in Texas.

You really made me laugh with that one.

So why do I love you? For your humour, clearly, your interminable almost paranoid insecurity, your lack of an articulated identity and your basic decency. And for the fact that I still believe you're trying hard to be a fair country.

Or, maybe it's because you are no one, and you are everyone.

The famous Canadian architect Arthur Erickson argues that Canada's lack of national identity will prove to be the country's strength in the 21st century, as the world moves toward what he calls a "humanity-wide consciousness." He goes on to say that - by having "no history of cultural or political hegemony, we are more open to, curious about, and perceptive of other cultures." <sup>5</sup>

It's this open curiosity and respect that will continue to make you, Canada, one of the great 21<sup>st</sup> century social experiments. Right now your foreign-born population is 21% compared with 13% in the United States. It's one of the highest in the world. And yet, things are running pretty well, all things considered. Your social dramaturgs are still on task.

John Ralston Saul also said: "Canada is either an idea or it does not exist. It is either an intellectual undertaking or it is little more than a resource-rich vacuum lying in the buffer zone just north of a great empire."<sup>6</sup>

So how will your story end? Will you be subsumed by the United States? Or will you shine on as a fully realized nation? I have no idea. But for the moment, I think you characterize the notion of how people, on a very small and very crowded planet, might be able to live together side by side, uncertain of what to call the association, but reasonably comfortable with it none-the-less.

And for that, Canada, I love you.

Thank you.

**Citations / Attributions:**

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### Keynote #3: Michele Volansky

Thursday, June 25

Good evening. When Bickers asked me to give one of the keynotes for this year's LMDA conference, she said two things: Be reckless and be brief. I hope I am at least one of those two...These are my musings.

I have – I suspect we all have -- been thinking a lot about community and what that means, really deeply and truly means, to me. I teach at Washington College, a small, residential liberal arts college. Community is a word that is bandied around a great deal there; it becomes quite meaningful in moments that I will talk about in a minute. I also live in Philadelphia, a city whose very name, "city of brotherly love," implies the relationship of one to the other. As part of my city, there is also "the theater community." Like many other theater communities, this one is strong and nurturing and rigorous and, on a personal note, saved my life this year. And if I am honest with myself, that salvation didn't have anything to do with a play.

If my high school Latin is correct, the word itself is comprised of three elements, "Com-" - a Latin prefix meaning with or together, "-Munis-" - "the changes or exchanges that link" and "-tatus" a Latin suffix suggesting diminutive, small, intimate or local. So, a strong small link. I like that. But where do we see that? What are the examples that resonate in our lives?

As I said, Washington College uses the word a lot. However, I don't think that my students really got what that meant until last spring, when one of their own hung himself in his dorm room. Our community was rattled and rocked. We adopted the hashtag #shoremanstrong to help express our need for one another. In my department, one that was deeply impacted by this death, our own adage, "We are family," became our calling card for each other. "Why am I hugging you right now?" "Because we are family."

I watched The Kilroys announcement last week -- and was delighted to see so many of my friends and colleagues cheering and celebrating one another and the work itself. Watching Gubbins work her magic made me appreciate my old community of Chicago theater, which also had its own share of grief and pain in the past year.

There was also the amazing effort of the hardest-working man in show business, sound designer Lindsay Jones, who found a stellar way of celebrating the design (and, by extension, the writing and directing) communities through The Collaborator Party, an event that coincided with the Tony Awards. Should I talk about the Tony Awards? Probably not...I mean, I am very happy that the people who won won -- I'm seeing FUN HOME tomorrow night and gosh, I love Jeanine Tesori and Lisa Kron. Some of my best friends have won Tony Awards.

But it did get me thinking. And here is the question that I will pose to you: are we talking to ourselves? Both about the work and then the work -- the "play" itself? Are our celebrations of our work, which, don't get me wrong, I don't think they are the issue, actually serving a community besides ourselves? And if so, do we have a responsibility to say so? Who is listening? Who is watching? Who is responding? Or are we chasing our own tails?

Are we really and truly exploring ALL facets of the communities in which we live? We spend a lot of time explaining how we are "serving our community." Foundations, donors and other gate

keepers give a lot of money to hear us talk about how we are exploring the communities where we live. But let's be honest: are we really? Is the work that we are making really impacting the greater world outside the walls -- real or imagined -- of our theaters? Is the answer to bring theater to the community...or is it to bring the community to the theater...or is there something completely different? And if so, who is doing it? Why aren't we?

There is also something else: what's the role of art in a community whose primary function ISN'T art...but is simply survival? Or a roof over a head? Or a meal? Or health care? Who cares about the work we do, other than us? And if we are doing it for ourselves, whoever "we" are, let's at least be honest about it. My partner in PlayPenn, Paul Meshejian, resident grump (sorry Paul) noted that "visual artists are unabashed narcissists about their own work. They make it for themselves. They don't care what you think about it." Hmmmm...is this us? Do we care? Do we actually care, not just about our audiences (who are a VERY rarified community) and our articulated, mission-statement communities, but about the people with whom we share air on a daily basis, who have no idea what a play is. Or a dramaturg....

My students told me something very compelling this semester. They told me that the ONLY time they turn OFF their cell phones is when they come into the theater. I'm kind of certain that it is because they are afraid of me and how batshit crazy I will go on them...but...I think it is something else, something related to community, something much more basic.

There is a deep need in us as humans to connect with each other. To sit in stillness and listen to each other breathe. How often do we do this? Think about it. Do you make eye contact with people you don't know? Do you smile at the person who gets behind you while waiting on line? Do you listen, really listen, when someone tells you their pain? If I acknowledge someone, even through eye contact, is that an invitation to engage? Or is it just an acknowledgment of humanity? And isn't that the first step towards feeling a sense of community?

Be honest. I think that diversity and gender parity and all our panel discussions about them are good and necessary. But what happens beyond that? How many different ways can we say it to each other? Here's the challenge I put before you: please let us emerge from this conference with some honest statements -- that don't have to be shared -- about how we define community -- and I'm not talking about friends. What are the biggest concerns in our community/ies? What can we do to help? On a concrete level. Dramaturgs can be not just the center of the theatrical universe, but instead, agents of empathy and compassion and honesty in a world that wants, needs, yearns for it. Maybe it's not about a play. Maybe it is about breathing the same air. Just for a minute.

Thank you.