

Study and Development Fellowships for Sessional Lecturers (CUPE 3913 Unit 2)
Fellowship Application 2015

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College: Arts

*Proposal for Publication and New Research on the Canadian Theatrical Avant-Garde during
the Interwar Period*

I. Introduction and Context

One of the most neglected areas in the study of English Canadian theatre history is the interwar period between 1919 and 1939. From its inception in the mid 1970's, Canadian theatre and drama studies as a discipline has primarily concerned itself with post-centennial theatre and drama, categorizing the largely "amateur" work carried out before 1967 as either emergent (e.g. the Dominion Drama Festival (1932 – 1978)), or, in some cases, of only minor interest (e.g. the Little Theatre Movement (1908 – 1929)).

However, with the recent rise of interest in modernism and the avant-garde in late 19th century and early 20th century Canada in literature and the visual arts, exemplified by such books as Gregory Betts' *Avant-Garde Canadian Literature: The Early Manifestations* (2013), as well as the ongoing Editing Modernism in Canada project established at Dalhousie University, the appeal to conduct serious research on this fascinating era is clear. In addition to works like Betts, Gillian McCann's *Vanguard of the New Age: The Toronto Theosophical Society 1891 – 1945* (2012) have also traced a quasi 'secret' history of the avant-garde in Canada with the influence of such occult organizations as Theosophy. This suggests a fascinating connection between the Canadian and European avant-garde that moves beyond aesthetics.

A theatre artist whose interests and work converged with all of these movements is Roy Matthews Mitchell (1884 – 1944). A monumental figure in the Little Theatre Movement in English Canada and a passionate advocate for Theosophy, Mitchell's book, *Creative Theatre* (1929), represents a seminal moment in Canadian culture and theatre history. *Creative*

Theatre remains the only book of theory to be written by a Canadian artist, and stands as the ‘manifesto’ of the theatrical avant-garde of the early twentieth century in this country.

As a teacher and scholar, I have focused a major part of my pedagogy and research on this period, and on Roy Mitchell’s work and thought in particular. In my years of service I have taught several courses that focused on the interwar period, with *Creative Theatre* as the central text, and I have published and delivered papers that focused on Mitchell’s role in the integration of theatre and theosophy in Toronto, as well as his response to modernism. Happily, this past April a proposal I submitted to produce a critical edition of Mitchell’s *Creative Theatre* was enthusiastically approved by the Editing Modernism Project and the University of Ottawa Press, and I am currently beginning work on the book.

Statement of Goals

With material gathered from my accumulated experience as an instructor and my work as a researcher, I am looking to start a long term project examining avant-garde theatre and drama of the interwar period (with a secondary examination of the years 1908 – 1918 and 1940 – 1950), with a particular emphasis on the Little Theatre Movement and Roy Mitchell. I consider my current work on the critical edition of *Creative Theatre* a starting point, and it will be the principal focus of my proposed work during this Fellowship.

The School of English and Theatre Studies has enjoyed a long and productive association with the study of Canadian theatre and drama, and many of its faculty, past and present, have made significant contributions to its development as a discipline. I believe this publication is another major contribution, insofar as it will productively expand and deepen the idea of what Canadian theatre and drama studies is, and should include, for both scholars and students. I believe I am prepared for this work, and the Study and Development Fellowship would allow me to begin.

My goals for this Fellowship are:

- While I am conducting preparatory work on the critical edition during the summer of 2015 (transcribing the primary text, researching and writing the introduction and on working on

annotations), the Fellowship would allow me the time to complete and polish the text, making final revisions, compiling and adding material such as reviews, drafts, etc. for appendices, in anticipation of the late November deadline.

- During the Fellowship I would focus on editing and annotating an omitted and yet unpublished chapter from *Creative Theatre* for the critical edition, which is currently held in the Roy Mitchell archives at York University. I would also write an article and/or conference presentation focusing on the editing process, the content of the chapter itself, and its relation to the book.
- The Fellowship would allow me the time and resources to gather material for a online digital apparatus, a part of the Modernist Commons (modernistcommons.ca) site, to function as a companion to the critical edition. This would entail additional travel to both the Mitchell archives and the University of Toronto archives.
- Last, I would research and, if possible, apply for grants related to my larger project.

Rationale, Methods and Outcomes

The solution to the lack of attention this period has experienced in Canadian theatre studies is to conduct the necessary research, deliver presentations and write articles – and hopefully book-length studies – that explore and examine the early 20th century avant-garde theatre and drama in Canada in detail, and to demonstrate its influence on Canadian theatre and drama up to and including the present day. In so doing, I aim to substantially develop my skills as a scholar, writer and researcher.

The method for this work will mainly entail extensive archival research, editing and writing. I am also eager to begin nurturing connections between other scholars interested in this period, from which valuable collaborative work will be produced. It is my objective to make the School of English and Theatre studies an important member of this growing network of scholars and projects focusing on this period in Canadian cultural history in general, and in particular to make it the hub of research on the avant-garde theatre and drama of the early to mid-20th century.

The primary outcome of this Fellowship in particular will be the critical edition of *Creative Theatre*. In addition to my development as a scholar, I also aim to improve my ability to better develop and deliver information about this period to students in related undergraduate courses

through this work, using the critical edition and related material, as well as my overall skills as an instructor. I am hoping that the development of the larger project mentioned earlier will further enhance the profile of the School and the University, as well as encouraging students to appreciate and explore modernism and the avant-garde in the context of Canadian literature and the performing arts.

Plan of Scholarly Activity

- Complete work on critical edition of *Creative Theatre* and submit manuscript for the November 2015 deadline;
- Edit an omitted chapter (“The Caste Mark”) from *Creative Theatre* for inclusion in the critical edition;
- Write and submit an article analyzing and discussing “The Caste Mark”, an omitted chapter from *Creative Theatre*, as well as the process in general;
- Submit a proposal on *Creative Theatre* and the Canadian avant-garde for the 2016 ACTR (Association for Canadian Theatre Research) conference at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences;
- Research the requirements of submitting a project proposal to SSHRC on the subject of the Canadian theatrical avant-garde, 1908 – 1939.