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Still Desire You: Revisiting Canada's Most Famous Case of Celebrity Infatuation

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the performance with what is, in fact, the opening of the play: “The stage is dark. It begins” (MacIvor 80). The intervening action has been the Playwright’s life, which, while it may be all he has to offer, is still an act of truthful communication between artist and audience. Saying “It begins” at the end of the play suggests that the Playwright, like the Assistant and the Young Man, is starting over again by writing this play and offering it to an audience.

By framing the play between these two moments of direct address, *His Greatness* brings the audience’s attention back to the theatrical performance in which they have taken part. In doing so, the play positions theatrical performance as a means of collective possibility through the ways it enacts dialogical communication and, hopefully, empathy. The play offers no guarantees of happiness, but it does suggest possibility, and a small amount of faith. Faith that if we have listened to and empathized with one another in the theatre, than the human condition is not tragic because we are not *truly* alone. It is in our connection to one another, MacIvor suggests, that hope for redemption exists.

For MacIvor, *His Greatness* is both a departure and a continuation that is *about* departure and continuation—though it is optimistically so. It hopes and believes, to quote the title to the Preface of a recent anthology of his plays, that “The End is the Beginning.”

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Notes

¹ *His Greatness* was published by Playwrights Canada Press in 2007.

At time of writing, it has been staged by the Arts Club Theatre, Vancouver (2007) and by Lyric Productions and Adam Blanshay at the Cherry Lane Theatre as part of the 13th Annual New York International Fringe Festival (2009).

² This is the same story, told by the same friend, at the same party that inspired Sky Gilbert’s play, *My Night with Tennessee*, published in *This Unknown Flesh: A Selection of Plays* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1995).

³ MacIvor has suggested that the theatrical performance is about “teaching people empathy and how to listen” from Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005) 26.

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Still Desire You: Revisiting Canada’s Most Famous Case of Celebrity Infatuation

by Graham Wolfe

Still Desire You. By Paul Ledoux and David Young. In *Double Bill*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2008.

Still Desire You is a new version of *I Love You Anne Murray*, a play that was first produced in 1984 and later remounted as *Love is Strange* (the original title was changed under pressure from Murray’s lawyers). It appears together with *Fire*, another eighties hit by Paul Ledoux and David Young, in a recently published “Double Bill” of their work.

As its original name suggests, *Still Desire You* is based on a case of celebrity infatuation that made headlines throughout the eighties and into the nineties. The Saskatchewan farmer Robert Kielling became something of a celebrity himself through his highly publicized love for the famous east coast singer, Anne Murray. Diagnosed with “erotic paranoia,” Kielling repeatedly violated court orders to cease his communication with the singer.¹ His love for her—and his insistence on calling her, visiting her home, and inviting her over for Christmas dinners—was undeterred over the years by a number of lengthy stays in prison and psychiatric wards. Set in a courtroom, Ledoux and Young’s play dramatizes a most unusual trial; its protagonist must convince the court that he is not a criminal for having delivered a love letter to the woman whom he loves, and whom he believes to love him back.

From its beginnings, a merit of this play has been the playwrights’ refusal to let the protagonist (referred to as Franz Colby in the original and David Stuart in the new version) be reduced to an insane maniac or a creepy stalker displayed for our morbid amusement. With the assassination of John Lennon so fresh in public memory at the time, the Kielling case had initially taken on forbidding overtones (a perception that the press did little to mitigate). Yet Ledoux and Young present the accused as a gentle, charismatic, and articulate man who pleads his case in a rational way. “We were drawn to the humanity of the situation,” they write in the preface to *Love is Strange*, “because, like most people, we’ve loved and been loved, fantasized about the ‘perfect mate,’ and experienced rejection” (285). The play seeks to move beyond tabloid sensationalism, exploring fundamental human desires, and in doing so, poses important questions about our celebrity-driven entertainment economy. On trial in this play are the strategies employed by the music industry to create effects of intense intimacy between singers and their fans in order to sell products. It reminds us, as the playwrights put it, “that we are plugged into the same network of public fantasy which

delivered the message of love to Mr. Kieling.”

The new version of the play retains the basic structure of the original. Court sequences oscillate with flashbacks as David narrates for us the development of his “relationship” with the celebrity singer (“Rose McKay”). And like the original version, *Still Desire You* works with live music, staging Rose’s concert appearances and allowing her songs to meld with David’s imagination. For the new play, Ledoux and Young have engaged the talents of Melanie Doane, whose music replaces songs by Murray and others.

The most conspicuous textual difference concerns geography. Whereas the protagonist in *Love is Strange* was an Albertan wheat farmer in love with a singer from P.E.I., *Still Desire You* gives us a dory builder from rural Nova Scotia pursuing a singer from “down home.” The change may seem incidental, yet the thematic preoccupations arising from it bring some significantly new dimensions to the play. Introduced to us as “a silhouette against a fishing village backdrop” (5), singing songs about saltwater and “the sunshine on the lee shore” (14), Rose embodies for David a vision of his Nova Scotian heritage, and it quickly becomes clear that this trial is about much more than a lonely man’s romantic obsession. Ledoux and Young’s protagonist becomes a lost sailor on the briny ocean of modern existence, struggling to see clearly amidst its fogs, holding onto “what’s right” (13) amidst the destabilizing chaos of its unpredictable storms, battling to keep afloat those “traditions that made us who we were” (15). Miraculously, as the wild sea of modern life comes blasting through the wharf of David’s hometown, smashing clean through the window of his dory-building shop, Rose’s song keeps playing on his television set: “Her singing that song. With the waves smashing the place to pieces, I grabbed onto the dory and hung on” (47).

David’s love for Rose is thus an extension of his stalwart passion for traditional life, and in pursuing her he is trying to protect the vision she represents from the threats of a late-capitalist world. Increasing commercial success has jeopardized the integrity of her music, leading her “away from the things that are real” (69); the authenticity of fiddles has succumbed to “overamped BS” (41), and David’s mission is to save her from this tumult, “give her back her soul!” (49). She’s “a long way from home” (42), but that home is “still there,” he asserts: “Fogbound maybe, but it will be there forever.”

In this light, Rose’s final rejection of the protagonist’s love reflects the tragic triumph of a modern world over the authenticity of heritage. As she enters to take the stand, dressed in futuristic attire and singing the song “Bionic,” it is clear that the current of contemporary life has carried her away. Her assertion that she doesn’t love David is tantamount to the first time he saw the coast of Nova Scotia “slip beneath the horizon. The saddest sight in the world. The soft grey fog wrapped around us and . . . my home was gone” (81).

This emphasis on the dissolution of heritage extends the playwrights’ original project of universalizing what

may at first seem a highly unusual, “pathological” love affair, discovering within it a revealing reflection of our own most fundamental yearnings—for meaning, for authentic contact, for a sense of “home.” Yet if this emphasis helps to make *Still Desire You* a tighter, more unified piece than its predecessor, does it not also stand out as the play’s most dated aspect? Perhaps the most serious charge to be levelled at David Stuart is that the theme of his defence has such a strong precedent in dramatic courts, and that in dwelling upon it so heavily he risks undermining our natural affection for saltwater and handmade dories. Besides, since the days of *Love is Strange*, has not this theme of vanishing tradition and authenticity been most forcefully co-opted by the music industry itself? Does not this industry work even harder than David to make us feel the loss of such authenticity—the loss of a traditional way of life, which for the most part, we never possessed—in order to sell us products that purport to recapture it?

In a larger sense, while part of us may laud the playwrights’ attempts to rise above tabloid sensationalism, the part of us that finds such incredible fascination in stories like that of Robert Kieling (he called her 463 times in five months!) may well regret that the truly compelling dimension of that story seems significantly muted in Ledoux and Young’s rendering. And in our defence, perhaps the issue is not (simply) that we lose the perverse thrill of an encounter with madness. It is not (simply) that we’d rather have a play about a creepy, disturbing stalker and that David Stuart is boring because he’s too human, too much like ourselves. What we seem to lose in this play is the capacity of Kieling’s story to bring forward the most fascinating and provocative—and daunting—dimensions of “regular” human love.

Put another way, if the intention of Ledoux and Young is to emphasize “the humanity of the situation,” perhaps the most notable feature of this eminently congenial protagonist is that he lacks the very *insane, irrational* dimensions that would make his love “most human.” David’s attraction to Rose makes so much sense. He fully understands his own feelings, explaining to us in well-worded monologues the precise nature of their origin, revealing them as a legitimate and understandable response to the socio-cultural conditions afflicting his nation. He demonstrates, moreover, that his love is without impurities, wholly unrelated to sexual desire—that its selfless devotion disguises no secret, perverse longings. And he proves to us that none of the decisions he made while in love were ever really mad, blind, or disproportionate. How can we relate to this man?

If on one hand the play could be criticized for drawing too heavily on the melodramatic motif of the suffering lover, perhaps the strangest thing about David’s love is its uncanny *absence* of suffering. Yes, he suffers due to external obstacles—legal interventions, cops who drag him away and doctors who confine him to hospitals—yet all the while *his love itself* remains unnervingly free of pain. *Knowing* that Rose loves him,

convinced beyond doubt that his love is fully reciprocated, he has no need for any of the anxiety and uncertainty and volatility that go hand in hand with love as most of us would recognize it. What is being in love for David Stuart? “You just sit back and think . . . ‘that’s so beautiful’” (59). If we quickly learn how wrong we are to dismiss the accused as a deranged criminal, we may simultaneously lose interest in this assured, beautiful love of his, a love that lacks the very *deranging* dimension that would provide a clearer glimpse of our own passions.

In this light, perhaps what enables us most effectively to consider the “pathology” of our own relation to today’s celebrity industry is the marked *contrast* between David and ourselves. Why, unlike David Stuart, do we not call up our celebrity crushes on the phone? Surely it’s because we’re sane people who realize we’re not actually in love with this voice or this picture or this on-screen persona, because we know down deep that the object of our infatuation is just a normal person and that what we feel for her or him is nothing real. Yet here again, is it not the excessive *sanity* of David’s approach that most distinguishes him from ourselves? In picking up the phone and calling Rose, he exhibits an all-too rational assessment of the situation—he is acting on the “correct” premise that Rose is a human being like any other and can therefore be phoned (especially since she so consistently reminds her fans to “keep in touch”). What David lacks here is the constitutive “insane” dimension of a regular human relation to celebrities, the deep and ineradicable feeling that celebrities are *not* just regular people, *cannot* be phoned, and *are* in fact possessed of some sublime quality that would overwhelm us upon approach. What he lacks is that dimension which would reduce us to babbling and/or gaping morons if we were ever actually to speak with the celebrity whom we “love.” (David, by contrast, calmly quotes from the Song of Songs). The truly *mad* dimension of his celebrity crush is its assertion of Rose’s mortal finitude, its preposterous assumption that one can simply talk to her or ask her out for some coffee . . .

It is also in this light that we should complicate the late-capitalist dynamic that the play critiques. Ultimately, David’s response to Rose should *not* be understood as a culminating reflection of the celebrity industry’s marketing dynamic, a fully-realized version of what the system does to us and provokes from us. Once again, there is a difference in kind between David and us, and once again, the distinction is not simply that he oversteps the “sane, healthy” distance which we ourselves maintain, and which we *must* maintain in order to resist the industry. Perhaps, as Jacques Lacan puts it, the issue here is rather *how the non-duped err*. Perhaps we are most fully under the system’s spell not when we actually fall in love with the celebrities it offers us, convinced that they do in fact love us back, but rather when we remain “non-duped,” convinced that our celebrity infatuations are “merely” a game, that we only love them “for fun,” from a distance, with no strings attached—while continuing, of course, to lavish money upon

them, to talk about them constantly, to spend more time with them than with our families, and to desire what they would have us desire. Are we not most fully subjected to the celebrity machinery precisely through the illusory *distance* that we maintain toward it—through our conviction that we have *not* been duped like David Stuart?

Graham Wolfe recently completed his PhD at the University of Toronto’s Centre for Study of Drama. His work explores the sublime and the fantastic in contemporary theatre.

Notes

- 1 See, for instance, “Jailed again, farmer can’t let singer be,” *The Globe and Mail*, 20 June 1984, and “Obsessed fan nailed again for harassing Anne Murray,” *The Toronto Star*, 29 June 1990.

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