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## Anne Nothof, ed. *Ethnicities: Plays from the New West.*

ANNE NOTHOF, editor. *Ethnicities: Plays from the New West.* Prairie Play Series: 16/Series Editor, Diane Bessai. Edmonton: Newest Press, 1999. 198 pp. \$18.95 CDN paper.

The three plays included in this volume are:

*Mom, Dad, I'm Living with a White Girl* by Marty Chan

*House of Sacred Cows* by Padma Viswanathan

*Elephant Wake* by Jonathan Christenson and Joey Tremblay

### JOHN A. HAWKINS

In her Introduction, Anne Nothof notes that the title, *Ethnicities*, "signals that the three plays constitute a departure from the 'norm' of western Canadian plays--rural, realistic, white, Anglo," but they also constitute "the presence of a complex, diverse, and imaginative theatre."

Marty Chan's *Mom, Dad, I'm Living with a White Girl* shifts between two realities, separated by repeated strikes of a gong. The "fictional" reality is the world of the evil Yellow Claw and her obsequious henchman, Kim. In the other reality, the actor playing Yellow Claw

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doubles as the protagonist's mother, Li Fen Gee. Kim the torturer is also Kim Gee, acupuncturist and father. Through this theatrical mechanism, only-son Mark Gee delays his admission to his parents that he intends to live with Sally, a "white girl," and "be Canadian." With a stroke of the gong, Mark becomes "Agent Banana," intent on defeating Yellow Claw with Sally's (a.k.a. the "Snow Princess") help; meanwhile, Sally copes with Mark's evasions of responsibility to her, to his parents, and to himself.


Chan's use of Asian stereotypes, used no doubt to defuse them, may be controversial. But he sets these glaring stereotypes against Sally's more subtle bigotry; she complains to Mark about his mother: "She just dismissed me because of the colour of my skin. You have no idea how that feels." When Mark replies evenly, "I think I might," Sally counters, "No, you're used to it. I'm not." Up to this point, Chan had seemingly given us enlightened young protagonists opposing closed-minded older folk--the immigrant-story formula. But Chan, more perceptive, makes us question whether the cultural imperatives of Mark's parents' generation have validity in a new Canadian demographic. One of Mark's final lines to Sally is, "I want you in my life. But can't there be room for my family?" Sally's willful confusing of this request with Mark's more culpable evasions earlier in the play, exposes her tendency to see the situation as "them or us." The play's ending poses a question: How can the butterfly "climb out of his cocoon," and simultaneously be "a perfect Chinese son?"

*House of Sacred Cows*, by Parma Viswanathan, is a sprawling play offering a large, diverse ensemble and a stage language that unfolds a rich, textured story by interweaving passages of the *Mahabharata* with realistic dialogue.


The play is set in a co-operative house with a multicultural mix of inhabitants in a western Canadian city. The co-op was established years ago by people played on video by the same actors as appear in the present. Into the co-op arrives Anand, a thirty-ish Indian man, who is "in," but not "of," the house. As Nothof observes, January, head of the household and daughter of a co-founder, "attempts to reinstate the [co-op's] original ideals of democracy and equality." However, January encounters the reality that democracy doesn't necessarily bring freedom; Anand reminds her, "you yourself have told me that these two are not the same." The focus is on earning one's freedom by taking personal responsibility for one's actions.

The play depicts several worlds: the past, on video; the physically realistic present; a netherworld occupied by Anand's dead parents, whom we always see but some characters do not; and shifts throughout the play between "Day," "Night," and "Out Of Time." These conventions exacerbate the play's dense texture, but the climax caps the play simply: a banal argument between January and Leaf actually elucidates an argument about the line between appropriate self-expression and unreasonable self-indulgence. Our resulting insights enable us to understand better Anand's struggle between his aspiration for Western-style freedom and his deeper sense of responsibility to his Indian family.

*Elephant Wake*, by Jonathan Christenson and Joey Tremblay, is a one-

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Anne Nothof, ed.

person play that has been performed from Edmonton to Brighton to Edinburgh. Nothof expresses satisfaction that this "very 'local' play could reach an international audience," but she is likely aware that *Elephant Wake* is hardly "local."

On one level, the play is a tale of two towns: Jean-Claude is the last denizen of the defunct francophone town of Ste. Vierge, Saskatchewan, whose economic relevance has long since been supplanted by the nearby English town of Welby. But the play is really about the universal theme of marginalization. Jean-Claude points out that, in the time before the Ice Age, elephants were the size of gophers; their unobtrusiveness was key to their survival. The playwrights propose that there is safety--even longevity--in being marginalized. Jean-Claude's one-person culture has survived despite his bastardy, his English schooling, the demise of Ste. Vierge, and the scattering of his family members. At the centre of his personal culture is the elephant, which we see as a powerful image evoking the solidity of the former Ste. Vierge and as a wistful image evoking the fragility of existence.

The most moving image in the play is evoked in Jean-Claude's first lines: "You know a long time ago . . . It's true that elephants, they could fly . . . they could float, like a balloon, like this," and he demonstrates. Later, Jean-Claude reveals "why elephants can't fly anymore": after an irascible "big fancy teacher," in a fit of pique, "said a big magic thing," the elephants "forget how to fly." Jean-Claude's lifelong coping strategy, learned at his *mère's* knee, is to repeat his defining mantras: "*Pleure pas; il faut être fort*"; and "*Il faut travailler fort*." The latter has an implacable corollary: "If you act sad, you're just being fucking lazy." Thus, we see Jean-Claude as both pitiable and heroic. He keeps his tears to himself; ours we find harder to hold back.

Nothof astutely suggests that the theme of accommodation under hegemony makes these plays "Canadian" and within that, they provide other ways of seeing and participating in the imaginative life of Canada's cultural diversity. After all, as Jean-Claude says, "You can hear things when you pretend not to listen."

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