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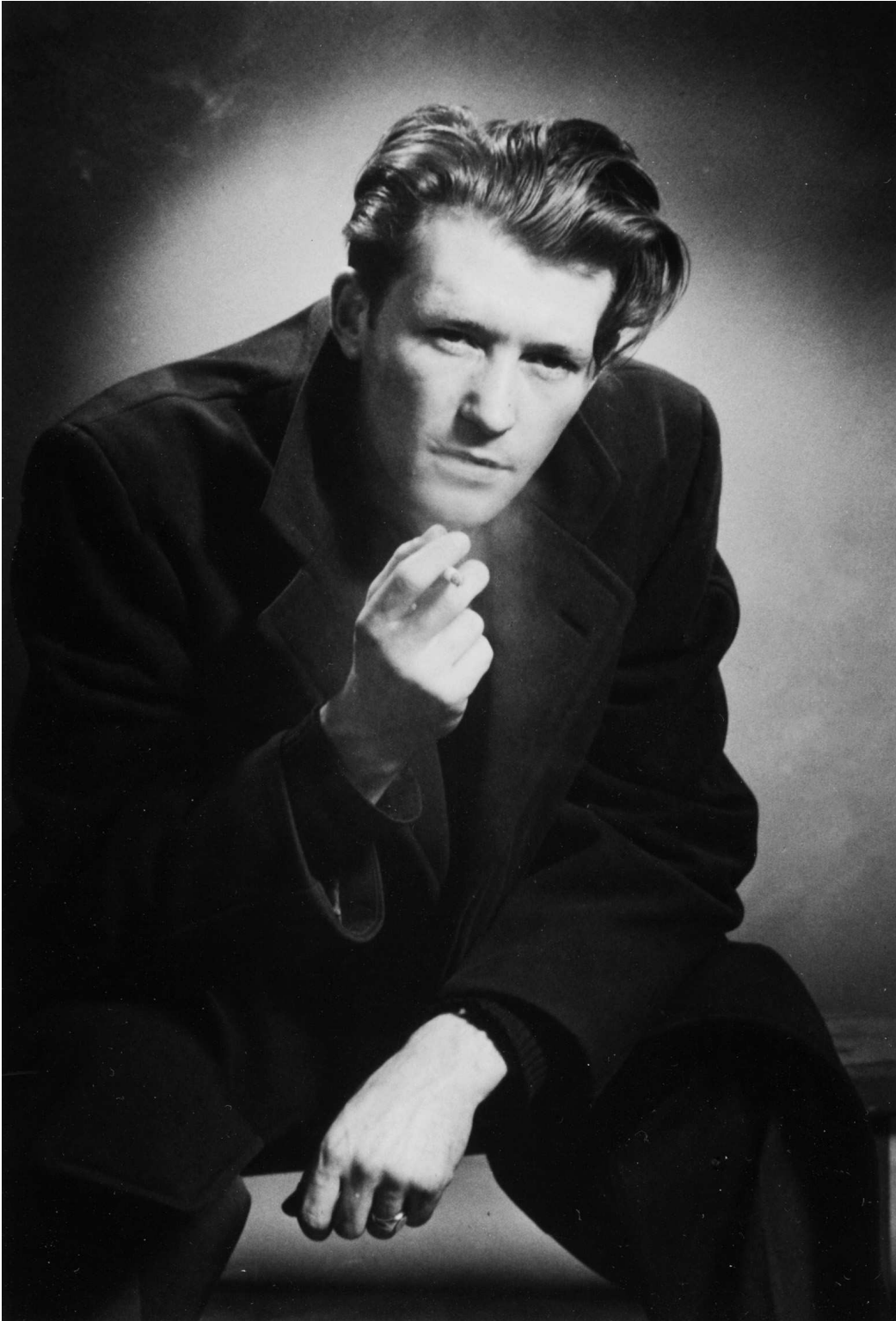
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INTRODUCTION

On an afternoon some years ago, I was sitting on the floor of the living room looking through files when some pieces of newspaper fell out onto the carpet. There were five of them from the 1940s and they were yellowed with age. My father, Floyd Caza, had recently died, and these were part of his papers. As I read the clippings, all play reviews of the Ottawa Stage Society and the Everyman Theatre in British Columbia, I became intrigued. They were all connected to my father's time in Canadian theatre, when he worked alongside actors such as Christopher Plummer and Arthur Hill. I knew he had been an actor at one time but had never really given it much thought beyond that.

The general consensus has been that theatre in Canada, in any professional sense, began with the Stratford Festival in 1953. Yet these clippings pre-dated the festival by several years. At first I thought it must be amateur theatre, done as a hobby, but the reviews indicated otherwise. As an ex-newspaper reporter, and a long-time lover of theatre, my curiosity was piqued. I looked at the clippings in my hand and decided I wanted to know more, much more, about this period of time in Canadian theatre.



Floyd Caza, the actor whose death was the catalyst for *The Opening Act*. He is giving his best William Holden impression in this publicity shot, c. 1950. (MCNICOLL COLLECTION)

The Opening Act evolved from those five pieces my father had cut out of newspapers all those years ago.

In recent years, I am happy to say, a number of volumes highlighting various theatres of the post-war period have been published, but back when I began my research there were almost no books on the subject. Finding little pre-Stratford material, I had to start from scratch. And I did it with no Internet, which, looking back, I have to admit may not have been a bad thing. It forced me to interview actors from that time, most of whom have since died, and to go to the source documents directly in order to discover the history for myself. It was not long before I realized my father had been involved in an exciting time in Canadian theatre, a time of incredible growth.

There had been earlier professional theatre in Canada, but it had been sporadic, scattered across centuries. By the early twentieth century there were some homegrown professional acting troupes, particularly in Montreal, but the majority of theatre in Canada was provided by touring companies from England and America. The Depression in the 1930s put an end to most professional theatre and while amateur theatres still existed, they were spread across Canada and had no cohesive force. At the end of the Second World War, no professional companies existed in Canada presenting traditional dramatic theatre.

After the war, in 1946, a new kind of theatre company sprang up, especially in British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec. They set out to be professional—paying the actors and providing the public with top-notch performances. One company led to another and professional theatre burst onto centre stage in Canada with incredible speed. It became clear to me that the modern era of professional theatre in Canada began, not in 1953 with Stratford, but during this post-war era. It did not take me long to decide there was a book here to be written about bringing professional theatre onto the Canadian scene.

In my naivety I didn't expect the manuscript to be a long one and thankfully had no idea it would take so many years to finish. I applied for, and received, a Canada Council grant, and with that help I spent most of the next year at the Toronto Public Library reading every issue of *Saturday Night* and any major newspaper or other magazine in the country from 1945 to 1953. The people in the theatre division were invaluable to me as they gave me files of the individual companies. At the same time I compiled a long list of actors from the era and started to track them down.

Determined to write a comprehensive history covering the entire country, I made a two-week trip out to Vancouver, the city that eventually became my home. I spent as much time in the old Vancouver Public Library as I could, met with actors, and made a side trip to Los Angeles for an interview with Arthur Hill. Unfortunately, the Maritimes did not have any homegrown professional theatre in the early post-war years. Newfoundland did have the London Theatre Company, started by Leslie

Yeo in 1951, but all the actors were brought over from England. Yeo himself had come to Canada four years earlier with Britain's Alexandra Company, which performed in Newfoundland for the 1947–48 winter season.

That first year of research helped crystallize in my own mind what I wanted to achieve. The focus would be professional theatre, although this was a little complicated as the line between professional and amateur theatre often blurred. Many of the little community theatres often did excellent work, but the sheer number of them simply prohibited inclusion. I decided that if the actors were paid to perform, then the group was professional, and that became my standard for inclusion in the book. I veered from this course only twice. The Montreal Repertory Theatre only occasionally paid *one* of the performers in a production, never all of them, but it was a very important long-standing group in English Quebec. The other large concession I made to my mandate was the chapter on the Dominion Drama Festival. While I wanted the book to reflect professional theatre, I felt I could not entirely overlook the impact of amateur groups on the growth of professional Canadian theatre. The Dominion Drama Festival was important because it not only gave Canada's actors an extra outlet for performing, but also presented many Canadian plays, thereby giving exposure to our fledgling playwrights.

The next step was to choose the order in which to introduce the theatres. I decided to start on the West Coast and move east, which seemed less complicated than trying to attempt a chronological sequence because so many theatres opened at the same time. It was also, I confess, the direction my father followed during his career as an actor.

I then had to decide which years to include in the book. Luckily, with the exception of Theatre Under the Stars, which started out in 1940 as professional in intent but amateur in reality, the new birth of Canadian theatre began following the Second World War. So, 1945 seemed a good starting point, and Stratford in 1953 was the perfect bookend.

One final decision had to be made. How was I going to deal with theatres that operated during the post-war years but continued on after 1953? Some theatres began and ended during the time period so they were easy to include. But others were less clear, such as the two French Quebec theatres, Théâtre du Nouveau Monde and Théâtre du Rideau Vert, which both continued past the 1950s. I decided to include any professional theatre that operated during my time frame, but the focus of the book would remain on the 1945 to 1953 period, with a preamble of any earlier influences or a short follow-up of the subsequent years.

When Stratford began in 1953, to be followed by the regional theatre boom in the 1960s, it was only because of the many qualified people who had acquired their training and experience through the theatres of the post-war years. Of the sixty-five actors at the Stratford Festival in 1953, all but four were Canadian, either by birth or training.

Without the earlier years of professional theatre that provided a pool of experienced Canadian actors, Stratford's first year would have had an entirely different look, and certainly not a Canadian one. The 1945–53 period was short but the impact it had on professional theatre in Canada cannot be overstated. The rapid growth during those years was all the more remarkable because it happened over such a brief period of time.

The people who laid this professional theatre foundation were as diverse and dedicated as any of Canada's other pioneers. I felt Canada owed it them to record their voices for posterity, and I set out to do that in *The Opening Act*.

The close to fifty interviews I conducted were crucial, because they give the flavour of those years. It was important that readers should have a view of the times through the eyes of those who lived it. Many of the theatre people from the period stayed on the stage while others became better known in movies, television and writing: Robertson Davies, Timothy Findley, Elwy Yost (Ontario's man at the movies), Arthur Hill, William Shatner and Christopher Plummer, to name a few. Much of the material from the interviews is included in the separate chapters, but to keep the biographical material from being intrusive, I have also included some excerpts from the interviews as well as historical material in an appendix of "Theatre Vignettes." Some of these are brief while others are longer, with the individuals talking about their childhood and what they did in later years.

It was remarkable that so many men and women suddenly decided in 1945 that they were going to be the ones to bring theatre to Canada—permanently. They strove with hope and determination towards the creation of a lasting professional theatre in Canada. They succeeded but, as will be seen, the road they travelled was far from easy.