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Performing Home

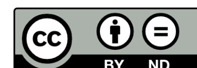
Theatre, performance, and the experiences of Finnish-Canadian settlers

"Performing Home" explores theatre in the Finnish settlements of the Thunder Bay region between 1880 and 1914. It begins with an overview of Finnish immigration to Canada, and moves into an analysis of the role of theatre in Finland, where it was used as a political and social tool by the working class to preserve language and identity under Russian rule. The fundamental role of identity in Finnish theatre made it well suited for Finnish communities in the isolated Thunder Bay region, as settlers "performed home" by mobilizing folk arts as a community building tool. This allowed for a greater sense of cultural identity, and helped Finnish immigrants maintain a connection to their language and national identity, while building a unique Finnish-Canadian artistry within their communities. The political tensions between socialist and conservative groups is explored through the use of theatre among workers' unions, and temperance societies. Further, the article argues that the role of theatre was essential in the establishment of settlements in the north in necessitating greater need for community spaces, such as town halls, which ultimately led to the growth of Finnish settlements in the region. Finally, the article aims to show how the theatre of early Finnish settlements evolved as a tool to preserve cultural identity and give voice to an isolated community with a unique language.

Keywords: Finnish-Canadian theatre, folk movement, immigration, community theatre, Thunder Bay, Ontario

DEDICATION

At the time of publication of this article, the Finnish Labour Temple is in the process of rebuilding following a devastating fire in December of 2021. The Labour Temple has served Thunder Bay's Finnish community for over a century, and played a significant role in the history discussed in this article. While it is not yet known whether much of the archives survived the fire, it is certain that the Finnish community of Thunder Bay will save what is left of the structure, and rebuild the Temple. While the impact of the fire was severe, the community remains strong in the wake of this loss.



INTRODUCTION

> Patrick's gift, the arrow into the past, shows Nicholas the wealth in himself, how he has been sewn into history. Now he will begin to tell stories.
>
> —Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*

In the face of change, our connection to home and identity grounds us. From the people with whom we surround ourselves, to the traditions we keep, home is for many an idea more so than a place; and though ideas are fluid, there are key tenets of home that make up the foundation of the stories we tell about who we are. This is perhaps most true for those who have left their country behind in search of a new life in a new part of the world. For those who have made this difficult journey, the task of preserving a sense of home and identity can be fraught. Our cultural connection to who we are can be cultivated in many ways, but perhaps one of the most powerful tools in shaping these narratives is the arts. Theatre, music, and dance, among other artistic forms, have a particular way of connecting us to that aspect of home which is not at all physical, but some untouchable part of ourselves that forms our identity. Perhaps this is why we often see the arts as a tool used within immigrant communities who must necessarily create and recreate a connection to home in the face of change.

In Canada's own history, a group of settlers who demonstrated particularly well the value of the arts in connecting communities to their heritage were the Finnish immigrants who came to the Thunder Bay region of Ontario in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During the period of focus for this study—between roughly 1880 and 1914—Finland itself was in the midst of a cultural revival, where a struggle for identity through folk arts and language was taking hold (Singleton, 1989, p. 72). While this would eventually lead to a civil war between socialist "Red Finns" and more conservative "White Finns," the factions along political lines could already be seen in Finnish art and theatre, with each party employing the arts to help cultivate the Finnish identity that would best reflect their vision of what an independent Finland might be (Singleton, 1989, p. 1).

In the midst of this uncertainty, those who chose to leave Finland behind to come to Canada brought much of these political movements with them, and it is perhaps because of this unique struggle—that Finland itself was emerging from a period of intense political turmoil, and reforming its own national identity—that Finnish-Canadians were so well positioned to build and reflect upon their communal lives through the arts. Indeed, for many of those first Finnish settlers in Canada, the arts were a central part of their daily lives, and a vital link between new and old identities. Through this essay, I explore what life might have been like for Finnish settlers in the Thunder Bay region between 1880 and 1914 and, specifically, discuss the role of theatre and the arts in the daily lives of settlers; and how, in many ways, theatre and

other art forms were essential in their creation of a new home, and in the formation of a unique Finnish-Canadian identity.

NATIONS ON THE BRINK: CANADA AND FINLAND 1880–1914

Before speaking to the experience of Finnish settlers in Canada during this time, it is necessary to understand that the Canada in which they arrived would have been far different from the country we know today. In many ways, the time surrounding Canada's confederation in 1867 was defined by factions: French and English, Protestant and Catholic, Indigenous and settler, and the east and the west, all represented key groups in Canada, each of which had very different needs and desires. At the same time, the influence of the United States and Britain was heavy, and in many ways, these two countries shaped the development of Canada as a nation. When one considers, then, that many Finnish settlers were leaving their home country to avoid political factions and the oppressive influence of larger world powers, it seems incongruous that Canada—a country divided in its own right—was where they landed.

Yet, while Canada was certainly a nation that had not yet found its footing, Finland too was confronting its own fault lines. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, Finland saw a long history of Swedish and Russian rule in the nation finally come to a head. As early as 1809, Finland had been under the control of Tsarist Russia, though de facto governed by Sweden (Singleton, 1989, p. 1). During this time, one obstacle that seemed to underscore diverse challenges faced by Finns was the fracturing of language practices between social classes. Governance in Swedish meant a clear, almost insurmountable gap between working-class Finnish-speakers and upper-class Finns who were fluent in Swedish. This division within the country furthered an already unstable sense of Finnish identity; which in turn, made any movement toward independence nearly impossible (Singleton, 1989, p. 76). The implication, then, was that Finns emigrating to Canada, as well as those who stayed in the country, faced the momentous task of establishing who they were free from outside powers. As such, the task of any art form aiming to connect Finns to a sense of heritage and history faced an uncommonly large challenge in reaching past the walls of Russian and Swedish culture which had been carefully crafted around an autonomous Finnish identity. In some ways, this was not dissimilar to the task Canada was then facing, insofar as both nations were working towards establishing who they would be on the world stage as the nineteenth century came to an end.

As both Canada and Finland worked to form their national identities in the face of myriad challenges, Canada also faced a more practical challenge: filling the land with enough people to establish a country strong enough to stand on its own. To facilitate this, a number of immigration campaigns began in the late nineteenth century with a focus on attracting settlers from Great Britain, Norway, Sweden, and Germany (Ranta & Burkowski, 1976, p. 15). However, by 1898, at least one program had shifted its focus to Finland. Finnish settlers were promised a better life, in a world

where they could *vuolla puuveitsellä kultaa*, that is, "carve gold with a wooden knife" (Ranta & Burkowski, 1976, p. 15). One could well argue that Finnish immigrants were recruited because they were, generally, fair-haired and Protestant, which would have been considered "ideal" traits by many Anglo-Saxon Canadians (Lindstrom-Best, 1985, p. 8); however, Dominion of Canada Sessional Papers from 1898 state that Finns were recruited because they were "sturdy, honest, hardworking, God-fearing folk, used to hardship and toil, obliged to battle in order to live" (Ranta & Burkowski, 1976, p. 15). By 1890, Finnish settlements in Canada were on the rise in British Columbia, the Prairies, and more than anywhere else, Northern Ontario (Lindstrom-Best, 1985, p. 6). It is difficult, however, to get concrete information on just how many truly Finnish settlers were in Canada at this time. Similarly to how most eastern Europeans were referred to as "Galicians" during the 1800s (Herstein, 1970, p. 289), Finnish settlers were often recorded as Russian or Swedish by immigration officials, while many Estonian settlers were marked as Finnish (Lindstrom-Best, 1985, p. 7). Because of this conflation, even our best numbers are rough estimates.

Though it was incredibly difficult to convince people to come to Ontario's north, once they did, it would seem they came in relatively large numbers. In 1884, Port Arthur – the settlement that would later become Thunder Bay – began building "immigrant sheds" to house newcomers (Ranta & Burkowski, 1976, p. 16), and while these conditions were certainly not ideal, they did serve as a first stop for new settlers—many of them Finnish—who were beginning the journey of making Thunder Bay their home. Indeed, by 1911 roughly half of Finnish Canadians living in Ontario were settled in the Thunder Bay region (Lindstrom-Best, 1985, p. 9). It was in this context of remote communities connected through a shared heritage and immigration experience that we begin to see Finnish theatre as a tool for settlement.

A FINNISH-CANADIAN IDENTITY: FOLK ART, THEATRE, AND THE POLITICAL

Many scholars have argued that there was not actually a "Finnish Theatre" until the second half of the nineteenth century (Singleton, 1989, p. 75). This was largely due to the fact that, prior to this time, most dramatic works were written and performed in either Swedish or Russian, in keeping with the language of the upper class and imperial rule. Beyond this, the majority of theatre in Finland was not created by Finnish theatre companies, but from touring groups (Binham, 1980, p. 58). All this began to change with the ringing of revolution, and the search for a truly Finnish identity that began in the mid-1800s. Around this time, scholars began encouraging Finns to find a sense of their own national identity through the folk art of the peasantry (Singleton, 1989, p. 72). Because Finland had been under Swedish and Russian rule for so long, by the late 1800s, many Finns no longer associated themselves with being "Finnish." Because of this crisis of identity, separation from imperial Russia was near impossible, making the "folk revolution" of the nineteenth century essential (Singleton, 1989, p. 75).

Finnish actor and author Philip Binham succinctly stated that "the Finnish-language theatre began as a protest, originating as a weapon of the Finnish nationalist movement in the mid-nineteenth century against Russian rule and Swedish culture" (Binham, 1980, p. 58). And indeed, unlike the theatre of other European countries which served primarily as entertainment, Finnish theatre was used, from its very beginning "by the workers' movement to educate members and bring them together in amateur performances" (Binham, 1980, p. 58). This practical, politicized form led to a very distinctively Finnish theatre: one which is nearly always realist in nature, and which prizes content over form (Binham, 1980, p. 58). Fittingly, much of the theatre we see developing in the late nineteenth century was rooted in the very folk art that was re-emerging in an effort to connect Finns to a cultural legacy that was uniquely theirs.

Perhaps the best example of a re-surfacing of folk art from this time came in the form of Elias Lönnrot's compilation of the *Kalevala*. The *Kalevala* is an ancient epic poem of purely Finnish origin that weaves together a number of key myths from the country's oral tradition and looks back to Finland's pre-reformation paganism (Pentikäinen, 1999, p. 41). The re-surfacing of this epic inspired a myriad of new works, from musical compositions, to paintings, to plays. One young playwright in particular made his mark with a *Kalevala* story: at twenty-six, Aleksis Kivi won the Finnish Literary Society's drama competition with his play, *Kullervo*. *Kullervo* is, interestingly, the only tragedy found in the entirety of the *Kalevala*. It carries strong Greek tones and is reminiscent of the Oedipus story; the crux of the plot occurs when Kullervo unknowingly seduces his sister, after which she commits suicide, driving Kullervo to eventually do the same (Pentikäinen, 1999, p. 40). The play has had great impact on Finnish culture, with some arguing that the character Kullervo has become a sort of role model for Finnish men, embodying stoicism, and the necessity of striving tirelessly towards your fate, even if that fate is a tragic one (Pentikäinen, 1999, p. 42).

While *Kullervo* was certainly defined by tragedy, that is not to say that all of Kivi's works followed a similar pattern. His play *Seitsemän veljestä* [Seven brothers] provides an interesting contrast, and perhaps greater insight into the Finnish folk movement. Though the play was initially poorly received, it was at one time the second most widely circulated book in Finland, with only the Bible ahead of it (Matson, 1962, p. 5). It is the story of seven brothers who, rather than man their family's homestead, choose to forge a life for themselves in a nearby forest. It is interesting that, in many ways, this theme of returning to nature and foregoing modern society is not dissimilar to the romantic sentiments around the natural world which were beginning to gain popularity in Ontario around the same time. As southern Ontario began to urbanize with the approach of the 20th century, more and more the idea of "the forest" began to be idealized in the arts; cultural attitudes around the simplicity and appeal of the pastoral, contrasted with the wild of the forest, began to shift (Smith, 1990, p. 75). It would seem that on both sides of the Atlantic, the natural world was beginning to be seen as an essential part of human identity.

Not long after Kivi's time, Finland broke free from Russian rule. But the tensions that formed among Finns during this period of uncertainty manifested in a Finnish civil war in 1918, less than a year after the nation gained independence. With so much political strife in such a short time, it is unsurprising that a large portion of Finnish theatre revolved around political ideologies, most markedly defined by the socialist "Red Finns," and more conservative "White Finns."

One playwright who would have fallen decisively into the "Red Finn" camp is Minna Canth. Canth was born in 1844 and made her work necessarily political by writing only in Finnish at a time when the language was regarded as second-class, and its use in literature at times even radical (Launis, 2011). That is not to say, though, that the language of Canth's works was the only thing that made them political. Her 1888 play *Kovan Onnen Lapsia* [Children of misfortune] dealt with the abject poverty often faced by the working class, and the devastating effects it could have. The piece was performed only once and was then banned by the theatre community for fear that the work would cause the state to repeal its theatre grants (Launis, 2011). This certainly speaks to the delicate balancing act which Finnish artists were forced to maintain.

While many playwrights, Canth among them, would have seen it as their duty to use their art to address the injustices of the state, the possible repercussions were not to be taken lightly. It is particularly interesting, then, to discuss how the Finnish theatre was applied and created by Finns who were no longer managing the constraints of their home country, but trying to forge a home in a new one.

THEATRE AND THE ARTS AS A TOOL FOR SETTLEMENT: FINNISH COMMUNITIES IN RURAL THUNDER BAY

As Finnish theatre evolved against a Canadian backdrop, its political underpinnings remained. The growth of industry in Ontario's north also meant the growth of organized labour, and in 1872, Canada legally recognized labour unions (Herstein, 1970, p. 300). As employees in many of the large industries that would have been affected by this change, many Finns were vocal about the rights of workers. And indeed, this centring of the working class in the Finnish community was not unique; many other immigrant communities had strong workers' theatres. Notably, the Ukrainian community in Winnipeg was renowned for employing theatre and other arts to raise awareness around social issues (Filewod, 2011, p. 66). Indeed, it would appear that, while working to fill Canada with as many European settlers as possible, the Canadian government overlooked the eventuality that many of those working-class "men in sheepskin coats" (Herstein, 1970, p. 288) would not readily trade their ideologies for a passage to the new world and a plot of land; and moreover, that many had been fighting for workers' rights in their own countries against incredibly high stakes. A majority of Finnish immigrants brought with them socialist ideologies, and what would have been seen as radical ideals. This is evidenced in data collected in the Finnish settlement of Intola, just outside of the Thunder Bay region. In 1914, there

were about 60 Finns living in Intola, and while only 14 were registered Canadian citizens, 37 were members of the settlement's Socialist Society (Ranta & Burkowski, 1976, p. 74). With such strong ideologies, the community tensions between political groups which were so prevalent in Finland would not have disappeared.

While it is true that a number of the performances we are aware of in these settlements were of published, relatively non-controversial plays, socialist theatre certainly played a role in these communities. A number of community halls with stages that would have been used by theatre groups served double-duty as socialist halls. Because of this, the relationship between Finnish theatre and socialism is indeed a close one. An excellent example of this can be found in the Kivikoski settlement's Finnish Labour Temple. Built in 1910, the temple served as a key gathering place for members of the Finnish community. Indeed, the Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada held its first delegates meeting in this space, and a photograph of the delegates was on display in the hall's archives.

It can be said with some certainty that the cornerstone of the Finnish theatre community was the working class. One particularly interesting performance at the Finnish Labour Temple captured this notion in its production of *Spartacus*. As a mythologized Roman slave who led a revolt, for generations the character of Spartacus has been interpreted as symbolic of the rights of the working class. How fitting then, that it should be remembered as one of the earliest plays performed at the Finnish Labour Temple.

While it has been noted that Finnish theatre was often bent towards a political left, spearheaded by those "Red Finns" who would have been firmly rooted in progressive ideologies at home, it must also be noted that "White Finns" who did make their way to Canada wielded theatre as a tool in their own right. Notably, the very first records of theatrical activity in Finnish settlements was the work of temperance societies (Sporn, 1995, p. 96). These often religious groups used theatre as a way to spread a "social gospel" to a population that was largely anti-religion. This must have been particularly taxing, as many Finnish settlers saw emigration to Canada as a way of breaking from the Lutheran church (Reeves, 2017). For those Finns who were more conservative, though, temperance societies must have offered a welcome place to find theatre that was not overtly socialist. That is not to say that those who were religious were always on the political right, while those who weren't were on the left; occasionally, combinations of ideologies led to rifts in theatre groups, leading to some very interesting hybrid socialist-temperance movements that must have found great difficulty in reaching either side in a meaningful way (Sporn, 1995, p. 97).

While plays were sometimes performed outdoors, or as home entertainment once the turn of the century hit, more and more community halls with stages were being built, providing more variety of space for staging. At the Tarmola Hall, there is a record of the play *Rymättylän Häät* [a wedding in Rymättylä] having been performed,

a Finnish work that would have brought a bit of home to Thunder Bay (Ranta & Burkowski, 1976, p. 35). Beyond this, the Lakehead Archives provide evidence of a number of staged performances from Finnish settlers at this time. This habit of performing published, well-established Finnish plays must have been key in helping settlers stay connected with the country they had left behind. Through these works, they would have been able to, quite literally, "perform home" by focusing on Finnish narratives and characters in their own language.

The records of plays, both professional and amateur, seem to reach an impressive level of prominence in the community. In Kivikoski, a professional director was brought in to lead the drama program (Halonen, 2016), just one example of the seriousness with which Finnish settlers engaged in theatre. Another interesting example can be seen in the Tarmola Hall, though this venue's existence slightly post-dates the stated scope of this study. Built in 1917, the Tarmola Hall opened with real velvet curtains at its stage, a commodity that would have been exceptionally difficult to acquire in Thunder Bay at this time (Ranta & Burkowski, 1976, p. 34). But then, it makes sense that these communities would have been willing to put so much of their limited resources into theatre spaces. Quite often, theatre groups literally "built" communities by necessitating the need for greater space, resulting in the building of town halls and other buildings that could serve as a meeting place (Ranta & Burkowski, 1976, p. 75). And with this, we reach the core of just why theatre in Finnish settlements would have been so important. While giving settlers a link to their home, it also offered them a bridge forward. Through the creation of new works and new spaces, a new identity began to form within these communities; one that was not purely Finnish or purely Canadian, but a combination of the two. And indeed, it could be said that this was the theatre's ultimate purpose for these settlers, and perhaps for many artists today: to hold a mirror up to where we are now, while reflecting on the past that brought us here, and projecting the future that might be built.

LOOKING BACK, MOVING FORWARD

The theatre of Canada's past, and particularly that of communities outside the official Anglophone and Francophone traditions, remains largely unexplored; but these stories have played no small role in making Canada the nation it is today. The ways in which theatre was used by Finnish settlers to help those first arrivals create a home in a new world exemplifies how the arts provide us with the tools to honour our past while building our future. Ultimately, the connection between the political, the arts, and the ways in which we continually create and recreate identity is a common thread linking diverse communities: just as theatre was used in Finland as a tether to the country's unique heritage in the face of Swedish and Russian rule, so too did it connect Finns in Canada to a sense of home and identity.

The power of theatre in community is its ability to allow us to envision more for ourselves, bridging the past, present, and future through an imagining of worlds that

might be. When brought to the stage, the narratives found in Finnish folk art, or indeed, the stories that any community might tell about who they are, allow players to step into roles that capture a part of themselves that is intangible—a connection to identity, home, and culture that lies at the root of who we are and who we might become. And through this, we see that the strength of theatre in community building extends far beyond socialist halls or imported curtains. Instead, it empowers communities to forge their own unique identities, ultimately finding a way to *vuolla puuveitsellä kultaa* after all.

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