



# CANADA'S HISTORY PLAYS



February 2016

Dear Educator,

In 2017, as the 150th anniversary of Confederation is remembered, we invite you to lead your students into the hyper-theatrical world of Michael Hollingsworth's epic cycle, *The History of the Village of the Small Huts*. Each of the twenty-one plays tells a story of Canada, with 40-55 characters joining the dialogue.

These award-winning plays have been produced almost exclusively in the theatre cathedrals and bars of downtown Toronto. But a couple of pioneering professors in Vancouver and Fredericton have challenged students and thrilled audiences with groundbreaking productions -- and we want to spread the word.

As you may read some detail below, in Professor Kugler's and Professor Whittaker's notes, the plays are a good fit for student productions because of the modern pace and technology of the staging, and because there are so many roles for actors, designers, technical wizards, graphic artists, and more. The first section below includes synopses to help you consider which of the *History Plays* is right for your students.

Our company has spent decades defining the 'Small Huts' style of costume, lighting, scoring, staging, and we are happy to share with you the techniques and ideas. Indeed, if any of you would like to join us during our upcoming rehearsal for *The Great War*, between February 15 and April 7, or during our own 2017 rehearsals, you are welcome to come and see how *we* make the sausage, all the better to make your own.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Adam Barrett  
Producer, VideoCabaret  
adam@videocab.com  
408 Queen St West Toronto ON  
416 703 1725

Michael Hollingsworth takes over where Pierre Berton leaves off in telling the story of our nation, warts and all.

*Rae Johnson, Painter, Teacher, Ontario College of Art and Design*

I am an ardent fan...the work is exciting, relevant, theatrical, educational, and intelligently provocative.

*Ron Singer, Professor Emeritus in Theatre, York University*

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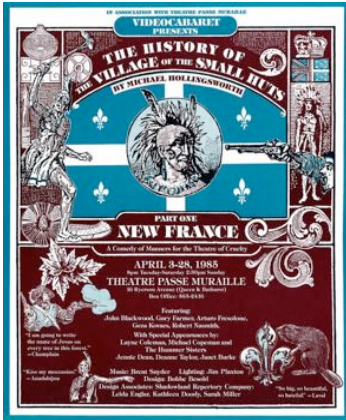
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# Canada's History Plays

by Michael Hollingsworth

## Beginnings



### NEW FRANCE

*The History of the Village of the Small Huts, 1534-1698*

*Four discrete 60 min. plays*

**Donnacona & Cartier** Iroquois Chief Donnacona is abducted by Jacques Cartier to the savage court of King Francois I. Roused by tales of treasure, the French return to Canada where the Iroquois revenge halts colonization for half a century.

**Champlain** Champlain allies with Huronia and battles the Iroquois to establish a settlement that includes the traders Anadabijou and Etienne Brulé, and Champlain's unhappy young bride.

**Brébeuf** Brother Brébeuf and the Jesuits declare war on Huron beliefs. The society of trader Arironta and his wife Agona is driven to the edge of annihilation, and spared as Chief Teganissorens wins a battle.

**Frontenac** Count Frontenac seizes control of the fur trade from Lake Superior to The Mississippi, as the Iroquois wage unrelenting war against French expansion. Bishop Laval imports destitute women from France to marry the rough and lonely fur traders, and take possession of the land one Frenchman at a time.



### THE BRITISH

*The History of the Village of the Small Huts, 1756-1815*

*Three discrete 60 minute plays*

**The Plains of Abraham** To prepare for a British invasion, the Marquis de Montcalm and French troops arrive in Quebec City where the defenses are in wretched condition under the corrupt Governor Vaudreuil. British General Wolfe leads a surprise attack, forcing a battle where a colonial history changes masters.

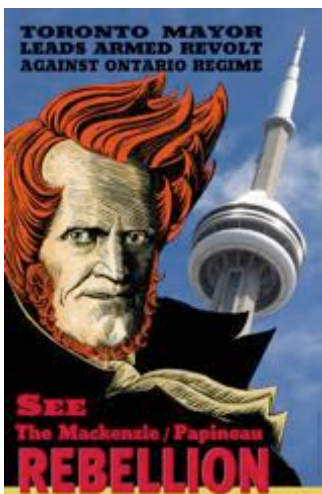
**Pontiac** After the British conquest, the Algonquin allies of the French fiercely resist the New Colonial Order. Under the leadership of Pontiac, Chief of the Ottawa, the alliance attacks and destroys sixteen British forts, and besieges Fort Detroit for six months.

**The Loyalists** Upper Canada is rocked by the American Revolution, the reshaped by the arrival of the United Empire Loyalists, and the treaties with the Iroquois Nation under the governorship of John Simcoe.

*Two Acts, 110 minutes*

**The War of 1812** When America declares war on Britain and her empire, a confederation led by the Shawnee chief Tecumseh defends its own territory by joining in the defence of Canada. In three years of bloodshed on land and lake, the Yankees burn York, the Yorkees burn Washington, and everyone burns the Natives.

## The Stirring of Democracy



### THE MACKENZIE/PAPINEAU REBELLION

*The History of the Village of the Small Huts, 1830-1840*

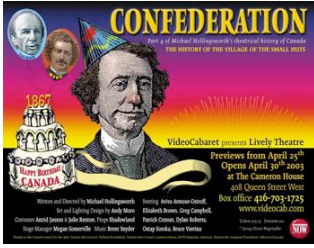
*Two acts, 110 minutes*

William Lyon Mackenzie publishes a rabble-rousing newspaper in the muddy town of York. When York, against his advice, was amalgamated into the new city of Toronto, Mackenzie became its first Mayor, challenging the Family Compact's control of landholdings, laws, and votes, and vowing to get their feet "off the people's necks". In Lower Canada, Louis Joseph Papineau, a wealthy landowner whose ideas echoed those of Mackenzie and their times, preferred a more limited revolution in which wealthy Francophones would replace wealthy Anglophones. The story of the Farmer's Revolt and the Uprising of Les Patriotes interweaves the plots and subplots, conspiracies and stratagems, that lead to the brutal suppression of both rebellions, and the endgame Toronto Historian William Kilbourne described as "comic ignominy."



# The Age of Confederation

*Five plays featuring John A. Macdonald, Louis Riel, Big Bear, Wilfrid Laurier*

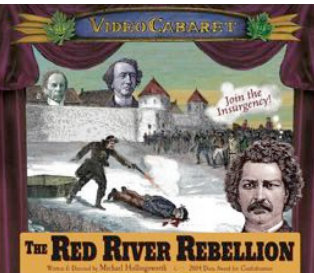


## **CONFEDERATION**

*The History of the Village of the Small Huts, 1861-1867*

*One Act, 70 minutes*

The play dramatises the deal-making behind the Confederation fireworks on July 1, 1867, as all resistance is overcome by dreams of expansion and nightmares of American annexation. John A. Macdonald bestrides the play with a bottle in one hand and a country in the other, beguiling, persuading, and trading with legends such as Georges-Etienne Cartier, George Brown, and D'Arcy McGee. Two young men meet in a Montreal law office: Wilfrid Laurier, an ardent anti-Confederationist; and the Métis Louis Riel who is preparing for the role of "public enemy".



## **THE RED RIVER REBELLION**

*The History of the Village of the Small Huts, 1867-1870*

*One Act, 65 minutes*

Prime Minister Macdonald plans to turn the west into one big Ontario. Louis Riel and Métis leaders want local autonomy. Across the country radical Protestants and Catholics plot assassination and terror, backed by American continentalists. In moderate minds, like that of young Laurier, Canada's secular and multi-cultural ideals are nurtured.



## **THE CANADIAN PACIFIC SCANDAL**

*The History of the Village of the Small Huts, 1870-1878*

*One Act, 65 minutes*

Canada's businessmen compete to own the revolutionary technologies of the day, the railway and telegraph lines. Prime Minister Macdonald establishes the traditions of Federal-Provincial relations by wooing British Columbia into Confederation with a railway, and making a side deal to swap the CPR contract for a large campaign donation. Caught red-handed taking a bribe from the owner of the Bank of Montreal, Macdonald heads for the political wilderness, but not for long. Métis leader Louis Riel, though a hunted man with a price on his head, is elected as an MP from Manitoba but denied his seat by Orange Lodge fanatics.

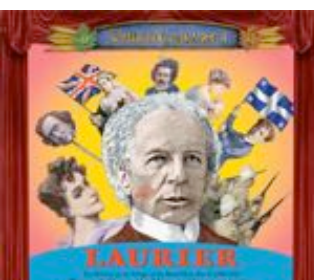


## **THE SASKATCHEWAN REBELLION**

*The History of the Village of the Small Huts, 1879-1885*

*One Act, 65 minutes*

Louis Riel returns from exile to join Saskatchewan Métis leader Gabriel Dumont and Cree Chief Big Bear, to fight for what we now call land claims, provincial rights, local government. The conflict is escalated ruthlessly from violent military action to mass starvation. In November 1885, the Last Spike is hammered, Riel is hanged, and the West is open for business. Macdonald's decision to execute Riel enrages Quebec and sends the Conservatives to the penalty box for decades. Laurier takes his fight for a secular society into politics, and wins a seat from Quebec.



## **LAURIER**

*The History of the Village of the Small Huts, 1885-1911*

*One Act, 65 minutes*

Louis Riel's execution is opposed by Wilfrid Laurier, a courageous act that propels him to the leadership of the Liberal Party. The death of Prime Minister Macdonald just after re-election launches a tumultuous inter-regnum, and in 1896 Laurier takes office. As Canada grows from colony to country, adding Alberta and Saskatchewan to the confederation, Laurier grapples with the conflicts of nationalism, federalism, regionalism. Laurier asks the question, What is a Canadian? And answers it. He also has a long affair with his law partner's wife, and their love child becomes an ardent Quebec separatist.

# The 20th Century



## THE GREAT WAR

*The History of the Village of the Small Huts, 1914-1918*

*Two Acts, 110 minutes*

In the spring of 1914 many cultures are struggling to maintain or establish their voices in the national dialogue, but British Canada is still a well-fed bulldog and when it barks, the young men say "Ready, aye, ready." The story follows Canadian officers and infantrymen through the battles of the Ypres, Vimy Ridge, Passchendaele, the Somme, and Amiens, as the war devours ten million lives. The action features legendary generals, and characters named in no history book. Under British Command, the Canadian forces suffer 230,000 casualties, 58,000 killed, altering the colonial gestalt forever. Pride and grief kindle a desire in Canadians for an independent destiny.



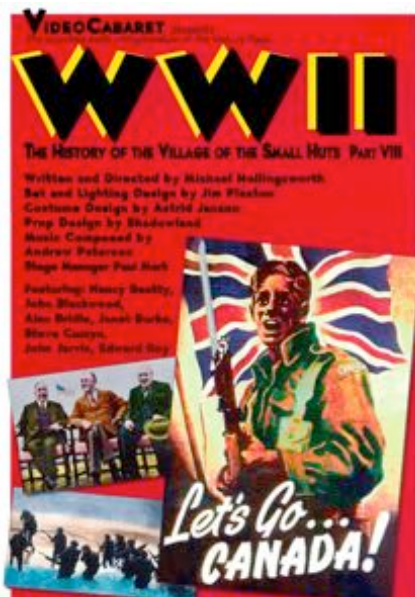
## THE LIFE & TIMES of MACKENZIE KING

*The History of the Village of the Small Huts, 1918-1939*

*Two Acts, 110 minutes*

As a grandson and namesake of the notorious 1837 rebel, William Lyon Mackenzie, Canada's longest-serving Prime Minister was driven by a sense of destiny and spurred by ghostly riders. He falls in love regularly but prefers the company of other men's wives, or seances with his late mother and other departed souls.

The play is a zeppelin-ride through the soaring twenties and the diving thirties. Between the shadows of two global wars, ideas clash and markets crash. Shaken by the Winnipeg Strike, the Union movement, the Great Depression, and Mackenzie King's flirtation with the Third Reich, Canada discovers its inner Communist.



## WWII

*The History of the Village of the Small Huts, 1939-1945*

*Two Acts, 110 minutes*

Prime Minister Mackenzie King, his soothsayers, and his magic dog Pat preside over the war effort.

*King We're not fighting this war to keep the world free of Nazis,  
nor to maintain the British Empire.  
We're fighting to keep the Liberal Party in power.*

The front lines are conjured by Private Joe and his cohorts, as Generals MacNaughton, Crerar, Roberts, Mountbatten, and Montgomery lead their men into the battles of Hong Kong and Dieppe, the invasions of Italy and Normandy.

*Mountbatten(At Dieppe) Oh yes yes yes, the Canadians.  
When they are not bragging they are complaining. I hate them.  
Just get them in the boats, get them in there and we'll see what  
happens. Who knows, maybe it will work.*

Rosie the Wrencher and daughter Muffin share the battles of the home front.

*Rose Anything happen today?  
Muffin No, not really, well, the Mounties came and arrested the neighbours.*



# The Global Village



## THE COLD WAR

*The History of the Village of the Small Huts, 1945-1963*

*Two Acts, 110 minutes*

In Halifax, Toronto, and Vancouver, two million parents and 2.4 million children watch Ed Sullivan over TV dinner. In Montreal a mad psychiatrist conducts hallucinogenic brainwashing experiments for the CIA. All over Canada, freedom-loving RCMP officers spy on Bolsheviks, beatniks, bleeding hearts, and bachelors. The COLD WAR links the regimes of Mackenzie King, St. Laurent, and Diefenbaker with an international espionage story featuring a trenchcoat full of trouble named Sam Steele, and a demimonde of noir-ish characters including Igor Gouzenko and Gerda Munsinger. Out in the burbs where babies boom, ex-soldier Tom Muffett becomes an Avro Arrow worker, the little Muffetts grow up in front of the TV, and mother Mary develops bats in her beehive.



## TRUDEAU & THE FLQ

*The History of the Village of the Small Huts, 1963-1970*

*Two Acts, 110 minutes*

A worldwide generation of post-colonial post-war babies is coming of age, dropping LSD and marching for peace, or blowing up police stations and killing for independence. In Canada, a brutal confrontation erupts between two irreconcilable visions of French Canada: one of Les Canadiens governing Canada from sea to sea; the other of Les Québécois governing la patrie, Québec. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and the Front de Libération du Quebec hurtle toward the collision known as the 'October Crisis', when the most violent manifestation of Quebec nationalism in Canadian history is answered by the heaviest federal response, the War Measures Act.

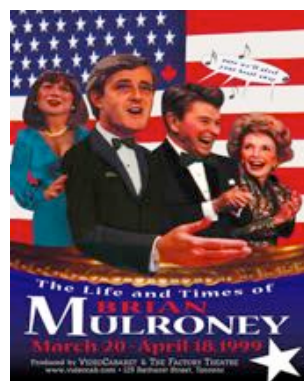


## TRUDEAU & LÉVESQUE

*The History of the Village of the Small Huts, 1972-1981*

*Two Acts, 110 minutes*

As the Parti Québécois rises to power in Quebec, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and Premier René Lévesque face-off in the 1980 Quebec Referendum on independence. Trudeau pushes for Canadian independence and the repatriation of the Constitution with a Charter of Rights. Through the high-profile plots runs the hush-hush intrigue of PQ Minister Claude Morin, undercover RCMP Agent; and the serial adventures of the Prime Minister's wife, Margaret.



## THE LIFE & TIMES OF BRIAN MULRONEY

*The History of the Village of the Small Huts, 1984-1993*  
*Written by Michael Hollingsworth and Deanne Taylor*

*Two Acts, 110 minutes*

Brian Mulroney, a failed Conservative Leadership candidate and heavy drinker, is soon fighting fit and ready for another try as a group of Canadian and American businessmen provide unlimited backing. The play's action follows the events that shape a Prime Minister's legacy and shake the lives of a family of factory workers. Also featured are the constitutional wars, the shady dealings with rich lobbyists, and the destruction of the national Conservative coalition by Preston Manning and Lucien Bouchard.

**CASE STUDY #1**    ***Dr. Robin Whittaker***  
***Associate Professor***  
***Drama Advisor and Creative Writing Acting-Advisor***  
***St. Thomas University, Fredericton NB***



The cast and crew of Theatre St. Thomas' production of *Trudeau and the FLQ*

**Insights, on the occasion of directing Michael Hollingsworth's *Trudeau and the FLQ*.**  
**by Robin C. Whittaker**

Producing and directing the outside-of-Toronto premiere of Michael Hollingsworth's *Trudeau and the FLQ* for Theatre St. Thomas (TST) was an extraordinarily rewarding experience—and the rewards reached far beyond selling out all five shows of the run.

We sought to be inspired by the VideoCabaret “black box” aesthetic, adapting what I had seen first-hand and in archive footage to the needs and abilities of our own theatre space, the (coincidentally-named) Black Box Theatre.

For anyone who has seen a VideoCab production at their ‘home-base’ at the Cameron House, you immediately see that it is not only the skill of the actors that astounds, but also the jaw-dropping technical proficiency needed to pull it off.

When quantified, the numbers are as staggering in practice as they are in print: Our production required 640 lighting, sound, and projection cues to stage the play's 93 one- to two-minute scenes with 5-second transitions in 11 lighting areas within one 13-square-foot "box." We cast the play's 60+ characters with 18 actors, 5 of whom played one character and 13 of whom played between 2 and 8 characters. Our costume coordinator sourced and altered over 80 costumes and chose about 15 wigs. Over the course of 8 weekends we rehearsed between 15 hours (before Thanksgiving) and 25 hours (after Thanksgiving) per weekend (including breaks, costume fittings, and act runs) for a total of 136 hours of rehearsal plus 15 hours of Q2Q (over 2 days), plus 3 dress rehearsals.

Hollingsworth's "Small Huts" plays are ideal for university environments, not only as vehicles for theatre training but also as learning experiences for audiences (we even held lively audience talkbacks with a few actors and crew members after two of our performances). The plays are by definition historical, political, and broadly education. As political satire they are engaging and hilarious. They are factually and chronologically accurate to a fault. This is also why I taught *Trudeau and the FLQ* in my Canadian drama course the previous year while another instructor taught it while our production ran this fall.

St. Thomas University (STU) is a "liberal arts university," which means that our theatre activity is viewed as part of the students' broader undergraduate education. Our acting courses are offered within a "Drama Concentration," which amounts to a cluster of courses in the English Department. Theatre St. Thomas is STU's flagship extra-curricular theatre company so students in all disciplines audition, including those pursuing the Drama Concentration. Some of our students who want to pursue professional theatre training audition for conservatory programs after graduating. Thus, our cast, crew, and enthusiastic audiences are made up of not only drama students but also students pursuing political science, history, journalism, anthropology, and psychology degrees, among others. This was the first and best way that our students had encountered this historical material—live and accurately portrayed. Along with a couple of drama classes, a political science class attended, as did about twenty of our faculty members across disparate disciplines.

Even more clearly than I have seen before, we attracted audiences beyond the usual "theatre audiences." We clearly benefitted from running the show just one month after the ascendance of Trudeaumania 2.0—and, on a sober note, a week after the Paris terrorist attacks. Everyone I spoke with immediately made these two thematic connections. To wit, just as we were closing the house for the Friday performance, three women with paper gift bags arrived asking to be admitted. When I replied that we were sold out, one of the women said that this show was part of a Trudeau-themed bachelorette party for her friend. I was a little skeptical (that's quite the line to get in to a show!) until another woman (the bride-to-be) produced from a gift bag a mug featuring "Just Watch Me," "Bedrooms of the Nation," and other Trudeau maxims on it. We managed to squeeze them in.

THEATRE ST. THOMAS PRESENTS

The Maritime Premiere of  
**TRUDEAU AND THE FLQ**  
 by Michael Hollingsworth  
 Part of his play cycle THE HISTORY OF THE VILLAGE OF THE SMALL HUTS

DIRECTOR: Robin C. Whitaker  
 ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: Jean-Michel Cléto  
 TECHNICAL DIRECTOR: Chris Saxe

Adam Rhindress  
 Alex Roux  
 Amanda Hay  
 Amy Baldwin  
 Angel Bossé  
 Bryan Weston  
 Cheryl Lee Watts  
 Danielle Chisoon  
 Diana Polinas  
 Dylan Grant  
 Gobby Fountain  
 Ian Dell  
 Jessica McKee  
 Kira Chishelm

Laura-Beth Bird  
 Liam Browne  
 Lucas Dalrymple-Robert  
 Matthew LeBlanc  
 Miguel Ray  
 Robyn Lynn  
 Rodney DuPlessis  
 Samantha Gillespie  
 Samantha McCormack  
 Samuel Corneil  
 Sharissa LeBlond  
 Talna Dewly  
 Wei Sing Tan

NOVEMBER 18-21  
 Show starts at 7:30pm  
 Saturday matinee 2:00pm

ADMISSION  
 \$10 general  
 \$5 students and seniors

BLACK BOX THEATRE  
 Sir James Dunn Hall  
 St. Thomas University

BLACK BOX

Theatre 2014  
 ST. THOMAS





Trudeau-mania at St Thomas University



Premier Daniel Johnson, Prime Minister Pearson and Pierre Trudeau

### Hot Tips for producing *Trudeau and the FLQ*:

- We had most of our set built and lights focused for the first read-through. This allowed our production team to give the actors a walk-through of the blocking and lighting “look.”
- One of our greatest discoveries was that because the scenes are so short, we could rehearse each one for about 20-30 minutes and then do a run of 15 scenes in an afternoon, which meant that we found a feel for the flow of the play very early. By the time we hit our first act run on the fifth rehearsal day we were in good shape.
- Our SM gave about as many line notes as entrance and exit notes. Dropping a line can always be ‘dangerous’ for a scene; but when working in this style, exiting in the pitch black through the wrong exit could mean a violent collision.
- I worked in our Black Box while my assistant director worked on scenes in a different space. This allowed us to “double up” our rehearsal time. We could then run about 15 scenes in order to see what each other had accomplished, and then shared notes. The next time we rehearsed the scenes individually, we directed a different scene. This was possible for *Trudeau and the FLQ* because about half of the scenes feature Trudeau and his “politicians” while the other half feature Maurice and his *felquistes*. There were always one or two actors migrating between rehearsal spaces within the same period, but that was entirely manageable.
- During performances, our lighting designer operated the lighting board (about 460 lighting cues) on the SM’s cues (this allowed the SM, who was most familiar with the show, to allow actors to improv at the end of scenes, which is part of the style). The SM ran the projection computer. A sound operator ran the sounds on the SM’s cues.
- Source your (very good white) make-up early! On the Friday before the run our make-up coordinator discovered that there was not enough face make-up in New Brunswick—or Halifax even—to get us through the third performance. Fortunately, her husband happened to be at a conference in Toronto and returned just in time with enough make-up to get us through the run.

CASE STUDY # 2 *Professor DD Kugler*  
*Theatre Area, School for the Contemporary Arts*  
*Simon Fraser University, Vancouver BC*



### PLAYMAKING RESEARCH

I have directed two mainstage productions from Michael Hollingsworth's *History of the Village of the Small Huts* play-cycle at Simon Fraser's School for the Contemporary Arts: *Laurier* in the spring term of 2004; and *The Cold War*, a decade later in the spring term of 2014.

Since each production was preceded in the fall term by a playmaking course (3hrs/class, 2classes/wk) devoted to studio research, I will briefly describe those processes.

During the first nine weeks of the fall 2003 term, the 20 students in the playmaking course read the eight published plays in Hollingsworth's *The History of the Village of the Small Huts: New France, The British, The Mackenzie-Papineau Rebellion, Confederation and Riel, Laurier, The Great War, Life and Times of Mackenzie King, World War II*.

During the first nine weeks of the fall 2013 term, the 34 students in the playmaking course read the eight most recent plays in Hollingsworth's *The History of the Village of the Small Huts: Laurier, The Great War, The Life and Times of Mackenzie King, World War II, The Cold War, Trudeau & the FLQ, Trudeau & the PQ, The Life and Times of Brian Mulroney*.

Both classes read parallel chapters from poet laureate George Bowering's *Stone Country* for another artist's rendering of Canadian history, and they researched historical characters in *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. Provisional risers were provided in the studio to create levels, and the trapezoidal performance area was marked off (12ft at the front, 5ft at the back, 16ft deep). The students performed excerpts from a play each week – incorporating costumes, props, music and light in the seemingly tiny performance area – to develop appropriate performance strategies for Hollingsworth's texts. At the end of this research period, the class voted for the script they wanted to perform as the spring mainstage.

During the final four weeks, students focused on two simultaneous projects – a more narrow work on the selected text, and a generative project incorporating Hollingsworth’s playmaking strategies.

For work on the selected script, the class was divided into groups (two groups in 2003, four groups in 2013) to edit and rehearse a section (an act of *Laurier*, half an act of *The Cold War*) for a 15-minute performance.

For the generative project, I asked the class to collectively select a topic for their historical research: in 2003 they chose “Hastings Street”; in 2013 they chose “Im/Migration/Home”. Each student wrote 4-5 scenes – connected to the topic – that moved through time and used what they had learned from Hollingsworth’s playmaking techniques.

The final two class were devoted to presentations of both projects. Each class performed an edited version of the selected play on the risers in the tiny designated performance area. For our final class, they performed my chronological ordering of the individual scenes they had written. In 2003, the “Hastings Street” scenes spanned from Georges Vancouver in 1792 to the recently opened safe injection site; they included moments as divergent as Gassy Jack, the collapse of the Second narrow Bridge, Bannister’s sub-4-minute mile, and even had scenes narrated by some of Hastings Street’s more famous neon signs. In 2013, the “Im/Migration/Home” scenes spoke eloquently of family biography and arrival in Canada from China, France, Viet Nam, Jordan, Hong Kong, Jamaica, Italy, Japan, England, Egypt, Scotland, Uganda, Ireland, and USAmerica, as well as documenting an aboriginal relationship to Canada.



At the conclusion of these research courses, performance students auditioned for the mainstage production with a good grounding in the process that lay ahead. I included non-actors in both preparatory courses: music students who later composed and played live during the productions; a film student who later became video designer; and production and design students who later took on the roles of technical director, stage manager, lighting designer, props designer, and assistant costume designer. The incorporation of non-actors into the playmaking research courses definitely created a stronger sense of ensemble within the rehearsal and performance process.

Pierre Sevigny and Prime Minister Diefenbaker, from *The Cold War* at SFU



## REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE

Each production had six weeks of rehearsal (Monday through Thursday 6-10pm, Saturday and Sunday 10am-6pm). Each week had a narrow focus: week one – act one on-book; week two – act two on-book; week three – act one off-book; week four – act two off-book. Each rehearsal concluded with a run of the work that day, each week concluded with a run of our work from the previous week. Week five was devoted to runs, the move from studio to stage, and technical rehearsals.

To an outsider, the rehearsal room probably looked like chaos. The provisional risers and taped performance area were on one end of the rehearsal hall. Sitting just in front of the risers with the student stage manager, I first worked with the performers at the table on each brief scene, then worked on the scene again on the risers, helping actors adjust to the demands of the performance area – a two-dimensional more-or-less stationary body, head tilted slightly upward to catch the single overhead light, shaping the body and speaking through a facial mask for each character. At the other end of the rehearsal hall my student assistant director led actors through exercises to develop facial masks and body shapes for each of their characters, and worked on more difficult moments we encountered. Between us all the other actors huddled on the floor, researching their historical characters, running lines, and developing physical business. A student dramaturg moved from group to group sharing information, responding to historical questions, taking on new research assignments. Two music students were also in the room composing a series of scores attached to characters and/or core themes. The hive of activity was infectious – the sharing of research and creation encouraging everyone to go further.



Mary Muffin, from *The Cold War* at SFU

Rehearsal was followed by 10 performances over two weeks. For *Laurier*, 10 actors performed over 50 characters in 113 brief scenes; for *The Cold War*, 11 actors performed over 50 characters in 133 brief scenes. In both productions each scene concluded with a blackout that lasted a maximum of 3 seconds as the actors changed places. These fast-paced productions – with numerous costume changes, including wigs and facial hair – required exceptional precision and repeatability from the performers.

Finally, what must be stressed, these are amazingly fun shows to perform, and equally fun to attend. We had enthusiastic responses to both productions not only from Contemporary Arts faculty and students, but also from faculty and students across the university – Canadian Studies, Communication, English, History, and Humanities.

## CONCLUSION

Michael Hollingsworth's *History of the Village of the Small Huts* – and the VideoCabaret productions – represent three decades of work by senior Canadian artists. I feel strongly that these scripts should be required reading/performing in school curriculums across the nation.

In my research classes, as well as rehearsal and production of these two scripts, I have found the entire play-cycle, and our subsequent focus on a single script, an immensely useful pedagogical tool.

- In reading the plays, students cover much of the historical ground they encountered elsewhere, but this time they were thoroughly engaged by individual characters, and their roles in an unfolding Canadian narrative. The plays proved an excellent jumping-off place for additional research into historical characters and events.
- The plays also encouraged research into the unique history of VideoCabaret productions of this cycle of plays.
- Each text suggests a distinct performance style, which leads to a stylized integration of the basic production elements – set, light, costumes, props, sound, and video.
- The scripts are amazingly gender neutral. The demanding leads in both plays – Laurier and Diefenbaker – we played superbly by women.
- Hollingsworth's construction of narrative had much to teach students about playmaking – especially story-telling based on research, with an epic sweep of character and time.
- VideoCabaret's – largely unfunded – dedication to this seminal project over three decades provides a terrific example to theatre students about what is possible given rigorous commitment from an enthusiastic ensemble of artists.

# Making History with Michael Hollingsworth

by Deanne Taylor



In 1982 Michael Hollingsworth was known for hip black comedies (one of them closed by the Toronto police) and video-rock stagings of Orwell's 1984 and Huxley's Brave New World; he may have seemed the playwright least likely to spend the next thirty years writing about Canadian history. But that year, Canada presented a pageant in which a British queen and a Québécois prime minister marked the repatriation of the Constitution. Michael was drawn to the drama, and suddenly became aware that he barely understood its significance. Born to Welsh and Irish parents, he had arrived in Canada at the age of five and, like most Canadians of the TV generation, knew more about the Alamo than the Algonquin.

Humbled by ignorance and driven by passionate curiosity, he posed a question – “Why is this country the way it is?” – and set out to answer it. He began ransacking used-book stores, reading original materials at the library and devouring the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, thrilled to find that Canada's history was as tragic and ridiculous as any country's. For a young playwright in search of characters and plots, here was treasure.



Michael committed himself to writing a comprehensive cycle of plays to be called *The History of the Village of the Small Huts* (an early translation of the Huron-Iroquois word Canada), basing his writing on the premise of three foundings: Native, French and British. His mind was well stocked with plays from every era, and his project inclined him toward the ancient and Renaissance theatres, with their epic stories, teeming characters and minimal sets. As he began to write *New France*, the outsized characters of Canadian history aligned with stageworthy archetypes – kings and courtiers, warriors and lovers, saints and hypocrites, old husbands and young wives – who personify the eternal tragi-comedy of the human heart.



With unerring taste for the sublime and the tormented, Michael reduced hundreds of historic figures to forty-eight essential characters, and papered the walls of his apartment with a totally unproduceable four-hundred-page draft. Working with fearless actors in lively workshops, he rediscovered the old tricks of theatrical “doubling” – early exits, delayed entrances, monologues to hold the stage while costumes are changed – and then devised charts of characters and scenes to track the actors’ paths. The stories of Donnacona and Cartier, Champlain and Anadabijou, Brebeuf and Atironta, Frontenac, Garangula, Les Filles du Roi and dozens more were condensed until they could be staged with a cast of nine on the slim resources of VideoCabaret and Theatre Passe Muraille. Since the première of *New France* in 1985, Michael has launched a thousand fools upon the stage in twenty-five productions of an expanding repertoire of *History Plays*.



To mount these grand productions on modest budgets depends on the priceless collaboration of many great souls. From the beginning, Michael worked with visionary designers over multiple productions, and each added immeasurably to the ongoing creation of the style. Chris Clifford’s video- landscapes for Michael’s earlier work revealed the power of closely framed gestures, quick highlighted appearances and a limitless cast of characters. In writing the *History Plays*, Michael reclaimed this dramatic vocabulary for the empty stage with rapid cross-plotting, in pithy scenes, defined by the stage direction: “The lights fade out, in another playing area the lights fade in.” Lighting and set designs by Jim Plaxton (1985–99) and Andy Moro (since 2000) match the playwright’s formal idea, using shards of light to frame the actors, and brief blackouts to edit their appearances and vanishings. To fill these flickering scenes with unforgettable images, Astrid Janson designs hyperbolic costumes that transform the actors’ bodies with bellies, bottoms, breasts or biceps, and instantly establish period and place without further scenery. The props and puppets by Brad Harley and Shadowland, and the wigs by Alice Norton, complete a handmade spectacle of great beauty and wit.

The *History Plays* are ultimately brought to life by seven or eight actors, playing dozens of continuing characters in tiny shards of light with Dervish-level choreography. The challenge has always attracted marvelous actors, forming a slowly changing ensemble whose veterans pass on to newcomers the arts of finding one’s light and not losing one’s moustache. Michael develops new drafts with the company who take the stage with cold pages in hand, channel astonishing characters, track seven character arcs and provoke bellyfuls of laughter. In rehearsal, lighting and sound designs are integrated from day one; the actors intensify their characterizations and trim



all but the most eloquent moves or gestures, trusting the precise frames of light to magnify a raised eyebrow. In stylized make-up they play any age, sex or ethnicity; they exit as one character and re-enter thirty seconds later as another; backstage, the intricate dance of costume changes and prop-handling never pauses. Playing with the actors, through thousands of cues are the invisible performers: the composer and musician Brent Snyder, and the managers of lighting, sound and stage.

Michael and his collaborators have created a vast human comedy – a nose-tweaking, beard-pulling, rib-

tickling, gut-wrenching satire of Canada’s heroes and hosers, winners and losers – that does answer the question “Why is this country the way it is?” with regular eerie resonance. But finally, it is the audience who make epic theatre possible, who enlarge cardboard swords into armies, who allow a few actors and bits of costume to conjure a world. In Michael’s generous theatrical vision, many characters contend for the spotlights of history, many players harmonize their artistry, and the most trusted collaborator in the dramatic journey is the audience, for it is on the stage of their imagination that the company plays.

*Deanne Taylor is the Artistic Co-Director of VideoCabaret*