Book Review/CTR (2012) unpublished

*Identifying Mavor Moore: A Historical and Literary Study* by Alan Boss. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2011. 205 pp.

Mavor Moore, the great philosophical provocateur of the 20th century Canadian theatre, once wrote with some sense of irony that “history is…largely the making of myths and the unmaking of myths about ourselves.” That is, one uses facts to create the visions one is most attracted to, and truth, the lonely camp follower here, becomes really just another myth in this whole field of mythmaking. Indeed, there was probably no one ever better at mythmaking and mythologizing than Mavor himself as even the title of his own memoir might suggest: *Reinventing Myself.*

Unfortunately, despite Mavor’s well-known penchant for irony in his writing, there is not one iota of ironic understanding to be found in Alan Boss’s rather turgid doctoral dissertation from the University of Calgary here published by Playwrights Canada Press with clearly not enough revision under the rather stultifying and totally un-ironic title, *Identifying Mavor Moore.*

Boss’s book sets out to “rescue” Mavor Moore’s reputation, although his reputation does not seem to me to be in any urgent need of actually being rescued. Mavor is certainly known all across Canada as the founder of several major theatres and theatre companies (the Charlottetown Festival and the St Lawrence Centre the largest among them), as a pioneer television producer at CBC, as the first “artist” to head the Canada Council and as a lifelong promoter of Canadian theatre.

In all of these ventures, he fought for new plays and new work, and he did so as both provocateur and playwright with a distinctly Canadian sense of humour. For theatre historians, he is also closely identified with the pioneering New Play Society (created by his mother Dora Mavor Moore but run by Mavor himself for many years) and by the many versions of *Spring Thaw* that he produced both through NPS and independently. He also helped create the Canadian Theatre Centre as a bilingual national communications organization, helped bring into being the National Theatre School and was one of the earliest professional links between English-Canadian and French-Canadian theatre. Oh yes, there is also the Charlottetown Festival’s long-run hit *Anne of Green Gables* which Mavor actually commissioned and even contributed to.

Is there really a person over 40 working in the Canadian theatre today who does not know Mavor Moore? Boss believes this to be so and that is, I believe, a major misreading of reality.

In fact, what Dr. Boss really seems to be objecting to is that in most versions of Canadian theatre history Mavor himself is not recognised as the Prime Mover or as a great dramatist. And that is probably fair. Mavor contributed much to creating a cultural atmosphere in which great drama could and would exist, but to listen to Boss, Mavor is the centre himself (though no real argument is ever made) and among the anointed as a playwright. Indeed, he allows comparisons to drop between Moore and Harold Pinter and even, for goodness sake, Sam Shepard. He also allows Moore to be connected rather incredibly with Jerzy Grotowski and his Poor Theatre work.

The fact is Mavor Moore’s ultimate contribution was far greater as a philosopher of theatre in and for Canada than it was as a playwright. He will also be remembered far more as the creator of the discipline of modern Canadian theatre history than he will be as actor or dramatist or any other of the many mantles he wore. Mavor was, to put it simply, an intellectual mover and shaker and we need to have those kind of people in a developing culture. He wrote plays, yes. But to think that his ultimate significance is those plays is to misread his life and the theatre to which that life was devoted.

As well, Boss never seems to recognise that Mavor was more raconteur (with Canada as his prime subject) than historical revolutionary. Mavor was one of those who helped lead beleaguered professional Canadian artists to the promised land through the 1950s and 60s and then chose to slip into academia in the 70s where he encouraged new generations (like me) into understanding why it was so important to have an indigenous theatre.

Boss, however, wants to, as the book jacket puts it, expose “a historical record that seems to conceal Moore’s work.” To do this, he keeps wondering why *CTR* itself in its historically-oriented early issues, didn’t recognize Mavor to a greater degree. In trying to get an explanation, Boss *was* apparently able to get to York University to examine the Moore Archives but was apparently unable to pick up a telephone to ask me for an explanation.

If he had phoned, I could have shared with him a number of facts: that Mavor created the first Canadian theatre history course in this country at York, a course I taught in as a tutorial leader and a course I still teach today, some 40 years later, using much material I learned from Mavor’s brilliant but often barely organized recollections. I would also have pointed out to Dr. Boss that Mavor’s influence (as often as his byline) could be found over and over in early issues of *CTR.* In fact, virtually no issue appeared without his being consulted. His influence was truly enormous. To say he was ignored – certainly to say *CTR* ignored him *--*  is to intentionally misread or misunderstand the record.

Indeed, Mavor’s greatest skill was as an editor. He caught errors and erroneous syntax again and again in early issues of *CTR*. In my own oft-republished essay from the early 1970s, “Creeping Toward a Culture: The Theatre in English-Canada Since 1945,” I remember Mavor changing numerous phrases and pointing out in his bemused way that the Canada Council itself had never started a single theatre in Canada, a point which (especially in the first version of my essay) I had seemed to suggest.

This commitment to accuracy in early studies of Canadian theatre history was one of the reasons why I subsequently tried to get Mavor to read anything I wrote and why I included so much of his non-dramatic writings and his essays in both *CTR* and, later, in my own standard text *Canadian Theatre History: Selected Reading* which, it should be noted, included three of Mavor’s essays. Mavor seemed to know everyone and everything that was being written about. He also seemed to have energy back then for any debate dealing with Canada, its identity and its culture. He was not immune from errors or forgetfulness but he would also never let anyone get lazy about the subject. And certainly not me.

Until Mavor became head of the Canada Council, he was an active member of the *CTR* Editorial Advisory Board and attended numerous meetings where he debated everything that was to appear in the journal with other Editorial Board members including the many artists included there such as playwrights George Ryga and Michael Cook, Peter Hay (the Hungarian-born founder of Talonplays), and directors John Juliani and Marion Andre to name just a few.

What a deep misunderstanding then and how inaccurate to suggest, as Dr. Boss does again and again, that Mavor Moore is under-represented in *CTR* and in the historical record. (23). He goes on to say that *CTR,* in writing about the early days of the Stratford Festival, also failed to credit Mavor with even bring there. Had Tom Patterson not met with Mavor Moore, Boss writes, “It is entirely possible [that Stratford] would not exist.” (p. 27) Really?

Boss’s argument against my own dismissal in “Creeping Toward A Culture” of most pre-1967 Canadian plays for being “depressingly derivative and dramaturgically dreary” is misleading as well. Boss argues that “many well-written plays existed before 1967.” Indeed, no one ever denied that “well-written plays existed.” But none have stood the test of time in terms of production. I believe my statement was then and still is accurate. The fact is, as *CTR’*s acquisitions editor a few years later, I published an important four volume series of just such works entitled *Canada’s Lost Plays,* a series edited by scholar Anton Wagner (who is also disparaged by Dr. Boss for not recognizing Mavor Moore as a major dramatist).

Boss goes on to attack in a similar vein almost all the early Canadian theatre historians of note – among them Ross Stuart, David Gardner, Renate Usmiani, Len Conolly and Richard Plant – for failing to appreciate Moore’s role in Canadian theatre history and his skills as a dramatist. Clearly, Boss, in working so hard to praise Mavor, does little more than bury him with generalizations. He himself never explores Mavor’s plays in any depth and never really puts Moore in any context other than that of the great “ignored” and never seems to understand exactly who this rumpled man with the razor sharp mind really was deep-down.

I loved Mavor for what he believed in and what he fought for. I loved what he taught me about life and the Canadian theatre. Is Mavor Moore under-appreciated and misunderstood? That may be so but *CTR* is certainly not the culprit. It may be hard to appreciate why Mavor chose to shine the spotlight in other directions when he wrote (i.e., onto a visionary director like Roy Mitchell or onto a visionary playwright like Herman Voaden) but that is exactly what he did. Many of the essays that Boss suggests “ignored” Mavor’s contribution were actually read in advance and edited by Mavor Moore. Boss would have been able to understand that had he just asked.

In the end I can only say that it is good that Boss got his doctorate from the University of Calgary because it’s very doubtful he would have gotten it if I had been asked to be on his supervisory committee. Because had I been, there probably would be one less Ph.D. working the Canadian theatre job market today.

Is my response to this book and Boss’s odd point of view some kind of sour grapes? I see it more as a case of academic integrity and editorial accuracy, two qualities much admired by Moore himself. This is in the end a book that references Mavor Moore far too narrowly to be useful as fact and far too casually to be seen as fair. The real book on Mavor Moore is still waiting to be written.

-- *Don Rubin*

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Don Rubin was a founding member of the York University Department of Theatre and a founding editor of the *Canadian Theatre Review* which he edited for eight years. Under Rubin’s editorship, CTR published not only the quarterly journal but also eight archival volumes documenting professional Canadian theatre activities from 1974 to 1982, the critically-acclaimed four volume *Canada’s Lost Plays* series (edited by Wagner and Plant) and Toby Gordon Ryan’s memoir of Canadian theatre in the 30s. *Stage Left.* More recently he served as series editor for Routledge’s $2 million, six-volume *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre* series and was co-founder and first director of York’s graduate program in Theatre Studies.