ABSTRACT

GEORGE F. WALKER’S BETTER LIVING: PLAYING WITH DIFFERENCE; A CANADIAN FAMILY ON AN AMERICAN STAGE

by Alexandra Whitney Marsh

The purpose of this study is to examine Canadian identity via the development of Canada’s modern theatre, to understand its relationship to Nationalism, and to explore the influence of playwright George F. Walker. This thesis functions as a two-part study: first, as a research project that focuses on dramatic constructions of Canadian identity, specifically within the plays of George F. Walker and relating to Benedict Anderson’s concept of the “imagined community,” and second, a discussion/analysis of the process of directing George F. Walker’s play Better Living and examining the responses of cast, crew, and audience members to this example of Canadian Theatre. Using Anderson’s texts, informed observation, and notation of the production process (including: auditing, rehearsal, direction, performance, and finally a survey to examine audience response) this study examines constructions and perceptions of Canadian Nationalism as communicated through the theatrical production of Better Living.
A THESIS

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DEDICATION

For the people who better my life.
For Mom, Dad, Webster and Peter.

Thank you for your love and support.
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I will forever be thankful to my parents who instilled the importance of creativity and imagination at an early age. Thank you for making me who I am today and for guiding me through life, you have been incredible teachers and parents. I would also like to thank my brother for all his love and support over the years and for teaching me how to share.

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Prologue:

An American’s Introduction to Canadian Theatre

Robin: I am Canadian. Remember? We celebrate Thanksgiving in October.
Ted: Oh right I forgot. You guys are weird and you pronounce the word 'out', 'oot'.
Robin: You guys are the world's leader in hand gun violence; your health care system is bankrupt and your country is deeply divided on almost every important issue.
Ted: [pause] Your cops are called 'mounties'.

In the spring of 2005, I found myself in the lobby of the small brick theatre building at the University of Toronto. I had arrived late the night before, specifically to audition for the University College Drama Department. The drive had taken me roughly nine hours from my hometown in western Massachusetts, and as I viewed my student competitors for the thirty-six available spots, I realized that this was my first real Canadian experience. I felt outnumbered.

For Americans, making fun of our neighbors to the north has become an almost given right. The comments are never taken very seriously and are usually an off-the-cuff, side remark. There are the traditional exaggerations of the northern accent, specifically when regarding such words as “Eh?” or “About” that is elongated to sound more like, “Aboot.” Then there are the gross exaggerations of the imagined Canadian persona: That they all live in the middle of a vast ice-covered tundra, and consequently, the cold has made them friendly, dull, and slow-witted. And of course, Americans enjoy belittling anything that is slightly different, such as, Canadian football, which only has three downs and boasts a field ten yards longer, the country’s use of the metric system, and their currency, which is fondly known as the Loonie.

That April when I arrived in Toronto, I froze when asked, “and where are you from?” I had traveled and experienced life outside of my small western Massachusetts town. I had been to Europe and the Caribbean, and every time, I would answer that very same question with “America.” But as I looked around me, taking in the faces that were also from the American continent, I stuttered. Where could I say I was from? This first experience of searching for a “correct” identity, demonstrated how labels can be both defining and confusing. One person can represent himself/herself in a variety of ways. For example, if I were asked “where are you from?” by someone in a town close to mine, I would simply respond, “Belchertown.” Or, if I found myself in Boston, my answer would be “western Mass.” In another state I would be “from

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Massachusetts” or a more general answer would be “east coast.” And yet, somehow, I did not feel comfortable announcing to the room of Canadian actors that I was from “America.” That would seem to render the country I was visiting to be unimportant.

At that time, I also felt insecure with my nationality, and how my own country might appear outside of its boarders was blindingly apparent. I had a president that I did not agree with in power, engaged in a war I was not in favor of fighting. I was almost too embarrassed to be a representative of my nation. This is not to say that I agreed with those gross exaggerations of my country, but I did feel that I would be automatically pre-defined by where I came from. In the end, I settled on “Massachusetts” as my geographical signifier. There was a moment of silence. I could see several students trying to make sense of my answer. Finally, someone called out “Oh you’re from the STATES,” proclaiming the word as a translation of what I had said.

Once my location was fully processed, the questioning began. “Are your parents Canadian?” (No.) “How did you find out about the University of Toronto?” (It was recommended as a good school.) “What are grits like?” (I’ve never had them.) “Do you import our maple syrup from Canada?” (We make our own.)

I felt surprised, a bit overwhelmed, and annoyed. Of course I had known that Canada was an easy target when it came to making fun, but it was surprising how quickly the tables had turned; I was now the joke. I was bewildered by the lack of tact by those around me. I was a stranger in a strange world. What I realized as a common theme between the two differing nations, was the apparent need to formulate stereotypes in an attempt to define each other. U.S. and Canada, bordering each other, were similar in so many ways, yet, so different. Heath care, government, school systems, all greatly differ for each country, but it is our perceived characteristics that create vast generalizations and misinformation.

Later that spring, I received my acceptance into the theatre department, and I officially moved to Toronto in September, 2005. I entered into the school as a transfer student from Smith College where I had also studied theatre. On our first day of performance class, our professor, Ken Gass, Director and Founder of The Factory Theatre Company, gave us our first assignment, to go out and memorize a monologue from a Canadian play. I knew playwrights from all over the world. I was familiar with American playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller; I had read Shakespeare and Beckett and the Greeks, with Aeschylus and Sophocles. During my first year of Smith, my theatrical studies also included Strindberg, Brecht, and even Artaud.
Now I was faced with Canadian theatre, something with which I could not even connect a simple image or genre. Surely, I had covered something about Canadian theatre in my five years of study. I scoured my resources but, in the end, I had nothing. No notes, no suggestions, no plays or characters would come to mind. Finally, I gave in and approached a classmate for suggestions, feeling as though I had missed something obvious in my education. But the truth was, I had no idea where to begin. My classmate took pity on me, even recommending two playwrights from Toronto, Judith Thompson and George F. Walker. My classmate’s motivation was that these specific playwrights would leave a lasting impression on me. He was correct. Though I chose my first monologue from Thompson’s *I Am Yours*, by end of the term, my performance class presented selections from Walker as well, including the first scene in *Better Living*. And, from then on, I was obsessed with Canadian theatre.

I entered my first term at Miami University in the winter of 2009. Like the majority of Masters students, my quest for a thesis topic was a consuming process. It wasn’t until I made a reference to a Canadian play, and a few of my classmates responded with “I’ve never heard of Canadian theatre” and “What exactly is Canadian theatre?”, that the basis of my thesis was born. One of my goals was to not only write about Canadian theatre, but to actually bring a production to Miami University. I directed Walker’s play *Better Living* in the fall of 2011 in an effort to provide an educational experience in Canadian theatre, as well as to gain insight into how Americans might perceive this work. My other motive was to be able to define what Canadian identity is, and to prove that art, both visual and performance, is the best medium to explore a national identity.

My creative thesis takes on two forms, monograph and directorial praxis, both aiming to support the notion that the artistic representation of a nation has the distinctive ability to develop and produce a national voice. My personal inspection of the Canadian national voice abroad was examined through the process of researching, directing, producing, and accumulating an American audience’s perspective of Walker’s play, *Better Living*. Chapter One, “Imagined-Nation: National Art for Canada,” is a theoretical examination of the reflection of national identity through the Canadian art movement founded by the Group of Seven. Utilizing the postcolonial lens of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, I will explore the manifestations of national identity and the effects it can have on a group of people. This chapter will examine national self-identification via original art created by Canadian artists in the 1960s,
the Group of Seven to create imagery and to construct a discourse around a specific Canadian identity: the land. As the first artists to intentionally develop national art for Canada establishes the early success of art movements in Canada thus influencing the Alternative Theatre Movement in Toronto that helped to establish Walker’s career as a Canadian playwright.

Chapter two, “Shouting from the Abyss,” is the dramaturgical analysis of Walker’s groundbreaking work within Canadian playwriting. I will provide a summation of Walker’s journey to become the award-winning playwright he is today, touching on the compass-like involvement of The Factory Theatre Company. In this chapter I will focus on Walker’s play Better Living and further analyze his artistic voice; I examine Walker’s dramaturgical growth, transformation, themes, and why this work can be considered a uniquely Canadian play.

Chapter Three, “Better Living Was Here: The process of directing George F. Walker’s play Performed at Miami University” recounts my experience of introducing a Canadian play to an American audience at Miami University. From the pre-performance design meetings to the post-show audience responses, I seek to challenge traditional American assumptions of Canadian identity while at the same time, identifying the audience’s response to the overall message of Walker’s Toronto play Better Living. In the appendix, I include Better Living’s 2011 production playbook, production photos, poster and post-performance audience survey.
Chapter One

Imagined-Nation: National Art for Canada

Canada is all landscape so far— at least, landscape is all that is national yet. Her people and her cities are not characteristic... But Canada’s physical appearance is distinctive and our artists are aiming to catch the illusive appearance virtues, what natural qualities it has to breed into the Canadian people... The Canadian people, seeing in these pictures something distinctly [and] feeling sympathy for what is caught on canvas, will buy them.

-G. Clark 1914

The best thing about Canada is that it is not this. It is this and that.

-George Bowering

July 1\textsuperscript{st} 1867 marks the day the North American British colonies joined together with Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario to create the unified country we know today as Canada. Canada is a multicultural country following a constitutional monarchy and maintaining a democratic system of government. Canada is a young country, still establishing its identity and in the early stages of building a reputation for national art. The Canadian landscape, the second largest in the world, provides a vast country that contains both large urban cultural centers and immense expanses of minimally populated territories (Pye 5). It is a complex task to begin to imagine how one might define Canada as a nation. Theorist Benedict Anderson suggests that these terms “nationalism” and “nationality” don’t exist outside of a belief system because the idea encompasses too many people for it to be realistic (Anderson 7). He goes on to explain that what creates images and ideas about nationhood is the distinct manner in which they are imagined. It is because of this conscious creation that a nation can come into existence at a very early stage of development (Anderson 6). Anderson notes that regardless of understanding how these ideas of self came about, the importance lies in the fact that they exist for everyone and are constantly reworked and redefined, but always in existence (Anderson 3).

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There is a level of importance placed on coming to terms with the notion of what a Canadian citizen represents as a singular member of the mass community. A person’s nationality is the basis of what might give someone reassurance of their individual worth. Strength and personal worth is gained when one can see themselves a part of a collective (Pye 4). Anderson comments that “Nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (Anderson 3). He defines his term of “Nation-ness” by a range of distinctive personal qualities that lie beyond one’s control. These qualities include skin color, birth-era, and parentage, to name only a few. There are multiple layers that define each individual. Once exiting the physical and going into the unseen, the layers of traits become that much more complex. Connie Brissenden writes about the complex relationship Canada holds with the U.S. and the U.K. in The Factory Lab Anthology. She writes, “We are a large and important country, yet we do not have a war to renounce or a dominant history and mythology to question. We hardly know that we exist as a nation, except through our rejection of British and American paternalism” (Brissenden 8). Brissenden suggests that because the Canadian identity has never been challenged internally, it is difficult to find a specific cause for their development as a nation. Everything that has become understood about the Canadian identity has been developed by what they did not have to endure. The connection to the colonial past of the former British Empire remains ever-present by the current fraternal association to the commonwealth. In order to understand the identity of this country and the voice of its citizens, one must look at the expressive qualities demonstrated through the arts. In visual arts, the Group of Seven provided the new images of Canada and in theatre George F. Walker created characters and dialogue to identify or imagine an individuality on a very personal level and in terms of a national relationship through the larger issues brought to the stage.

An identity, especially for a country like Canada, must go beyond the physical (Durkheim 52). Until the late 1960’s Canadian theatre was defined as a “desert,” one that was “lacking in roots or tradition.” By developing ideas and images that surpass the physical, one can define a variety of individuals by a “conscious creation” of self identity (Anderson 6). Anderson notes that regardless of understanding how these ideas of self came about, the importance lies in the fact that it does exist for everyone, constantly reworked and redefined, but always in existence (Anderson 3).
Canada’s image is often times blurred by the close relationships the country maintains with Great Britain, politically, and the US, geographically. Canada’s national expression is, more times than not, defined by what it lacks (Unger 21). This was not only evident in artistic expression on canvas but also in relation to the theatre. Ken Gass, founder and director of The Factory Theatre, acknowledges this fact from his experience fighting for a national theatre within Canada. Robert Wallace writes in *Staging A Nation*,

In Canada during the last 30 years, theatre has led audiences not only to appreciate Canadian plays but, to use them to create our sense of ourselves, our relationships with each other, and with the world. The cultural policies that enable the evolution of Canadian theatre during this period of remarkable ferment are complicit with the plays and productions they facilitated. Together, they provide us with a series of representations whose cumulative effect is the staging of a nation (23).

Wallace suggests that developing original Canadian theatre is more than filling an empty space or discovering one great playwright. He notes that the voices expressed on the stage would help connect thoughts and arguments.

Long before the struggles of the Alternative Theatre Movement in Toronto, Ontario, a group of painters fought a similar battle to produce national artwork for Canada. In the early 20th century, a group of artists, later known as the Group of Seven, joined together in an effort to create national art for Canada, and in turn, define a nation through art. Through prolific production of their own wildly colored and uniquely envisioned images of the Canadian landscape, the Group of Seven built a collective sense of Canada’s artistic expression. The existing European artistic pallet was not prepared for the rough portrayal of the northern landscape. The European perspective was that not only was the Canadian landscape unfit for the canvas, but that its artists were too unschooled for true artistic appreciation and representation. The path to enhancing national pride was laden with disinterested critics and unresponsive national galleries.

Connected by their shared goal to create visual images that represented their country, each artist’s unique style provided a personal perspective, and the combined efforts of the group established the connection of Canadian citizens to their country’s land. The ongoing success of

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4 F.B. Housser writes in *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven*, the issues the group faced when their paintings did not fit with the traditional European way of viewing art.
the Group of Seven’s work is a clear example of how artists were able to connect a national community by visually defining an undefined nation. David P. Silcox comments on the impressive impact the artists made upon the Canadian people as well as those who had never crossed its borders. He comments that the paintings were more than just art. Silcox writes, “The Group’s paintings imbedded themselves into the country’s self-image in ways that were unrelated to the images themselves. In the United States and abroad, the Group of Seven’s masterworks became the signature for the land that everyone who had never been here imagined Canada to be like. Canadian children learned about their country and their place in the world through the Group’s paintings” (Silcox 45). In otherwords, the paintings helped to imagine the community.

In 1920, the Group of Seven gathered together for their first meeting in Toronto, Ontario. The members had previously met through the Toronto art community. A.Y. Jackson, a founding member, comments on the experience of living among the working artists in Toronto in his autobiography, A Painters Country. He writes, “The artists in Toronto were woefully lacking in information about trends in art in other parts of the world” (23). Jackson, like the other members of the Group of Seven, became disenfranchised with this somewhat backward and old fashioned art being produced in Toronto. Jackson notes in his introduction that this unflattering image of art in Canada was the driving force that brought the artists together in protest. Jackson writes, “The members of the Toronto Art League were probably the first artists in Canada who believed that art in this country should be rooted in our soil” (23). While it is unknown who invited the original group of artists to the first meeting, the men were ultimately gathered because of their shared belief that they could fill the empty hole that stood in the place of Canada’s national art (Silcox 17).

The Group formed as a collective, and that was the way it remained. If there was a designated leading member, it would have been Lawren Harris. Harris acted as the primary motivating force for the promotion of the Group’s art. Early on, Harris recommended that the group develop a shared studio location in Toronto. This location would provide a home base and a collaborative working environment to enhance their creativity. Jackson writes, “It was Harris’ belief that if conditions favorable to the artist were created, good results would follow” (27). This downtown location became a central place for artists to create and build a communal identity. Harris was quoted, “people only live when they create, and that all other activities
should be a means to creation” (Houser 42). Powerfully creative visual representations were the key to the Group of Seven’s national success. The wide range of images produced by the Group of Seven encouraged painters to develop their own style and techniques in portraying their country. The new painting techniques of the Group of Seven were seen as a premature attempt by the colonial perspective of European art critics. In the Morning Post 4th on July 4th a critic wrote,

A Canadian painting has not yet grown beyond the assimilative stage of youth; its painters still look toward Europe for initiative, its students go to London and Paris for the training and the inspiring associations that the artist-life of the Old World alone can provide. The sapling, however, is a vigorous one, and all that is now being grafted on it will in due season bear rich fruit. The Art of Canada must ere long become a distinct factor in the Art of the world, in spite of the poor encouragement given to it at home, where, as elsewhere, there is little real taste for Art among those who have money to spend on pictures; and as a result, large sums are lavished on the acquisition of old masters (Hill 19).

Along with Harris were four core members that made up the Group of Seven. These artists included: J.E.H. MacDonald, A.Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer, and Fred Varley. The two final group members who would make the total seven were Frank Carmichael, who acted as more of a silent partner for the group, and Tom Thomson, who unfortunately died in the early development of the group, but whose influence set the tone for later collective creations. The strength found within the Group of Seven was formed by a common understanding of how to approach crossing the barriers of the art world (Hill 17).

Around the time the Group of Seven began painting, eighty percent of Canadians were living in rural towns (Silcox 13). For these rural citizens, one specific location represented their entire country, as well as their national community. Aerial photographs taken in the late 1960s show the variety of the Canadian landscape. Photographs taken from above show the range of mountains, lakes, valleys, far stretching farm lands, and urban centers merging to define one nation. Such range for one nation is an element that very few countries are able to claim for themselves. Because of this, the Canadian landscape can differentiate Canada from other countries. The landscape from above is an impressive sight, but the Group of Seven’s work focused on very direct and personal aspects of the country. Trees and the local vegetation were
primary subjects for their paintings. Focusing their work on specific locations, a member of that same community might be able to recognize their hometown among the collection the Group of Seven produced.

As Jim Wilson notes in his book *Native Trees*, there are many elements that create an ideal environment for the growth of a specific type of tree or plant. He writes, “The balance of species can be so finely tuned that the subtle changes in growing conditions from place to place result in different species dominating in different areas, or in some species being replaced by others in a particular natural community” (17). By recognizing their surroundings, the Canadian community would be able to experience the entirety of Canada. Through this group of artists and their unique style of using the paintbrush, the Canadian community would be able to be defined through their personal home environment as well as claiming the connection to the artists themselves. Since the majority of Canadian citizens lived in small towns, separate from the rest of the Canadian landscape, the paintings provided an understanding of community based on recognizable natural resources from one area of Canada to another. For the first time, Canadian citizens saw bits of themselves in art.

In the late 19th century, prior to the movement created by the Group of Seven, Canadian landscape painting was used more for “documentary” purposes. These images were unidentified and generalized locations composed of pen and pencil, primarily created for surveying purposes during the country’s colonial period (Peters 11-12). The transformation from landscape art in 1845 to the art produced by the Group of Seven after WWII in the 1940s shows a drastic difference in terms of perspective alone. A.Y. Jackson comments on the importance of developing art and making it unique and specific. He writes, “We have great wealth and resources; we are respected as a nation; all over the Western world there is a feeling of goodwill toward us. If we are to uphold this reputation we must bear in mind that all countries that have made their mark on history have left a record of themselves through their sculptors and architects, their painters, poets and composers, and others endowed with the creative spirit” (Jackson 169). This spirit is definitely exhibited in the Group of Seven’s pieces. While the group focused on providing a concrete established space within their paintings, their colors and brush strokes allowed the viewer an experience of what the place represented to the artist and what the experience of painting in that environment would have been like.
Criticism arrived early on for the Group of Seven. Art critic, Hector Charlesworth commented that, “The chief grudge that one has against these experimental pictures is that they almost destroy the effect of very meritorious and sincere pictures which are hung on the same walls” (Hill 25). The idea that the images were not “realistic” enough based on the wild color pallet dissuaded many critics from taking the Group of Seven’s art seriously. The other extreme of complaints that poured in opposing the Group of Seven’s art was that it was seen as too realistic. Similar to Walker’s work the objective view of Canada produced and exhibited by the artists appeared too honest and unflattering to observers, this is something the artists have in common. Critics from Europe commented that “The school evidently sees only rocks, ice and snow, some timber but mostly burned, they do not see the beauteous scenery of this country, scenery which is comparable with the best in the British Isles or on the continent and which has inspired some of the greatest landscape painters.” Critics also took a very personal approach to each artists work commenting specifically on Arthur Lisamer’s paintings; “His pictures sometimes have the appearance of being carelessly painted but on investigation they are found to be replete with summarized detail and cosmic generalities” (Housser 175).

The locations captured on canvas were very specific, and the trees and buildings they painted actually existed in the form they were presented. Though the group did come across criticism over their pieces being “too realistic,” for impressionistic art there was a deeper meaning to painting what was right in front of them. The Group’s vision of Canada was not always bright; they painted Canada for what it was, capturing the majesty of trees in fall and winter, with the glum moments of muddy trails in early spring, or the tragic remnants of forests after logging. “For years it had been said that pine trees were unpaintable. Our hinterlands were supposed to be too ugly as a medium of expression for a painter unless disguised to look like Europe or England” (11). In the examples of Lawren Harris’ Northern Lake, bright red leaves fall gracefully in the foreground while the lake is undisturbed with a block-like painting technique. The painting gives the sense of serenity, as if one were looking over the lake during a cottage weekend in fall (Silcox 308). In Jackson’s Early Spring Quebec, murky brown mud paths slather their way across what was a pristine snowy landscape. This painting represents the unmistakable mixture of white against brown before the green of spring makes its joyful appearance (202).
The great north was a feature accepted and enhanced in the images produced by the Group. Lawren Harris places the embodiment of the art on the northern spirit. He says, “This emphasis of the north in the Canadian character that is born of the spirit of the north and reflects it, has profoundly affected its art, and its art in turn, clarifies and enhances the quality of Canadian consciousness” (26). In essence, the connection of this immigrant-based country lies in the land that comprises the Canadian nation. The Group of Seven produced images of Canada that were not traditionally picturesque and yet the work showed beauty within the reality portrayed. The same can be said to George F. Walker’s written work for *Better Living* in the way he writes an unapologetic portrayal of the messy life people lead. The painters and playwright create, in their own defined artistic styles, images of a muddy and sometimes bleak world in a stunning artistic format.

The Group of Seven pushed on to produce more and more images of Canada, fighting against criticism and fighting for admittance into Canada’s national galleries in an effort to finally exhibit Canada’s glorious natural resources and make art that could be called uniquely “Canadian.” From their Toronto studio, the artists took off on national and international exhibiting tours. Mass production of their art allowed the images to penetrate into communities, their work appearing on the walls of high schools and dentist offices. Their popularity was “Considerably enhanced by the distribution of silk-screen reproductions” (Hill 15) of the wide range of work. The mass production of the Group’s images helped to expand the Canadian imagined community. By witnessing specific locations of Canada, Canadians were able to envision an honest portrayal of the expanse of their home land. A national identity was formulated through the artistic expression vibrant landscapes. This confirmed that Arthur Lismer, a later addition to the Group commented on their movement saying, “Canadian artists are not dealing with the merely transient, but aiming to give a sense of the eternal” (Housser 181) Today, the Group of Seven are regarded as household names, their art selling for $825,000 at auction (Stoffman). Their triumph ultimately results in the group’s existence as an integral part of Canadian history in the way they enabled the Canadian community to see itself connected through landscapes.

Similar to the Group of Seven, the Factory Theatre also placed emphasis on production from a shared Toronto headquarters (Hill 17). The Group of Seven are an excellent example of what pitfalls- as well as potentially high acclaims and success- the Factory Theatre might expect
in the future. Although there is no direct connection between the Group of Seven and the Factory Theatre, their base locations in Toronto and their entrance into an otherwise non-existent art form in an effort to define the Canadian nation are the same. While the majority of art that pulses through Canadian theatres is touring from the US and Europe, it is the Factory’s ownership of the physical stage that provides patrons and playwrights with reliable access to uniquely English-speaking Canadian theatre experiences (Wagner 75).

The large mainstream theatres refusal to produce original Canadian works was due to an assumption that Canadian plays were seen as immature and risky for box office profit. Denis W. Johnston suggest in Before the Flood, a discussion of the Alternative Theatre Movement in Toronto, that the movement brought forth a wave of new theatre companies, all rising up as a revolutionary answer to the lack of original Canadian plays being produced by the larger national theatres that produced tours of American and British productions (Johnston 10). Johnston comments directly on Toronto’s ability to harbor a wide range of theatres, writing, “In Toronto, however, with its larger and more diverse population, older forms of theatre persisted alongside the newer ones. American and British touring shows remained a staple of Toronto audiences” (Johnston 10).

The Factory Theatre was one theatre that sprung up during the Alternative Theatre Movement in Toronto, Ontario. Prior to the discovery of Walker, the theatre company known as Theatre Passé Marialle created a groundbreaking performance in 1972 entitled The Farm Show that was a huge hit for Toronto theatre. The Toronto-based company worked to create improvisations and documentary storytelling, traveling to specific locations to stage their future theatrical productions. Myth was a theme that the company used within their performance. The group looked to highlight the mythical qualities of Canadian life, specifically motifs and images that could identify the Canadian culture (Filewod 25). In an interview for the Toronto Star, Paul Thompson, director of Theatre Passé Maraille, comments on his notion of myth within a Canadian context, “Myth is no longer a fashionable word. But a myth, in the Canadian context, is a thing so obvious that eventually you cannot deny that it exists; even the guy at the garage will nod his head. Canadian myth is originated from the heart beat of the people/characters within” (Filewod 25). The heartbeat of the Canadian character is a distinctive connection between the artists of Passé Maraille, the Group of Seven, and George F. Walker. Through even the worst of experiences there is a drive to continue forward for better or worse. Regardless of what occurs on
stage or who is being represented, there is a truth to it, a life that goes beyond our own at the heart of the text. Paul Thompson discusses his specific use of Canadian truth, or mythos, within his own work. He says,

We didn’t just talk with the people we ended up portraying, we listened to their speech patterns trying to understand them through a kind of verbal interplay. The actor’s ear for detail was a very strong point. They were not just recording cameras. In the midst of talking and listening they were already imbuing the experience with a mythic dimension. They were already conscious of how the person they were talking to represented more than himself; like he may be one person, but he was a type (25).

The process of interviewing each person and then collectively creating a piece based on what was said realistically recorded this farming community in Ontario. In this example, the use of myth is another form of creating and envisioning the imagined community. In this case there was the understanding that the individual was a part of the imagined rural community.

In their “collective creations,” Theatre Passé Marialle demonstrated a primary focus on the actors (36). The Farm Show is not simply about an Ontario farming community, rather, it is a play about the experiences of actors as they passed through these communities in the course of researching their material. It is, in fact, an urban Canadian community looking at a rural Canadian community. The work of this group brought the Canadian image to life on stage but it was still the rural small town Canadian citizen where daily challenges are of the dangers of failed crops and working with industrial farming machines. The performance “represents the ultimate in naturalism-an imitation of life in the most literal sense” (Usmiani 47). The struggles of a Canadian urban community portrayed in Better Living illustrate characters clashing with differing ideals. The ideals of safety in home while coming to terms of the evils that waits beyond the threshold is the crux of the urban struggle within this Walker play.

Theatre Passé Marialle was able to create ground-breaking theatre through a documentary format; their success with The Farm Show brought a large amount of recognition to the small theatre company and showed a view of Canada that was largely rural. Similar to the paintings by the Group of Seven, Canada was once again drawn to be rural farm country, producing images of small town folk for the theatrical world to see. What about the diversity of the Canadian self? Walker’s Better Living is set in the East End of Toronto, the place where Walker himself was raised. Within the text, the representation of the home environment varies from character to
character, but one aspect that is undefined for all is what goes beyond that door in “the outside world.” Every character is fearful of something, and while many of the characters show their evil tendencies on stage, the real danger is always thrown to the imagination.

Developing a space where the imagination can truly have the freedom to explore offers a physically established support system for both visual and performing arts. As seen in the work of both the Group of Seven and The Factory Theatre Company, there is a successful combination that comes from a group’s collective vision with a concrete space. Though an imagined community is encompassed of billions of individuals from all walks of life, it is the establishment of art, and the work of Walker with the Factory theatre, that allowed the plays to come about from a very real and honest perspective. Though the overall genre may not be naturalistic, there is a sense of real life that comes across in the bold decisions made by Walker. He portrays life as the way it can often seem, that the world is about to end at any moment. Our vision of our own existence can be quite specific and overly explosive because the world means a great deal to us; it is our own and it is not always pretty. Just as the Group of Seven artists painted an honest portrayal of their country with their own stylistic twists, so also did Walker bring the Canadian people he knew and witnessed into the spotlight; they were not always pretty.

The Factory Theatre, by opening its doors to the playwrights of Canada, provided the megaphone for a cross-section of Canadian voices. Walker benefitted highly from the support of the Factory as a writer. Walker was able to stay true to himself, shaping his work over time, allowing his own personal truth to come forward and then to become recognized as a voice for a Canadian nation. Often, the characters represent the common person, a character who would not normally necessarily take center stage. These are not necessarily the ideal, but the uncomfortable, awkward, unsightly humans that everyone can see daily. What is placed on the proscenium and placed under the lights is real life being portrayed before the audience who listens to a voice who speaks from Canadian experience.

In order to truly understand a nation’s cultural identity, one must experience and examine the artistic expressions in painting, music and drama. Creative works provide a deep wealth of symbolic understanding that goes to the core of traditions, customs, and society. Lawren Harris comments on the production of art aiding these very issues. Who are we in the past and present and future and how can we view ourselves if there is no art produced from within. Harris says,
Through our own creative experience we [the Group] came to know that the real tradition in art is not housed only in museums and art galleries and in great works of art; it is innate in us and can be galvanized into activity by the power of creative endeavor in our own day, and in our own country, by our own creative individuals in the arts. We also came to realize that we in Canada cannot truly understand the great cultures of the past and of other peoples until we ourselves commence our own creative life in the arts. Until we do so, we are looking at these from the outside (Silcox 27)

In this quote Harris places great importance on how the production of Canadian-developed-art not only aids in establishing the imagined community within Canada but far beyond its borders. Art, such as the Group of Seven’s paintings and Walker’s play Better Living, all created within Canada, mean a great deal to the promotion of the Canadian cultural identity. But what does it mean when brought to the U.S., presented to a community with its own defined perspective of self and of Canada. Can a cultural identity through art cross borders and become recreated for another public?
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Chapter Two

A Dramaturgical Analysis of Better Living

“As individuals, and as members of a political, geographical, and cultural entity known as Canada, we stand to benefit from insights and challenges created by our playwrights.”

“All writers carry their childhood with them.”

The Search for Identity

The destructive family drama is not a new theme to occur within contemporary theatre; there are many dysfunctional families that have been brought to the stage. However, in Walker’s play Better Living, the Canadian playwright presents a unique Canadian perspective of power and dominance in a most original and familiar form, the family unit. The Canadian voice can be heard through Walker’s plays regardless of the location in which the play is set. Walker’s work has developed into a personal Canadian perspective of the world. His characters, regardless of time or space, all attempt to survive in the unique environment created and developed by Walker. Their struggles represent the post colonial search for identity, seen through a distinctly Canadian perspective, through Walker’s brilliant blend of comedy and tragedy. Similar to the Group of Seven’s artistic depiction of Canada, Walker’s plays speak to his own Canadian perspective, subjecting an audience to images or “real life” that are not always picture perfect.

As I explored Walker’s work through my dramaturgical analysis, I confronted a number of questions that centered around the notion of “home.” Does this concept of home contribute to our identity? Is the answer based purely on life experience? Is it formed by a daily routine? Can it be derived from a job or one’s education? Could it even be representative of the place that is uniquely defined as “home?” The relevance of a place to call home is a distinctive element that can separate an individual from the masses, while simultaneously building a sense of community. The home, whether it is defined as a literal house or general location, be it as expansive as an entire country or as singular as a number on a door, represents an environment where freedom of self is explored and established. At the same time, the home provides a kind of

5 Conolly. 7
6 Susan Thompson, Toronto playwright comments to the Globe and Mail about inescapable personal experiences involved in playwriting. For more on Thompson’s her work; Conolly 343.
port, a safe haven. The identity of home has the ability to transform itself into as many variations as are imaginable, yet the idea itself is widely understood and desired. In Toronto, Ontario, before the 1960’s, the Canadian theatre culture was defined as a “desert” and “lacking in roots or tradition” (Lane 2). Canadian playwrights were essentially homeless in their very own homeland, their creations floating in the ether of an unresponsive audience and silent stages.

Canada is a multicultural nation settled mostly through immigration. As well as having two nationally recognized languages, Canada also acknowledges the First Nations Aboriginal community who occupied the land prior to the founding of the Canadian nation. Both the First Nations and Francophone communities have utilized theatre to highlight their cultural presence and express their unique life experiences on the Canadian stage. Both communities, fighting for recognition and acknowledgement, are portrayed in Les Belles Soeurs (1965), the naturalistic play written by Michel Tremblay. Inspired by Tremblay’s depiction of the Francophone community in Canada, Thomson Highway wrote his play The Rez Sisters (1986) to express the life of women living on a reservation in Canada. The Anglophone theatre that I discuss in this thesis places more importance on the text and language. Francophone and First Nations theatre tended to move more towards the physical and imagery based theatre, highlighting the unique cultural experience that could surpass language (Wagner 337). Before the 1960’s, Canadian theatre had little impact on the national and world stage. As the plays The Ecstasy of Rita Joe (1967) by George Ryga and Circulations (1984) by Robert Lepage became known and appreciated, Anglophone Theatre and Canadian theatre in general established a unique reputation and gained an appreciative audience.

Walker, explains, “Starting to write Anglophone plays in Canada, as you know, was starting from nowhere, really. We had no tradition that we could hold fast to” (Lane 30). Up to this point, all Anglophone theatre produced in Canada was imported. The Alternative Theatre Movement stemmed from political and artistic goals. In the political realm, the need was for a “redistribution of economic resources” placing importance on smaller independent theatres that struggled because of government funds being given to larger regional theatres. For the artistic goal, it was to create new and original Canadian plays that were never seen as marketable by the large theatres (Rubin 391). Here, Walker touches on his personal struggle as a Canadian playwright that ultimately, they were alone to fight for the stage against the established and well known playwrights from abroad and Toronto’s own larger theatres.
A person’s nationality can provide the basis of individual worth. Strength and personal worth are gained as well as grounded when one can be a part of a collective (Pye 4). This idea of the power of a collective was very much the case with the successful emergence of Walker, as he made his way from obscurity onto the Canadian stage. Walker is one of the principle playwrights whose work stimulated the Alternate Theatre Movement in Toronto and through his own development there was modeled a positive growth within an underdeveloped theatre culture. Walker’s work provided the essential anatomy required to first construct and then solidify a Canadian national identity in and through theatre. Joining into a working partnership with Ken Gass, the founder of Toronto’s Factory Theatre, was one of Walker’s most important decisions, and thus having a great impact on his work.

Achieving this guided support from Gass’ theatre company early on, Walker was able to ascend from his original status as local Toronto taxi driver into one of the “Most prolific and celebrated English-language playwrights in Canadian history” (Posner, Globe and Mail October 23 1997). This incredible achievement would never have been accomplished without formulating a collective between playwright and alternate theatre company. Indeed, the Factory Theatre provided the springboard from which Walker as able to launch his career, and, in turn, Walker worked closely with the theatre in support of the company’s need of new Canadian works. The guaranteed venue allowed Walker the unique opportunity to freely explore any concepts and themes he decided on with the promise of production.

Walker’s writing is known for its strong characters, who all exist with the same guttural pain. All of his characters enter the world on the brink of self destruction; Walker drives them to the brink suggesting that there is nothing to lose, highlighting the belief that “moral corruption becomes social oppression” (Lane 57). Walker’s expressive writing style allows emotional intensity to seep onto the stage, bringing forth the deepest and darkest character psyche to break previously traditional and accepted theatrical boundaries of the traditional conflict and resolution. Walker’s plays leave little resolution for the audience; his conflicts are ongoing.

As Walker wrote for the Canadian stage, his settings were anywhere else. The locations in Walker’s plays are expansive, taking place in a jungle that lies somewhere near Mozambique (Beyond Mozambique), in Hong Kong (Ramona and the White Slaves) and in a ravaged countryside in Italy (Zastrozi). The locations were set far and wide, literally distancing these pieces as far from Canada as possible. From this point on, regardless of location, Walker is able
to work with the unanswered x-factor, what is life all about? This answer never comes but in using this endless question of meaning Walker illuminates human desire through his characters’ sustained day-to-day activities that range from mundane to bizarre. Walker was able to succeed in delving deeper into larger issues of humanity when placing his characters in drastically different locations. The locations may not have been set in Canada however in play *Beyond Mozambique* the character of Corporal is a Canadian Mountie, searching the dangerous jungle to ride the world of evil doers. This play questions the extremes humans are willing to go to. Walker uses, the Canadian Mountie as a representation of the traditional generalization of Canadian citizens that they are somewhat simple minded but mean well. Fifteen years after his first play, Walker was able to return home, setting his well loved characters in the east end of Toronto. By this time Walker was able to produce a voice that was all his own, a style that was recognizable unto himself and one that, when he finally wrote his first Toronto-based play, *Better Living (1986)*, the term of naturalistic theatre was no longer representative of the Canadian theater Walker produced (Lane 59).

**A Playwright at Home**

George F. Walker grew up as a seemingly traditional product of the urban Canadian environment he was born into. The role he assumed later in life was as a non-traditional trailblazer for a fledgling national art movement. Walker was born into a working-class family in the east end of Toronto in 1947. The east end, apart from being a defining characteristic of the playwright himself represents the key landmark for his series of *East End Plays*, a compilation which includes *Better Living*. In an interview published in the playbill for the premier of *Better Living* in 1986, Walker remarked on his enduring passion for his home, “I love it here, I’ll stay in the east end until they kick me out” (Milikin 6). Regardless of his success, Walker continued to live in the east end; it was the one place that would always concretize the meaning of home for him.

While Walker was working as a Toronto taxi driver, he came across a pamphlet posted by The Factory Theatre Company. The announcement called for submissions of original plays written by Canadian playwrights. Having a collection of written work, Walker answered the call

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7 The naturalism in Canadian theatre that I discuss here should not be confused with the American distinction for naturalism. Naturalism used in Anglophone Canadian theatre is more of an emulation of the already established theatre traditions in England. More information provided in *Establishing Our Boundaries: English Canadian Theatre Criticism* by Anton Wagner.
by submitting his first play, *The Prince of Naples*, which was accepted and produced by The Factory Theatre in 1971. The way in which Walker entered Canadian playwriting is often a surprise to Walker’s fans when they realize that the playwright was not a student of traditional University education. Friend and collaborator Ken Gass saw that Walker’s early work could be seen as an untainted source. Gass saw that the lack of formal training gave Walker the freedom to produce unique original work that was created without the constructed assumptions of what makes successful plays. That in essence, Walker’s work was as pure and unsoiled as Canadian theatre could produce. Walker’s original perspective seemed to be the perfect solution for defining Canadian playwriting. Commenting on why Walker was able to write in such a unique way Gass stated: “George is a wonderful contradiction. His roots were very much working class. Yet he was extremely well-read. And because he hadn’t been educated in theatre, he was able to give free reign to his imagination” (Posner).

Walker’s plays gained popularity, the range of work growing and evolving at the rapid pace with the steady production of his plays. After his first submission, Walker worked closely with Gass and soon thereafter was invited to join the company as a resident playwright. For Walker, the stability provided by Gass and the theatre company allowed him as a new playwright an incredible amount of support. The residency lasted roughly six years, enough for Walker to produce a large body of work.

As a resident, Walker was able to further establish his style with a rapid growth of plays. *The Prince of Naples*, opened the door. Within a three-year period, The Factory Theatre produced five of Walker’s plays. Gass commented on Walker’s growth in *What Is A Canadian Play?,* one of the pieces selected for *Canadian Theatre Histories*. Gass writes, “It is satisfying to reread his earlier works, not only to see how well they stand up, but also to observe how he develops his themes from play to play” (Rubin 333). Walker’s early plays were a time of practice and risks. *Ambush At Tether’s End* (1971), *Sacktown Rag* (1972) and *Bagdad Saloon* (1973), were his following productions. All the plays exhibited the writer’s interest in the absurd. Gass commented on Walker’s early writing style, “show a distinctly European style, a linguistic wit that pays respect to the French absurdists and the English tradition for articulate language” (Lane 1).

In the early 1970s, he wrote in a more absurd format that brought the critics out in full capacity, arguing that his attempts could be construed as a lesser version of Beckett’s own work.
Edward Mullaly critiques Walker’s writing style within the play *Ambush at Tether’s End* in *Waiting for Lefty, Godot, and Canadian Theatre*, stating “why Walker has spent his time on a script Beckett had already written with much greater discipline, intelligence, and skill” (Mullaly 53). Walker’s work had evolved and, at such an early stage of his career, to be mentioned in a similar context to Beckett, demonstrated Walker’s strength in theatrical writing. The use of banter still exists within Walker’s plays, but at this early point, Walker had yet to reach the full volume of his voice, as he played and worked with ideas and techniques. Walker’s plays have been connected directly with the establishment of Toronto theatre. However, there is a distinctive style that defines Toronto theatre.

Judith Thompson, another Toronto playwright, has established her theatrical voice as “naked, sweaty human need” (Conolly 341). Similar to Walker, Thompson’s characters also find themselves in a search for meaning and identity. Her contemporary work also deals with the media world. Her play *I Am Yours (1987)* is about human need combating social status, as five characters collide in their issues of love, expectation, and self worth. In Thompson’s work Canadian theatre highlights the animalistic nature within everyone, emphasizing our internal desires and letting them run free on stage. These natural urges tend to take over in the most chaotic of times when who we truly are is revealed. Similar to Walker’s work, Thompson experienced difficulties with remounts of her work. Martin Morrow, writing for the *Calgary Harold* commented on the unfortunate results of extreme matters dealt with on stage. He writes, “Despite this Toronto playwright’s success… I don’t believe her work has been done here before. And it’s understandable that our larger theatres wouldn’t be falling over themselves to produce it. Her depressing vision isn’t the kind of thing that sells tickets” (Conolly 342).

Thompson’s subject matter is quite similar to Walker’s in the matter in which the well-defined characters find themselves at odds with each other and themselves, creating a darkly comedic portrait of their life. The distinction between Thompson and Walker’s dark writing is that the characters never apologize for their horrifying situations and the dark reality goes on, undisturbed by promises of a better future, that they are ever-present. This anguish that both playwrights successfully bring to their work allows an audience to see characters entrenched in the struggle and that the lack of outward recollection, that feel despair themselves. As the quote above suggests, these subjects are not marketable to large communities of theatergoers. Who wants to feel the ache of complete and utter hopelessness on a weekend trip to Toronto? Yet the
Toronto voice is still defined as being “irreverent without being cynical” (Conolly 299). I believe that this definition can be seen in *Better Living* and can define the Canadian culture as it is imagined, polite and having the good intentions of that Corporal lost in the jungle *Beyond Mozambique*.

Gass sheds some light on what Walker’s theatre is ultimately bringing to the Canadian stage. Gass writes, “While the work is not consciously political or even sociological, it is, nonetheless, an apt metaphor for the building of a new Canadian culture” (Lane 2). Gass states that whether or not this Canadian playwright means to or not, his life experience and connection to Canada create the culture that has been needed. This can be seen in the success of Walker’s work for theatre, which has won him numerous awards, including the Governor General’s Literary Awards for Drama in English, the DORA award for outstanding new play in Toronto, and eight Chalmers Canadian play awards. In 2005, Walker became a member of the Order of Canada for his contribution to Canadian theatre.

**When a House Becomes a Home: George F. Walker and The Factory Theatre**

Walker’s entrance into Canadian theatre came at a time of revolutionary transformation for Canada’s stage. During the 1960s and into the 1970s, the Alternative Theatre Movement was building strength in Toronto Ontario. For a decade, the Alternative Theatre Movement pushed for the productions of theatre works unable to gain space in the regional and national theatres of Canada. The Toronto Alternative Theatre Movement was spearheaded primarily by theatres such as the Tarragon Theatre, Theatre Passé Muraille, Toronto Free Theatre, and The Factory Theatre with each company, in their own creative way, manufactured their own original Canadian theatre. Instantly eliminating any popular existing theatre from a years season, their production line-up was essentially a mystery because all of the plays performed in their season were new plays.

The creative partnership between Walker and Gass was monumental for the careers of both men. Not only did they feed the necessities of filling an empty stage with original Canadian plays, they built a collaborative relationship that helped to create the future of Canadian theatre. Gass recognized the power and creativity Walker possessed, and with his own knowledge, graduating from University of British Columbia, Gass was able to help funnel that new voice into the Alternative Theatre Movement.
The Factory Theatre is still known today as the “home of the Canadian playwright.” Gass elaborates saying, “By limiting the Factory to only Canadian plays, we were forced to abandon the security blanket of our colonial upbringing” (Gass 80). The Factory Theatre eliminated all temptation to produce successful works, creating a very risky move for their box office. The theatre sought to honor those individuals who were left in the dark, with no stage and no opportunity to showcase their works. The theatre not only provided the setting, it provided opportunities for new playwrights in the form of workshops that would help develop the writers into the playwrights The Factory Theatre had been yearning for. The Factory Theatre stood at the helm of promoting Canadian theatre by acting as the leading supporter of the creation and production of new, distinctly Canadian pieces for Canadian audiences. Walker’s residency promised consistent original Canadian plays for the Factory to produce and Walker was provided theatre space as well as the opportunity to be directly involved in the production of his works. During the opening of one of his new plays, Walker was known to seem very nervous and often hid behind the risers to listen intently to his play and also to experience the audience’s reception to his work (Lane 6).

While Walker was allowed complete artistic freedom with promised production, the Factory was equally supported in this collaborative union between company and playwright. Founded in 1970, the Factory settled in a loft performance space and awaited script submissions. At the start acquiring good new works was a difficult task, and the constant move toward production meant that plays went up before they could be polished (Gass 75). But production was a necessary yet time-consuming task. However, the importance of what the theatre company was working towards was always present. Gass said of his company’s mission, “Gradually we are defeating our playwrights’ greatest enemy: Canada’s psychological distaste for her own artists” (Gass 85). By introducing Canadian theatre to the Toronto population on a regular basis, the Factory, which established a downtown location for itself, provided the designated location to see and experience what English Canadian theatre was all about.

The Factory theatre’s downtown location acted as an aesthetically encouraging environment for Walker’s works, especially his compilation of The East End Plays (1999). These plays, which take place in Toronto, and specifically Better Living (1986), parallel the struggle of the Toronto arts system and the need to create a home for themselves, with the subject of the play. The trilogy of plays follows the struggles of a blue-collar family as they
grapple with the day-to-day frustrations of their lives. In all three plays, the odds always seem to be stacked up against the family, whether it is dealing with criminal activity, a power hungry father returning home, or being subject to a criminal investigation, the family pushes on. Better Living centers the action in an important emotional space, specifically the home. Throughout the play there is a resonance of national identity, a shadow of a colonial presence, and the internal class struggle that are all wound up within Walker’s web of dark comedy (Conolly 300).

**Evolution of Playwriting: Shouting from the Dark**

During an interview with Robert Wallace, Walker commented on the connections made between his work and realistic playwrights. He states,

> There’s supposed to be two schools in modern playwriting right now: the realists and the writers of the imagination. I need to have total freedom to explore my voice and themes and, through that, theatrical structure. But it’s got to bend. It has to change with the voice. I mean, I have respect for Chekhovian structure and everything he and Ibsen did. But you can’t necessarily put your voice into the structure (25).

Walker’s themes can be related to the works of Ibsen and Chekhov in the way the characters yearn for something more than their social and physical boundaries allow them. But the Walker banter is quite unique, and I believe that what he is trying to say is that though there may be a connection in some structural form, the dialogue is all his own. Walker actively nods to the work of Chekhov, even in Better Living three sisters who are trapped within the home, yearn to escape. Walker’s character, Elizabeth, can be seen as a very direct and calculated acknowledgement of Chekhov. The Russian female from Three Sisters is also portrayed in Walker’s play, Beyond Mozambique, yearning for Moscow and calling out to for the Russian city from her jungle prison.

This direct connection of the Chekhovian female character can be seen as a blatant sign for those who critiqued Walker’s originality in his early works. Critics questioned the work that Walker was producing early in his career, asking if the plays were original in form, need, and style. After the success of his two early plays for the Factory, Walker’s direction changed, his stylistic playwriting was seen to be “cartoonish” “sexually perverse” and “violent.” Walker’s use of dark comedy mixed with the sense that each character is on the edge of his very own cliff, gave the honesty a contemporary edge. Walker’s next collection of plays is regularly referred to as Walker’s “B-movie” plays, cheesy horror-film situations where gruesome violence is as
disturbing as it is comedic. This genre is a tip-of-the hat to what Walker himself enjoyed watching as a youth and as a young playwright, revisited as he experimented with his themes and style.

_Beyond Mozambique_ (1974) was a play of transition; Walker states, “I saw ‘B’ movies a horror and an ugliness that was only hinted at” (Lane 27). Within this structure, Walker wrote to suggest chaos that occurred off stage, allowing audiences to imagine in their own detail how grim the situation could be. “People felt the freedom to suggest the horror but they never went all the way” (Lane 27). Walker rarely produces explicit horror to be portrayed before an audience; he relies on the power of the imagination to take the mind to an even deeper and darker location than he would be able to produce himself. Later it was argued that the setting was merely a mode from which Walker was able to bring forth demonizing elements of humanity and humankind at its worst. The characters found in the middle of the jungle portray the negative attributes and the contrasting ideas and ideals of society.

In the _Suburban Motel_ Series, Walker creates characters that are the least likely to appear as a leading role in a play of their own. These are the characters that are shoved to the side, who never fight for their beliefs, or come to understand their surroundings. Danile De Raey in the forward to Walker’s _Suburban Motel_ series, explains the complexities of the characters; he writes, “Walker’s stories don’t really end, and his characters don’t ever lie down- unless, of course, they die. And even then we know that the room will be cleaned up, new people will check in, and life will go on.” Walker has been known to not have endings; he has always found it difficult to come to a conclusion satisfying to the story as a whole. The end does not always appear to be so until the lights come down and the cast is awaiting their applause. In _Better Living_, there is the opportunity to come to a reasonable completion. The father has gone, and the family is united as one on stage for the first time. At last, Nora takes control of the family unit, as she should have done from the beginning. And just as the wax begins to firm, ensuing a satisfying end, Tom, the destructive character in the play, returns home holding a television set.

Walker’s connection with television and film are ever present in his work. Whether he writes in a similar style to the films he grew up watching or uses a physical television set his plays _Problem Child_ and _Better Living_. The use of these two forms suggest that “Walker’s work discusses the fact that North Americans do not live original lives, but are borrowed from TV and

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8 See Walker’s _Suburban Motel_ for Daniel De Raey’s forward.
movies” (Conolly 300). By use of cinematic and action movie techniques, Walker attempts to blend the mediums by bringing the outlandish horror genres to be played out in front of live audiences. The technique forces the audience to suspend their disbelief and watch the broadly defined characters suffer very honest emotions. Walker’s views are seen through the interactions of stereotypical characters and their interactions with others that surround them. Of the cast of characters there is the mad scientist who has traveled to the jungle to search for a cure for cancer; only his testing mutilates the native community. This blending of the seemingly impossible occurrences then allows Walker to comment on crimes against humanity in the guise of a melodramatic B movie production, allowing the audience to go to a deeper level than they could with a realistic approach. I would argue that there are many actions that humans take against one another and would be beyond imagination. Beyond Mozambique shows how good intentions are often times corrupt when put in practice and where does one draw the line between useful and destructive. In opposition to the bad however, there is the Canadian mounted policeman who wanders the jungle, trying to correct all the wrongs of the world in a wholesome and proactive way.

Ramona and the White Slaves (1975) takes place in Hong Kong. Ramona, an opium addict, mother figure, and pimp, is the lead character in the play. Everything can be seen as if from a dreamlike state, probably all occurring through the opium-laden perspective of Ramona herself. Zastrozzi (1977), produced at the Toronto Free Theatre, was Walker’s breakthrough play in terms of his gaining recognition as a popular dramatist. His cult following was growing and Nothing Sacred (1988) won Walker international recognition; the play was awarded “Play of the year” and was adapted of Turgenev’s novel Fathers and Sons which Walker read as a seventeen year old. His initial relationship with the characters in that book has continued to intrigue him even at the age of forty when he wrote Nothing Sacred. Walker comments on how his identity has changed over the years saying, “I’m no longer just a son; I’m a father, too, and I have to come to grips with that, to understand that as well” (Lane 55). Walker’s notion of self can be seen transforming through his work on a very personal level of development. Life experience can be seen through art, and the Canadian self, at any stage of life is expressed to a larger audience through performance.

It is Walker’s belief that life, even when portrayed on stage, should not be offered in the form of a neat and tidy parcel. This is seen in the way Walker sees perfect endings as fanciful
because he rarely writes a distinct ending into his plays. Life goes on whether we like it or not and the key to his theatre is watching this characters continue on. “In effect, I’m saying that’s what the world is like, and I’m opening up the panel more to see more of the world” (Walker Globe and Mail Feb. 3 2000). For Walker, the natural setting is only the beginning; what he is trying to show is the world that we know but never discuss that of our fear and, our daily struggles.

The naturalistic setting is only one aspect of Walker’s work. He does not attempt the world of Beckett’s End Game, in which there is no understanding of the world outside. Naturalism merged with the grotesque is the playwright’s basic themes. Walker disagrees with a Canadian theatre only as a realistic genre and yet he still finds the need to present honest human responses within his work. He does not provide conclusions because life does not have conclusions. This merging of different styles reflect the many post colonial influences being used at this time in Toronto theatre can be seen in the way Walker is melding an identity that separates his work apart from the established productions coming from abroad.

Walker’s characters speak directly to the audience. In the first play of the East End series, Criminals in Love, Walker’s character William, a homeless man in Toronto, speaks from his viewpoint:

I speak now from the heart of experience. I use words like destiny and fate and despair. I talk of the great abyss which beckons us all. I speak of the great under-class or our society, the doomed, the forgotten, the outcasts. I describe the fine line which separates the lands of function and dysfunction. I put it in terms which cover the spectrum. The political. The philosophical. The poetic. Occasionally I use vernacular. I talk of the great fuck-up. Of getting shafted, getting screwed up the ass. Without even a kiss. I describe the human condition. I tell you Junior’s story. Your story. And if I may be so bold, our story… Because aren’t we all in this together. Aren’t we all friends here. Can’t you feel the bond. Isn’t this the absolute truth!? ⁹

Within this one monologue, issues of social class, human need, and the discussion of producing theatre in Toronto can be read. William, like Walker, “describes the human condition” and calls to an understanding that theatre brings everyone together as a community. The audience is asked to listen to the shared story, “our story.” Destiny, fate, and despair, as William relates, are

common themes one can see in Canadian theatre. In *Better Living*, the family embodies this fate and despair via what occurs when Tom returns home again and again.

The Canadian voice needs to be given a stage and that it will tell the stories of the Canadian community. Specifically, he talks about “the human condition.” Theatre is able to represent the tragedy of the common man. It presents an insider’s glimpse to the sufferings and struggle that are a daily occurrence of these characters. Walker was able to build a body of work, furthering his self discovery of his voice and what he wanted to say. William also discusses on a more personal note the struggle Canadian playwrights have dealt with and the colonial presence that has been placed upon them. Here Walker speaks to the Canadian community, reminding them that they are all in this together.

Walker’s style is in the form of Naturalism used in *Better Living* is only designed to be used to outline the story. The truth is more frightening than fiction. The result of Walker’s work is not to shy away from the demonizing qualities of the middle class and their unredeemable attitudes. Real life, real issues, that is exactly what Walker is providing. It is just in the writing style that is unlike other playwrights, but one that was defined in and about Canada and can only be termed, Canadian. This fast banter is quick and reactionary as if Walker has split open the heads of all the characters to allow their immediate thoughts to pour out of them. A lot of where the difference lies is in the self-deprecating nature of the comedy: the laughs, often times, happen at the character’s own expense and the character does not slow down to make anything easier, on themselves or the audience.

**Better Living: “Closer to the Bone”**

*Better Living* was originally staged at Centerstage in Toronto, Ontario in May of 1986. Of the three East End Plays, *Better Living* is the least produced. The first written and the second produced, *Better Living* tells the story of a family living in the east end of Toronto. A review from the NY Times discusses how Walker portrays his characters: “Walker seems to see our struggles, and he’s forgiving and often funny about human ineptitude in the wake of social havoc.” This is a clear example of how Walker doesn’t let his characters ‘off the hook’ and doesn’t need to decide exactly how or why they suffer, just that life does not always produce the perfect reason for ineptitude. In *Criminals in Love*, young couple Junior and Gail, the only
reoccurring characters throughout the entire series, try to find ways to support themselves when
the world appears to have made them into criminals. *Escape from Happiness,* is set in the same
kitchen as *Better Living;* this time two Toronto detectives have come to solve a crime that Junior
is involved in. For the first time, outside forces enter the family’s home environment.

*Better Living* begins with renovations in the basement, sex in the kitchen, and drinking
and discussion over the father figure that has gone missing for ten years. The family is united as
one on stage for the first time since the exorcism that ended with Gail, the youngest daughter
passed out on the floor. At last, Nora, the mother, takes control of the family unit, as she should
have done from the beginning. Part of this, I believe is that Walker understands that happy
endings are fanciful. Life goes on whether we like it or not. “In effect, I’m saying that’s what the
world is like, and I’m opening up the panel more to see more of the world” (Walker Globe and
Mail Feb. 3 2000). For Walker, the natural setting is only the beginning, what he is trying to
show is the world that we know but never discuss: our fears, our daily struggles of a first world
capitalistic life. Class and social standings of the family are visible from the beginning of the
play. The physical space that Walker creates in *Better Living* concretizes the unsettled home
environment of a Torontonian community. The stage directions describe the realistic location in
which Walker has placed his characters: “the kitchen of an old run-down house in the east end. A
screen door leads to an over ground backyard. There is a door into a hall. A door leading to the
basement. In one corner a wicker rocker. Beside the rocker a pile of yellowing newspapers. The
linoleum floor is warped and slopes badly” (83).

As the directions note, the setting is very realistic. Within the house the family creates the
need for more. Essentially, the family has a roof over their heads, water, food, but this living is
not what it could be and that is what begins the question, “What is better living and for who?”
The play presents seven unique characters, all connected through this home and family but all
with a very different perspective on what the world has to offer them. Chris Johnson writes on
how Walker’s characters are able to connect with the audience they are speaking to. Johnson
comments on Walker’s strength in writing characters that all reach out and connect on a range of
levels. He writes, “We therefore agree intellectually with one character, feel we ought to respond
spiritually to a second, and identify most closely with a third” (Lane 20). The characters in *Better
Living* are well-defined in who they are and expressing their needs within the world they inhabit.
It is in this sense that Walker’s Torontonian voice breaks through, separating him from others,
speaking to the struggle that each character experiences as a result from the quest for better living.

Stephen Haff comments on Walker’s reactionary writing style, “He still takes no interest in their psychological histories, so that the characters are ardently present-tense” (Lane 83). This technique is used by Walker to let the higher authorities listen to the fact that the time of a reigning colonial super power is over. Reid Gilbert eloquently describes in his paper “Escaping the “Savage Slot”: Interpellation and Transgression in George F. Walker” Walker’s use of performative hybridity writing that he “gathers bourgeois propriety, theatre etiquette, theatrical conversation, and much more complex psychological performativity together in his final stage image, and literally points it out to an imperialist audience predisposed to miscomprehend” (Lane 150). In Better Living each character represents part of a larger post colonial community and the actions or non-action that is taken when a new regime has entered the space.

**Nora**

*Better Living* opens with the mother, Nora, expanding the small urban home in preparation for the return of her adult children. Nora’s one goal throughout the play is to make things physically better. There is a constant need to improve everything around her, but she is blinded to larger issues by dedication to her basement project. As she is ripping up the foundation of the family home, she is ignoring the dysfunction occurring on the upper floors. She has neglected herself, her family, and doesn’t seem to be aware of the deteriorating home that surrounds her. Nora’s denial allows her to only see the good in the world. When her abusive husband returns home, she decides to ignore what has happened in the past by giving him a new name and identity. Nora remains in this state of denial until she is literally conquered sexually by Tom. I believe that Nora is a representation of the many people who refuse to acknowledge the ugliness of the world, even when it exists within their own homes. A positive denial driven outlook is viewed to be as dangerous as a negative one. Imagining that the world is a better place does not make it so. As a subject of Tom, Nora’s positive energy is stifled especially when she realizes that it is too late to change leadership.

**Tom**
As a contrast to Nora, Tom also is interested in improving his home, but for different reasons. Tom is direct, forceful, and aggressive. He does not see any hope or redemption in what he calls the “outside world,” whatever lies outside of the home. It is something to vent rage at and try to manipulate. In his home, he is in command, the leader and puppet master. It is the one place he has total control, and he forces his family into obeying his impossible rules. In Tom’s monologue, said to the eldest daughter Elizabeth, Tom’s anger towards the world is described in detail.

Tom: I can kill. With my bare hands. I can rip flesh. I can take a knife and cut throats, or put it in bellies. When the total shit of the future comes I can look it in the eye and keep it out of this fucking house. I can cheat. I can lie. I can steal. I can beg. I can sneak and grovel and betray and burn things to the ground to protect this family. I am the soldier of the total shit future. I am the provider of the total shit future. I am the basic ingredient for survival (141).

Tom’s power and mind games are oppressive and relentless. From Tom’s entrance, there is an understanding of what this man is capable of and that having him in power would be a terrible mistake. Walker allows the audience the freedom to take in this character without full judgment. He allows the audience to grow comfortable with Tom in the similar manner as the family. By leaving the details out, Walker gives the mind an opportunity to image what might have happened ten years ago. Although there is a lot of discussion about Tom, family members take no action in protecting or defending themselves, they just become subservient and allow Tom to take over. Elizabeth says it best that those people who are in power “are dangerous by nature. Sometimes deranged by nature” (134). Elizabeth notes this as she sits at the kitchen table stuffing envelopes per Tom’s order.

Elizabeth

The character of Elizabeth is a character of extremes. She offers the audience comfort because she is assumed the savior, the one character who would be willing to stand up to the evil superpower. However, she disappoints by giving in because the fight is just too hard. Elizabeth in her display of opposition exemplifies that we cannot fight alone, and without the necessary support, we are victims of our circumstances. In her case it was prostitution that helped her through law school. The other extreme of Elizabeth is her drastic transformation from prostitute
to lawyer, in a sense, Elizabeth is a mockery of the judicial system. She lives the extremes in her attempt to be successful.

Elizabeth seemingly is able to move on from her past as a prostitute. She does not appear to be negatively affected by her previous work, and explains that she has no bad thoughts about men in general. But similar to Nora, she is in denial, and doesn’t understand how her past, creates a weakened structure for the life she tries to build. For both women, Walker exhibits the strength of survival. These characters live through whatever they need to in order to make a better life for themselves, a capitalistic first world characteristic of believing that there needs to be a constant upward mobility to succeed. Elizabeth also represents the extremes of living life in the free world. Yes, there are opportunities to enter politics and law regardless of where you once came from, but Walker highlights that these dreams of success must begin from somewhere, that often the beginnings can seem like nightmares not often acknowledged or discussed after success. He dares the audience to take in this strong and powerful female with a known history of prostitution. Elizabeth does not hide her past from her family. She allows the dream to be seen for what it truly is. The present situations do not erase the past and she will always have been a prostitute in order to succeed and a lawyer, one could argue, is just another kind of prostitute.

**Mary Ann**

The character of Mary Ann acts as the megaphone for the concerns of the world. This middle child is very vocal about her feelings of exasperation toward her family, but also to herself. She is so emotionally affected that her paranoia extends from real fears of nuclear power to imagined terror of cats and teeth. Mary Ann’s monologue offers an excellent example of the way Walker manipulates language. In a world where there is so much going on, the constant moving speed of a capitalist country, Walker exaggerates this energy with short quick sentences, one after another. As Mary Ann makes a pie, Walker’s language is a steady stream of consciousness. He juxtaposes the tragic with the comedic, the absurdity of life in the east end with the daily reality that exists. Here, Mary Ann shares many of the issues urban Canadians may have to deal with on a daily basis. In Mary Ann’s monologue, she exhibits many of the emotional rollercoasters that we all grapple with on any given day.

What separates her experience from ours is that most of us keep our emotions buried and intact, while hers are highly eternalized expressions. Mary Ann suffers from oppressive forces; she may be frightened of “teeth” or have an aversion to too much traffic that becomes a stress of
a daily life. All of her fears are only potential, they have not, nor will not, necessarily occur. Mary Ann also is the architect of her own fears. She is afraid of not bringing her baby correctly, when she, in fact, has abandoned her child to live with her family. In the following monologue spoken by Mary Ann, Walker gives voice to the subconscious thought process of life in the east end to Toronto, what this community imagines are the real concerns of the world. Mary Ann is rolling out pie dough, and in the process, speaks to her uncle Jack about her fears of the world.

She says,


Mary Ann introduces very serious issues: sickness, pollution, poverty, and death. These are very loaded life complications that cross many minds, fearing the worst and understanding that these are very real issues. In the text, Mary Ann also includes very positive elements to life. In the same list of issues that cross her mind she discusses money, love and friends. She does not express exactly why these words have made it on her least of worries, and the assumption is that they are there because they do not exist for her. In her life, where she is cared for, not starving or poor, and yet these three positive life experiences weigh on her psyche. Mary Ann is very symbolic of the worries that are circling the mind. Similar to her Mother Nora, Mary Ann speaks her mind but she understands maybe a bit too deeply the truth and chaos of the world. Her skin is thin and everything that could possibly penetrate does and the inner fears are physically present within Mary Ann.

Gail and Junior
Gail represents the future generation, and the baby in the family who was forgotten and not taken seriously. Gail is constantly looking for approval, a promise of good to come. As the youngest, she has the opportunity to get a university education, but the family support is waning. It has already been spent on the two other daughters. Gail’s role in the play is to be a sort of voice of reason. She, in some sense, is the only one who voices the fact that the emperor has no clothes or in this case, her mother has no effective goal to better the family.

Junior is the follower and does not question what is occurring around him. Junior is desperate to receive positive feedback, and is will to take orders from anyone regularly complements him. He has been ignored for most of his life and he finally feels that he has a purpose, even if he is a pawn under Tom’s control. For Walker Junior represents those who follow blindly, and will continue to follow bad leaders as long as they are offered some personal gain. In Junior’s case, he diligently carries boxes of canned vegetables down to the basement and is happy to do so as long as someone tells him that he is doing a good job. One of the keys to success that is mentioned in the play by Tom “In bad times you work for two basic reasons. To get something done. And to keep people busy so they don’t worry” (118). Junior is the poster child for how effective Tom’s strategy is for the family. And to the audience, who watch the struggle of characters like Mary Ann and Gail, see Junior following without question or concern and distracted in his oblivion of imagined personal success.

**Jack**

Jack can be seen as the Shakespearian fool, the character who uses wit to reveal the truth of the moment. Jack’s dismissal of the church is based on the understanding that even giving up his life, the greatest sacrifice he can make, is not enough to make a difference in the world. His disenfranchised perspective of the world is revealed in his comments. Though honest, he hides behind alcohol, and faces his problems through a drunken haze. Tom gives some perspective to Jack’s situation. Tom discusses the struggle of priests. “Some of them want to help. Some of them even die to help. But it doesn’t. Not much anyway. Priests who die for a cause, that’s an overrated thing” (116) Jack’s disillusionment with the church has left him powerless. Jack is the most sympathetic character, he sees and feels the full extent of the chaos but does nothing. Jack finally realizes his power when he sits within reach of a gun and the power that comes with a single action of removing the gun from his nieces hand transforms a situation in which he sat
powerless under a dictator to placing himself in the seat of power. Walker uses this final glimpse of the social structures transformation when weaponry is taken advantage of.

**Canadian Theatre and the Absence of the American Dream**

Sandra Hanson writes, “At its core, the American Dream represents a state of mind—that is, an enduring optimism given to people who might be tempted to succumb to the travails of adversity, but who, instead, repeatedly rise from the ashes to continue to build a great nation” (Hanson 3). In *Better Living*, Nora represents an overly positive outlook on life, so much so that she can no longer comprehend that her life is truly crumbling at her feet. The return of the paternal leader, Tom, rises from the ashes of his once abusive past, resulting in forcible actions that reduce his family to captive laborers for a better society. Within these characters, a dream exists, but the way to improve themselves is by wrecking someone or something.

The Canadian voice can be defined in comparison to American idealism. The American culture has built itself on the idea of the importance of coming out on top, of finding the purpose in everything. The weight of the American dream is heavy on its citizens who are driven to be successful, no matter what the odds. This can be seen in Arthur Miller’s play, *Death of a Salesman*, has been acknowledged as one of the most well-known plays in the US, especially for its role in highlighting the downfall of the American dream. In the opening “An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality” (Miller 11). In Miller’s play, there is this struggle against the inevitable tragic outcome of an unsuccessful attempt at the American Dream, suggesting that the dream is more harmful than helpful. The character Willy represents a failed attempt at the American Dream, his martyrdom shows that even with hard work the best intentions that the dream is not achieved by everyone.

In *Better Living*, there is no such thing as the “American Dream.” The betterment that is Nora’s primary focus does not center on riches, but bettering what is around her. There is little external focus, and when the outside is referred to in *Better Living*, it is not specific. The jobs held by the characters are not oppressive in the same way. The present tense that Walker places his characters keeps them more grounded than the characters in *Death of a Salesman*. Both families are very honest but difference lies in the fact that Walker’s family does not envision anything beyond their financial means. There is a need for betterment of their situation, but there is a primary acknowledgement of the situation that they are in, and if nothing changes, than they
will continue on as they have been for years. For this family, there is no great fall from betterment or the idea of it.

The importance of given a voice to the Canadian stage was just as important to the theatre world as it was to the nation. Robert Wallace explains how the Canadian imagined identity is further developed by original national theatre. He writes,

In Canada during the last 30 years, theatre has led audiences not only to appreciate Canadian plays but, as well, to use them to create our sense of ourselves, our relationships with each other, and with the world. The cultural policies that enabled the evolution of Canadian theatre during this period of remarkable ferment are complicit with the plays and productions facilitated. Together, they provide us with a series of representations whose cumulative effect is the staging of a nation (Wallace 23).

Walker’s plays start in a realistic setting, and while the situations and writing seem to be frenzied and chaotic, there is a level of accuracy and understanding of human motivation and relationship. He explains, “When I have tried to, my experiments have been in realism which for me is an unnatural writing style. It’s not how I see the world” (Wagner 80).

The American dream, originating with the Declaration of independence in 1776, highlights the pursuit of happiness, which in turn continues on into fulfillment, privilege, and has unfortunately transitioned into an expectation (Hanson 2). From the character Tom’s perspective, “the future is total shit” and the here and now is what needs to be reevaluated. Walker’s use of the present is an important distinction for Canadian work. Because the theatre is being written for the present audience, there is a sense of description of what our current struggles are and opening the world to an even deeper personal level. All of the chaos that Walker brings into his plays is a reminder that there are present issues. Don’t worry about the chaos of the past or the inevitable chaos of the future. This is happening now.

The American dream is what defines the American community, it is the imagined understanding that we all enter with equal opportunity, and that possibility of unbounded opportunity is what makes us American. Our reasons for believing in the American Dream and imagining that we will be able to succeed are seen in a 2009 Zogby Interactive poll, 59% “I’m intelligent and work hard, so I should succeed.” 52% “American is the land of opportunity” 25% “I am an optimist.” 15% “My religious faith ensures I will find fulfillment.” The question is, does the American dream truly mean securing fulfillment. “The American Dream promises
immediate property and ultimate happiness, physical possessions, consumer goods, and an ensuing metaphysical joy” (Hanson 27). The American dream is focused on the children, offering more to the up and coming generation.

In Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, the future of the family rests on the prosperity of the son. In *Better Living* it is the present that is most at stake. It is about survival and community instead of the achievement of one among the rest. The play reflects the hectic life of North Americans. However, survival means a very different thing for a first world nation. In this world, the concern is who will be in charge and what happens when we follow blindly. Often times, it is the male patriarch who is in charge. Yet, who will rise up and fight? *Better Living* shows that these power dynamics are quite real and can occur in the smaller realm of the house and home. The fact that the American dream is deeply embedded in American mythology and in the consciousness of its citizens. That is exactly what gives the American Dream its staying power, even in times when it seems as though it should surely die (Hanson 7). The American dream can reflect a belief system of how the American imagined community is established. “After all, myths last because they are dreams fulfilled in our imaginations” (Hanson 7). Similar to Anderson’s imagined community, there is the imagined idea of the American dream.

A more contemporary look at the American family drama, is represented in Lee Blessing’s play *Independence*, which was produced at Miami University in the spring of 2011. In Blessing’s play, the home represents a place that cannot be “bettered.” It is a place to move away from if there is any hope of achieving success. The mother figure, similar to Nora, is deeply troubled, and over the course of the play, she malfunctions completely, unable to care for herself or control over her hysteria. The home becomes a place to escape, the outside world is promising. Unlike Walker, who highlights the fears of the world and how the future will only be worse, brings success back to the home, where one is accepted no matter how crazy or absurd their behavior appears to be.

Walker describes a home that has been disregarded, left to fall apart, disintegrated around its inhabitants; enter a catholic priest. This is the first image of Walker’s *Better Living*. No one is the singular hero in the play. Elizabeth stands out as the most likely candidate. She has consistent access to the world, she is the most functional family member, and has already made her way in the world. But she disappears when the family needs her the most. Jack, as well, seems to be a good man for the job, but like Elizabeth, he fades once Tom returns home. As Tom establishes
himself in the seat of power, Jack becomes more and more drunk. It is as if he is using alcohol as a buffer to deal with the reappearance of Tom, and to suppress any emotional upheaval with which he is grappling, hiding the reality with the use of alcohol and not his own imagination.

In Walker’s work his own perception of the Canadian self-image is secure, he creates a family and characters that are offer honest perspectives from their personal point of view. The uncertainty of the outside world is what throws them off. The chaos that he throws at them is what further defines their character, and shows how this Canadian community can respond. In example of Beyond Mozambique the character of the Canadian mounted police, the Corporal, divides the community members in two. He says “In times of crisis there are only two kinds of people. People who behave badly and people who pass judgment on them” (53). This is ultimately what Walker utilizes to show the truth in every character he places on stage and that crisis and complete and utter fear releases the true self. All characters in Better Living suffer from defining their self worth. What does it truly mean to represent a priest, a mother, a father a sister a lawyer, a prostitute, a criminal? What connects us to make us better when the differences are so vast even within a small family unit? Christ Johnson argues in George F. Walker: B-Movies and Beyond\(^{10}\), while mainstream American drama consistently portrays the failure of the American Dream, that which has maintained the illusion of ‘meaning and purpose,’ the American theatre-going public has an aversion to the next step, a dramatic form which not only discusses but reflects the disintegration of the Dream (Lane 12). Walker’s Torontonian play embraces the human faults even highlights them. The people involved decide what better living means to them. Whether the notion of better living is achieved, the journey to betterment is sometimes ugly, tragic, comedic, hopeful, but most of all, Walker makes the search an honest one.

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Chapter Three

*Better Living Was Here: The process of directing George F. Walker’s play Performed at Miami University.*

When I began the search for my thesis topic at Miami, the residual influence that George F. Walker's plays had left on me was unshakable. I began to explore the notion of defining Canadian theatre through production. Though I was drawn to Walker's work, I alternately loved and feared the idea of directing one of his plays. I knew his work to be challenging, but I also understood that the risk made the project that much more appealing. I chose Better Living, because it represents Walker's return home.[...] His message is simple and poignant: to go on, we must find comedy in our tragedy, if we can only attempt to extract a sense of self from within the clutches of life's chaos.

-Alexandra Whitney Marsh
Excerpt from Director’s Notes

*I know I am Canadian because when I travel to other parts of the world, even to the United States, I feel different.*

-George F. Walker¹¹

In 2005 I found myself, a lone American student, discovering Canadian theatre in the quiet solitude of the Robarts Library on the University of Toronto campus. This was not an ideal setting to experience Canadian theatre for the first time. As I later discovered, quietly reading Walker’s play *Beyond Mozambique* to myself, I was unable to fully digest how transformative the performance would be, as compared to my internal experience. This was generally my experience when only reading scripts. Because plays are meant to be performed, my understanding of the play was enhanced when I was invited to a rehearsal for the 2006 production of *Escape from Happiness* at the Factory Theatre. At the rehearsal, I saw the text I had read brought to life, and observed the process that goes into performing the explosive interactions of Walker’s characters. The pieces began to fall into place and by the end of my first year I was able to experience Walker’s work through my own performance, during my acting classes’ year-end selection of Walker’s plays. Thanks to this intimate classroom process, I discovered how frustrating it can be to live as a character in the midst of Walker’s chaotic and

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fast-paced world. I discovered, as an audience member for my fellow classmates, that during specific moments I observed a lack of commitment and trust on the actor’s part, in relation to the text. This acting challenge seemed to be exhausting within this outrageous world, and also made the overall experience excruciating to witness.

Based on my initial experience with the script alone, I wanted to further my own discovery of Canadian theatre, specifically focusing on introducing an American audience to Walker’s work. Through discussion and gaining a deeper understanding of the academic structure of the theatre department at Miami University, I came to understand that many members of the Miami theatre community had never heard of Walker. By producing a play written by this Canadian playwright, I hoped that I would be able to gain insight into what an audience would be able to take away from the experience when answering a survey moments after the production had ended.

“Nothing happens for no good reason unless you have no good reason for it happening.” –Nora, Better Living

The impact of my initial introduction to Canadian theatre as an undergraduate student was so defining that introducing a Walker play to the Miami University community inspired my decision to direct a Canadian play for my creative thesis. I was intrigued by the idea of being witness to initial reactions and assumptions that might come with this play and topic. As my audition for the main season, I directed a scene from the play The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine, written by Robert Morgan, Martha Ross, and Leah Cherniak. This piece is a fast paced interaction of an urban couple moving into a basement apartment together. The decision to direct this piece for my audition was twofold. I wanted to show an original Canadian play for the students and faculty to gauge interest in my thesis request. And to use this play as a testing ground to if I was able to direct a piece that contains quick witted banter and dark humor. As part of my five submissions to Miami University’s main theatre season, three out of the five play submissions were by Walker, and Better Living was my first choice. The truth was that I would have been happy to direct either of the other two submissions, Problem Child and Zastrozzi. The main difference with Better Living was that I truly enjoyed reading this play. I couldn’t help but envision the chaos that occurs within the small, urban house. I felt drawn to the characters themselves, more specifically the women. I knew that if I was cast in the place of the Miami
students, especially as a female actor, that the opportunity to sink my teeth into the roles as Elizabeth, Mary Ann, Gail, and especially Nora, would be of great enjoyment and benefit to my acting experience. The idea of directing a play by Walker was very intimidating from the start, and quite honestly, I wasn’t sure if I would be able to pull it off.

In March of 2011, Better Living was chosen as the play that I would direct. I sat down with my design team and stage manager for our first planning session. As a director, I wanted collaboration to be an important element to the process of creating Better Living. My tactic was to begin from the ground up, initially bringing the designing voices into the creative dialogue. I began our first meeting very casually by asking what the design team thought of the play. My goal was to take note of the initial reaction of those who read the play. I wanted these creative participants to have their say before my own views were brought in. Since I had spent the entire summer with my script (now dog eared) I wanted to remember what it was like to read through a George F. Walker play for the first time. Surrounding me at the design table were all American professors and students. The set designer and props manager was professor Gion DeFrancesco, sound design was professor Russ Blain, and costume design was undergraduate theatre major, Kate Hawthorn.

The faculty members loved the script and were excited to create a world with so much going on. The students were unsure of how to take in this text. Some thought it was very twisted and dark and found the play lacking in comedy. The students, used to realism, did a very literal reading of the script, and were confused by the direct and often sarcastic jokes. Once everyone had shared their own perspectives, I entered in with what I had known of Walker’s work and what I wanted to create. I provided a few of the boundaries I believed were needed: this has to take place in Toronto, Ontario; this needs to be as authentically Canadian as we can make it. Under this parameter of Canadian specificity I offered the designers a great deal of freedom to explore how they imagined the world of Better Living. To suggest a connection to my thesis work, I brought in the art books I had with images of Canada painted by the Group of Seven. I passed these images around, suggesting that we could make the play authentic without falling into the dangers of generalizing. Just as the Group of Seven had painted very specific locations of their country, I wanted this play to represent a very specific Canadian setting. This first meeting established an agreeable foundation for the rest of our future work together. The
atmosphere was calm and joyful for the most part, and there was a sense of fun and comfort throughout the collaborative design process.

**An Unknown “Canadian” Script**

I suppose I would represent the early process of garnering student interest in *Better Living* similar to a coach’s halftime speech to an underdog team in the finals. As a part of Miami University’s main season, I would direct one of the three shows that would be produced during the fall term of 2011. As part of the requirements, all shows would be casting from the same audition pool. During the first week of school, I attended the undergraduate “town hall” meeting, a gathering where new theatre majors and minors were introduced to the department through a sketch performance created by the current theatre majors. After introducing their professors in a silly skit, the students introduced the plays that were to be produced in the 2011-2012 theatre season. Each vignette was performed in comical fashion and portrayed the storylines and themes, a sort of Sparknotes version of the season for those who had yet to read the scripts for themselves. The selected works included Tennessee Williams’ *Glass Menagerie*, William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, Thorton Wilder’s *Our Town*, and Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls*. Last presented was *Better Living*, and I was intrigued to witness the conclusions the students had drawn for themselves as Canadian theatre and George F. Walker’s work is not traditionally included in undergraduate theatrical studies. The students set themselves in their place, about to perform the story, but remained frozen in their tableau. They raised their arms and with wide eyes and apologetic smiles said in unison, “We don’t know, EH?!”

I felt perturbed and a bit saddened by the lack of interest in this production; I knew that I needed to personally get the word out and build the excitement around this show. I left feeling somewhat enlightened that I now knew what I would be up against, both in terms of interest and also what the impression of Canada was among these American students. “Eh” was used to pretty much sum it all up, and the classic plays were once again (did this happen before?) pushing the original Canadian play to the side.

**Auditions**

Once I knew I would be directing *Better Living*, I tried to image the physical nature of the characters and the qualities they would need to possess in order to be believable. In one of
Walker’s interviews, Walker himself suggests that the characters are somewhat malleable in what “types” of actors can play them. Other than Tom being physically large, each character can be fluid and that many “types” of actors can easily portray these characters. Walker said, “I believe that I put the character in the play and that they are who they are, and that five or six different actors can do them and they’ll still be who they are” (Lane 53). It may be somewhat presumptuous on the writer’s part to suggest that his characters are so well-written and developed that anyone can play them and the character will still represent the original vision, but I believe Walker’s notion to be true. Each character, with the exception of Tom, could change in body type, vocal range, and overall nature and Walker’s text would hold strong.

Over the summer, I had written out the characteristics of each part in Better Living, ranging from adjectives that I envisioned, to physical combinations. My early concerns going into the auditions were to find my two parents, Nora and Tom. For Nora, I refused to write “crazy” as one of her defining traits, and I worried that I would be unable to find someone who would be able to play her age, as well as sell some of Nora’s ideas with the utmost sincerity. The danger I faced was to have someone respond to her as “crazy.” For the character of Tom, I knew I needed physical presence and dominance. From early on, I knew Tom would be a challenge to find.

Auditions were held on Wednesday, September 24th and Thursday, September 25th with callbacks on Friday, September 26th. Over the summer I had sent a request to the technical director that, as part of the four minute audition, the students should provide a joke along with their two monologues. I decided that instead of adding a third monologue for the students to memorize, I would see some of the personalities better by the telling of a short joke. What I discovered from those two days was that once the student had completed their “performance” of the two memorized monologues; there was a sense of relaxation that I witnessed both physically as well as vocally. The actors appeared to settle into themselves as they spoke to us. Through this joke telling, I was able to witness the vocal variety of many of the students, aiding in my final casting decisions to gauge comedic timing, risk, and character development.

When deciding on call backs, I had a general idea of who I wanted for two of the sisters, Nora, Jack, and Junior; Tom was still at large. However, as the competitive person that I am, I wanted to make sure that I would have options ready if I was unable to cast a first choice actor due to the needs of the other two shows, so my callback list was quite large. We began with a
quick and energetic warm-up and got right to reading scenes. I had selected scenes that had no more than two actors. What I was looking for was commitment to the moment, taking risks, interacting with their acting partner, and still showing the humanity within this seemingly cartoonish character. Early in the process, I was asked by a professor how I felt about a multi-racial cast. My answer was this: if they are the best they will get the role, regardless of race. The idea for a mixed race family is not something I would have overlooked in my performance or my research. I believe that if I did cast a group of multi-raced actors, I would have discussed the diversity within Canada and that it is an immigrant-based country just like the U.S. As it turned out, my cast was all Caucasian, a majority of the population at Miami University.

My plan for the callbacks was to see as many combinations of actors as possible, as well as to see how the actors would take direction from me. My experience as a coach has been that if you are not a positive part of a team early in the process, this is unlikely to change, especially during times of struggle. I’ve experienced wonderful combinations of teammates and also witnessed the destructiveness of having one person who refuses to work as a team player. I was looking for team players. When the readings began, the stage manager, Jacqueline Smith, and I experienced our own inside jokes when those students who had never read the script before suddenly found themselves performing an exorcism. I couldn’t think of a better play where students learned that reading the script beforehand could make a large difference to one’s audition. In this case, their lack of preparation drastically showed.

By the end of callbacks, the initial responses for Nora, Jack, Junior, and Mary Ann followed through into my final decision. For Elizabeth, I focused on power and directness. Some of the actors refused to take direction and were automatically eliminated, while others played this character weak and whiney. The actress who won the role brought the power that I love to see in female actors. When she was speaking, all eyes were on her and everyone was listening. This was the Elizabeth I needed. Gail I had written off early as “the part that almost anyone could play.” Over time I would discover just how taxing a role like this would become for me and the actor that would play Gail. As it turns out, only one actor stood out from the rest. She brought a sense of sorrow to her teenage angst, and refused to reduce the part to a boiled down version of a girl who just wants to be loved by a parent. The search for Tom continued to be a struggle. I found actors who had the physical make-up, but that was about all. Most were unable to provide meaning to the character, limited him to being angry, or just created caricatures that didn’t have
any substance. By the end of the night, the actors who had been called back to the other shows arrived for the end of the callbacks, among them was Tom. Yes, the image of Tom was scary. He is physically and emotionally frightening. The actor, who came in to read for Jack, was asked to play Tom for a scene, since the rest of the actors had been released for the night. Watching this actor perform Tom’s monologue drew me in. For the first time, I experienced the reason why Tom is so dangerous; he believes everything that he says. This is what the actor brought to the callbacks, what ultimately won him the role, and added integrity to the show.

When working with the other directors to decide casting, I had come to the meeting ready to fight. I knew my cast and I wanted them, badly. As it turned out, the drastic differences of all three shows proved to be the perfect match for my needs. Our first choice cast lists did not cross over, deeming this casting session, as the technical director called it, “one of the best I have ever seen.” We were off to a great start!

**Setting the Scene**

My goal for *Better Living* was to create a thought-provoking world that the audience may find uncomfortable or have a difficult time relating to. Similar to my own experience of living in Canada, the audience would begin to notice things that were both familiar and, at the same time, somewhat different. I would use small details, like a Canadian milk pitcher, candy, and music to build a sense of place. Through rehearsals and design meetings, my goal was to create a world that we could call Canadian and that an audience would accept as such.

On a deeper performance level, I wanted the honesty of a family unit in disarray to be ever present. Overall, I did want the audience to understand the story of each character to be true and in essence, hear the Canadian voice come through.

**Scene Design**

The location for *Better Living* is distinctly set in the east end of Toronto. What I hadn’t realized until the second design meeting was how formulated my idea of the space had become. Gion presented his conception for the space, and I felt caught a bit off guard. There are two very distinct moments where Tom enters into the kitchen and those times are designed to highlight his silhouette. There is also the call for a screen door within the script. The idea that was presented during our meeting was to have the main entrance come from down stage left, forcing the actors who used this door to enter from the audience; this would also eliminate any kind of door, screen
or otherwise. I was confused because I felt that Tom’s entrances should be presented as a surprise, this presence that just appears when you least expect it. In this design, my fully formed image of Tom’s final entrance at the screen door, his silhouette as the last remaining image for the audience, followed by the glint of the television as everything fades into darkness, was the best and only conclusion I envisioned for the show. In the design presented, I would lose that final impression I was hoping to bring to have the audience question, “was Tom really there?” That would really change the ending.

I took a mental step back and focused on the other elements of the set, so that I wouldn’t jump to conclusions. What I noticed was the kitchen island. Up to this point, I had been mentally grappling with the use of space and how to make the action interesting and organic with a kitchen table and a rocking chair. Seeing this new addition allowed me to open my mind to alternative routes. Instead of discounting the product in front of me, I left the meeting feeling the sensation of the challenge before me. I re-read the script focusing on actions that might occur in the space that Gion had created. What I discovered was a surplus of creative ways of playing these dramatic moments, of making them my own. For the first entrance of Tom, he appears at the kitchen door, blocked by the screen. In the original stage directions, Tom says his line and then enters. The idea that came to me with this new design was to bring in Tom’s voice before he was seen, cutting through the chaos with a knife. In the performance this worked out extremely well. The amount of chaos that occurs as part of the first exorcism scene holds the audience enthralled, unable to tear their eyes away from the mess that is exploding before them. When Tom says “bullshit” out of sight, I noticed in every performance that the audience immediately turned. There was an energy that built based on questions of “who was that?” or “did someone really speak?” One evening I even heard an “uh-oh” released from the lips of a frightened audience member who seemed to know what was coming next. This vocal entrance before the physical appearance of Tom allowed the actor to leisurely walk to the stage, dramatically wiping his feet on the welcome mat, creating an even more powerful moment than if a door had been in his way.

Early in the process, I requested that the home should look as if there were many attempts to “better” it. I made suggestions, such as peeling wall paper, broken chairs, an array of mismatched, thrown-together pieces that were either family heirlooms or free from the side of the road, to create the semblance of an unfinished project. This idea was primarily inspired by
Nora’s character. I wanted her self-denial to be seen in her many attempts at keeping busy. I wanted her story of obsessive busyness to come through in specific projects that she had started and never seen to completion. Her busyness is as much about trying to work towards better living as it is about self-denial. One of my favorite elements was the wall paper. Nora mentions wall paper a few times in the script. “This place is a mess. How did it get to be such a mess. That wallpaper used to be pretty” (127). This moment occurs after Nora has had her “sexual experience” with Tom (or Tim as he is now known). This is the first time she sees her home as messy and unfinished. Here she takes a moment to fully take in her surroundings and I wanted to pay direct attention to that.

Paying tribute to my own experience of moving to Canada as a college student, I discovered for the first time how much name brands influenced my own identity. I would often forget I was in Canada until I had to go grocery shopping. Anderson suggests that the communities are built through print media, specifically commenting on newspapers. While I am not suggesting that newspapers are the same as canned food or potato chips, there is a large distribution and an understanding that dill pickle potato chips are standard fare for Canadian citizens and not available to American citizens. Anderson writes, “the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed on the subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life” (Anderson 36).

In my experience as an outsider to the Canadian community, the simple ritual of shopping for food in a store similar to those in the U.S., was particularly taxing, as the brands threw me completely off track. I remember spending twenty minutes looking for milk, convinced I was going crazy. I discovered that Canadian milk is sold in large plastic bags that contain a minimum of four smaller bags to place in a pitcher. Once I discovered this, I can’t even begin to explain the exhausting task of trying to pour the milk, without having purchased the necessary pitcher. Gion was also the person in charge of props and traveled to Windsor, Ontario to collect the edible signifiers of Canadian living. To represent our consumer society, I wanted these possessions to be interwoven in their daily lives, causing small discrepancies in what we consider “normal.” I provided the milk jug and Gion brought back the bags of milk. As per request, he brought back Tim Horton’s coffee cup (Canadian sized), Tim Bits, and a bag for a bagel which is also different from what they give out at the American Tim Horton’s. All the
newspapers read in the show were the Toronto Star or the Globe and Mail. Gail reads the Canadian magazine Maclean’s in one scene, and all the food used was Canadian as well. Some of the samples included: dill pickle potato chips, maple cookies, Smarties candy, and Shreddies cereal. While the U.S. has potato chips, cereal, and cookies, I wanted to create the subtle differences that are part of the Canadian household supplies. What I realized living abroad was how accustoming I had become to the certain size, shape, and color of brands of food. While some of the labels contained the same type of product, the make-up of the exterior is quite different and often contains French in the title.

**Costume Design**

The costume designer, the only student on the design team, created an impressive statement with her selections. I didn’t offer many restrictions, only that I wanted to really define each character through costumes, highlighting each personality. I included a list of necessary outfits that I wanted Nora to wear when she enters from the basement. To the other designers, I stressed the need to keep this as authentically Canadian as possible, and Kate Hawthorn followed this request with diligence and incredible research. From the beginning, Kate took on this challenge and really made this creation a work of art!

For her presentation during our second design meeting, Kate came in with information about the latest fashion styles in Canada, specifically Toronto. She emphasized the clothing cut, and discovered that the Canadian fashion industry was placing a large amount of emphasis on keeping their clothing production local. The most impressive element that Kate brought to the show was the in-depth glimpse into Toronto life by providing authentic Toronto East End band t-shirts for the character of Junior. She brought in a list of legitimate band names that brought to our meeting a great amount of laughter. The two bands that we settled on were “Cancer Bats,” a name that was just so absurd, it fit in very well with the show, and “God Made Me Funky.” Though the second t-shirt only made a short appearance, it provided an offbeat symbol for a character that might not have appeared as outrageous as the others on stage. Kate gave Junior more depth and life in her design and research. Another element that Kate worked into her costume designs was the use of color, based on the Toronto police officer uniform. By using the blue and red color combination, Kate was able to visibly represent Tom’s domination of the household. Beginning in Act Two, the navy blue with a stripe of scarlet became the uniform of
the entire family. Kate gave armbands to Mary Ann and Elizabeth, commenting on the solidarity of the family unit as well as to suggest the fascist regime occurring within the household.

**Lighting Design**

There is a sense of darkness in Walker’s plays, but it is also finely tuned with comedy and heartfelt moments of love and affection. The lighting designer returned with an idea of darkness, of the inability to escape the confines of the house that sucks the will out of everyone. This was the first time I had difficulty collaborating with a designer. There was no comedy or sense of life in his design. From the beginning, the designer appeared focused on the most physically traumatic events in the play, Mary Ann’s dream of her father’s condemnation of her and the breakdown of Tom as he throws Elizabeth against the table in anger. What this experience confirmed for me was how dark Walker’s work appears on the page. I remember the first reading of his work, and only darkness and despair seemed to come from the script. As a new addition to the design team, I was able to experience a fresh look later in the process. Unfortunately, time was very limited and we settled with a naturalistic lighting for the majority of the play. I changed some of the lights for the dream sequence, but overall, I allowed the audience a clear view of the human darkness under naturalistic lighting.

**Sound Design**

The sound design played a very direct role in establishing a sense of place. The pre-show sound was an idea developed by the designer, Russ Blain, only his original plan was to record a French radio station for a play set in France. His concept had never been used, so I asked if this idea could be adapted to establish the Toronto setting, playing an authentic Canadian radio station during the pre-show and intermission. I shared with Russ some of my experiences while living in Toronto. I explained how I would listen to the radio and then all of a sudden some of the dialect would differ from what I had become passively accustomed to, forcing me to immediately stop what I was doing to listen a little more closely.

Pre-show sound, while setting the location, was also a tool I used to counter any accent issues. The Canadian accent, in American culture, tends to be embellished and over the top. It can become a joke quite easily and I didn’t want the actors to have to deal with that. Based on the amount of time I had with the actors, I didn’t want the focus to be about the accent. Especially with the play set in Toronto, a city built of a myriad of lifestyles and cultures, the
accent can range and is subtle compared to say the Prairies or the East Coast. At the beginning of the play, the use of the Canadian radio stations set in Toronto, included real Canadian commercials and were chosen to help define the sense of place.

I requested that authentic radio dialogue be played, to create a specific sound image of life in Toronto. Members of the audience would listen to the taped radio conversations, as they waited for the show to start. Sports and traffic reports were wonderful additions Russ brought to the pre-show. We used CBC and Toronto’s station “The Edge.” What I wanted to do, in a subtle way, was to have the audience perk up to the sound of something different. This was the moment in which I would highlight the real accent. I wanted the audience to fall into the similar rhythm of what they might listen to on a Cincinnati radio station. I had one specific request to include the Mazda car commercial. The word “Mazda” sounds so incredibly different from what we actually listen to, that I thought it would be a good addition. Other than that specific request, I told Russ that he could incorporate whatever he found interesting and “different”, as long as it could help further establish the location before the actors even came on stage.

During our second design meeting, I brought in a few songs that I personally enjoyed and felt could be used for sound cues within the performance. My request was that we only use Canadian artists throughout the play. Russ built off of this idea, bringing in his own personal preference to the sound mix. I had brought in a song for the closing moment where Tom enters with the television; the lyrics play off of Tom’s return, hauntingly singing “make yourself at home.” The second song I brought in was the song “Skidamarink,” a children’s song from the Canadian television program “The Elephant Show.” Russ noted that both of these musical pieces spoke to what was occurring on stage. Based on what we saw, the sound design needed to highlight the comedy of the play, and in some moments have a feeling of disjointedness. One concern I shared was that I didn’t want the audience to lose interest or become tired of all the chaos occurring. I wanted the music to support the energy of the scene, transporting the audience from one scene to another, or highlighting the last moment before the lights went down for the scene change. Canadian artists like Sass Jordan, whose song “High Road Easy” started off the show with a rocking bang. This artist was one Russ had listened to while one tour with Tom Jones. Balancing the rock and roll with a more settled feeling were Feist, Sarah Harmer, and The Tragically Hip.
In the opening montage, the music plays from the larger speakers surrounding the audience and once the first line is spoke, the music transitions to the radio in the kitchen. I wanted this moment to suggest that the Toronto radio station had been playing from this family’s kitchen the entire time. The sound design grew to be an integral part of the show, interwoven with the emotional rollercoaster of the action on stage. During our final dress rehearsals, the sound surrounded us with a sense of Canadian culture, that could be felt both physically and emotionally; it made the show complete. I heard, more than a few times, “I love this song! But I didn’t know they were Canadian.” The cast and crew grew in their respect for Canadian artists and songs, and offered a promise for the performances that were ahead of us. I wondered if this understanding of Canadian culture could be witnessed by the audience in one performance.

Building the “Family Unit.”

Mary Ann: Yeah. And we obey orders gladly. Some of us are becoming good little citizens of the cooperative consumer republic. Some of us are undergoing personality changes (147).

In an interview with Robert Wallace in 1988, Walker explained that trust in the actors was very important. “If you don’t trust your actors and you don’t get them to trust you, you’re out of luck” (Walker 53). I could not agree more with this notion. I knew from the beginning that I needed to build a cohesive group of actors, through primarily building and establishing trust. The characters in Better Living are quite difficult to portray, and I wanted to make sure the actors would feel safe and supported throughout the process.

I was asked how I would direct students who were primarily trained in realism to perform a play that was not a realistic setting. My answer was that I was willing to work and coach the actors, and that I did see Better Living as a challenging script, but, I would help the cast to understand the importance of experiencing the many forms of performance as preparation for a career in theatre.“Not all theatre is going to be realism.” To come up with a defined plan for my rehearsals, I met with Julia Guichard, the acting professor, to discuss plans for the rehearsal process. She knew many of the students who would be auditioning and had experienced, on

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many occasions, when direction could work for or against the students’ personal journey. I expressed the concern that I wanted to allow these students the freedom to enter these very dark and emotional places without bottling up the emotion or shying away from the harsh reality. To make this task more difficult, the darkness and absurdity needed to be rhythmic, which required very specific timing and meant they needed to rely on one another. I was very aware of the potential obstacles of this play with young actors, and I prepared myself for the worst case scenario, a cast that hated the script and refused to play with one another. Julia provided me with much needed stability, simply telling me that I should give the actors notes on what they should do and avoid telling them what not to do. I made this note and followed it through the rehearsal process.

After the casting, there were three weeks of preparation, allowing me time to consider the specific actors that I had cast in the roles I had imagined for so long. The first two days of rehearsal I wanted to sit down with the cast, get to know one another, and work through the text. My goal was to keep the energy light and happy for the beginning; I wanted this experience to be enjoyable. We shared personal stories and decided on what powers we would have if we were superheroes. This roundtable session allowed me the opportunity to observe the actors and get to know their personalities a little bit better.

After our session of sharing, I had the actors give a dry reading, just listening to the words and taking in the overall sense of what was going on. Once we completed the script, I asked the actors for their opinions, similar to what I had initiated at the design meeting. One actor mentioned, “I thought it was really crazy at first, but now it makes sense.” “It really is funny when you hear the other characters.” For three weeks these actors had been alone as they memorized lines, not clearly hearing what was going on and who was reacting to what. My early feeling was that, at least for an American college student, it would be difficult to understand this particular dialogue until you interacted with it. Our first rehearsal days were spent looking over the script and re-reading it to ask questions. I would answer technical questions, but would leave an open-ended conclusion to questions about a character’s motivation.

As part of my teambuilding strategy, I began the “assassin game.” Everyone is given a plastic spoon to decorate however they want, I also included the stage manager and assistant stage managers in this process. The rules to the game went as follows: to win you must tag people out by touching them with your spoon. You are safe as long as your spoon is in contact
with your skin. The game is not allowed to be played in the library, during class and rehearsals. By utilizing this game, I hoped to get the competitive spirit surging, as it is reflected in their characters. I wanted a sense of everyone out for him/herself, incorporated into a silly and wacky game that ran twenty-four hours a day until the last spoon was captured.

With the first few readings completed and the assassin competition under way, rehearsals for the rest of the week were geared around character development, vocal variety/comedic rhythm, and improvisation. Julia returned to offer a workshop she provides for Shakespearian texts. Walker writes with many short sentences, the period being the punctuation of choice. I had expressed to Julia my fear of the students falling into a very “stop and start rhythm.” After seeing some of Walker’s work performed, I knew that this written decision was made to express the thought pattern of the character. Though they are short sentences, it does not mean that they come to a full stop. Walker writes the way a human thinks, in very quick and responsive patterns that don’t always feel as though they link together. An early realization of the text was the lack of question marks. One of the actors had even emailed me, asking whether or not I wanted her to say her line as a question even though it was not written with the “correct” punctuation. My answer to her was that Walker has written a question, but do you think the character is honestly asking those around her for an answer, or just asking it rhetorically?

Julia provided a workshop based around this technique of “the punctuation dance.” The actors were given a large amount of text that they had to physically work through. Whenever they came to punctuation, they had the option of sidestepping, hovering, jumping, and coming to a complete stop. Julia mentioned that Walker has written the text to help inform the actor and that it is the actor’s job to bring his roadmap to life. This workshop was incredible. After only an hour and a half, the text felt alive and meaningful. The exercise created a physical response to the characters’ thoughts and emotions and provided a strong starting place to understand the text. As we closed our first week, I began the rehearsal by shutting off all the lights in the room and bringing the actors focus inward. The next step was to feel their character enter their body, and as the character took over, to develop a secret that they held inside. This was to deepen the character, and to allow a little fear to be present. Everyone has something they don’t want anyone else to know about them, and this was a requirement for these characters.

Early on, the Canadian dialect was eliminated. My goal to highlight the Canadian characteristics was very important, but working with a traditional Canadian accent felt as though
this would be over the top. I wanted the action and relationships to take focus, not the accent. Paul Thompson, of Theatre Passe Muraille, struggled with this when auditioning actors for his theatre in Toronto. During auditions, he would request that the actors perform using five different Canadian accents. Out of this experience, Thompson remarks, “one of the things missing in Canadian theatre is an identifiable base for the characters. Instead there’s a kind of general base and you see too much of what I call movie-acting” (Filewod 27). If Canadian actors struggled with native accents, I was a bit fearful of what American theatre students would do when asked to speak like a Canadian. I didn’t want the accent to detract from the process and overall performance.

The final dress rehearsal before opening night was quite intense. As a warm up, I had the actors walk around the room, and play the game “Bomb and Shield” developed by theatre practitioner, Augusto Boal. Boal’s game, developed for his “Theatre of the Oppressed” workshops, provides image-based exercises. In this game, the actors are able to physically address their interpersonal connections and boundaries. The actors, in character, decide on one member of the cast who will be the bomb, the one person they must keep their distance from. Once this person has been silently decided the actors then determined a person who would represent their shield. This person needed to be between them and the bomb. When we brought the game to a close, the character of Tom was on one end of the room, and Nora and Jack stood between Tom and everyone else. With this game, we were physically able to bear witness to the oppressive power Tom held over the family members and how much of a buffer Jack had become.

During the final stage of the pre-blocking workshop, I used an improvisation exercise that I was taught as an undergraduate student. As part of our final for performance class, we had to interact with our scene partner for thirty minutes, improvising off of one another, not to make it funny, but to keep the momentum of the scene moving forward. The amount of time was frightening but this was an incredibly effective exercise to learn to trust a scene partner for balancing the scene, as well as to support a partner by responding to their initiatives. I decided that the actors would only be able to go for about twenty minutes during our rehearsal. Still twenty minutes is a very long time to create. The actors played their characters from Better Living. Before the twenty minutes began, the actors were given a few moments to do

13 This is a game that can be found in Boal’s book *Games for Actors and Non-Actors.*
improvisation in various corners of the room, developing some sort of story behind the scene. There had to be a revelation as part of their improvisation, and the actors were allowed to decide what it was, just not when or how it would be revealed. The workshop turned out to be quite successful, and everyone went twice, changing partners for the second round. This not only supported the actors in learning to trust one another, but this also aided in further developing their characters, as well as understanding how and why they react to certain situations. We were ready to block!

As the director, I was very adamant about getting the blocking down so that we could play later on. I was concerned that if blocking became an issue later on in the process, other elements of the performance would falter. By the end of the first week of blocking, we had surpassed our original schedule, allowing me to set aside two days to return to the performance. Walker had stated that the best way to perform his work was not to over think the response, “The best way to do the material is to free fall, is to trust that things can occur without having to set them up to occur” (Lane 53). George F. Walker writes in a very reactionary manner. All the characters find themselves in very stressful situations and tend to fall into their animalistic responses of fight or flight. Similar to the Bomb and Shield game, I had the actors walk around the space, and from a 0-10 count, they would transform into the animal that best represented their character. By the number 10, all actors were fully formed, taking in the environment as their animal would. I asked them to implement some humanity, to find words and speak with the voice of the animal. Snarls, barks, screeches, and snorts were interwoven in their expressions. This work was brought back from the count of ten, not only transforming back into the fully human form, but focusing on the heartbeat of the animal within. The conclusion of the exercise was to share the animals with one another. The connections between the characters Tom and Elizabeth, who are at odds the most, and Gail and Junior who are draped all over each other were interesting to discover. Tom was a Bengal tiger and his daughter Elizabeth was a lioness, this showed a strongly matched battle between two powerful individuals. Gail was a kitten and Junior was a puppy. The kitten would tend to have the upper hand, as Gail does, over the puppy. Nora decided she was a lemur, Jack was a chimp and Mary Ann was a squirrel.

Understanding A Reality
The first main characteristic of play: is that it is free, is in fact freedom. A second characteristic is closely connected with this, namely, that play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life. It is rather stepping out of ‘real’ real life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own (Schechner 51).

In the final two weeks of the rehearsal process, I wanted to pay tribute to the Canadian culture. After a tedious and difficult rehearsal on Monday, October 10th (Monday’s were not our best days) I surprised the cast with a turkey dinner in celebration of Canadian thanksgiving, which occurred that Monday. I used this opportunity to help the cast relax and connect with one another in an effort to create my own imagined community. Over dinner we were reminded that everyone was in this show together. I also took this opportunity to provide some information that they may not have known before. Thanksgiving occurs in early October and is more of a celebration of the harvest. Dinner can occur on any of the days given during the long weekend, eliminating the pressure of returning home for that one day. This was the day that I shared my own experience of living and working in Toronto, offering answers to questions and developing an understanding that though this country is known as “other” there are connections as much as there are differences between the cultures. As we ate, we developed a dinner the family in Better Living would have had together. Imagining what a dinner would be like with Tom present, and how it changed when he left.

Although I was not requiring the cast to use Canadian dialect, there were elements of the script that needed further development. Benedict Anderson supports this notion of language as a defining characteristic in imagined communities and that it supports a sense of kinship (Anderson 143). I, myself, had not mastered the Canadian dialect, and wanted a level of proficiency so I invited a friend from Richmond to come in and work with the cast. Lorie M.Z. Lundy is a skilled Canadian actress, who has primarily focused her career on the French Canadian theatre. However, she had worked with Walker’s scripts and knew his world very well. She shed some much-needed light on the use of punctuation within the script. “As Canadian, we tend to speak in questions, always going up on the last word.” She went on to say, “Walker opposes this tendency, he forces you away from that softness and gentle attitude often attributed to the Canadian image.” I experienced a very “ah-ha” moment. Laurie revealed Walker’s style of the punctuation as the opposite of what was normally presented to the world. Laurie also aided the actors in taking more chances, and not being afraid of the risk. Her work not only furthered
the honesty of what was being said on stage, but also developed how it was said. There are a few moments in the script where the term, “eh” is pronounced. This, out of all the Canadian expressions, is the one that is mocked the most. The actors had been experiencing a difficult time using this interjection naturally. The actors’ “Eh” did not sound organic and I didn’t know how to teach it because I was unable to express it correctly. As Laurie watched the actors, every “eh” they came to was either rushed over, completely skipped, or exaggerated, as if to say “HERE IS THE “EH” I AM SUPPOSED TO SAY!” She sat everyone down and described it as a part of the word itself. Instead of adding on the “eh” to the end of a sentence, add a “-ay” to the end of the word. This drastically changed the way the actors not only said the word, but seemed to approach the entire meaning behind the use of “eh.” As one actor said, “I didn’t realize there was a ‘right’ way to saying this.”

The Director Post-Production

Directing Better Living was one of the most challenging experiences of my career at Miami. That being said, directing Better Living was the highlight of my career at Miami. Better Living opened October 26, 2011 at 8pm in Studio 88. Opening night I sat next to my husband who grasped my sweaty and shaking hand. As a director, letting the reigns go and watching the cast and crew take control of what has become their show is an incredibly exhilarating experience. When the first spurts of laughter began, I relaxed, ready to ride the rollercoaster of events that I knew were lying in wait for me, as well as for the rest of the audience. By the end of the first night I felt as though I had completed the personal goals and challenges that I had set in place for myself. Before my eyes was a strong and cohesive cast. Each actor held his/her own on the stage, some performing the role they were born to play, others stretching their acting techniques in directions they couldn’t have ever imagined. The performances further developed over time, growing more and more vivid and formed. I felt that we had performed Walker in a way that showcased a voice from the north, offering alternate perspectives on class, government, and survival. The conclusion of our run brought the reality of our successful journey together. We began with a script that not many of the students particularly enjoyed or understood, and we exited the theatre, leaving the empty and dusty floor of studio 88 behind us, with a new appreciation for the work we had accomplished together and the love of creating something that was breaking with the theatrical tradition.
Works Cited


Epilogue

Surveying an American Based Audience: The Response

“The presence of an audience is central to the definition of theatre.” 14
“Theatre is the testing ground for the validity of words and images.” 15

Herbert Blau writes in his book *The Audience*, that there is a deeper connection to theatrical works. “That what we see of as society or imagine as community is a more or less livable fiction that incorporates an *interrogation*” (Blau 346). In this quote, Blau suggests that in performance there is a blending of real life with fiction. In directing *Better Living*, my goal was to produce a commentary on a picture of Canadian life, and to determine how an American-based audience in Oxford, Ohio experiences the imagined community of a blue collar Canadian family. In doing this I also developed an understanding that George F. Walker has his own style, creates his own vision of society while not suggesting that his play represents every Canadian.

The survey, which is attached in the supplemental information, was meant to elicit an audience response. The time to complete the survey was roughly eight minutes; my goal was gain insight into the first defining images that audience members can come up with in a short amount of time. The primary goal was to enhance a quick response and to learn what about Canada was ingrained in their minds. The shared experience of theatre would produce a bond that the audience would enter as individuals and leave with a collective reflection of what they had just witnessed. Shirly Ardener explains in *Ground Rules and Social Maps for Women*, how theatre is a very communal event and the audience members on any given night are a part of the rules and regulations that come with this community. She writes,

A restricted area like a club, a theatre or a nation state has a set of rules to determine how its boundary shall be crossed and who should occupy that space. Those who enter it share certain defining features: They will perhaps have met specific criteria or club membership, bought a ticket or passed a citizenship test. In some way they must be recognized, say by gate-keeper, such as a hall porter, an usherette, or an immigration officer… In studying the way people patter their perceptions, attention has been drawn

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to the perimeters of categories that we make in order to codify and confront the words we create, in which we then live, and how we cope with some of the problems that arise from the existence of these boundaries (Ardener 25).

Taking a lead from Ardener, I actively sought out a way to bring the audience to a common ground. From the start of the play, I wanted the audience to feel a part of the show and experience a performance that would be out of the ordinary. In the opening sequence, just as the lights had gone to half, a pre-recorded and mundane cell phone announcement would be played simultaneous to the entrance of the actor Tom. Instead of the traditional audio reminder to turn off all cell phones, I wanted the presence of the most imposing character to be felt before the performance “officially” began. In this sequence, an actress planted in the audience would answer a ringing cell phone, unaware of how her call is interrupting everyone in the theatre. As she continues to speak over the announcement, the actor performing Tom walks over, and takes the cell phone away. He ignores her protests and as he drifts out of sight, places his finger to his lips and tells the audience to “shhh.” Throughout the opening moments, Tom never enters the performance space but instead remains in the audience’s allotted area. In traditional theatre etiquette, the audience already understands they are expected to sit quietly, and ignore any disruptions from the outside world. I wanted to use this routine to allow the audience to see themselves as part of the show. I also wanted the audience to be prepared for the unexpected.

My hope was that the cell phone introduction would make some difference, but what I realized, over the run of the show, was how significant an addition it was. The audience should be surprised and on alert to viewing a different type of performance. The cell phone “bit” worked well on opening night. The audience responded well, audibly chuckling after it was over, and ready for comedy. The impact the cell phone bit had on the audience was clearly evident on the second night when our actress was detained, and never made an appearance. The stage manager went on and the audience only heard the mundane cell phone reminder and the performance began immediately after. Without the interruption and humor, there was a lack of energy from the audience. They entered the performance that night complacent about the show they were about to see. Compared to opening night, the audience seemed very passive. All members of the cast and crew witnessed a marked change to the audience’s audible response. After the show one of the actors said, “They didn’t get it was funny until scene 11.” It was true, the cell phone “bit” did seem to warm the audience up and aided in the connection that they not only felt for the
performance but would feel towards one another. There was a sense that “none of us knew that was fake.”

The final realization came on the last performance, and it was when I understood that the bit needed to be comedic. Originally, I had requested that the actor improvise whatever she wanted to say; she had free reign in her scene. All but the very last performance the actor would answer her phone to talk to a boyfriend where she would obnoxiously coo and giggle or answer as if she were giving directions to someone who was lost in the Center for Performing Arts. Every improvisation worked very well in preparing the audience for the performance. On the final night however, the actress answered her phone with a very serious tone. “Is mom alright?” she asked fearfully into her iphone. This new improvised direction clearly affected the audience. As rehearsed, the actor who played Tom went about his business as usual, snatching her phone from her hand and turning to the audience with his index finger over his lips. “Shhh” He said. But the “Shhh” that night was ominous. The “Shhh” represented “You are not even allowed to speak with a family member in need.” This resulted in a very stiff and unfriendly audience; they did not share a positive bonding experience but instead, they appeared to feel as if they were treated poorly. They determined that we did not want them or their potential life-threatening problems interrupting our production.

The audience demographics, over the course of the six performances, were composed primarily of those who identified as “American.” The other listings written on the survey were: African American, Asian, Black, Black & Native American, Canadian, Caucasian, Croatian, Chinese, Hispanic, Mixed Black-White, Mexican, Norwegian, Puerto Rican, White, and Serbian, the majority residing in Oxford Ohio. The collection of surveys showed relatively similar responses in areas of familiarity with theatre as a medium of study and entertainment. The majority of those who attended Better Living acknowledged that they were regular theatre goers and felt comfortable with discussing theatre on the survey. When it came to the subject matter of Canadian theatre most felt that they were uninformed and nearly everyone who had attended Better Living had never heard of George F. Walker.

I was truly interested to see if the audience would suggest a change to this Canadian story to make it “American.” I posed this question to the audience, asking them what would change if this were, in fact, about an American family. While a quarter of the audience agreed that there would be no real difference, that this play would not change if it were set in the U.S., the other
three quarters of the audience responded with varying thoughts. A portion responded to the use of politics in *Better Living* stating “Perhaps not as veiled in a domestic setting… A more overt political critique of U.S. power” and “I think the relationship to government is different. There is a deeper distrust of government in America.” Others commented on a more specific role for the father and mother, for example, “It would be more serious and mental illness would play a bigger role,” “Dad would be ex-military,” “Power dynamics would be about competition between men like in a Sam Sheppard play.” “Someone would have actually shot their father.” “Bigger Guns.” “They’d have hick accents.” “I don’t think the family itself would differ, but digging in one’s own basement would be considered a sign of American can-do-ness.” These responses seemed to show that in reflecting on stereotypes of other they openly shared stereotypes of American identity.

The early responses show the need for attention to Nora’s “illness.” Throughout the play, there is no intervention for Nora’s issues; in fact, no character ever discusses an external support system for Nora. I felt that there was nothing specific, other than extreme denial, and I believe that within this text, there doesn’t need to be. The family’s problems will still be the way they are. The issue of healthcare came to mind as I pondered this suggestion. The treatment of a mentally unstable parent would be much more difficult to treat financially in the U.S. than it would in Canada. Taking this notion a step further, I would suggest that the lack of acknowledging of what was “wrong” with Nora, could be an attempt to hide the future financial woes by ignoring the symptoms.

Others commented on the way in which the story was told. “It’s very matter-of-fact to me.” “It would be more predictable. “Less humorous” “Less open talk about sex.” “They’d be drinking Jack Daniels instead of R&R” “It has more reality and madness than American plays.” “Seems more edgy and more honest.” And, “I think there is a sense of helplessness that I wouldn’t expect in an American family and playwright.”

When asked if the audience would have known it was Canadian without any supplemental information, here were some of the responses, “Only because of the cursing.” “I need more than one example to decide.” “Because I have never seen such an interesting interpretation of sarcasm.” “I wouldn’t say that this was different from any other dark comedy/drama (in the sense of genre; the play was definitely unique)” “I think the difference is pretty subtle. I suspect similar differences in regional theatre in the U.S.” “I don’t notice much of
a difference except the food looks very authentic.” and “In Chinese, a sentence said, ‘3 women’s life can be a drama.’ It seems like it fits all of the world.”

What is interesting to note, is that the audience felt there were ways to make this play more American: bigger guns, hick accents, even discerning a specific illness to the mother or making the father a war vet. There appear to be a variety of ways to make this one performance more American and there were plenty of ideas given to answer this question. When asked how this was Canadian, the majority of the responses claimed that there was not much difference. In essence, the messages within the play were global problems, and all could understand the subject matter. This audience could not supply reasons why they could see it as a Canadian play.

The audience was asked for five responses to the word “Canadian.” The one listed the most was “hockey,” with over half of the audience putting that word in their five responses. The second place answer was “maple leaf” followed closely behind by “eh.” Finishing out the top five most popular answers were “bacon,” “French,” and “cold.” I suppose that I could have assumed those answers before the performance.

Upon reviewing my own survey list of Canadian connections, none of the responses appeared to be out of the ordinary, until I read one response that said that “Canadian” was “another word for a black person.” I initially wrote this off as a misunderstanding on the part of the survey participant. I had no idea how to take this in, so I noted it down and moved on. Later that night, I ran into some undergraduate theatre students who asked what results I had discovered after compiling the surveys. I explained the seemingly random comment I came across, expecting to see a similar response but everyone was silent. “Yeah, that’s a real thing.” One student said. “Kids would say that at my high school.” I proceeded to ask why that was the case, why the word “Canadian” was a substitute for “black?” I felt as if I were witnessing a bizarre generational gap; I had no idea what was going on. “Well, it’s a way of saying the ‘n-word’ without really saying it.” I was shocked and appalled. This connection didn’t make sense and yet here I was, standing among a group of students who all knew this word association to be true and accepted it.

During a year when Canada was named the winner as the best country brand in the world decided by “3,400 international travelers who assessed 110 countries,” Valerie Hauch of The Star online wrote, “The world may think we don’t have the best nightlife or tourist attractions, or that Canada is not the best place for doing business — but what Canada does do well is make the
best, consistent use of its assets.” The rankings of Canada are as follows, political freedom (4th) tolerance (5th), stable legal environment (4th), freedom of speech (3rd), and environmental friendliness (7th). FutureBrand says Canada “continues to be the strongest country brand despite its lack of leading rankings in any one dimension — proving that consistency is more important than specialty focus.’’ (Hauch) Apparently, when deciding the winner, the defining qualities in relation to culture never appear to override others by coming in first. In this example, Canada wins the overall prize.

I went online to do some research and found this acknowledged on several websites. My first random search brought me a surplus of information. As it turns out, “’Canadian’ was the new derogatory term that racist Southerners were using to describe persons they would have previously referred to [with the N-word].” The site went on to share that Stefan Dollinger, a postdoctoral fellow in linguistics at University of British Columbia and director of the university's Canadian English lab, speculated that the slur reflects a sense of Canadians as the other” (Melissa McEwan). This use of “Canadian” also appears in the urban dictionary where the term is defined as an: “Expression for black people used by whites as ‘code’ when they want to refer to blacks in a semi-derogatory manner without being detected in a group of people.”

The “undetected” and code-like aspect of how “Canadian” is used in our society shows how we relate to this country. From my first experience in Canada, I was very aware of the ugliness that appears within American borders, and I didn’t want to be a part of that community. Somehow, sewing a Canadian flag onto backpacks and luggage offers Americans an easy pass through territories that would look unkindly towards the stars and stripes. And calling someone “Canadian” appears to be the perfect code word to voice unsuspected acts of degradation. As seen in the surveys, our small Ohio audience can instantly name what is American. For describing Canadians, there is not the same immediate response. I examined my own experience of living in Canada and feeling different, and tried to bring that understanding into my interpretation of Better Living. In one response to this survey, I discovered how truly separate Canadians are from Americans. We assume that everything of value around us is American, and are seemingly shocked to find out that a top musician, painter, actor, or director is Canadian. It is

as if they have somehow pulled the wool over our eyes. The use of the word “Canadian” does become code for other and in this example of blatant racism, it has become the code word for it. The innocence that is believed of the Canadian community from abroad can be utilized to hide the dark attitudes of hate in American. This example shows that the general consensus is that Canada does not elicit fear or anger among American citizens. The image of “Canadian” seems to be ambiguous thus providing a successful code word to be offensively used and still remain unnoticed.

Canada is a nation that has become a part of who I am today. Toronto represents my entrance into adulthood as well as my present theatrical passion. What I’ve witnessed through this experience is that Canadian theatre can be respected and appreciated by American audiences. Canadian theatre provides a voice into their values and beliefs, and describes their people and community. Through George F. Walker’s plays, we see the complexities and characteristics that make up his view of Canadian families and society. Through his characters and dialogues we can begin to form a better understanding of our northern neighbors, recognize their differences and similarities, and begin to appreciate their separate and unique culture.
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APPENDIX

Production Poster
The Set
Gail and Jack with Canadian props.
Junior, Nora, and Gail watching when Tom returns home.
Tom and his daughter Elizabeth.

Tom and his daughter Gail.
Elizabeth and Nora attempt to remove Tom from the home.
Jack listens to Mary Ann

Jack listens to Tom
COSTUME DESIGN

Nora
Elizabeth
Mary Ann
Junior
SURVEY QUESTIONS

Are you Male or Female?

What is your age?

What is your Nationality?

How far did you travel to see Better Living?

How often do you go to see theatrical performances?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

How would you rate your knowledge in the subject of theatre?

Poor 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Strong

What brought you to Better Living?
A: Family/friends
B: Required for a class
C: Poster/Advertising
D: Other:

What other theatrical events have you attended at Miami University?

Have you ever traveled to Canada? Yes / No

If yes, where?

List 5 examples of what you associate with the word “Canadian.”

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Prior to seeing this production, how would you rate your knowledge on Canadian Theatre?
Have you ever heard of George F. Walker? Yes / No

At what point did you come to understand that Better Living is a Canadian play?

A: Prior to the show
B: The supplemental information i.e. the lobby information/playbill/poster
C: Through performance and language
D: Through props and costumes
E: Other:

If you hadn’t been told before hand that this was a Canadian play, would you have come to that conclusion anyway?

If so, how?

As an audience member, what message does the playwright seem to want to convey to his audience?

As an audience member, what message does the director seem to want to convey to her audience?

How does the story in Better Living differ if this were a story about an American family?

Do you think Canadian theatre is a genre unto itself?

Why or why not?

Comments:

Thank you for participating in this study! Please bring your survey to the deposit location in the reception area to enter into the raffle.