

MAKING UP HISTORY: A LOOK AT JOHNNY CANUCK FROM THE COMIC PAGE TO THE DRAMATIC STAGE

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History is often chosen as a dramatic subject in order to transform, expand, challenge, celebrate or subvert national narratives, mythologies and discussions of identities. Director-playwright Ken Gass founded one of Canada's most recognized theatres, the Factory Theatre Lab, in Toronto in 1970, and has himself used history as a dramatic subject on numerous occasions. Generally, his plays have gone beyond straightforward factual accounts and have turned historical narratives upside-down. For example, his controversial play *Winter Offensive*, produced at the Factory Theatre Lab in 1977, drew protestors who objected to its staged violence and sexually explicit scenes among the leaders of the Nazi party. In a 1975 interview with the *Canadian Theatre Review*, Gass suggested that for him, history "needs to be transcended" ("Postscript" 123). Verifiable truth is not the end goal, nor is it plausible or even desirable. In fact, he went on, "we should lie about our history or make one up if we don't like the one we have" ("Postscript" 123). In 1974, just four years after opening his new theatre, Gass put his belief of making up history into action, writing and directing *Hurray for Johnny Canuck*. The play, based on a World War II comic book series, follows Canadian superhero Johnny Canuck and his Supersquad as they save the world from Hitler and the Nazis during the war. Gass not only uses the Johnny Canuck comics to help develop the content of the play, but also employs a comic book performance style to tell his made-up story of World War II.

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In this article, I hope to build important connections between Johnny Canuck's role as a national superhero in the World War II comic book series and Ken Gass's later depiction of both the Johnny Canuck figure and the World War II comic books on stage in *Hurray for Johnny Canuck*. In order to start to build such links, I will begin with a brief history of the figure of Johnny Canuck and its emergence and reoccurrence in moments of heightened national discussion in Canada during the time

of Confederation, World War II, and the 1970s. I will then look at why this recurring use of Johnny Canuck as a national figure is so unique by addressing some of the challenges to Canada's mythology. Following this, I examine the creation and history of Johnny Canuck in Bell's Dime Comics in World War II in order to lead into a discussion of how Gass transfers the comic book to the stage in *Hurray for Johnny Canuck*.

To build upon Bell's national use of Johnny Canuck in the comic books during the early to mid-1940s, I will move into an analysis of Canadian theatre during the 1970s to show why and how Gass's use of Johnny Canuck continues to capitalize on the figure's national associations. I argue that the central concern of *Hurray for Johnny Canuck* is to mythologize Canada by representing moments of national accomplishment through a nationalist perspective, and challenging and/or removing the colonial view of our history. The theatre of the 1970s in Canada placed an emphasis on celebrating an independent nation. In fact, I argue that the perspectives of playwrights like Gass can be historicized alongside other socio-political changes of the period. This approach borrows greatly from the theories of new historicism that address many of the same connections and ask how a play, novel, movie, or comic, among others, relates to a culture in a specific society, time, and place. With such a perspective, questions of cultural narrative, definition and performance are highlighted.

JOHNNY CANUCK AND MYTH IN CANADA

Long before his arrival in comic books, Johnny Canuck began as a figure in political and editorial print cartoons. His first appearance was in 1869 in the *Grinchuckle*, a Montreal humour magazine, in which he is seen kicking Uncle Sam across the border (Cottrell). This patriotic portrayal was typical for Johnny Canuck; in and around the time of Confederation, he represented Canada next to Uncle Sam for the United States, and John Bull for Britain. Johnny Canuck was portrayed as a simple northern man and lumberjack. Leo Bachle, the creator of the World War II comic book series, expressed an interest in a similar characterization of Johnny Canuck: "I wanted a hero that was Canadian, that was 100% Canadian, 100% brave, that was going to be a Superman but didn't have Superman powers. He just has good Canadian muscle" (qtd. in O'Connor). Johnny Canuck's depiction as a proud Canadian and as Canada personified through various logger, lumberjack, habitant, and soldier characters has remained throughout his various representations. For example, he has been used as an image for the Vancouver Canucks hockey team during their inception post-World War II in 1946, and he has been commemorated on a stamp as part of a series released by Canada Post in the 1990s.



Figure 1. Newton McConnell, “Jack Canuck: O yes! you all come with the glad hand when you know I’m prosperous.” (c. 1905-14)

In fact, Johnny Canuck has, to a certain extent, defied the odds. He has managed to occur and *re-occur* where other mythological or national cultural figures have lost their relevance. This is in part because the subject of myth in Canada is particularly complex with a variety of factors negatively impacting or challenging the creation and stability of a national mythology. These factors are not new to discussions of identity in Canada, so I will only summarize them briefly here. A frequently addressed topic is Canada’s proximity to the United States. According to Thomas Axworthy, the Executive Director of the Historica Foundation and a key player in the creation of Canada’s Heritage Minutes commercials, “we have trouble telling our own story in our own land and having access to our own imagination just because of the weight of the neighbour beside us” (*60th Minute*). The country’s vast geography also hinders the development of a national mythology. Canada’s size allowed each community to develop its own local, non-national narrative, which meant that few had to confront their involvement in anything larger. Canada’s history and image as a colony of Britain rather than an independent nation also subverted the creation of a national set of stories. Daniel Francis agrees on the construction of Canada being particularly dichotomous to the creation of myth:

We have evolved historically at a measured pace; by and large, change has occurred

gradually, without the turmoil of civil unrest. We have had no civil war, no wild west, no successful revolution, all events which might have provided us, as it did the United States, with a pantheon of heroes. (112)

Within this context, however, numerous Canadian artists from a variety of fields have dramatized history in an attempt to overcome these challenges and establish national myths.

JOHNNY CANUCK AND WORLD WAR II COMICS

106 One of those artists, young Leo Bachle, was keen to help out in Canada's World War II effort; so keen, in fact, that at fifteen years old, he lied about his age and made his way onto a military base in Ontario (Reycraft). His army career, however, was short-lived and his true age was quickly revealed. Not too long after, Bachle came upon a chance encounter that provided him with a remarkable (and what would be a historical) way to support Canada during the war. Bachle was looking through comics at a local newsstand in downtown Toronto when, unknown to him, Cy Bell of Bell Comics casually asked him what he thought of the drawings and storylines (Reycraft). In true adolescent brashness, Bachle responded, "I could do better" (Reycraft). Intrigued, Bell asked Bachle to drop off some samples of his work; Bachle did so, and was hired the very next day (Reycraft). Bachle created Canadian superhero Johnny Canuck and his Supersquad, a group of Canadians who, through sheer grit, strength, and intelligence, win World War II and defeat Hitler.

Like many artists, Bachle sought inspiration from his day-to-day life and those around him. His close friends became the members of the Supersquad, and his teachers at Danforth Technical Institute, the high school Bachle attended in Toronto, became the evil Nazi characters (Reycraft). Of course, the charming, strong, and handsome Johnny Canuck was modelled after Bachle himself (Reycraft). Bachle's days at Bell Comics, however, were numbered and as the war ended, Canadian patriotism gave way to the bottom line of the business. Bell decided to cancel Canadian comic book publications, instead focusing on where he believed they would make the big money: American ones (Reycraft). Bachle later changed his name to Les Barker and went on to have a career as a stand-up comedian and an entertainer, eventually touring with his wife, Lucy Loring, who was also a performer. Bachle died in Toronto in 2003 at the age of 79.



Figure 2. Leo Bachle, Johnny Canuck in Bell's *Dime Comics* Vol. 1 (1942).
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CANADIAN THEATRE AND NATIONALISM

A few decades after World War II, during a new period of intense national discussion in the 1970s, another artist turned to Johnny Canuck to dramatize history in an attempt to mythologize and celebrate stories about Canada. During the 1970s, numerous Canadian playwrights used history as a dramatic subject as part of “a much-needed culture-building process” (Usmiani 151). Stories of Canada’s past were rewritten, reimaged, or simply told for the first time in the hope of creating familiar and accessible narratives through which Canadians in all parts of the country could identify. Cultural industries were equally growing to allow greater space and opportunity for these stories to be told. But what happened to link questions of national identity and myth at this time? It was in the 1960s that theatre in Canada generally

transitioned into Canadian theatre, and from a more amateur field into a professional industry. That is, with the creation of the Canada Council in 1957 and with Canada's Centennial celebration in 1967, not only were theatres being built across the country, but numerous plays with an interest in Canadian subject matter emerged, plays that made suggestions about the definition of Canada's infamous national identity. Many scholars (Per Brask, Eugene Benson, L.W. Connolly, Ross Stuart, Don Rubin, and Robert Wallace among them), note the importance of the 1960s and 1970s in the drive to create a national mythology. Buma argues that this resulted in "a period of concerted national 'imagining' [...] [of] a distinctly Canadian history, tradition, and cultural identity" (9). The stories told by artists helped to construct ideas of cultural identity, make meaning of and from Canadian history, and highlight longstanding traditions through their mythmaking endeavours. Perhaps this growing nationalism was inspired by Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau's optimistic sense of Canada as a potential player on the world's political stage.

108 The 1960s and 1970s did see many nationalist cultural projects. It was not until 1964 that Canada had its own flag, or 1967 for its own national anthem. In addition, new funding for culture emerged at the federal and provincial levels; conferences and festivals on cultural subjects began to take place; for example, the festival of Underground Theatre in Toronto in 1970. In addition, a conference of theatre editors from a dozen countries convened in 1976, sponsored by the new *Canadian Theatre Review*, itself founded in 1974. Even still, Actors Equity (based in the US) became Canadian Actor's Equity; a playwrights' union and a national publishing house were formed; small alternative theatres developed in greater numbers across the country and were committed to new Canadian work (such as Theatre Passe Muraille, Factory Theatre and Tarragon Theatre in Toronto, with others created nationally soon after); and the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT) emerged to represent management, as did the Associated Designers of Canada (ADC) to represent designers. A professional theatrical infrastructure on such a scale was created for the first time in Canada and changed the ground rules of theatre. Montreal also hosted the Olympic Games in 1976, with its attached cultural programming featuring things Canadian, and giving Canada a central position on the world stage. Notably, along with the Canadianist interest of plays like *Hurray for Johnny Canuck*, the "re-nationalization" of comic book publishers like Bell also occurred in the 1970s (Beaty 438).

The 1970s saw the first Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA) awards, the first broadcast of a Canadian educational TV station (Television Ontario), the establishment of Heritage Canada, and the first Canadian content regulations created by the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission. The numerous historical plays and the conscious mythmaking that emerged from all these activities reflected this nationalist cultural vision. Such major nationalist moments occurred in a relatively short period of Canadian history, highlighting the conscious and concerted effort to foster and celebrate Canadian culture. Part of the significance comes from the fact that they were generally *national*,

not *regional*, projects. These many achievements were also significant because they involved national performance and the performance of the nation.

Clearly Gass was not alone in his desire to celebrate, nationalize, and mythologize Canada's history. From the late 1960s to the late 1970s, numerous artists suggested that Canada was lacking a national mythology and tried to do something about it. In 1970, in his introduction to *Canadian Writing Today*, Mordecai Richler stated, "We are still a fragmentary nation, yet to be bound by a unifying principle, a distinctive voice, a mythology of our own" (23). In 1972, in her introduction to *Survival*, Margaret Atwood wrote of a missing Canadian culture, depicting Canada as a sort of cultural colony of the United States and Britain:

I started reading Canadian literature when I was young, though I didn't know it was that, in fact I wasn't aware that I lived in a country with any distinct existence of its own. At school we were being taught to sing 'Rule, Britannia' and to draw the Union Jack; after hours we read stacks of Captain Marvel, Plastic Man and Batman comic books. (29)

In 1973, Rick Salutin, another playwright who used history as a dramatic subject during this period, extended Atwood's absence of Canadian culture and Richler's absence of Canadian mythology to include knowledge of our history. Articulating once again this "lack of" sentiment, he said:

Other countries may have to relive or reinterpret their past, but they know they *have* a past. In Quebec they may hate it, but it's sure as hell there. English Canadians, at least around here, must be convinced there is a past that is their own. (186)

Gass, capitalizing on the history of Johnny Canuck and his national associations, transferred the figure to the stage in order to celebrate Canada—a very political choice during the theatre of the 1970s. This is accomplished in a variety of ways, which I will elaborate on later in the article. For one, Gass sought inspiration from historical material while inventing the story. The colonial mentality is included, but then disputed, by showing Canada as more than capable of being an independent nation. In this approach, Canadians are the central protagonists and characters of "power" (often British) are depicted negatively. Indeed, this play suggests Johnny Canuck as a national hero. Gass noted the "difference" between Canadians, Americans, and the British, and we see the recurring *Canadian* theme of "survival" introduced by Margaret Atwood in the 1970s. In addition, there is a particular emphasis on the comic book form, storytelling, and a variety of Brechtian influences in the production style of the play.

Gass's *Hurray for Johnny Canuck* is decidedly nationalistic. Gass chose to rewrite history so that fictional Canadian superhero Johnny Canuck and his friends single-handedly end the war. The play begins with Johnny and his friend Derek, a French-Canadian character, clearing land on their mountain. They are approached by Corporal Dixon of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and recruited as members of the Secret Canadian Supersquad. At the core of this play is a real historic event, World War II, but the surrounding narrative is very much created from merging

fiction and historical narratives to celebrate Canada's past: "The blurring of fact and fiction, can be interpreted as a deliberate device to undermine the authority of the established historical version" (Zimmerman 68). This historical version is further undermined in the comic book construct.

STAGING COMICS

In an interview in the early 1980s, Gass explains that the "comic books provided the first inspiration for the play, and then it was developed in a workshop where I created a scenario from the comic books" ("Interview" 201). In fact, Gass relies on comic book conventions in both content and production style of his play. The play starts by presenting itself as a comic book narrative. Similar to an introduction that might be included in print comics, the narrator states, "What you are about to witness is an absolutely factual, historical document of how Johnny Canuck and the Secret Canadian Supersquad saved the world from the evil, sneaky, dirty, fascist, slant-eyed, Nazi, anti-democratic menace of men like Hirohito, Mussolini, and Adolf Hitler as authenticated by Bell Comics of Canada" (1).

This use of a narrator is also important to superhero comics, and it helps to condense information into short and to-the-point updates. Gass includes this convention in his play, and the narrator begins many of the scenes by providing such updates. For example, as the Supersquad are in Germany fighting Hitler, the narrator says, "The daring Canucks are in the final stage of their attempt to blow up the German Munitions plant. As Ruth Barton mixes the explosives, Johnny drills a hole in the metal containers. Above, Derek Bras d'Or, the golden armed Canadian, keeps watch for Nazi guards" (22). Not only does this mimic comic book captions, but it also mirrors the quick pace of a comic book read.

Gass plays on the stereotypical comic-book catchphrases. Corporal Dixon calls Hitler an "evil menace" (11) and refers to the "headquarters of the German underground" (15). The narrator calls Corporal Dixon and his dog Laddie a "daring duo" (3). In addition, Gass mimics traditional superhero narratives where the good always manage to evade evil, even in situations where it looks impossible. Goebbels tells Hitler, "Mein Fuhrer, dat Canuck iss ein dead duck. Ve are laying a trap for him a trap from vich no one can hescape" (18). The characters also have secret superhero personas and alter egos. John Campbell is superhero Johnny Canuck. Derek Dufois's superhero name is Derek Bras d'Or (Gold Arms). Ruth, the heroine of the group, "is no ordinary woman" because "she works for the Canadian Red Cross" (4).

Continuing to play upon the idea of superhero identities and alter egos, Gass ends the play in a typically elusive but open-ended way. After Johnny has saved the world and returned home to Canada to live on his mountain somewhere out in the wilderness, the narrator tells the audience, "Johnny Canuck has not disappeared. You can still find him swinging his axe in Northern Ontario. He is not dead. And if the Fascist

Menace ever returns, you can count on Johnny Canuck to save the day” (48). One final ode to print superhero comics is the play showing Hitler, on numerous occasions, reading Superman comics (30). The choice of Superman, a superhero created by a Canadian, further celebrates Canada.

Gass also integrates the comic books into the form and production style of the play. Most notably, he uses cartoon panels that change from scene to scene for his set. These mimic the illustrated background images of comic books rather than a fully dressed and three-dimensional stage design. Some of the cartoon panels included are a palace window looking on to St. James Park in Britain, scenic forest backgrounds for Johnny’s home in Northern Ontario, and barbed wire with a swastika when the Supersquad is fighting Hitler. Much like a comic book in which so much is depicted visually, rather than through extensive textual detail, the play relies on the staging to share information with the audience, rather than communicating it realistically through dialogue or additional scenes.

The props are also two-dimensional, including a single-sheet cut-out of a radio, a movable and cut-out image of a mountain, and a campfire. Consisting of only a mock proscenium, the rest of the set is intended to frame such images much the way images are framed and captured on the page in print comics. There are also various moments in the play when the actors freeze in a particular position creating what is called a tableau, and further mimicking the drawn and still images in print comics. Lastly, the play includes phrases written on cardboard to act as the notable thought captions of print comics. As Corporal Dixon is about to walk into a trap, his dog, Laddie, “thinks,” “You fool Dixon” (3).

The production style and narrative of the play move away from the more traditional sense of Anglo-American naturalism and highlight the actor as storyteller. It was more presentational than representational; presenting war realistically on a stage was not being attempted. Perhaps such a narrative style was more useful in the making of myth. Despite addressing historically complex events that span multiple years, the play takes a confused and intricate history and forms it into a more familiar, accessible, and anecdotal version—one need not know elaborate military history to understand the story or the message of the play. Like the comic books, the play’s narrative relies on an episodic structure, and is comprised of multiple shorter scenes. *Johnny Canuck* also includes well-known songs representative of the World War II period. The inclusion of known songs situates the story in history, presenting markers of the era and the feel of the period. Finally, this lack of verisimilitude is clear in Gass’s decision to address the audience directly through the narrator. Bessai argues that storytelling “identifies the essential Canadian structural feature” (189), further presenting Gass as attempting to Canadianize in his stylistic choices as well.

Through such performance styles, we are reminded of Brecht and his *Verfremdungseffekt*, also called the Alienation Effect, which is intended to make the familiar strange. Through this distancing, emotional involvement in the play is challenged, and instead the artificiality of the performance is emphasized. This approach

is highlighted in the ways that Gass chooses to transfer the comic-book form and content to the stage. Audiences know that they are watching a play and can focus on the social politics of the piece instead of being swept up in the lives of the characters with empathetic emotional involvement. The point is not that these techniques prevent the audience from feeling anything, but that what they feel is towards issues of the play in order to be moved enough to act in order to combat similar issues in their contemporary period.

Clearly, there are some important similarities in the national ideologies expressed in both the comics and Gass's play, but there are also some differences. Bachle's primary motivation was to contribute to and support Canada's war effort, and while his decision was indirectly a political one (particularly given Bell's decision to cancel Canadian comics after the war), it was not his initial goal. Gass's central motivation, on the other hand, is much more inherently political in wanting to address Canada's approach to its history, identity, and theatre through the nationalist associations of **112** Johnny Canuck, many of which were set in place by Bachle. In other words, Gass takes the images and ideas from the comic books and print cartoons, and presents them in a particular way to critique issues of nationalism and identity in his own time.

Drawing on comic book conventions, the historical characters of the play (such as Hitler, Mackenzie King, Churchill, and Goebbels) are presented as cartoon figures. Gass himself suggests, "very little, if anything, is sacred here" (Gass's notes to play script). With the patriotic perspective that Gass took, the British are presented negatively as helpless. The figure of Churchill admits:

we have lost our positions in France and Holland and Belgium and Norway and Finland and Luxembourg, though ten million men have been sacrificed and all of our finest ships have been lost to enemy fire. Though our allies have given in to the enemy and though we have no ammunition or supplies to save them. (24)

Johnny Canuck also gives us a satirical portrait of an all-powerful, but incompetent German army, here called the "Turd Reich" (38). Goebbels can never remember the secret password when he knocks on Hitler's door, always responding, "I forget, mein Fuhrer" (18). This becomes a running gag. After Hitler and Goebbels have captured the heroine, Ruth, Johnny knocks on the door in disguise trying to save her:

GOEBBELS. There's someone at der door, mein Fuhrer.

HITLER. Password.

JOHNNY. What shall I say? (*He peeks through the props curtain at the audience*)

GOEBBELS. What did he say?

HITLER. Password!

JOHNNY. I forget, mein Fuhrer.

GOEBBELS. Ah, it's only me, mein Fuhrer. (32)

Gass illustrated the colonial mentality and moments in which the colonial relationship with Britain is challenged, highlighting his story as a nationalist narrative. In

Johnny Canuck, when presenting Corporal Dixon with a medal of bravery, the King believes he can exploit Canada and its resources. He says, during the ceremony, “Canada will gladly place its raw material and human resources on the side of the right and reap its reward” (7). He then proclaims, “During troubled times like these, it warms the heart of Mother England to know that her Colonial Children will unite to support her in her struggle against Imperialism, I mean, Fascism” (7). In short, Canada’s relationship with Britain is presented critically, with Britain taking full advantage. However, Johnny Canuck and the Secret Canadian Supersquad challenge the colonial mentality. Johnny does not fight out of a sense of responsibility to Britain; rather, he does so in order to “protect the [Canadian] land” (11). In the play, Corporal Dixon explains, “Johnny Canuck is the symbol of free Canada. Canada needs Johnny Canuck to build its image as a freedom-loving Nazi-hating country. In short, we need you to lead the Canadian war effort” (10).

In challenging the colonial mentality, Gass was also commenting on the state of Canadian theatre in the 1970s. Rick Salutin wrote during this period that “theatre is one of the few areas left in Canada where the main imperial oppressor remains England and not the US” (187). The creation of anti-imperial plays in a field where imperial attitudes still existed became a major step in creating a new nationalist point of view, one that challenged the dominant attitude held by many in the regional theatre system. In *English-Canadian Theatre*, Eugene Benson and L.W. Connolly report, “A 1971 study showed that of 108 plays produced by seven regional theatres between 1965 and 1971, only 19 were Canadian” (83).

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In reaction to this, *Johnny Canuck* is most positive and optimistic towards Canada. It opens with Canada’s national anthem being sung “raucously” (1). Gass also paid particular attention to celebrating Canada’s nature and landscape, something frequently cited in Canada’s mythology. In 1963, with a clear interest in myth, Arthur Lower said, “Let us celebrate the forest, write stories about it, make poems in its praise. Let us cross the paddle and the axe in national symbolism” (199). As if in response to Lower, Johnny Canuck proclaims, “Well, you see, we love this land, these rugged mountains, these giant trees, these sparkling lakes, this epic of nature” (11). For Johnny, the Canadian wilderness is his home with “all kinds of birds and other critters making sounds” (8). It is this Canadian landscape that, along with Johnny and his Supersquad, constitutes the positive centre. Such an emphasis on landscape is significant, not only because such features are physical, tangible, and viewable, but also because, as Eva Mackey suggests, “In nationalist mythology the nation is often represented as embodied in the landscape itself (125). Therefore by celebrating and glorifying it, Gass is symbolically doing the same of Canada.

Gass positioned a particular rural and northern landscape at the core of our national imagery, suggesting it as a distinguishing and uniquely Canadian feature. This “northernness,” argues Mackey, “symbolically differentiates Canada from both the US and Britain by mobilizing a symbolism of unpeopled and rugged wilderness. It is a northernness that is not American, and a harsh wildness that is not European”

(127). For Canada, this landscape is a “symbol of nationhood” that defines “the boundaries of the imagined nation” (Mackey 125). In such mythmaking, the contradictory reality that “Canada evolved out of largely isolated communities constantly pitted against nature” (Lucking 22) is not as important as celebration.

Not everything, however, is celebrated in Gass’s play, and despite the superheroic narrative and parody, Gass appears to question the value of war. This may in part be an indirect influence of the US war in Vietnam that was going on during this same period. Dagmar Novak argues that the war in Vietnam “made critics out of many thoughtful Canadians, particularly the country’s young men and women” (134), who then began to think about the value of war generally. *Johnny Canuck* ends on a contemplative and somewhat ambivalent note. Johnny, returning home after winning the war, reminisces about Derek, his close friend killed during their mission:

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Well, guess there’s just me left. Think I’ll go back to being plain old John Campbell for a while. I’ll go back to those great timberlines of Northern Ontario on my own. (*He moves towards the sun. Suddenly Derek’s old lumberjack song is heard in the wings*). Ahh, shucks, I’m really going to miss you, Derek. (48)

Despite Johnny’s heroic acts, rather than rejoicing in the end of the war, we are reminded of his loss. Gass’s play makes an important distinction between celebrating Canada proudly and unabashedly, and recognizing the loss and sacrifice that comes with war.

In the play, part of celebrating Canada involves making suggestions about what it means to be Canadian. Northrop Frye suggested that, traditionally, it is believed that “English-speaking Canadians [...] cannot be told apart from Americans” (57). Lower, too, refers to the “old assertion that you cannot tell Canadians from Americans” (167) and further argues that this is a result of the Canadian population’s own cultural apathy. However, in the 1970s, Gass and other playwrights clearly and explicitly try to change that gaze through parody of simplistic national stereotypes and popular national perceptions, forging realistic and nuanced depictions of identity.

A scene towards the end of *Johnny Canuck* superficially and stereotypically highlights the contrast between the national traits of Canada and those of the United States. Johnny—ever the Canadian—is modest and humble, while Captain America—not so humble—is conceited and arrogant. Captain America enters and exits with “shazam” (46) and laughs at Johnny’s lack of superhero uniform (46). The two go on to have a conversation about their roles in the war:

AMERICA. Come on, guy, tell me what you did in the War?

JOHNNY. Well, I—No, it wasn’t much. I did my bit, but I’d like to just say it was a great team effort.

AMERICA. (*Producing a grand, colourful comic book*) Well, I can tell you what I did in full colour. It was Captain America that won the war, not the Brits, not the old Allies. We saved their skins in Europe and we wiped the Pacific clean. And we don’t mind taking credit for what we done. (46)

These portraits being drawn again reflect Canada in its mythologized modest glory. After Major Domo starts to show off, Dixon tells him, “We all appreciate your heroism today, but you are all on a special assignment and must behave with Canadian modesty” (41). As Frye explains, “American students have been conditioned from infancy to think of themselves as citizens of one of the world’s great powers. Canadians are conditioned from infancy to think of themselves as citizens of a country of uncertain identity, a confusing past, and a hazardous future” (*Divisions* 57). Clearly there is a threat of being culturally consumed by the United States and Britain.

Such a threat also brings with it questions of survival, argued in 1972 by Margaret Atwood as a defining theme of Canadian literature and “the central symbol for Canada” (32). Although Atwood does not speak specifically of war in her study, her notion could be extended to include this subject. Survival is obviously a major issue in this play and in this period of Canadian theatre. Atwood argues, “our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back, from the awful experience—the North, the snowstorm, the sinking ship—that killed everyone else” (33). We can add war to the thematic mix. Lucking agrees with this reading of survival as particularly Canadian. Survival, he argues, “functions [...] as a coordinating symbol, which seems to make sense of the distinctive features of the Canadian experience” (26).

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Canada during the 1970s was concerned with various types of survival, and so too are Johnny and his supersquad concerned with survival in their own historical context, despite close brushes with death. This is another way in which the play merges comic book traits with the national theme of the play. In *Johnny Canuck*, after capturing Johnny and all his friends, a Nazi guard says, “Dey are sitting ducks, nein? Ve Vill haf ourselves some target practice” (23). At this dangerous point, Johnny and his Supersquad are almost killed, but manage to escape—and survive. In the end, Johnny and his Supersquad destroy Hitler’s War Munitions factory (19). After they succeed, Johnny is declared a hero. Fanny, a young female character, tells Johnny, “you are my hero! My hero, Johnny Canuck!” (25). The characters must equally survive nature. Corporal Dixon must fight “through the raging blizzard” (2). Saved by his dog, he was “rescued from a close brush with death down an icy chasm” (3).

Playing upon Bachelé’s choice to keep Johnny as a sort of ordinary superhero without superpowers, Gass also attempts to heroicize everyday qualities. Despite Johnny Canuck’s heroic acts in the play, the name Johnny Canuck still suggests a sort of ordinariness about him. “Canuck” is used to describe Canadians generally, and Johnny is a stereotypically average, traditionally generic name. The name alludes to a sort of attainability for Canadians to be like him, particularly for other young male Canadians during World War II to support their country the way that Johnny does. He is not one incredibly unique or extraordinary person, so very different from the rest of us.

Although Johnny is intended to be relatable to the audience of the play, clear-cut and superficial character types traditionally found in comics are employed to fur-

ther Gass's attempt at a national narrative. In the 1970s, Canada was going through its own questions of unity, highlighted by the events of the October Crisis and its aftermath. This crisis itself is not present in the play, but perhaps its absence is more telling. That Gass largely ignores such conflict and instead shows Johnny (English-Canadian) and Derek (French-Canadian) as best friends, living together, working together, and fighting together, suggests a national point of view. Paradoxically, however, Gass depicts Derek as someone with sheer brute strength, but also as simple-minded, largely dependent on Johnny, and with an insatiable hunger for food, specifically apple strudel, hotdogs, chocolate and "patate frite" (10). Is such a representation merely a result of the satirical approach Gass takes in the play generally, or does it have larger political implications? Even Johnny, although depicted more positively, is presented as a two-dimensional stock-type character.

116 Marc Colavincenzo refers to myth in postmodern Canada as a "means of revolution" (xix). For Lucking, part of this revolution means "casting off of those myths that have been imposed [...] by the founding nation" (26). Gass presents a historical but created story in a new, proudly Canadian way, subverting Britain's imperialist version of Canadian history through his comic book form and his comic book hero. Gass relies on the mythology and history of the figure of Johnny Canuck.

It is not only in his treatment of Johnny Canuck that Gass celebrates Canada, but also in his choice of using the Canadian superhero. In the article "The Fighting Civil Servant: Making Sense of the Canadian Superhero," Bart Beaty argues that superheroes are often associated with national identity because they "serve to protect the national interest within superheroic narratives" (428). That is, they are a pro-national force. Beaty goes on to suggest that they "serve to illuminate national interest in the real world as iconic signs" (428), or that they become symbolic of the nation and the identity that they seek to protect. Beaty further argues that "superhero characters should be understood in terms of the ideology of the era in which they were created and utilized" (428). If we apply this to Johnny Canuck, we can see that artists appear to turn to him more frequently in moments of intense national discussion and debate in order to investigate the nationalist needs of these particular historic moments. This can be seen through representations of Johnny Canuck in political and editorial cartoons around the time of Confederation, in comic books during World War II, and on stage in the 1970s during the cultural discussions that followed Canada's centennial.

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