

“The Malcolm X Stare”: Messages from David Fennario on Where We Should Stand

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To Tom and Liz

I here present a selection of the almost ten-year-long email correspondence I enjoyed with David Fennario, an author on whom I have extensively written and published.¹ I have chosen to leave the stage offered by *Il Tolomeo* entirely to David, who is no longer with us, so that his message shall remain as loud and clear as possible. It is an excruciating and precious testimony to our times in the West, as seen by an incredibly talented but undeservedly unrecognized working-class artist.

The messages that follow deal with a variety of themes, ranging from Fennario’s theory of political theatre, to the role played by war and the militaristic engagement of our western societies, to reflections on issues such as his upbringing and his neighbourhood, at the centre of his poetics, and they alternate with some of David’s poems.

I received this email from David on January 23, 2014, the year when his play *Motherhouse* came out:²

1 See the select bibliography at the end of my obituary, “In Memory of David Fennario, 1947-2023”. *Il Tolomeo*, 25, 2023, 363-5. <http://doi.org/10.30687/Tol/2499-5975/2023/01/037>.

2 In *Motherhouse* (2014), conceived as a sequel to *Bolsheviki* (2012) and dedicated to the Canadian engagement in World War I, Fennario further emphasizes his opposition to the “militaristic trend” of our times by adopting a woman character, the Anglophone



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Recommend you start watching old films on the Turner Film classic channel 338 of the postwar forties before the rise of McCarthyism and blackmailing of leftist artists in Hollywood.

Check out you tube for *Intruder in the Dust* based on Faulkner's novel of the same and *The Joe Louis Story* made in the black&white Forties.

The Malcolm X stare in the eyes of the cornerman and trainer of boxing champ Joe Louis and William Faulkner's black Lucas of segregated Oxford, Mississippi, defies all stereotyping of blacks of the time when America was deeply segregated.

Real breathing living blacks not step-n-fetching-it.

No wonder Joe McCarthy and Nixon and other members of the House of Congress Committee on Un-American Activities went bananas with their campaign to 'purge Hollywood of Communists'. Took twenty years before we saw that Malcolm X stare back on the faces of black performers in film.

What a terrible waste of talents occurred in the McCarthy Era when Leftists of all varieties were black-listed out of mainstream Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

But what are we to say today about the post modernist intelligentia now in the Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences?

Nobody beat them into silence

Nobody really forced them to stop telling the truth

They did it to themselves

Malcolm said long time ago

No Solution but Revolution.

Motherhouse is also the occasion for expanding David's theory and practice of an anti-illusionary theatre:

I feel very satisfied with *Motherhouse* as an artistic and political intervention in its very nature without really purposely planning it to be such a challenge to theater establishment. A tremendous challenge because of its simple premise that the performers are up there IN touch with their audience letting them know their opinions and critique in a public form. In other words, a return to the age old tradition as a school of entertainment that we learn from by discussing in an entertaining fashion issues that affect our society. I don't pretend or ever wanted to be one of those artists with grand theories about what is the right or wrong theatrical technique. I came to my conclusions for the need of an anti-illusionary style of

Lillabit from David's neighborhood in Verdun, and representing through her long monologue all the female workers in the British Munitions factory that assembled weapons for the conflict in Europe.

performance and script as an entertainer that wanted his audience to really think and feel and be moved, hopefully into action against some of the social issues facing us today.

I think *Motherhouse* in a small but important way, proves it can be done. It's no coincidence that a lot of the negative reviews I've received for *Motherhouse* are hostile to my political vision, and in particular to my celebration of resistance from the ground up. I must admit I'm quite daunted with the thought that at this particular moment I'm actually the one taking the lead in this ground breaking challenge to the total theater of illusion. With all its world famous experts who have written whole books on the giants of our craft, including Brecht because up till now I've always managed to pay my rent without knowing my ass from my elbow.

"Stanislavski who?"

But as Karl Marx once said "FUCK EM if they can't take a joke."
(February 6, 2016)

Motherhouse soon became a ground-breaker in Canadian theatre, as David himself points out:

First to challenge in a public forum the Quebec Anglo elite on their continuing denial of the historical oppression of Quebec as a nation;

First to define Protestant Verdun as a settler colony similar to those that British imperialists established in Asia, Africa and Northern Ireland;

First to celebrate and advocate mass resistance as a deterrent to the growing militarization of our society;

First to challenge the hierarchal imposition of Full Illusionary Theatre on all theatre practice and theory;

First to point out that such a hierarchy exists;

First to champion an anti-illusionary approach to theatre based on Brechtian practice and theory;

A pioneer in the designing of plays made to be used as political interventions in the class struggle. (August 9, 2014)

Commenting on illusionary theatre, do we still need Beckett on stage, David wonders:

The lack of support for Anglo theatre in Montreal could have something to do with what does get done on stage.

For example Guy Sprung is a big fan of Samuel Beckett.

You know, meaninglessness of life...ho hum...screaming angst... yawn... flashing lights ...burp... and does anyone outside of tenured academia really-really believe any more that nudity on stage is some kind of social critique?

The Carré Rouge painting the whole town red during the student strike is the kind of energy we need on stage based on the celebration and affirmation of life. (September 16, 2017)

Canadian movie director, animator and actor Neil Affleck wrote this email to David on August 7, 2020, stressing David’s recognition by the Francophone community as Montréal’s leading playwright:

“Je me réjouis que Fabien Deglise nous rappelled l’importance de David Fennario parmi les écrivains qui ont le mieux reflété une des périodes les plus touchantes de la vie montréalaise.”

Not Too Shabby Dave!! It seems you have officially joined *Maître Michel Tremblay* in the pantheon of significant progressive Quebecois *persons of letters!* Pretty cool!

I read both the *Devoir* piece and the Louis-Dominique Lavigne letter to Editor *en français* and all I can say is Yeah Man!!³

Despite some well-deserved critical acclaim, David held a strained relationship with the literary establishment:

A few years back I got an email from something called the Canadian Theater Museum, who got my address from the Guild of Canadian Playwrights, congratulating me on being accepted on the roster of playwrights selected by the Museum.

My gut reaction was one of anger.

Who says I want to be part of their fucking selection or be congratulated for it?

I mean don’t you have to be dead before you get to be a museum display?

Sorry I said in my gut response, I’m not dead yet and got a snarky reply back from them.

But the truth is there’s a lot of dead theater out that does belong in a museum.

As the playwright Rolf Hochhuth says in his play *Soldiers*:⁴

‘...the theater isn’t a museum.

History only ceases to be academic

³ Fabien Deglise is a prominent journalist with Montréal’s leading Francophone newspaper *Le Devoir*; Louis-Dominique Lavigne is a playwright and founder of CEAD (Centre des auteurs dramatiques); Michel Tremblay is Québec’s leading author, novelist and playwright, sharing with David his common working-class origins.

⁴ Rolf Hochhuth (1931-2020) was a German author and playwright; his play *Soldiers, An Obituary for Geneva* (1967) contained a strong denunciation of the bombing of civilian areas by the Royal Air Force during World War II.

when it can illustrate for us and now
man's inhumanity to man...'
(December 6, 2014)

This feeling of rejection by the academia resulted in one of David's most striking poems:

For the Literati
I don't want to be remembered by you
I don't want your celebration or documentations
memorialized or editorialized or summarized by you
bar me from your schools of learning
spare me all your speculations
your museum retrospections
your plaques of recognition
your sanctifications and decorations
you are the death of me
I don't want to be remembered by you
(October 30, 2017)

My defiance of the literati in my poem is not based on self-pity but contempt
I was recently informed by city councilors in Verdun that they wanted to name some public space after me
I said no because I don't want them claiming me
I am anti-capitalist to the bone.
(November 1, 2017)

David often reminisces about his neighborhood in Verdun, Pointe-Saint-Charles / *Balconville*:⁵

This is what my first glimpse of the world looked like looking down from the second floor balcony of a six-plex on Second Avenue in

⁵ *Balconville* is David Fennario's greatest dramatic achievement. After it premiered at Centaur Theatre in 1979, in the wake of the Francophone nationalist party electoral success in 1976, the Parti Québécois, the play enjoyed a tremendous success with over 50 000 spectators attending in Montréal only, and it soon became one of the most popular plays ever in the English Canadian dramatic canon. It has been represented since then in Toronto and abroad, with a memorable *tournée* in England and Northern Ireland, an occasion which gave rise to Fennario's monologue play *Banana Boots* (1998), and in Italy it was presented at the Festival Quartieri dell'Arte in 2005 in Caprarola (Viterbo), with my translation. The play's title contains the poetics of Fennario's theatre: it is a hot summer day in Pointe-Saint-Charles, a disadvantaged, working-class, ghettoized neighborhood, where the eight characters (four Anglophones and four Francophones) living in a two-story popular tenement try to find relief from the heat, both groups expressing themselves in their own language.

the most densely populated sector of the most densely populated municipality in Canada according to statistics
the noise of it all echoing upward
not exactly the 'road to Avonlea'
motherhouse.

The photo caption says it's a photo shot in the 1930's of a family moving but it could easily be a shot of yet another family being evicted for non-payment of rent on the Avenues at a time when half of Verdun was on relief in the Depression.

A Verdun unemployment group lead by Kent Rowley often organized against evictions

Militants would put the furniture the bailiff's men had deposited on the street back in the house and then block any further attempts to evict by picketing

Essentially making the action a community action

Kent went on later to lead in partnership with Madeleine Parent the historic Valleyfield strike of 1946, a landmark victory for Quebec workers.

Now there's someone we can name a street after down here in Balconville.

(August 30, 2014)

As a four year old remembering when Wellington Street was still festooned with telegraph and telephone wires extending from pole to pole to pole and crowds of people bumping along sidewalks paved with slab stone and me hanging onto my sister Peggy Ann's hand hoping we don't get lost in all this sudden noise and never find our way back home to 633 Second Avenue. (November 23, 2020)

David's complicated relationship with the past makes him think back on his difficult journey from class subalternity to becoming a fully-fledged artist with a new name (from a Bob Dylan song) and a new identity:

It saddens me to hear of that young humpback whale dying a few days ago and has me now thinking of all my crazy traveling days coming close to sudden death at least four times hitch-hiking that summer of 1963 down down down the US One all the way to Daytona Beach Florida where I got busted for vagrancy and even though I did manage to get back to Montreal a month later it was David Fennario that came back not David Wiper. (July 4, 2020)

As a Marxist, David has painstakingly documented himself on World War I in preparation for *Bolsheviki* and *Motherhouse*:

Done a lot of reading on WWI especially over the last few years as research for *Bolsheviki* and *Motherhouse*.

Some have a critique that includes imperialist ambitions as the main cause of the war but only a tiny percent even barely mention that there was mass resistance from the rank-and-file and that it played a key role in ending that war.

A few – so few you could list them all on one page – make the rank and resistance its central focus, i.e. *Generals Die in Bed*, *The Monocled Mutineer* recommended.⁶

But I am the only one in Canadian literature and theatre or elsewhere – as far as I know – that actually celebrates that resistance and argues for it as the best way to stop wars.

I'm more amazed than proud of that fact, disturbed really that it should be so.

All this to say we have a weapon here so let's use it as part of the resistance to Harper's push to have us in another war.⁷ (September 17, 2014)

David in his later years felt an increasing urge to denounce war and its aftermath, the human cost:

Watching one of the episodes of the Ken Burns documentary series on the Vietnam war – recommended – dealing with the first American ground troops sent overseas, the US marines landing in Danang in 1965, and I'm thinking... Danang... yah my cousin Peter, a big brassy boom of a guy, he was one of those marines.

A year later Peter was back home, all fucked up when we met him at a Xmas family gathering, passing around photos of dead bodies piled up on street corners in Saigon, along with photos of himself with teenage hookers all draped around his neck.

Pete got better in time but never quite lost a strange shriek in his laughter that made you wonder... where did that come from?

I never asked because I didn't want to know.

My mother always said my father came back a stranger to her after being wounded overseas in WWII.

The photos of my father before and after the war confirm what she said

The human body is not wired for the stress of war even and despite being trained as a marine

There's hope in that fault. (September 21, 2017)

⁶ *Generals Die in Bed* (1930) is an anti-war novella by Canadian writer Charles Yale Harrison; *The Monocled Mutineer* is a book published in 1978 by William Allison and John Fairley, which in 1987 became a famous BBC drama series centered on army deserter Percy Toplis.

⁷ Stephen Joseph Harper served as Prime Minister of Canada from 2006 to 2015.

I was there today with Liz [Elizabeth Johansen, David's wife] standing behind the Échec à la guerre banner wearing our white poppies along with John Bradley, Martin Duckworth and about sixty or so other anti-war protesters and this year no attempt was made to push the protesters out of the vicinity of the Remembrance Day ceremonies.

Remember in November

I dedicated my first book *Without A Parachute* back in 1972 to my grandfather Andrew Boyle missing at the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

When my grandmother Jeannie first read the dedication she hugged the book to herself and burst out crying for the young man who had died over fifty years before

All that grief she held inside

I was thinking of her today. (November 12, 2017)

'Happy Ending'

Come down to Verdun on Remembrance Day when the browns and grays of November combined with the browns and grays of the tenements provide the perfect back of a community of doom and gloom that had the highest military casualty rate in World War One and World War Two.

So easy to put the statistics down on paper but not so easy to talk about, especially coming from a family with a long connection to death and mass murder.

My grandfather Jock Kerr fought in WWI and my father in WWII and I tried to join the Army in 1960's but flunked the medical, but my younger brother James Wiper junior continued the family tradition and joined the army and saw action in Bosnia and came back not too fucked up, not like my father James Wiper senior in 1945 who promised my mother when the war broke out in 1939, the year that they got married, that he wouldn't join the recruits, but when France fell to the Nazis in 1940 he decided to join the fight and signed up with the Engineers figuring he might learn a trade of some sorts overseas while fighting Hitler and Mussolini. But he didn't tell my mother he was going overseas right away, waiting till the very last minute when she totally flipped out in the old Bonaventure train station and fell down screaming and crying and hanging onto his trouser leg right there on the platform in front of hundreds of people as he boarded the troop train in June of 1940 to England where he gets wounded twice in the Battle of Britain and doesn't return until August of 1945.

But he was not the same man I married, my mother used to say whenever she got pissed, "He came back a stranger to me".

He stayed a silent stranger with an angry frowning mask of a face put there from all the death and destruction he witnessed

overseas, until the 1980's when he started going senile with my mother complaining he kept forgetting to put on his socks when he put on his shoes, but in the process of forgetting who he was, my father also forgot the war and the more he forgot the more the frown disappeared from his face. (November 14, 2017)

So I decide ok - because this is in the 1980's and I'm really in the money - ok now's the time to give my parents a treat by taking them out to Vancouver because my mother hasn't seen her sister my Aunt Ann in thirty years and then going out there by CR Rail four days on the train because they won't get on a plane with my mother in her glory cheating at Bingo during the day and getting pissed in the bar car every night with me tipping the waiter, the bus boy and porters and the conductor so they'll put up with my Maw getting loud and pissed and then in Vancouver getting loud and pissed with my Aunt Ann in the Dover Inn pub in Vancouver where all the limeys on the West Coast go because the Dover serves British bitter on tap and fish and chips on newspaper and everyone singing the old army songs.

And my old man who was having trouble remembering who he once was, remembered the words to one of the songs they were singing

'There will be blue birds over
the white cliffs of Dover
tomorrow when the world is free
there'll be love and laughter
and peace ever after
tomorrow when the world is free'. (May 21, 2018)

Meanwhile working on writing about my family life in context of growing up in Anglophone protestant Verdun, a community that made a living getting itself killed in two world wars.

Did you know that Verdun had the highest war casualty rates of any community in Canada in both world wars?

That Verdun is the only community that has two annual war memorial ceremonies and parades in Canada?

There is a reason why there was a place until recently called the Verdun Protestant Hospital for the Insane

My father, who saw a lot of death overseas and was wounded twice, came back crazy and never really fully recovered and neither did hundreds of other veterans from Verdun. (June 15, 2018)

My dad spent five years in the Canadian Army as a volunteer in WWII and was wounded twice defending England during the Battle of Britain when Hitler was bombing the shit out of London

And I remember when I was a young kid asking my father what he would do if Hitler walked in through our back door
"Shoot him" he said. (July 22, 2018)

David took inspiration from real-life characters for *Bolsheviki*:⁸

Harry Rowbottom was one of those kids still bitter about what he and his brother went through on the farms as "Home Children". Harry's brother died in the Battle of Loos in 1915 but Harry lived on until his 80's when I interviewed him and he told me about how he heard while lying in a bed in an army hospital after being wounded in the battle of Vimy Ridge that a revolution was happening in Russia and that the soldiers were walking out of the trenches going home and him and the other wounded soldiers got so excited that a riot broke out right there in the army hospital. Harry never had much of a family but he had comrades by his side all the rest of his life.
I put his story in my play *Bolsheviki*. (October 7, 2017)

A poem by David, "Red Annie":

The poem (Red Annie) I wrote regarding one of the Home children that got put on the farms, based on a story I heard down in a bar in what used to be called the West End and is now known as Little Burgundy:

*I see my fourteen year old Anne of Green Gables
freckles and red hair in pig tails with a pregnant belly and small
suitcase in hand
standing confused in the crowded concourse of Windsor Station
in 1910
on a cold wet day in April in Montreal
she's not here to seek her fame and fortune
she's here because she is five months pregnant
and doesn't know which of the three men on that farm
with the same rough hands had done it to her in the barn
and now standing there with people banging and bumping into her
until someone takes her by the arm*

⁸ In Fennario's provocative, anti-war, monologue play *Bolsheviki*, Canadian involvement in Europe during World War I becomes the occasion to create once again a mixed and wonderfully powerful bilingual theatre. Through the characters of veteran Rosie Rollins (modeled after Rowbottom), coming from the begrudging slum neighborhood of Griffintown, home to the descendants of the Irish who had escaped the Potato Famine of mid Nineteenth century, and his Francophone buddy Rummie Robidou, met in the hell of trench warfare in Flanders, separate destinies unite and languages merge.

*down a flight of stairs of the Saint Antoine street exit
and turns the corner out of time and history
never to be seen again
except as an item viewed on archive microfilm
of just another woman found dead in just another rooming house
around the corner from Windsor Station
where the door slams the lights go out and she's no longer there
(October 8, 2017)*

David has always remained true to his anti-establishment commitment to popular culture and its musical expressions:

Just watched a tribute to Smokey Robinson on TV with various performers doing his greatest hits to a live but very white upper middle class audience in New York City, songs like "You Really Got A Hold on Me", and yah ok some of the performers were into it but our Jackie Robinson from Reading street in the Point on his own alone with a quart of beer and the usual broken string on his guitar I guarantee woulda broken hearts with his version of the same song.

The only official gig Jackie ever did was one I organized for one night only in the Student's Union Room at Concordia before a small audience that kept getting larger and larger pulling in black students passing by in the hallway and stopping, puzzled by this skinny white kid with crooked teeth from the Point doing R&B blues so well in his own voice:

I was born by the river
in a little old shack
and like that river
I've been running ever since
it's been a long time coming
but a change is going to come'
(July 23, 2017)

One good thing about rock n roll music
just one good thing about rock n roll
when it hits you, you feel no pain
(July 28, 2017)

Meanwhile I'm gonna sign off on the correspondence on Jackie Robinson of Point Saint Charles, and sort of feeling a bit worried you'd be thinking that I've been trying to promote Jackie into the unique rank of the great artist category, because Jackie himself was quite content with just being himself for himself and giving his friends a good time.

Jackie does deserve personal credit I think, as being mostly likely one of the first in Montreal to introduce James Brown, Otis Redding and Etta James to a bunch of Verdunerheads like me before the color line on Soul Music was broken and James Brown went mainstream. Music of the people, by the people, for the people.
(July 29, 2017)

Their big hit song "1-2-5" can still get me up on the dance floor I crashed once with the Haunted⁹ at their place in the infamous Amesbury Apartment on Dorchester street - now named after Uncle René Lévesque - back in 1966
The nuns in the nunnery across the street used to call the cops on us just about every weekend and one night the drug squad hauled everybody in except me hiding under a bed hanging onto the bed springs
People forget how so very straight and narrow and repressed and depressed and oppressed it was back then when what you wore or how long your hair was or your preference for grass over booze could and did end up with lots of my street pals doing serious time in the Pen
But we kept on rocking.
(April 19, 2019)

A poem by David, "James Brown dies on Xmas morning":

*He was scheduled to play the Club Metropolis here
in Montreal on January 3 2007, so I never got to see
him live on stage doing the splits and spin
but I lost respect for the 'Godfather of Soul' when
he came out for Leon Spinks in the celebrated match
with Mohammed Ali at the Hilton Hotel in Las Vegas
all the experts figured Spinks was going to win
so James Brown bet on him even though he said
his heart was with Mohammed Ali
I've known too many guys like him who once had soul
but lost it when they went for the smart money
sometimes you got to be dumb to be smart
(June 25, 2018)*

Nobel prize winner Bob Dylan represented David's guiding star:

'And Ezra Pound and T.S Eliot
fighting in the captain's tower

⁹ The Haunted were a Montreal rock band active between 1966 and 1971.

while calypso ladies laugh at them
and fishermen hold flowers'
Bob Dylan (October 29, 2017)

'you don't need a weatherman
to know which way the wind blows'
Bob Dylan (June 27, 2018)

David's reflections on our political and social system, as climate change begins to hit hard:

I am of the same generation as the pensioners down in Florida; many of them like me were part of the New Left that organized and protested in the 60's and 70's against oppression and exploitation and won some victories.

A lot of them later in the downturn of the economy in 1980's and 90's began investing in the system as the only safe means of securing some security as they aged.

Look at all those new high rise towers down in Florida being built for the now retiring baby boomers to live out the rest of their lives safe, secure, and warm.

Hurricane Ira is now teaching them what they really invested in
This is what you paid for

This is what you get

But you still got time to correct your mistake

Obviously the US government and FEMA¹⁰ and other officials are much more concerned about protecting property than people so don't make it easy for them

Don't leave town

Get out there in the water wind and rain and kick ass

Having the cops beat up on old folks will let people know where it's really at. (September 10, 2017)

The Montreal Metro is under water with Venice sinking down into the sea and Australia and California and other parts of the globe either on fire or scheduled to disappear under water as we speak. It's like waking up inside an unreal B rated disaster movie featuring [a political leader] playing the role of the mad scientist in charge of an army of zombies. (November 14, 2019)

The first election of US President Donald Trump was felt by David as a traumatic event, as well as highlighting the American amnesia about the Vietnam war:

10 FEMA is the USA equivalent of Italian Protezione Civile.

Most frightening show on Halloween night is not a movie but watching the Trump creep show on the CNN news channel, the night crawlers, bottom feeders, vampires and zombies posing as human beings before the TV cameras

Truly frightening to think what's going to happen down here at the bottom of the food chain if we don't start waking up from this nightmare soon

Health Care Not War Fare

Books Not Bombs

No Blood For Oil.

(October 31, 2017)

The mass media busy satirizing themselves on mainstream television pumping out exposures on the Trump administration sounding like it was scripted by a hack reporter for a tabloid magazine minus a Martian or two seen in the White House.

Trump in Vietnam, the country that lost three or four million people in the American attempt to 'bomb Vietnam into the Stone Age' back in the 60's and 70's

telling the Vietnamese that 'America Comes First'

Get the message?

(November 10, 2017)

Trump does a speech praising the military in front of the Lincoln Memorial, where Martin Luther King once did his 'I Have A Dream' speech in the summer of 1963, to an almost all white audience in their beady eyed bigot thousands looking like they just crawled out from under a rock cheering on their hero while military jets zoomed over their head all so grotesque, obscene and sinister.

Trump in passing mentioned and praised the Civil War and World War One and Two as fights to defend American freedom but not one single word or syllable about Vietnam.

The names of the fifty thousand or so Americans that were killed in that war are inscribed on a memorial wall in Washington that stretches about a city block long

About eight million Vietnamese - give or take a hundred thousand or so - were killed in the decade long carpet bombing of Vietnam.

If the Vietnamese ever erect a memorial wall with the names of their dead men women and children it'll stretch about 200 blocks long. (July 5, 2019)

David has granted special attention to Canadian First Nations, as in his play *Doctor Thomas Neill Cream* (1993), in these emails he deliberately uses the term Indian:

Indian is a deliberate choice because it was the only term used during the period that I'm writing about.

I respect the fact that officially native or indigenous people are the proper terms to use but unofficially I've had some activist friends object to the official choice

Indians are known to run wild

Natives get restless

But indigenous people are just items on someone else's agenda.
(December 4, 2017)

I think I have more written on a suicidal winter tour out west that included the Sault, Winnipeg, Regina and Edmonton known there as Deadmonton, and over all realizing it's the same coast to coast newspaper montage of Indians found shot sliced stabbed or fast frozen here in our home on native land

Maybe do my own tourist guide book

'The 911 Tour of Canada'.

(November 26, 2017)

It was during a coast-to-coast winter tour as a famous playwright back in the 1980's from Halifax to Vancouver, and everywhere it was the same tabloid montage of natives found fast frozen to the sidewalk often in the parking space next to the hotels we were booked into. It was all accepted hohum by the hotel management and my touring director but by time we hit Saskatoonie [Saskatoon] I was getting real fucking verbal about having fast frozen natives as part of the western hotel decor.

I'm usually a good time drinker as you know but I was persona non grata by the time that fucking tour ended in Vancouver, where the touring director left me on my own to find my way back home from what turned out to be my first and final national tour.

That'll teach me.

(December 6, 2017)

Check out the *Gazette* for an article on Sir John A Macdonald that reads "Historians Make Move to Strike Macdonald's Name From Prize".

The author James Daschuk, winner of the 'Sir John A Macdonald Prize for Best Scholarly Book in Canadian History', said he thought it ironic that his book entitled *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation and the loss of Aboriginal Life* (2013) which exposes Macdonald's genocidal treatment of indigenous people should win a prize with his name on it.

Some years back some Métis in Montreal under cover of the night sawed off the head of Sir John A's statue in Dominion Square and

left a note stating they were keeping it for ransom until the Mé-
tis got their land back.
I got some treasured photos of Sir John A still minus his head
It was a definite improvement.
(December 21, 2017)

David considered school a discriminatory institution for working-
class kids:

An article in the *Gazoo* [*Montreal Gazette*] mentioning how many
persons of talent and fame, doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs and
artists like Mordecai Richler, were graduates of Baron Byng High
School.

What a comparison to my old alma mater, Verdun High School,
that can only claim three famous persons:

Buzz Beurling, the leading war ace of the Allied Armed Forces in
World War Two who shot down more fascists than any other Al-
lied pilot;

Scotty Bowman, the coach of the Montreal Canadiens who still
holds the record for winning the most Stanley Cups for the Best
[hockey] Team of the Season;

David Fennario, the playwright who was the first to put the F word
into the theatrical dialogue on stage;

All of them high school drop outs.
(May 3, 2018)

Don't know much about Maynard,¹¹ but being black in Verdun at
that time would have been a very solitary experience, unless you
were willing to be a clown. Maybe ten blacks in an all white blue
collar high school of hundreds of students, with very few being
openly racist, but he would have been stereotyped beyond forgive-
ness, that's for sure.

Very much doubt if he'd appreciated being classified as a
Verdunerhead.

I have very much the same feelings about myself.

When I was invited back to Verdun High as a 'Famous Canadian Play-
wright' I opened my speech to a large crowd of students by saying:

"I never thought I'd come back here except to burn the place down"
Maynard, no doubt, could have set what I said to music.

(May 7, 2018)

11 Walter Maynard Ferguson (1928-2006) was a white Canadian jazz trumpeter and
bandleader, born and raised in Verdun, Montreal. He collaborated with Oscar Peter-
son (1925-2007), who was a black jazz piano player, also born in Montreal, as a corre-
spondent writes to David on 8/5/2018.

British colonialism and the legacy left to Canada has often been portrayed in David's theatre; foremost is *Joe Beef* (1991):

Watching the Royal Wedding and remembering Eddie Casey, Dan Casey's father, a Catholic out of Belfast saying "I'd like to take a good long piss on [a royal member]"
Not Forgiven and Not Forgotten.
(May 19, 2018)

Can also add Metro Peel named after British prime minister Robert Peel, whose policies during the great Irish Famine of 1847 lead to the death by starvation of millions of men, women and especially children
All the names of our oppressors and exploiters have to go along with a society based on profit not people.
(June 24, 2018)

Hope you're enjoying the increase of the decrease of Sir John [Macdonald] statues and memorials all across our true land strong and free
I've been smiling in my sleep for weeks
Imagine the equivalent happening down in the States to that slave owner George Washington father of the disunited States.
Anyhow I've always had a vague idea of what Canada was all about anyhow starting from grade school down on the Avenues where protestant kids were taught to salute the Union Jack and sing 'God Save the Queen' first thing every morning in class and meanwhile there's my catholic buddies in parochial schools run by nuns and priests preaching that the only thing worth living for is dying as quick as possible so you can get into some fucking place called Heaven but only if and after you passed something called The Catechism with absolutely no instructions on how to become something people from Ontario called Canadian.
(August 21, 2018)

The legacy of slavery in the US is also a heavy burden to bear:

The film *Abraham Lincoln the Vampire Hunter* (2012) set during the American Civil War portrays the 'Old South' as an evil empire ruled by vampires feeding off their slaves, with Lincoln with an axe leading the attack against them; it has all the guts and gore of a film made for teenage consumption but it's the only thing I've seen on screen that truly portrays the pure evil and horror of an empire based on slavery and white supremacy, it gives a whole new take on *Gone with the Wind* and a heroine whose first name is Scarlet. (July 26, 2019)

David, whose life since the beginning of the new millennium had been severely hampered by a neurological condition, has some considerations on the COVID-19 pandemic:

Very strange seeing Wellington street without even a single panhandler
It's not the first plague I've lived through
I survived Whooping Cough Scarlet Fever and Polio plagues of the 1950's
Not to mention Miss Bruce Miss Dennison and Miss McMonoque in grade 1 and 2 and 3.
(April 27, 2020)

Having been through an epidemic back in the 1950's peak of the Baby Boom down on the Avenues in those crowded four-and-a-halves with two or three hearses cruising up and down with kids on the sidewalks skipping rope and singing

'if you ever see a hearse go by
remember that you are the next to die
they'll put you in a big black box
cover you over with mud and rocks
the worms will crawl in
the worms will crawl out
and eat out your eyes
crawl out your mouth'

and somehow doing a song like that together made us all less afraid because at least we were all scared together and on that note I'm going to share this poem I wrote with you

*the song of a dead bird
can only be heard
in what they don't tell us
we just die the way we do
a disease no one makes claim to
and nobody seems to care much
if we don't stay around much
ask them why and they'll tell you
only what they did not do*
(March 14, 2021)

David often focused his attention on protesting in our democracies; in this email he narrates with his unique style what happens when you confront police brutality:

Riots

You can be sure the looting of stores happening down in Minneapolis during a protest march against police brutality was planned in advance by professional criminals and possibly agents provocateurs but not by the protesters.

I've seen such actions myself in my lifetime.

Back in the Sixties here in Montreal there were a lot of mass protests organized by various francophone Quebecois students and workers tired of working at what we used to call 'Joe Jobs'.

So one night in the autumn of 1965 I'm sitting in a popular coffee and donut shop on Saint Catherine street when I see a cousin of mine from the bad side of my family - as one of my aunts made a bad career move by marrying into a family who were part of the West End Irish mob - and hi and hello and I join my cousin and the guys he's with and they're discussing who's going to hit what stores along the street and then make their getaway while the cops are busy clubbing the shit out of the protesters in the middle of Saint Catherine and I got a really nice leather jacket at a good price

So put that in your fucking history books.

(May 29, 2020)

A poem by David, "Sudbury" (November 25, 2017):

Sudbury

*the sound of the name Sud-bury
away up there in the north of the north far deep into a tundra
landscape
looking like the blackened bald rock surface of the moon
with all the vegetation burnt off by cancerous clouds of sulfur and
cinder smoke
back when the big booming in Vietnam caused a big boom in the
smelting of nickel
with Stelco Inc. and Falconbridge hiring anyone who didn't talk or
look too smart
tell them you're from the Maritimes was the advice we got from
friends back in Toronto
but Toni was too young
you had to be eighteen
I was too skinny
you had to weigh a minimum of 145 pounds
Toni gets a job as a dishwasher at a Woolworth's lunch counter
and I get a job in a heartbreak hotel
with a grizzled old geezer guy on the top floor*

*ordering fast food to his door along with cigars booze broads
on a Saturday night when everyone else who didn't talk or look
too smart
is out getting pissed and plastered
with the smash of glass and screech of cars and sirens
into a surreal Sunday morning calm
with a few drunken Indians staggering around like they just been
hit with a giant fly swatter*

Sudbury...it's not the end of the world but you can see it from there

Some time before we lost him in September 2023, David sent me this lovingly ironic self-portrait:

Waking up unshaven on my 75 birthday to take a piss and looking in the mirror at this old fart looking back at me and thinking hey I must be dreaming and then went and cut myself shaving but at least now I don't look a day over 74. (October 24, 2021)



Figure 1 Photo courtesy of Sondra Edelstein Sherman, taken in Verdun, 2018