

Harlequin in Hogtown

George Luscombe and Toronto Workshop Productions

Toronto Workshop Productions was Toronto's first 'alternative' theatre, and for thirty years, from 1959 until its closure in 1989, it introduced audiences to a radically new form of theatre. Neil Carson's in-depth history of TWP traces the fortunes of many of its actors, writers, designers, and technicians – but the troupe's colourful artistic director, George Luscombe, is its central character.

George Luscombe brought Toronto a new form of theatre based on the techniques and theories he developed during the four years he worked with Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop in London. Toronto Workshop Productions began its activities in a small theatre in the basement of a factory in 1959 with Luscombe as artistic director. He presided over a program of collective play creation that fostered cooperative collaboration among all the contributing artists. A series of original works and plays from the European repertoire in innovative productions won the company increasing critical acclaim. The company acquired its own building in 1967, establishing its reputation as the most exciting theatre in the city. By the early 1970s, however, a growing atmosphere of Canadian nationalism caused TWP to be overshadowed by a number of new alternative theatres. Luscombe's and TWP's vision of an ideologically committed, technically experimental theatre remained strong for a number of years, but in the end a combination of internal and external problems overwhelmed the company.

TWP's productions provoked radically different responses among audiences, and Luscombe's particular style of drama – a combination of documentary, stylized movement, and music – remains controversial. As a pioneer and as a stimulating teacher, however, George Luscombe has provided inspiration for countless actors and directors. Carson's book is an invaluable addition to the history of Canadian theatre.

NEIL CARSON is a professor of English at the University of Guelph, and author of *A Companion to Henslowe's Diary* and *Arthur Miller*.

Our job has to be to draw the raw material of the theatre from the community, interpreting it in our own way and giving it back to the community, not as real life but like an image in a purposely distorted mirror.

George Luscombe

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Neil Carson

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TO ALL THOSE WHO MADE IT HAPPEN

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Preface

Toronto Workshop Productions is the stepchild of the alternative theatre movement. Born a decade before its better-known Toronto rivals, it saw its own early achievements ignored or undervalued by a new generation of critics who, like doting parents, exclaimed over every faltering step of its younger siblings. The ten-year period during which TWP provided the most vital theatre in the city was dismissed as the 'Dark Ages' before Theatre Passe Muraille discovered collective creation.¹ Its highly acclaimed productions of the 1970s, such as *Ten Lost Years* (1974), *Les Canadiens* (1977), and *Ain't Lookin'* (1980), were considered somehow peripheral to the significant developments in the city. Historians of Canadian theatre continue to distinguish TWP from what they call the 'major alternative theatres,'² seeing its work as somehow both less 'collective' than theirs (because the actors were subordinated to the director)³ and less 'Canadian' (because its Canadian writers and actors did not deal with 'indigenous' material).

This conventional assessment of TWP has always seemed inadequate to me. I remembered having been overwhelmed by the energy and imagination of TWP productions in the early 1960s, and I felt that the excitement of those productions had never been adequately communicated. What was missing from the usual historical accounts was a sense of the novelty of the enterprise. Before TWP, most people believed that original Canadian plays would never be popular in the country. Luscombe and his actors proved them wrong. In effect, they demonstrated the viability of Canadian drama.

In following the story of the company, I have been struck by its ambiguous outlines. TWP was unusual in having a clear aesthetic vision to which it remained faithful for almost thirty years. If it was distinctive artistically,

however, it was subject to the same political and economic forces that affected all arts organizations in the 1970s and 1980s. TWP's story, therefore, is both singular and typical, representative and unique. Though it marched to a different drum, TWP was caught up in the same battles that engulfed all the alternative theatres in Toronto.

The task of reconstructing those battles has been more complex than I anticipated. In spite of the existence of extensive archives (including play-scripts, photographs, audiotapes, and critical reviews), the spirit of many of TWP's productions is almost irretrievably lost. Fortunately, I was assisted in my archaeological undertaking by many individuals who, in different capacities, had been connected with the company. Foremost among them was George Luscombe, who in a series of interviews in 1987 and 1988 provided me with the basic information out of which this history has been woven. In the months and years following those interviews, I have spoken to a number of performers, administrators, civil servants, and others who were themselves involved in the events I was chronicling. Without exception, they have been generous with their time and have provided me with details and anecdotes with which to enliven this story. To construct a solid foundation for the account, I have also consulted the records of related organizations such as the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council, and the City of Toronto. I am grateful to the staffs of the several libraries holding this material, including the National Archives of Canada, the Archives of Ontario, McMaster University Library, the Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library, and the McLaughlin Library of the University of Guelph.

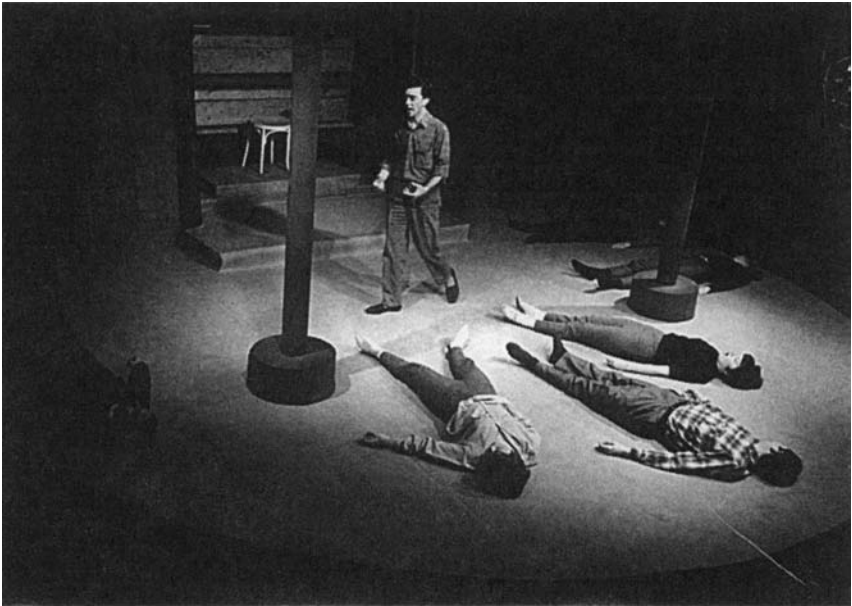
I owe a special debt of gratitude to the late Norman Walford and to Robert Sirman, both formerly at the Ontario Arts Council, for granting me access to records in the Council's possession. But my main appreciation goes to the many individuals who were willing to share with me their memories of their impressions of and relations with the company, including Lou Applebaum, Maja Ardal, Michael Ayoub, Anne Bermonte, David Bolt, Carol Bolt, Jeff Braunstein, Lee Broker, Steven Bush, Tom Butler, Calvin Butler, David Clement, Suzette Couture, Larry Cox, Linda Desjardins, Len Doncheff, Diane Douglass, Arnold Edinborough, Norman Endicott, Ronald Evans, Peter Faulkner, June Faulkner, Joan Ferry, Alan Filewod, Barry Flatman, Bill Glassco, Milo Ringham Gold, Diane Grant, Robert Green, Tom Hendry, John Herbert, Karl Jaffary, Astrid Janson, Urjo Kareda, Nancy (Jowsey) Lewis, Olga Kershaw, Derrick Kershaw, François Klanfer, Sonja Livingston, Doug Livingston, William Lord, Mona Luscombe, Peter McConnell, Catherine McKeenan, Richard McKenna,

Leslie Mendelsohn, Jack Merigold, Peter Millard, Victoria Mitchell, Tony Moffat-Lynch, Kathleen Crawford-Patterson, Tom Patterson, Len Peterson, Walter Pitman, Susan Puff, Geoffrey Saville-Read, Brooky Robins, Grant Roll, Robert Rooney, Toby Ryan, Oscar Ryan, Rick Salutin, Edward Sanders, David Silcox, Florence Silver, Ross Skene, Cedric Smith, Anna Stratton, Paul Thompson, Frances Walsh, Herbert Whittaker, and Jack Winter. Finally, I would like to thank the University of Guelph for financial support during a sabbatical year, which enabled me to work full time on the project.

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George Luscombe playing for a group of CCF Youth Club members in Toronto in the 1940s.



Relaxation exercises during a training period at 47 Fraser Avenue. Note the final shape of the stage, with double pillars, projecting platform, and minuscule 'inner stage.'



Rehearsal for *And They'll Make Peace* (1961) at 47 Fraser Avenue. The cast and Jack Winter (in the checked shirt) listen to Luscombe (off camera) give notes. Note the bleacher seating and the use of ramps.



Hey Rube! (1961). Left to right: Barbara Armitage, George Sperdakos (with back to camera), Glen Reid, Tony Moffat-Lynch, Joan Maroney (Ferry), Hal Sheftel. Note the clown make-up, which was the inspiration for the company logo.



Nancy (Jowsey) Lewis. Courtesy of Nancy Lewis.



The automobile routine from *The Mechanic* (1964), at the University of Waterloo. *Left to right*: Larry Perkins (Lee Broker), Lyndsay Punchard (seated), Yvonne Adalian, Gregson Winkfield, Edward Kelly, Victoria Mitchell.



The Death of Woyzeck (1965), at Fraser Avenue. *Left to right:* Larry Perkins (with back to camera), Don Meyers, Gwen Thomas, Yvonne Adalian, Edward Kelly, Victoria Mitchell.



The Golem of Venice (1967), at Fraser Avenue. *Left to right:* Geoffrey Read, Mark Stone (with guitar), Frank Norris, Frances Walsh, Milo Ringham. Note the elastic 'pages' through which the performers entered. Photo by Robert van der Hilst.



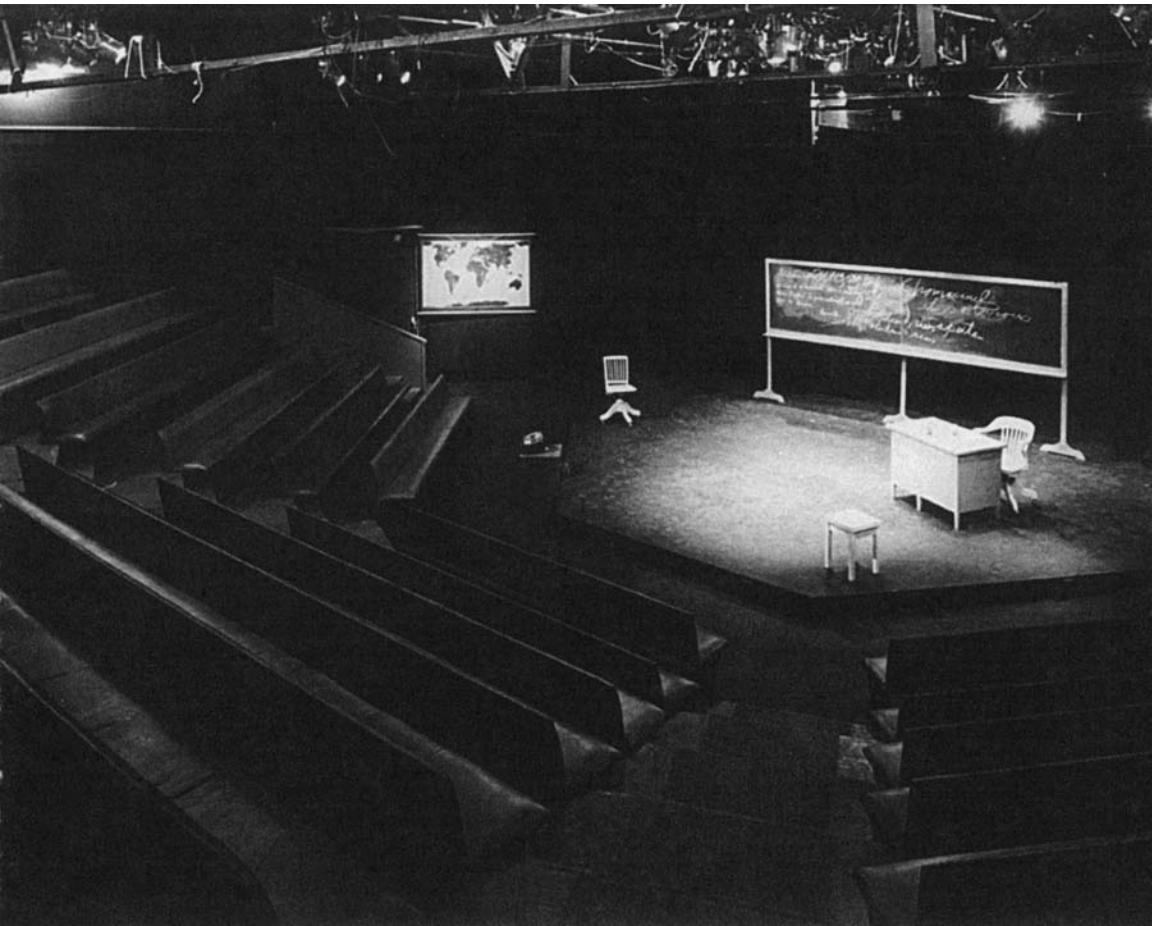
The Captain of Köpenick (1967), at Stratford. Note the stylized movements of the actors and the pavilion theatre.



The company in 1967–8. *Left to right:* (back row) David Clement, Ray Whelan, George Luscombe, François Klanfer, Peter Faulkner, Tom Fisher; (front row) Jack Boschulte, Diane Grant, Milo Ringham, Durango Coy (Larry Martin), Barbara Walther, June Faulkner, John Faulkner. Photo by Robert van der Hilst, courtesy of June Faulkner.



The theatre exterior, 12 Alexander Street.



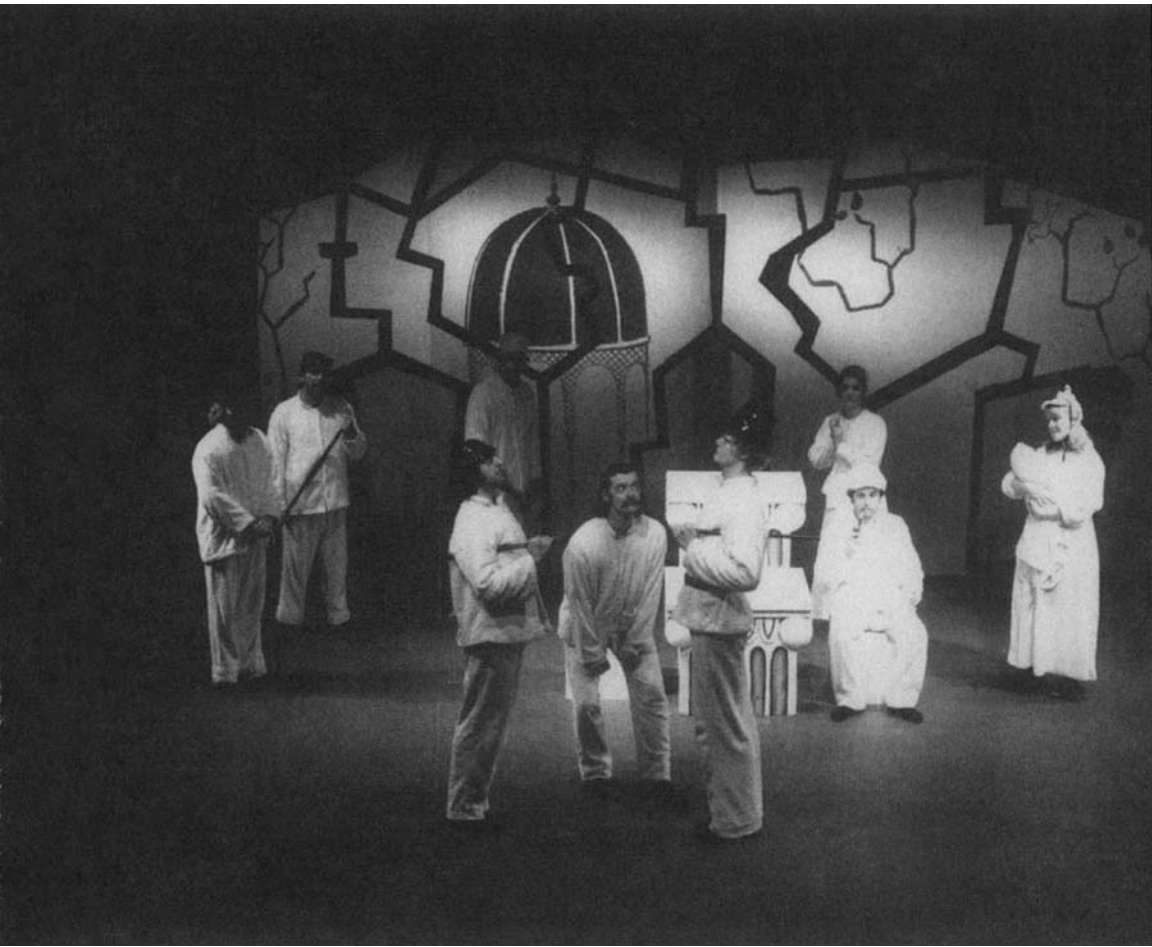
The theatre interior, 12 Alexander Street.



Ray Whelan, Calvin Butler, and Mona and George Luscombe relaxing in Venice, 1969.



Che Guevara (1969). *Left to right*: Cedric Smith (with back to camera), Keith Dalton, Jack Boschulte (kneeling), Mel Dixon, Gay Rowan, Ray Whelan.



The Good Soldier Schweik (1973 revival; first produced 1969). *Left to right:* Ross Skene, Len Doncheff, Jeff Braunstein (in front), Allan Royal, Peter Millard, Grant Roll, François Klanfer (seated), Milo Ringham, Sonja Livingston.



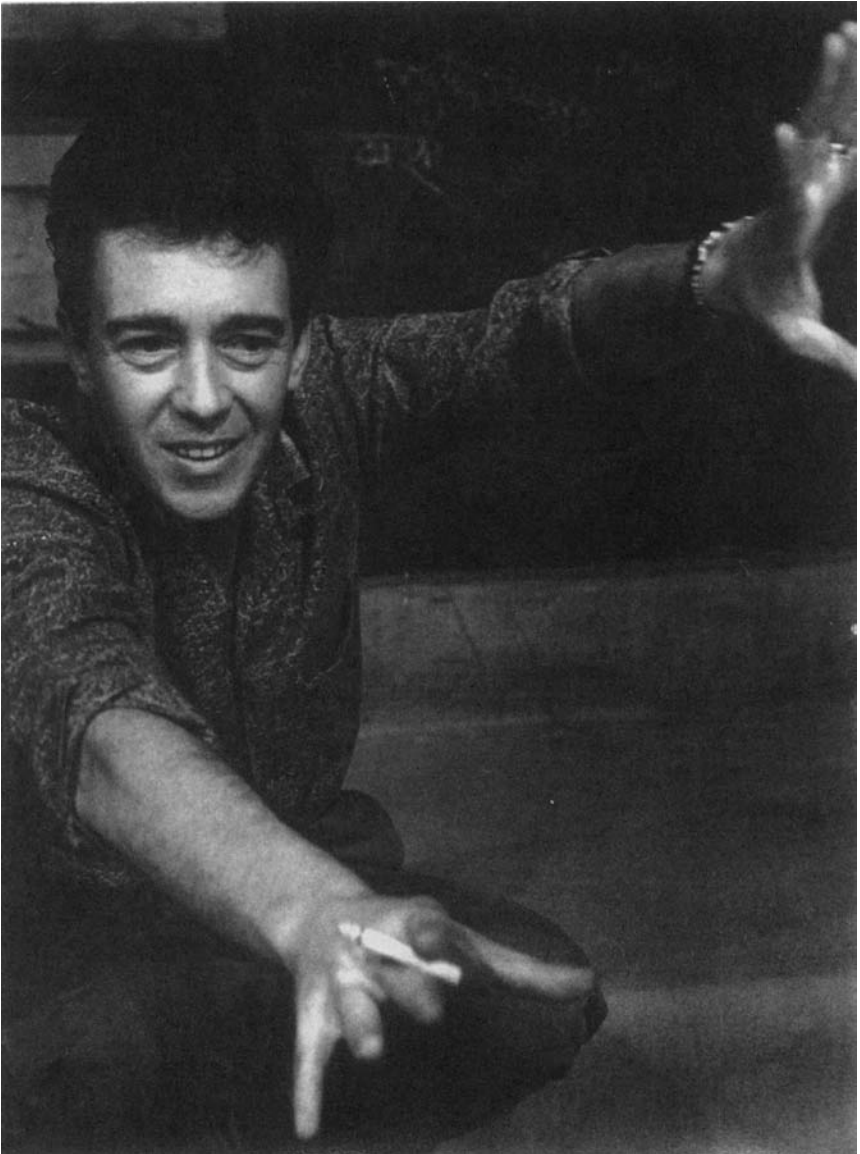
Ten Lost Years (1974), western tour. *Left to right:* Ross Skene, Rich Payne, Michael Burgess (with banjo), Sandy Crawly (with guitar), Rosemary Dunsmore, Iris Paabo (on stool), Peter Faulkner, Diane Douglass, Frances Walsh (sitting on the piano), Peter Millard.



Mr Bones (1972 revival; first produced 1969). *Left to right*: Errol Slue, Don Meyers (partially hidden), Ron Weihs, Suzette Couture, Michael Marshal, Maja Ardal, Allan Royal, Jeff Braunstein.



Summer '76 (1975). *Left to right*: Rich Payne, Diane Douglass, Grant Roll.



George Luscombe at 47 Fraser Avenue. Courtesy of George Luscombe.