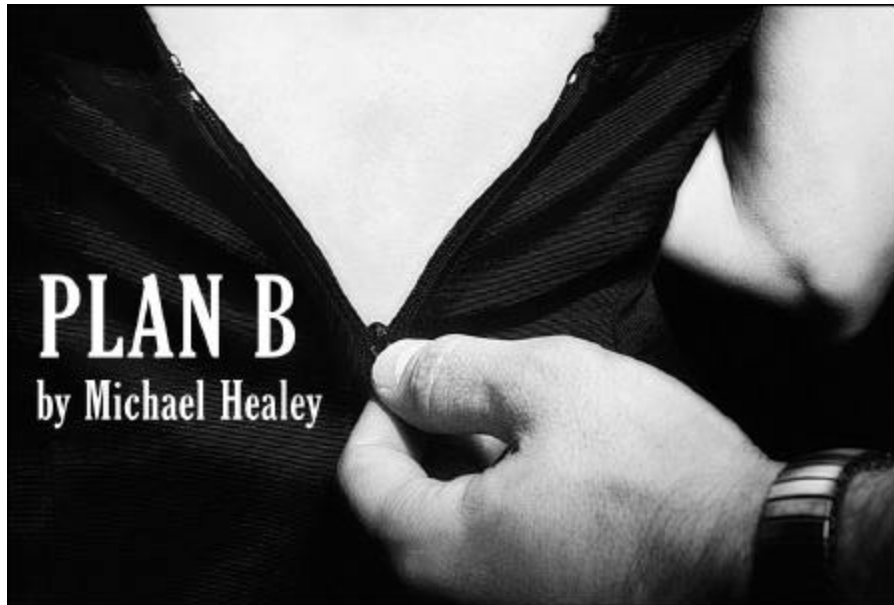


TARRAGON THEATRE

study guide



**Starring: John Dolan, Peter Donaldson,
Marie-Hélène Fontaine, Peter MacNeill**

**Directed by Richard Greenblatt
Set designed by Glen Charles Landry
Costumes designed by Christina Poddubiuk
Lighting designed by Andrea Lundy
French translation by Sonya Malaborza
Stage Manager: Randa Doche**

January 2 – February 10, 2002

About the *Plan B* study guide:

This study guide has been created in order to make your theatre experience at Tarragon a more fulfilling and engaging one. We hope that it will help create discussions, generate ideas and prompt many questions.

With regards to this play, we feel especially strongly that students will benefit most if they are aware of the events that are described within the script.

The *Plan B* study guide was compiled by Amelia Faught and Mary Wood in Tarragon's **OutReach** department.

Special thanks and acknowledgements to Urjo Kareda, Kristen Van Alphen, and Andy McKim for their invaluable contributions.

The *Plan B* study guide is divided into several sections.

1. **Themes** and **theatrical elements** in *Plan B*.
2. **Lesson plans** for your class grounded in the Dramatic Arts curriculum.
3. **Additional resources** including reviews from newspapers about *Plan B*. We encourage your class to discuss them (i.e., Do you agree or disagree?) and develop your own reactions to the reviews and interviews provided.

We encourage you to contact us should you have questions or comments at 416-536-5018 x243.

Plan B Synopsis:

Four representatives from the Canadian and Québécois governments meet in a hotel in Hull, Québec in the not too distant future to negotiate the departure of Québec from Canada. What was intended to be a carefully planned process of pre-determined outcomes of negotiation, is thrown into disarray when the Canadian Federal Finance Minister discovers feelings of which he is unaware. The original plans are discarded in an attempt to truly communicate his feelings, on both a personal and political level. Each character is challenged to address their own fears and concerns with respect to vulnerability in relationships (personal and political).

Characters:

Lise Fréchette, Québec Intergovernmental Affairs Minister, early 40s

Colin Patterson, Senator from Saskatchewan, 60 years old

Mathieu LaPointe, Premier of Québec, late 40s

Michael Fraser, Federal Finance Minister, mid 40s

Explanation of the Title:

The title of the play **Plan B** refers to the range of concerns in dealing with Quebec sovereignty and the subsequent adjustments for both Canada and Quebec. **Plan B** also represents the turn in the dramatic action of the play, where character Michael Fraser (current Federal Minister of Finance) decides to deviate from the original planned process of political talks.

What was playwright Michael Healey trying to explore?

Plan B addresses the complexities of intimate relationships between people, and playwright Michael Healey uses the tenuous relationship between Québec and English Canada as a metaphor/analogy to explore this topic. Healey is interested in the complexities of relationships between men and women, and particularly, how difficult it is to join one's own life to another person's in a committed relationship. The issues of communication, identity, culture, history, and experience are all powerful players in intimate relationships between individuals. This is highlighted through questions of Québec's and Canada's nationhood.

In **Plan B** Michael Healey asks us (the audience) the following questions:

How difficult is it to be a citizen of a geographically large, and culturally complex country?

How difficult is it to be in a relationship with another individual?

Exploration of roles:

Michael Healey admits that the chosen governmental positions of the characters may not be realistic, but he finds them to be the most useful configuration, dramatically.

Until Federal Finance Minister Michael Fraser's "plan b" comes into effect, the characters play predictable roles in their interactions with each other and in the process of negotiation. Not only is this a witty satire on the state of political negotiation in Canada, it is also, implicitly, a critique of the false roles and processes we fall into in relationships. In politics, there is a certain processing that must be applied before a message is released to the public, and Healey asks us to consider whether our interactions with each other are processed in a similar way. Do we truly know how to communicate with each other?

Bilingualism and Translation in *Plan B*

One of the most striking aspects of *Plan B* is that it is a play performed in both our official languages (another bilingual Canadian play is *Balconville* set in Montreal by David Fennario). The characters converse in both English and French, and surtitles are employed to translate the respective languages. Michael Healey suggests two purposes for the use of visual translations:

- 1) the need to translate for unilingual audiences
- 2) as a constant reminder of the bilingualism of the play and of our country

*What does it mean to live in a country with two official languages? What are the implications for us, as Canadian citizens? Do you think we truly embrace the experience of both official languages living in a city like Toronto? How would a production of *Plan B* be different if produced in Montréal or Regina?*

Effects of the surtitles:

The translations bring to the foreground issues of language, including language as a barrier to communication and as a component of the politics of identity. Also, the use of surtitles lends a particular feel to the production. While we may be accustomed to seeing projected translations in opera, or foreign films, this is not a common device in the theatre. There is a distancing effect that takes place, in that the projections are a reminder of the construction of the performance itself. There are also humorous implications such as when Lise and Mathieu speak in French to make fun of Michael and Colin. Michael and Colin do not understand what is being said but because of the surtitles the audience is able to be involved in the jokes. Would this humour derived from language barriers be as effective without surtitles?

Brechtian theory and the staging technique for *Plan B*

Bertolt Brecht (1891–1956) devised an alternative **epic theatre**, which was born out of his anti-bourgeois and Marxist beliefs. He proposed a major alternative to Stanislavsky's realism and the concept of the "well made play." Brecht believed that the theatre has the potential to promote action and encourage social change; this involves appealing to the spectator's reason, not to his/her emotions. Brecht employed the **Verfremdungseffekt** (alienation effect) to encourage the spectator to adopt a critical attitude to what was happening on stage. This involved a radical departure from the theatre of illusion, including: revealing to the audience the lights and the workings of the stage machinery, the use of projected signs and placards, and the unexpected shift into song. These anti-illusory techniques were designed to remind the audience that it is watching a subjective reproduction of reality, not reality itself.

*Do you find, in viewing *Plan B*, that you are able to adopt a more critical attitude to what is happening on stage? Does the construction of the play make you think about and question the issues it addresses?*

The play does have naturalistic elements that Healey finds work well with the theatrical nature of surtitles. The interplay of these two styles of theatre supports one of the central debates in the play: **the dichotomy of emotion and logic.**

For example, where Québec Premier Mathieu LaPointe's political argument appears to be grounded in logic, Federal Finance Minister Michael Fraser can only counter the argument through feeling. Does a relationship of any kind eventually come down to feeling? Can it be as simple as, "*If we feel we are tied together, then we are tied together; if we feel we are not tied together, then we are not tied together*"? Healey wonders if this is sufficient to sustain a relationship

Michael Healey's literary influence

John Ralston Saul's *Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century* (1997) inspired many of the ideas Michael Healey presents in the play. According to Healey, the book posits a

politics run by fear and anger, the very qualities that undermine productive relationships and dissect a nation.

The caveat from John Ralston Saul's *Reflections of a Siamese Twin* states:

An exposed ice surface often displays a dull, undifferentiated façade.
The intricate crystalline structure can be revealed, however, by pouring
a warm liquid over the ice.

Thomas Wharton, *Icefields*

This quote is extremely relevant to a discussion on the complex construction of Canada, and the supposed apathy of Canadians with respect to their country. How is this statement applicable to personal relationships, and how does this sentiment play itself out in **Plan B**? In discussing this quotation with your students drawing on a Canadian example is it felt that it is relevant and telling of our country?

Themes in *Plan B*:

Communication

Two official languages

What does the bilingual nature of the play reveal about language and communication?

The surtitles serve the comic impulse of the play, since they create a gap in the understanding of the characters and the audience (much like asides and soliloquies in Shakespearean plays). How might the play change if Michael Healey had decided not to translate the different languages? What audience **is** this play ~~is~~ intended for?

The Language of Referenda (excerpts taken from *Reflections of a Siamese Twin* (1997))

In a referendum society, language and argument as the central tools of democracy are swept away. They are replaced by a goal-oriented process which reduces the citizen's real participation to passive acquiescence or refusal; a participation which is expressed through one of two single-syllable words (248).

Referenda, and referenda-style government of the sort we are now seeing in Ontario, have very little to do with democracy. After all, democracy is not primarily about voting. That is only an end-product of the system. What matters is full participation. Referenda, by replacing the complexity of reality with naïve, crystal clear either-or scenarios, eliminate the possibility of active participation (250).

Difference between true communication and propaganda/rhetoric

In **Plan B**, when do we see characters truly communicating with each other, and when are they employing rhetoric or propaganda?

Why would someone want to create "a winning formula"? What are the implications of such an endeavour in a relationship?

If rhetoric refers to the art or study of using language effectively and persuasively, or language that is elaborate, pretentious, insincere or intellectually vacuous, how significant are the quotes below?

What is required, therefore, is not language which accurately describes the policy, but language which is attractive to the public. If the public gives an affirmative vote to this formula, those in power will interpret the result as a blank cheque to do what they have always intended to do, but never clearly explained. What we are dealing with, therefore, is not language. Language is a

means of communication and the referenda process is intended to prevent communication. “A winning formula” is the opposite of language. You could call it rhetoric or propaganda (251).

It [a winning question] is not designed to find out what the citizenry wants or even thinks, but to get them to approve a winning phrase so that those who propose it can do what they want (253).

The absence of a plan appears to elicit the truest expression. Consider this excerpt from **Plan B**:

Michael: I have no plan, and I think I'm being honest when I say that. I don't tell you this because I have some goal in mind, regarding you or us or even this meeting's outcome, I just thought it time to let you in on what I've been feeling. [...] I found I couldn't exist within the constraints of our current arrangement any longer.

Identity

Language

Michael Fraser's naïve argument with respect to the French language, “*That's just language!*”, undermines the relationship he has built with Mathieu LaPointe. The language that we speak is integral to our identities, and Michael's desperate attempt to convert Mathieu eradicates the developing communication between the two men. Michael forgets that he speaks from a privileged position: English speaking Canadians are a majority.

Do some of you speak another language, or is English a second language? To what extent does language constitute your own sense of identity?

It is interesting to note that language within French culture holds a very high place when compared to the role of language within English culture. In 1635 France established a governing body (l'académie française) to regulate and preside over the development of the French language. This illustrates how both culturally and historically the notion of language is very sacred for francophones.

Diversity vs. homogeneity of linguistic, cultural and social identity

The Péquists (supporters of the separatist Parti Québécois) linked their case for an independent polity to the needs of a homogeneous linguistic, cultural, and social identity. But a philosophical defense of the more cosmopolitan alternative that Canada represents would have to rest on arguments that were rooted more in the cool politics of “reason” than in the hot politics of identity. For further information please refer to:

“Canada and Quebec After Quebec Secession,” Denis Stairs, Centre For Foreign Policy Studies, Dalhousie University, <http://mypage.direct.ca/p/planb/stairs.htm>

Physical affliction represents psychological affliction

Colin: There's your hate. [...] That's your affliction. [...] You live with that. It's you. You don't try to get rid of it. Then who would you be?

Physical affliction represents psychological affliction (as represented by Mathieu LaPointe's wandering eye and Michael Fraser's attention deficit disorder) – what we have to learn to live with – we bring our physical shortcomings to a relationship – we have to admit and embrace them, not avoid them. This is a challenge the characters face in **Plan B**.

Culture

What does it mean to experience shared culture? What do we as English and French Canadians share (television shows, books, newspapers, theatre)? What are the experiences that bind us together?

Michael: This is an outdoor country, and it used to be full of people who actually liked the outdoors. And they'd meet up, and look at each other, and they'd just know: "He and I both know what it's like out there. I got bit by the same bugs he did. I looked at the same rocks and trees as he did a few days ago. We both avoided the same bear." And they'd know who they were. And how to talk to each other.

History

Often, interpretations of history are subjectively constructed to suit the concerned party.

Mathieu: It's true. Tell me. The BNA Act. Is it a compact between two founding nations, or is it a blueprint for Confederation? [...] we've been walking around, you and us, thinking it was two different things. Even if we didn't care, Colin. Your behaviour based on one assumption, ours based on another.

Does it help to recount and assume responsibility for history? Colin recounts, in the first person, the history of French and British relations in North America since 1713. He assumes personal responsibility by placing himself in history: "*And then in 1760, Montréal fell to me, and of course I started putting up signs in English right away.*" What impact does this first-person retelling have? Colin also outlines the different referenda, and he concludes:

Colin: And maybe this is just me, but I always thought the question should be, if you insist on having one to ask over and over, I always thought it should be: What will you do without your hate?

How does history play into this hate? How difficult is it to move past it?

Personal experience

Consider the following quotes from **Plan B**. How does personal experience impact on the way that we interact with each other? Does fear and anger play into our relationships based on our previous experience?

Mathieu: Well, there's a lot of things to occupy me. I don't spend a lot of time thinking about how I feel.

Mathieu: Can you see the distinction between having an affinity for something, and having an appetite for it? (consuming it and being intimate with it)

Michael: Those among us who want you to stay, who swear we can't understand why you would leave, most of us, we just don't want it to be us that are responsible for you going. We'd prefer that not to be our legacy. We just don't want to be here when it happens. Which isn't the same as not wanting you to go.

The Lise-Michael Relationship

It is through the Lise-Michael relationship that Michael Healey most clearly addresses the human aspect to issues of relationship. The liaison, which initially was intended to remain on a level of "fun," progresses toward something much deeper. Michael needs to escape his current relationship with his wife of silence

and compromise. This desire carries through to the political discussions as well, and it is because of Michael's feelings for Lise that he unexpectedly puts "plan b" into effect. The personal and the political merge at this point in the play, making the personal and political goals one. Michael's assertions can be equally applied to his relationship with Lise and to his redefined role in the plan B talks:

Michael: [...] even as I continued to engage or appeared to engage lightly in our thing, I was spontaneously reevaluating how I felt, and the evaluation always ended up at these large feelings. They are the reason for my actions, they are the reason I called this meeting.

What is it that becomes an impediment to Michael and Lise's relationship? Why does this impact the progress of the political talks?

Additional Questions:

Plan B entertains a notion of "*Two Solitudes*." Is there an absence of representation in this debate? Where is the Aboriginal voice? How might a "*Three Solitudes*" discussion be developed?

How do the blackouts operate in the play? What do they accomplish? Is there another technique(s) that could have the same effect? Why does Michael Healey choose this technique?

Consider the implications of the gender division in **Plan B**. Is it significant that Michael represents the political "oppressor" and Lise the political "victim?"

Design Elements

Set and Prop Design:

Usually, before rehearsals begin the designer meets 3 or 4 times (for a period of 4 to 8 hours) with the director. Plan B is directed by Richard Greenblatt, with set design by Glenn Landry. The designer and director thoroughly discuss the play to ensure both parties share a similar vision of the play, and explore how this vision will be represented through scenic design.

A proscenium like stage frames the **Plan B** set located in a high-powered hotel conference room in Hull, Québec. Mr. Landry has used materials resembling stone, wood and marble. These elements reflect Canada's wealth in raw materials as well as maintains the strong images we have of Canada as represented in our natural rugged beauty and widely interpreted by artists such as the group of seven. As well there is aboriginal art present in the room

There is also a rear view photograph of the Parliament buildings and aboriginal art displayed, a constant reminder of the Federal and native presence amidst the "plan B" negotiations.

There are two locations in **Plan B** so the set needs to be versatile enough to create an environment for both settings.

During Plan B setting includes:

The conference room
Michael Fraser's hotel room

How are the set changes accomplished? What elements are added (musical or otherwise) to help with the flow of these transitions?

Props

The props reflect and represents the monetary wealth of the characters in the production. For instance the fine steel martini glass, several bags from Holt-Renfrew for shoe shopping.

The colours used for the dossiers are blue and red representing both the independent Québec and federal Canadian side of the negotiations.

The water jug and constant filling of glasses could also represent the Canada's water supply that is an element both sides use to bargain with.

Sound design

The sound cues in **Plan B** help ease the transition between scenes. Author Michael Healey has specifically selected the songs that are used from several Canadian bands including The Tragically Hip, Lullaby Baxter.

You will notice that the songs are edited to highlight particular lyrics which provide scene change commentary. As well, although subtle the lyrics reinforce the themes of the script. The Tragically Hip use their music to contribute to our Canadian identity – songs like *Wheat Kings* or *50 Mission Cap* – use our own stories as inspiration for their music. Members of The Tragically Hip are also intellectual artists and allow their music to be a vehicle for expounding their views, political and otherwise. The common goals of their music and this script make The Tragically Hip and **Plan B** perfect bedfellows.

What effect does having music that we hear on the radio, that we are already familiar with, have when hearing it played in a theatre?

A/V equipment

Plan B uses a significant amount of audio visual equipment. The equipment is integral to the scene changes and serves to create practical considerations such as noise from the projector and running power to the booth so that actors are not responsible for the manipulation of the equipment (television etc.)

Lighting:

Lighting helps reinforce place, mood and atmosphere. For instance, in **Plan B** the backdrop picture of parliament becomes darker or lighter to denote the time of day. There is an element of mystery created by lighting and the use of specials help forward the plot during the scene changes. Because the scenes are primarily static it is during the tops and tails of a scene as well as during the scene changes that allow for more artistic interpretations of lighting design. For instance, the long glowing fades as actors continue to speak prior to a scene change.

Costumes:

When designing wardrobe pieces, the costume designer, Christina Poddubiuk, considers several elements as part of the costume creation.

Research

Through discussion with the director, actors and head of wardrobe the costume designer decided on a concept for the costumes. The designer then looks through resources (magazines, old catalogues) according to the period they have chosen.

Looking at the script

The designer also works from indications within the play's script. In **Plan B**, Michael Healey has indicated that Lise Fréchette has a shoe fetish, this is highlighted when she and Michael go shoe shopping together. From these textual hints the designer begins to form concrete ideas about costume, in this case that Lise would probably have a wide and extremely stylish variety of footwear.

Practical considerations

Designers must also think practically when designing costumes. In the case of ***Plan B***, the short time allotted for costume changes between scenes are a definite consideration. The male characters are only able to make subtle costume changes by changing their shirts and ties. The costume changes for Lise Fréchette's character are more noticeable as her shirts are more varied in style and colour. In considering safety, all the shoes that were leather bottomed had to have rubber put on the soles so that the actors would not slip on stage. Michael Fraser and Mathieu LaPointe's characters wear slip on shoes to aid with the quick changes of taking off and putting back on of pants.

Artistic choices

The designer continues to study the script and look for hints into the characters' personality and then makes artistic choices for the colour of the costumes, their shape, the fabrics to be used etc. Period will dictate shape, colour, fabric, footwear, skirt length etc. In the case of Lise Fréchette the designer looked at what colours best suited the actor (Marie-Hélène Fontaine) and decided on burgundy, rust and cream colours. She decided to stay away from grey since (the set is primarily grey) and wanted Lise to stand out to highlight the liveliness of her character.

Reflective questions

It would be interesting to pay attention to the colours of the ties worn the men. Do they follow a certain pattern or do the colours conotate different feelings about the character wearing them? Also, although most of the costumes represent a very formal environment – the men wearing power suits – Colin's character enters on stage with a very "cute" pair of pajamas? What does his sleepwear say about his character? Similarly, Michael Fraser is determined to immediately change out of his suit back in his hotel room. What does the shedding of his suit when he reaches privacy indicate to us about this character?



Lesson Plan
Discussion of the Technical Elements of *Plan B*

Objective:

?? *Demonstrate an understanding of the function of design, lighting, and sound in the communication of Drama*

?? *Demonstrate an understanding of audience perspective in the communication of a Drama*

The Ontario Arts Curriculum

?? The aim of this activity is to have students begin thinking about the **importance of technical elements** as part of a theatrical production.

?? Assigning specific **roles** to students by creating a mock **press conference** will allow them to be more **engaged** in the classroom activity **and** the performance of ***Plan B***

?? In assuming the role of a designer, for example, they immediately will **look more closely** at the designer's artistic **choices**.

Activity:

?? The press conference should be a **moderated event** where the journalists ask questions, the designers answer

The first part of the lesson plan prepares the students for ***Plan B*** and their responsibility while watching in role.

Part 1:

?? Before the students attend the ***Plan B*** performance assign each of them in a role:

✍ several are **theatre critics**

?? The remaining students assume the role of one of the following (in groups):

✍ **costume designer**

✍ **lighting designer**

✍ **sound designer**

✍ **director**

✍ **set designer**

✍ **musical director**

?? Inform the students that when they attend ***Plan B*** they should focus on their assigned **role**.

?? For instance, the theatre critics (for the *Globe and Mail*, *London Free Press* etc.) need to think of what they would comment on the performance's **technical aspect**. What questions would theatre critics ask the designers, directors etc. about their choices (such as why choose specific pajamas for Colin's costume)

?? Similarly, the designers, directors etc. need to pay close attention to their designs while watching ***Plan B***. They need to think critically about the artistic choices that were made and why. How did these choices help reinforce the main themes (ideas of the play) and add to the telling of the story?

?? All the students prepare for their role so that after the performance (back in class) a press conference is held where the theatre critics will direct questions to the designers, directors etc.

The students should be encouraged to think of their own questions to ask the artists

Lesson Plan Point of View Activity

Objectives:

- ?? *Monologue development*
 - ?? *students will demonstrate an understanding of their own and others' respective functions in collaborative work in Drama*
- Ontario Dramatic Arts Curriculum

Activity:

- ?? Divide the students into groups of 4
- ?? Have the students select a scene from **Plan B** that they felt connected to
- ?? Each group collectively decides who will play which character from **Plan B** (roles need not be gender specific)
- ?? The students map the **key actions of the scene** on the attached **Project Planning Sheet**
- ?? Rehearse the piece
- ?? Each student is responsible for developing their **Plan B** character (**facial expression, voice, body movement**)
- ?? Students may look to the Tarragon production as a grounding reference
- ?? Once the scene is rehearsed the group decides a point in the action where each character would “step out” of the scene and perform a **1 minute monologue**
- ?? The monologue should represent this characters **point of view**, what the character is **internally feeling**, trying to reach out to the audience and convey his/her story
- ?? The monologue can include references to other moments in the play (or past) that are not necessarily performed in this scene
- ?? The students should decide what **structure** they want to use to “**frame**” their monologues (i.e. a freeze out of which the character steps, a blackout and a spot into which the character moves; theme music which indicates a tableau and a monologue)
- ?? Each Scene should **begin** and **end** in a Tableau (to frame their work)
- ?? Each group performs their scene in front of the class

Possible Extensions on the exercise:

- ?? Before the scene begins -during the tableau- facilitate a discussion with the class as audience about: **Which characters are in the tableau? Why? What is the scene about?**
- ?? Each student can submit their written monologue as part of a written component (*the written assignment can come out of monologue brainstorming, before or after the performance of the scene*)
- ?? The students can wear costumes to highlight their character

Post Activity

Discussion of Scenes:

- ?? Did the monologues provide additional insight into the action and character choices?
- ?? How did the framing of the monologues look from a **dramatic** point of view? Did it flow?
- ?? Did different characterization of the characters (from those at the Tarragon) develop or come out of your scenes? Why? or Why not?

Two sexy solitudes

THEATRE REVIEW

Plan B

Tarragon Theatre, Toronto

BY ROBERT CUSHMAN

Not to worry, but the separatists have finally got the referendum result they wanted, and Quebec is about to take its leave of Canada. Talks are underway. That is the situation depicted in Michael Healey's new play. In a hotel ballroom in Hull, Que., four politicians meet to discuss terms, just for the look of the thing; they all know and admit that the real decisions are being made elsewhere.

Representing Canada-as-we-know-it are Michael, the finance minister, who seems endlessly conciliatory, and Colin, a Saskatchewan senator, who seems rudely confrontational. Across the table are Mathieu, the Quebec premier, and Lise, who is minister for inter-governmental affairs, and has one with Michael. (I should admit that the play is ahead of me in making that joke, though the character who cracks it *répète* it as soon as it's out.)

Plan B is, among other things, the best political play Toronto, or maybe Canada, has seen in years. However, it is among other things. In interviews, Healey has said he is using political relationships as a metaphor for personal ones. Usually it's done the other way round, and audiences will probably assume it to be the case here as well. Practically it makes little difference; the two levels get equal time and are mutually supportive. By the end, they are as one; some virtuoso passages of dialogue could refer equally well to the state of play in bedroom or ballroom.

The ambiguity is an integral part of the program; the play is

shimmeringly accomplished but tantalizingly cool, even though it involves some high emotions. The first line, explosively lobbed across the table by Colin, is an obscenity that then appears, in deadpan French translation, as a surtitle at the top of the set. This, it turns out, is not a one-off jest; it's a thoroughgoing convention. Every speech in the play, English or French, is reproduced aloft in the alternative tongue. This can be very educational, especially when swearing is concerned. (Michael complains bitterly about the French language's inadequacy in this respect.) It also clues us in, wittily and unsettlingly, to the *provisional* nature of everything; and, of course, in a play set at a bilingual conference, it functions handily as something between a fact and a metaphor.

The centre is Michael, described in a line that seems destined to pass into legend as "a man of successive sincerities." He is sincere when he talks on the phone to his family; he is also sincere when he tries to get Lise into bed and when he professes his love to her. In the other part of the forest, he is passionately sincere when he pleads with the Quebeckers to remain a part of Canada.

He can also turn, as they say, on a dime and become the ruthless politician, next in line for prime minister; and here, too, he obviously believes what he says, or believes that he does. Peter Donaldson plays him brilliantly as a sleek self-deprecator, alternating between an unassuming amble and a decisive pounce. Fine though he is, the voice I hear when I look at the published text is that of his author, an ingratiating but somewhat unsettling comic in his own right. And he has given the character his own name.

The only other figure of comparable complexity is Colin, whose belligerence, in Peter MacNeill's performance, is twinned with humane guilt, ferociously denied. It all boils over in a francophobe diatribe he delivers in an empty room he knows to be bugged — in

French, so he will be understood by his enemies, and so they will know how well he knows them. John Dolan as Mathieu is mostly required to be interestingly suave, and Marie-Helene Fontaine as Lise to be interestingly alluring, in a mature, French kind of way (i.e. very); these assignments they carry off triumphantly. Pitch and timing in Richard Greenblatt's production are just about perfect; while the set, by Glen Charles Landry, is geometrical in its elegance, protean in its efficiency and drop-dead in its handsomeness.

I found it hard to believe that an illicit liaison would be so freely discussed at the diplomatic table; and there are some melodramatic developments in the political action. But the play's two floors line up as neatly as the author hoped they would, especially when they each slope toward betrayal.

Along with this goes some verbal play that occasionally — in a pregnant confusion over the word "trust," for example — approaches Stoppardian resonance, though the general tone is closer to that of another serious British farceur, Michael Frayn.

This is Healey's first play since *The Drawer Boy*, and it lacks the narrative compulsion and the immediately engaging characters of its predecessor. But it is a broader achievement, taking its author into new areas of conflict: intersexual and — at least in theory — international, and making theatrical sense of both. We can stop crossing our fingers for him.

Until Feb. 10. Box office: 416-531-1827.

National Post

JAN. 10 / 02

globeandmail.com

Two degrees of separation

By KATE TAYLOR

Thursday, January 10, 2002 — Print Edition, Page R3

Plan B

Written by Michael Healey

Directed by Richard Greenblatt

Starring John Dolan, Peter Donaldson, Marie-Hélène Fontaine and Peter MacNeill

At the Tarragon Theatre, Toronto

Rating: ***

Michael Healey is not the first writer to compare Quebec and Canada with a capricious woman and a blinkered man, but rarely has the two-solitudes metaphor been deployed with the giddy satirical élan that marks *Plan B*. Indeed, the first half of Healey's new play, which opened Tuesday at the Tarragon Theatre where it is being co-produced with the Shaw Festival, is so delicious it would be tempting to declare that the creator of the much praised *Drawer Boy* has another hit on his hands -- were it not that the second half of this bilingual comedy loses momentum.

First, the fun. It's sometime in the future, 53 per cent of Quebecers have voted to separate and negotiations over the province's departure have begun. In the conference room of a Hull hotel, Quebec Prime Minister Mathieu Lapointe (John Dolan) and Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Lise Fréchette (Marie-Hélène Fontaine) get down to business with federal Finance Minister Michael Fraser (Peter Donaldson) and Senator Colin Patterson (Peter MacNeill).

Except that there isn't much business to get down to: turns out these are decoy negotiations that both sides have agreed they will angrily break off at a predetermined point while the real deal-making goes on elsewhere. After drafting their communiqué announcing a news blackout and then carefully orchestrating their daily leak to the media, the foursome have nothing to do. Fréchette, in particular, has cabin fever, and Fraser, the great persuader, is happy to provide some recreational activity. To foil the CSIS bugs, he seduces her in the language of intergovernmental relations.

His politically inspired love-making -- and the senator's revelation, hilariously rendered by MacNeill, that the only thing that binds the country is each region's conviction it is being uniquely screwed by the feds -- are tear-inducingly funny. And the whole first half of this play should be just as wonderful once director Richard Greenblatt gets his cast to pick up the pace and more gracefully negotiate the ever-shifting tone required by a tricky text full of feints and fabrications. They had not fully mastered the production on opening night, but will surely take control as the run continues.

Unfortunately, more intransigent problems emerge in the second half. In part, Healey has attempted a *Sleuth*-like twister that charms an audience with its layers of deception and surprise, but he has not always wound the plot tight enough to avoid niggling little questions arising from the action.

Meanwhile, he has also attempted a larger drama with some development of theme and character -- these people are both opportunists looking for the occasion when they will rise to more honest heights and idealists fearful this is the moment they will fall to more cynical depths -- but there, the playwright is hampered by the demands of his clever plot. The result is that, as Fraser and Fréchette's love affair

<http://www.globeandmail.ca/servlet/GIS.Servlets.HTMLTemplate?tf=tgam/common/Search> 14/01/2002

deepens and the political negotiations also take an unexpected twist, the characters' motivations become less plausible.

The lively Fontaine produces Fréchette with brisk appetites for sex and power that largely succeed in papering over questions about her character. And while MacNeill lets rip on the outraged Western senator, Dolan does a lovely job producing quieter comedy as the dour and bemused Lapointe who suffers from both a lack of personal warmth and a wandering eye that means his opponents never know who he's looking at.

The more difficult role is that of Fraser, and while Donaldson is often very amusing, he and his director have not resolved the contradictions with which Healey has saddled them. Fraser describes himself mainly as a Michael Wilson-like figure, so bland he never offends the electorate and can be conveniently manipulated by the backroom boys. And yet, he is also supposed to be a political persuader, charmer and seducer.

Donaldson adds an ironic veneer to his performance that strikes a strong comic note but doesn't explain who the man is. When he tells Fréchette that he wants to become prime minister because the job only involves reading whether at a desk or out loud at a podium, we assume he's joking, but she apparently takes his ambitions at face value. Perhaps with more subtle direction from Greenblatt, the play could make room for this misunderstanding, explaining it as yet another of the alternating layers of truth and deception that Healey has constructed, but currently it's jarring.

Similarly, it would take a more refined production to lift up Healey's ambitious bilingualism, which includes long passages translated into French for him by Sonya Malaborza. The notion that Fréchette and Lapointe carry on their conversations in French is dramatically plausible and with the francophone Fontaine and the plausibly bilingual Dolan on the job, it's smoothly delivered. There is even added suspense when Fréchette persuades her boss to stay at the table in a speech that the anglophones will only understand by reading the surtitles that run throughout the show (in English or in French as required).

However, when Senator Patterson reveals he can also muster some salty talk in the other official language, we suffer through a major speech that may have seemed funny when Healey wrote it in English but flops painfully when delivered in French. The problem is not MacNeill's workaday French, so much as it is some cultural gap in comedy: The joke has gotten lost in translation.

Turns out those two solitudes give Healey some real dramatic headaches even as they provide him with some of his best material ever.

Plan B runs to Feb. 10 at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre. For information call: 416-531-1827.

Copyright © 2002 Bell Globemedia Interactive Inc. All Rights Reserved.