Chapter II

1837: The Farmers’ Revolt: A Historical Perspective in Collective Creation

Passe-Muraille achieved a great success in its collaboration with writers in the area of historical plays: 1837: The Farmers’ Revolt, with Rick Salutin, Buffalo Jump with Carol Bolt, and Them Donnellys with Frank Mac Enaney, are all the best ones in the historical docu-dramas. 1837: The Farmers’ Revolt is a good example of Passe-Muraille’s general approach to historical topics. Prominent plays inspired by the important historical event, 1837 rebellion, such as Rick Salutin and the Theatre Passe Muraille’s 1837: The Farmer’s Revolt (1973), Michael Hollingsworth’s The Mackenzie-Papineau Rebellion (1987), and Anne Chislett’s Yankee Notions (1992) aspire to correct the historical record, and with it, to correct society; even as such plays exploit the anti-mimetic conventions of theatre to challenge historical stereotypes, they tend to resort to the stereotypes of their own ideological affiliations to urge a purportedly more faithful image of Canadian history.

Scripted by the Theatre Passe Muraille company in conjunction with Rick Salutin, 1837: The Farmer’s Revolt is of the three dramas the most faithful to Buchner’s dubious ambition to come as close as possible to history as it really occurred. Like Buchner, however, the collaborators do not equate historical veracity with representational illusion. With its gender-blind ensemble cast generating the scenes and duplicating a wide range of historical and fictitious roles, 1837: The Farmer’s Revolt is a fluid script altered in performance to conform to its changing audience.

Rick Salutin is concerned with historiography and theatre as a social process rather than as products. The historical plays of Rick Salutin, make no attempt to
transport their audiences back in time through an authentic reconstruction of an authoritative myth of the past. Salutin produces his script through a collective process that subverts the very concept of historical or dramatic authority, and avoids illusionist naturalism and period costumes in favour of a presentational meta-theatricality that in turn subverts the traditional Aristotelian concepts of empathy and catharsis in the theatre. Salutin’s openness to collaborative theatre comes from his populist approach and the respect he has for the actors he works with. He wrote in the diary which he kept during rehearsals:

> Actors have been so infantilized. Writers tell them what to say and directors tell them where to stand and no one asks them to think for themselves… It shocked me that they were like any other group in the country, politically, that is. But the actors are also the real proletariat of the theatre... They are the bottom of the rung. They take shit from everyone else, and their labour hold it all up: reproduces it all, night after night. (Salutin 104)

The collaborative approach, frustrating at times, enabled the actors to bring their insights and experience to the play, giving it a freshness and spontaneity that made the second version, which added the subtitle “The Farmers’ Revolt”, a runner-up for the Chalmers Award in 1974. It also gave the play a disjointedness and collage-like effect that made the end result less than the sum of its parts.

Salutin’s play *1837: The Farmer’s Revolt* is one example of the documentary theatre that came into prominence at that time; other examples are *The Farm Show, Paper Wheat* and *Ten Lost Years*. The strength of the documentary theatre lies in the authenticity of its representation of actual events; but it also challenges the author’s imagination to make the scenes more than a mere recreation of a past or present...
situation. The imagination of Salutin and the actors raised *1837: The Farmer’s Revolt* above a simple recreation of history through the poignancy, wit, passion and humour of many of the scenes.

*1837: The Farmer’s Revolt* is an exemplary instance of cultural nationalism, dramatizing a discredited historical class uprising as a spur to directed present action. Produced collectively by a company sensitive to issues of gender, class and race for a small-subsidized theatre, it was subsequently staged in rural auction barns as well as the main stages of large cities throughout Canada. In the preface Rick Salutin praises the first production of the play for conveying the impulse “to throw off colonial submissiveness in all areas” (Salutin 112). The play thus represented “a political event, and not just, or even primarily, a theatrical one” (112).

The play describes the events of the past that clearly reflects the contemporary issues of nationalism of the mother country. The play presents Canada lacking independence and subservient to British imperialism. Created during the heyday of Canadian nationalism, the play was meant to speak about the contemporary sense of the American imperial domination and economic, political and cultural colonialism many Canadians still feel. Since the play *1837: The Farmer’s Revolt* is about the Mackenzie rebellion in Upper Canada, it needs to have an understanding about the rebellion of 1837.

**Historical Background**
The rebellions of 1837 in upper Canada and in lower Canada are one of the central events in the history of Canada. In lower Canada, the Rebellion was led by Louis Joseph Papineu and in upper Canada by William Lyon Mackenzie, a Scottish migrant, led the Rebellion, the most controversial issue was the allocation of land. Vast tracts of land, ten to fifty thousand acres, were set aside as “Crown reserves” and allotted in “gross favouritism” (Powell 1) to certain aristocratic people “on purely personal and political ground” (Powell 1). These reserves of unworked land lowered the value of the neighbouring farms, because isolated farms were less efficient than farms close together. The British governments’ system of allocating land was seen by many as excessively bureaucratic when compared with the American system. The government of Upper Canada was run by the wealthy owners of most of these reserves. Land has also been set aside for the Protestant clergy of the Anglican Church. The defiant action of the Church of England in establishing forty-four endowed rectories in Upper Canada in 1836 is yet another cause for the Rebellion. There were other minor grievances, which tended to aggravate the situation. American Republicanism or the spread of American democracy with the arrival of large groups of settlers from the South led to calls for reform in Upper Canada. Mackenzie was one of the radical reformers whose call for republican government was not acceptable to most reformers.

Mackenzie was active in politics and won a seat in the Upper Canada assembly. Later he became the first mayor of the newly re-named Toronto in 1834. His radical reform movement met with opposition from the conservatives who attacked his newspaper press, The Colonial Advocate. Mackenzie gathered support of the farmers around Toronto who were sympathetic to his cause. The harvest failure of 1835 led to a recession and in the following year banks began to tighten credits and
recall loans. When the Patriots Rebellion broke out in the fall of 1837, the British troops stationed in Toronto were sent to help suppress it. Mackenzie and his followers seized an armoury in Toronto and organized an armed march towards the city. But the rebels were defeated by the government forces. A group of rebels who came from London, near Toronto, to support Mackenzie were also defeated near Hamilton. Some of the rebel leaders escaped and crossed the border into the United States where they found many sympathizers.

Mackenzie managed to reach Buffalo, “after one of the most thrilling escapes” (Powell 2). There he got local support and soon he became active. He called for an armed rebellion and seized Navy Island in the Niagara River where he declared a provincial government. Very soon he issued a bombastic proclamation, which offered Canadian lands of three hundred acres to each volunteer who would join the Patriot forces. He also offered a cash bonus of hundred dollars, which will be paid after six months. The functioning of the Government was restricted to the island, which later became a self-imposed military prison, with no outlet of retreat of escaped or with no base of supplies. In 1838, under attack by British soldiers, the rebels fled. Mackenzie crossed over to the United States where he was arrested and charged under the Neutrality Act. Meanwhile the Patriots Rebellion in Lower Canada was more serious and culminated in the arrival of Lord Durham who was assigned to report on the grievances of the colonists and find a ways to appease them. His report led to greater autonomy in Canadian colonies. The Lower and Upper Canada were united to form the province of Canada in 1840.

**Transformation of History into Art**
Like Passe Muraille’s other collective creations, the play *1837: The Farmers’ Revolt* was researched and created by actors functioning experimentally as actors: Salutin’s diary entry for fifteenth December 1972 records the actors’ discovery, walking through the Old Toronto sites where the events on which the play was based took place, that “December was a hell of a time to make a revolution here” (Salutin 105). But more significantly, they discovered the revolutionary impulse itself through the connections between their own lot as the real proletariat of the theatre in a colonized culture and the lot of the farmers in 1837. Their method is echoed within the play through the use of metadrama in an early scene, the farmers help one of their member to tell the story of his confrontation with the authorities in Toronto by acting out the story, assuming roles and discovering what happened and what it felt like. Placed in his situation, as the actors of the play *1837: The Farmer’s Revolt* placed themselves in the situations of the farmers, they find the story, or make it. William Westfall points out about the method as, “drama was the vehicle to carry the group from their own frustration with the present back to a new past: Drama led to history, history did not lead to drama” (72).

The history play merged both the immediate and extended dimensions of audience involvement, which was accommodated separately in *The Farm Show*. The play draws its audience into a sympathetic view of pioneer farmers in the 1830s. At the same time, it cultivates a present-time perspective that speaks to the audience about the colonial conditions reflected by the interpretation of history. When the play was premiered in Toronto in January 1973, it was a Toronto-centered treatment of the historical uprising. *1837: The Farmer’s Revolt*, as a collective production attempts to practice the egalitarian politics it extols. It provides a socialist interpretation of the conflict. It was the working people against the Empire. Emphasis falls not on the
urban agitation of leaders such as politician and editor William Lyon Mackenzie or Attorney John Rolf or officer John Anderson but on the rural class whom they rallied. The rebellion is thus characterized as class warfare.

Salutin’s conscious change from Mackenzie Rebellion to The Farmers’ Revolt is significant and is itself political. The collective method is, as his published rehearsal diary makes clear, a self-conscious reflection of the hierarchical structure of the traditional theatre, a version of theatrical revolt that deliberately paralleled the play’s historical subject. Similarly the presentational style of the production, which engages the audience imaginatively in the process of creating history through play, has been designed to highlight the parallels between the events of 1837 and what Salutin calls a widespread determination to yoke off colonial submissiveness in all areas of cultural and economic life in Canada in 1973.

With regard to the technicalities that have been employed in this play, the creators of the play make use of a range of Brechtian techniques – from the alienation effect and third person acting to the use of flexible sets, minimalist staging, abbreviated scenes and direct address. They plot to revive a dominant inheritance of the leftist engagement. The first few lines are spoken by the audience, which is still entering the auditorium when the first character appears on the stage. Just as in ancient Athens, where the assembly and the theatre were similar and related structures, this play presents itself simultaneously before a theatrical audience and a political assembly.

Like The Farm Show, 1837: The Farmers’ Revolt went through two successive, distinct versions. It was first produced under the title 1837 at Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto in 1972. During 1974, a revised version went on tour,
playing in auction barns in South-west Ontario, as well as the Victoria play house in Petrolia. It was published in 1976. The play is divided into two acts, each consists of a number of scenes. The large numbers of characters are played by a small group of five, three men and two women, who take turns playing all the parts. Men played the cast of women and women played the cast of men or animals or objects or parts of the body, depending on the situations and who constructed with Salutin and director Paul Thompson a series of vignettes based on historical documents. These vignettes were, in effect, historical performances that drew attention to their own theatricality, deconstructing the myth of 1837 as presented by established history and establishment historians.

There is a clear thematic differentiation between the two acts: the episodes in Act One provide the background for the revolution; Act Two presents a selection of scenes from the revolution itself. The play is particularly effective in its mixture of fact and fiction, documentary passages, such as authentic speeches by some of the historical figures, stand next to freely invented characters and situations.

Act One contains several historical episodes, while the second act, more solemn in tone, contains a number of truly gripping scenes. Several scenes of Act One combine to give a clear picture of the frustrations suffered by the farmers which eventually led up to the revolution. The first two scenes ‘Walking’ and ‘Clearing’ show the enormous effort the home steader put into the land and the depth of their despair when they were ruthlessly evicted after years of hard labour because they could not show a deed to the land. The ‘Walking’ scene shows a farmer walking across restlessly. The ‘Clearing’ scene shows the two land policy scenes. It portrays a farmer, Peter Steadman, a ‘squatter’ settler who spent two years of hard labour on the land for clearing it. He confronts a Magistrate name Thompson, who indulges in
destructive cause towards him with a survey map, which indicates that the land in question “is part of a parcel of one thousand acres which was granted three weeks ago to Colonel Sparling of the Forty Eighth Highlanders” (1837: The Farmers’ Revolt 114). The hardwork of the farmers is being snatched by the Magistrate who is represented as the capitalist.

In ‘The Tavern’, the people act out the common experience of one of their members, Fred Bench, who returns, furious and humiliated after many days of waiting to see the commissioner to purchase the land for twenty dollars, but he was approached by a private land agent, obviously in league with the commissioner, who offered him land at a price he cannot afford, two dollars an acre. Fred Bench, in ‘The Tavern’ scene, is so angry against the private land agent that he grabbed his shirt and threw him down. The recklessness of the commissioner is very well depicted in this scene. He doesn’t bother about the poor who succeed in their mission. The land agent is a voracious money maker.

The present scene is structured like an improvisation on the issue. It begins with Fred Bench’s introduction of himself and eventually shifts into a section in which, under Fred’s direction, all the characters of the scene act out the parts that tell us his bad experience at the Toronto Land Office. The technique provides for an agit-prop tone by the commissioner of crown lands, who is conspiring with his friend, a private land agent, pricing the land as he chooses.

On several occasions, the play engages the audience in its strategy of politicizing history. One such occasion is when the performers realize that Fred has lost his bid to become an independent farmer because the abuses of Government patronage have suddenly increased the nominal price of land a hundred fold. This
scene engages the audiences’ participation also because the actors not only perform and witness alternately the process of their friends’ victimization; but involves the larger audience in the auditorium to pass through the same cognitive process as the characters. The audience thus becomes the ultimate object of the scene’s partisan appeal for sympathy and the play starts picking up a sober mood.

The oppression in ‘The Tavern’ scene is made possible by ‘The Family Compact’, a small number of families hold all the power in Upper Canada, as demonstrated by Mackenzie through the metaphor of a conjuring trick. The grim background is rounded out by small vignettes of the daily life of the period, such as “Mary Mac Donald”, the arrival of a farmer’s new bride from Scotland. The couples, Mary and Edward, have never seen each other before, and the scene of the first meeting is treated with gentle sympathy and humour.

‘The Family Compact’ scene exactly provides the right background to the ‘Fred Bench’ type of encounter as it is a fine illustration of the hit against the nepotistic list of members and holdings of the colonial bureaucracy. The scenes, conceived in a satiric mode, draw heavily on the stage language of popular performances like magic shows, patriotic tableau and ventriloquism for the purpose of creating authenticating metaphors. The impact created by these scenes is similar to that of political cabaret though they have either a thematic or chronological context within the first act.

Salutin describes the rehearsal process, recounts how each scene developed to its final form through the collective’s characteristic trial-and-error method rather than out of any clear sense of direction. ‘The Family Compact’ scene, based on Mackenzie’s satiric piece from ‘The Advocate’, in which he lists and cross-references
thirty names by number, is like a documentary. In the first version, this eventually became an expressive epic listing in Bob Wallace’s words, “that long list of names growing like a snake as fire or six actors progressed through the set like children playing leapfrog” (Thompson 65).

In the revised version, the information is embedded in the structure of a magic show performed for the audience. Mackenzie plays the role of a conjurer, who, with his assistant’s help, transforms three volunteers into entire Family Compact. Through this device, Mackenzie relates the source of the original satire to a metaphoric rendering of facts he discloses. Mackenzie is the performer who displays the most remarkable conjuring trick of all the nepotistic contrivance by which “this band of criminals” (1837: The Farmers’ Revolt 117) transforms itself “into the ruling class of this province” (117). This time an extended conceit helps the audience to pass through the whole investigatory process form the very beginning to its satiric conclusion.

Three scenes of political satire, ‘Lady in the Coach’, ‘The Head’, and ‘The Dummy’, add much needed force to the historical panorama evoked in this first act. ‘Lady in the Coach’ presents Lady Backwash on her way to a dinner party in Niagara Falls when the coach she is travelling gets stuck in the mud. The driver asks her to get out to lighten the load. She at first reacts with typical British upper class indignation. She is forced to accept the realities of the situation. She gets out and instructs her man, Johnson, to help push: “Johnson, push with a will -the eyes of England are upon you” (120).

An Indian passing by stops to watch the procedure. Johnson, in terror, flees the coach and climbs a tree, only to be called back instantly by Lady Backwash. The
Indian is then put to work to help push the coach, and the journey continues. She calls the Indian ‘brave bush’ which clearly shows her colonial attitude towards the natives. ‘The Head’ is nothing less than a mimed pun on the name of the then lieutenant governor of Upper Canada, Sir Francis Bond Head; while a narrator describes his features, four actors assemble the face, two heads for eyes, two arms for arching eyebrows, two more arms for the nose until the entire head complete with dimple, stands before the audience. This scene begins with the narrated piece by piece construction of the head, after which the head then proceeds to speak. Pronouncing the words of a speech made by the lieutenant governor at the time, the actors use the various parts of their anatomy to provide such appropriate facial expressions as a frown or a smile. The words uttered by the talking head are blatantly authoritarian and imperialistic.

‘The Election of 36’ scene depicts an election of two major parties of Canada: the Tory and the Reform. A typical election scene can be seen when Robert Davies, Upper Canadian farmer, is attacked. In ‘The Canadian Farmer’s Travels in the U.S.A.’, Robert Davis gives a picture of his travel in the U.S.A. and the method of election held there. From the travel he learned a lot which he wants to implement in Canada. He wants the people to be united. ‘I’ve seen it now. I know it can be done. We can do it, if we stay together. Now is not the time for Reformers to fawn and crouch. Now is the time to unite and fight!’ (124).

‘The Dummy’ scene represents a bitter indictment of colonial oppression. In the framework of a political rally, a ventriloquist show is announced. The performer is John Bull, an Imperial Ventriloquist, with his companion Peter Stump, the Canadian axe man (124). Their dialogue is a brilliant illustration of the colonial spirit which flames in the minds of the natives:
PETER. Hello.

JOHN. Aren’t you forgetting something, Peter?

PETER. God Save The Queen.

JOHN. Good, Peter. Very loyal. I say – what is that in your hand?

PETER. My axe.

JOHN. What do you do with your axe, Peter?

PETER. Chop down trees. He chops. Timber!

JOHN. And what do you do with the wood you cut?

PETER. Send it to you in England, John.

JOHN. Very fine Peter. What else do you have there?

PETER. My rifle.

JOHN. Aha – and who are you going to shoot?

PETER. Yankees

JOHN. Good, And quickly too. (125)

In ‘The Dummy’ scene, Peter eventually demands to be released from the ventriloquist’s hold. To the surprise and indignation of John, he slowly finds a voice of his own, and his first independent words are ‘Thank God for the man who is giving me a voice – William Lyon Mackenzie!’(125). The scene is directed first to the gathering of farmers who are now primed for Mackenzie’s speech. Moreover the scene addresses the actual audience in the auditorium, who is persuaded by the
aptness of the modern theatre-of-protest idiom. Once more, what began as a satirical conceit gives dramatic context to both historical information and the progress of the action.

The last two scenes of the first act, picturises the revolution itself. ‘The Speech’, highly inflammatory piece of rhetoric by Mackenzie, incites the farmers to open rebellion, using the metaphor of the turkey hunt. The audience as well as the readers of this play can easily notice this as he rouses the populace in ‘The Speech’:

But don’t you think a turkey shoot would be more fun if there was a little drilling beforehand? And don’t you think you could shoot turkey a bit better if everyone shot at once – bang bang bang. Because you see, the thing about Tory – I mean a turkey – the thing about a turkey is you can shoot it with a rifle, you can cut its head off with an axe, a pike is an excellent tool for getting turkeys out of high places – and if worst comes to worst, you can always grab a turkey in your own bare hands and wring its bloody neck! (126)

The speech by Mackenzie makes the crowd think and obey the leader’s order. The crowd is gradually attracted to the speech and finally all agree to fight against the Tory. From the speech of Mackenzie the crowd is ready for a bloody hunt of the Tories. They are ready to shoot down the turkeys or the Tories. The scene is more persuasive as a contemporary comic satire than as an argument for revolution in 1837. It is also a humorous reminder that there is more than one face to imperialism, even in the present day. In the last scene, ‘Lount’s Forge’ we find Samuel Lount making spikes instead of horse shoes. This scene reflects the natives’ readiness for the revolution.
Act Two takes us logically and chronologically through the events of the revolution itself; preparations; the march on Toronto; the disastrous defeat; and the tragic aftermath of exile, imprisonment, and execution. The focus shifts back and forth between the leaders of the revolution, Mackenzie and Van Egmond, and the ordinary people. Although the fictional people of the first act reappear as participants in the rebellion during a series of short scenes, the act refers more particularly to historical personages. Mackenzie is shown in conflict with Toronto’s cautious middle class reformers Rolph, Parsons and Doel as well as the celebrated William Tiger Dunlop of the Huron Tract. The latter is suspicious of Mackenzie’s brand of treasonous radicalism. Dunlop is turned into a villain in the play, although he is remembered historically as a strong critic of the Canada Company’s neglect of settlers’ rights.

In Act Two Scene One, 'Doel’s Brewery’, Mackenzie along with his reform associates calls for an emergency meeting. Through his inspiring speech he picks up the attention of the mob and collects men for the revolution. He is depressed. According to him, there is an unguarded store of arms at City Hall. If the rebels act now instead of waiting for rural support, they have an excellent chance of seizing power. The people of Toronto get ready for the revolution and want to raid the Kingston Fort and seize the arms. The metaphorical speech of Mackenzie is revealed when Parsons asks him to sit for a moment, he says:

PARSONS. trying to settle him down Now Mackenzie – You’re our leader, we all agree to that. But why don’t you just sit down for a moment and -

MACKENZIE. springing back up This is no time to sit down!

It’s time to rise up and act! (128)
The scene ends when Mackenzie is ready to head the revolution. The ‘Drilling’ scene gives a detailed preparation of how a farmer gets ready for the revolution. He uses his pitchfork as a rifle and demonstrates it to the audience for an attack against the British.

Act Two Scene Three, ‘Tiger Dunlop’ remarks the strength of Dunlop, doctor in medicine who is joined by Mackenzie and Colonel Anthony Van Egmond to head the revolution. The date is fixed on seventh December. Dunlop doubts whether Mackenzie could head the revolution.

Act Two Scene Four, ‘Leaving’, presents fragments of events that show the audience how the people are attracted towards the revolution. A servant quits job from his master as he wants to join the people. At another place, Fred Bench of Act One steals away to the door, leaving his wife at bed, with his gun. The following six scenes concern people leaving for the battle. The verse explains the step by step movement of the people for the battle. The first verse runs like this:

Up now and shoulder arms, and join these free men’s march boys, It’s time to show the Tories that this country’s no man’s toy. So it’s march, march, march to Toronto town today And we’ll use that fork to pitch Bond Head – across Toronto Bay. (130)

This is immediately followed by a scene in which, a servant quits job from his master in order to join the people who rise against oppression. At another place, Fred Bench of the first act steals away to the door with his rifle, leaving his wife at bed because his wife does not want Fred to join the revolution. The use of chorus in this scene explains the development of the rebels for the revolution. The people’s choice of Mackenzie as their leader is shown, when the chorus sings:
Now all across this country, you can hear the Rebel yell

We’ll follow you Mackenzie to Toronto or to hell,

So its march, march, march to Toronto town today,

And we’ll use that fork to pitch Bond Head – across Toronto Bay. (131)

Another event expresses a husband’s duty consciousness to participate in the war and a wife’s longing face on her husband’s departure.

In Act Two Scene Five, ‘Van Egmond’s March’, Van Egmond’s preparation for the march is seen. Many events take place in and around Toronto, when Egmond marches towards the city. A rebel on the way informs that military men have been stationed to fight against patriotic forces. Van Egmond goes to meet Mackenzie on the way to Toronto. The following scene ‘The Battle’ directly continues from the previous scene. Van Egmond meets Mackenzie and he is surprised to hear that the change of date has created chaos among them. A meager number of soldiers are headed by Van Egmond, and Samuel Lount advances into the woods against the loyalists. Each phase in the action of this scene is clarified through a running account by a rebel soldier, who functions like the on-the-spot narrator of a documentary film. The camera eye cuts briefly to the failed attempt of Peter Matthew’s diversionary action at the Don Valley Bridge, Bond Head’s mustering of his army in downtown Toronto, the meeting of the two opposing forces at Montgomery’s Tavern, and the defeat of two hundred poorly armed farmers at the hands of six hundred trained militia.

This defeat is signified by an actor standing on a table under which two others are crushed. The realistic account of the scene concludes with the actor playing
Mackenzie giving a third-person resume of Mackenzie’s escape, Van Egmond’s capture, and Mackenzie’s establishment of a provisional government on Navy Island. At the end, the actor steps back into the character to speak briefly his defiance at the pursuing government forces. This method of the actor stepping in and out as a character and the use of spontaneous narration is not only a convenient presentational device but also a means of maintaining direct contact with the audience.

The following three scenes, ‘Knocks on the Door’, ‘The Rope’, and ‘Emigrating’, depict the atrocities committed by Government forces at the homes of suspected rebels. In the two gestural scenes at the end of the play, there is a skillful blend of the political and polemical elements and the stage metaphor is particularly made strong use of. Their clear focus is on the consequences of “the unreliability and timidity of bourgeois leadership in a struggle for Canadian independence” (Salutin 107). The more theatrical of the two scenes began in rehearsal with a captivity exercise in which Thompson looped a rope over the heads of the actors and invited them to react to their return to Toronto as prisoners. Thus, in ‘The Rope’, the fettered prisoners wind twice about the ramps, utter their names, speak out the circumstances of their capture, and express their defiance or convey their greetings to the imagined crowd around them.

The final scene ‘The Hangings’ shows how Lount and Matthews meet their ends with exemplary dignity. They failed to do was to address the crowd at the gallows. The Theatre Passe Muraille assembled a gallows speech out of the things Lount is recorded as saying in the prison; if effect they used documentary source material to amplify the inherent theatricality of that moment on the gallows:
My friends, I address as friends all those in jail behind me, in all the jails across this province, in the ships bound for Van Diemen’s Land, in exile in the United States there are over eight hundred of us. I am proud to be one of you. John Beverley Robinson Chief Justice Robinson you seem to fear we will become martyrs to our country men. Well, still your fears. This country will not have time to mourn a farmer and a blacksmith. It will be free; I am certain, long before our deaths have time to become symbols. It cannot remain long under the hell of such merciless wretches that they murder its inhabitants for their love of liberty. As for us, I do not know exactly how we came to this, except by a series of steps, each of which seemed to require the next. But if I were to leave my home in Holland Landing again, and march down Yonge Street, I would go by the same route, only hoping that the journey’s end would differ. And there will be others coming down that road you know, and others after them, until it ends differently. But for us the only way on now is by the rope. (137)

The play ends with the announcement of Van Egmond’s death in his cell and the hanging of two other rebel leaders: Matthews and Lount, the Blacksmith. Lount makes an impassioned last speech, a plea to continue the freedom fight with the rope already around his neck, he still insists on his hope for a better future. The trap falls, and the two men dangle by the ropes as the lights go out. With Salutin’s last line for Lount, and the quick tug at the noose rhetoric and physical gesture cross the barriers of time in a more persuasive ironic combination.

Lount’s preceding public address to his defeated comrades in arms drives home its contemporary relevance to history, which the play as a whole has been striving to analyse the issues relating to it. He assures his compatriots that the farmer,
Matthews, and the blacksmith, Lount himself, will never become national symbols. Lount is right, of course, but not for the reason he gives: that, in “their love of liberty”, the working people of Upper Canada will soon rise again and therefore will have no need for martyrs. They have not become symbols, the play implies, because the writing of history in this country is so colonized that the nature and justification for their dissent as well as the real cause of their failure are virtually unknown.

The final remark seems melodramatic, it is also very important for Salutin’s intent in the play and for the connection he sees between the Rebellion of 1837 and the present day Canada. For him, the play is a statement not only about the oppression of Upper Canadians in 1837 at the hands of their British and Tory masters, but also about the oppression of Canadians today by the imperialism of the United States. It is assumed by Salutin that the American empire is the most powerful the world has ever known and that Canadians see that their situation today is like that of their nineteenth-century forebears, and that they must take the lead from Mackenzie, Matthews, Lount, and the other rebels and fight against the domination and injustice of their masters. Salutin makes this clear in his analysis of the play:

The idea was that the main problem with Canada today is the fact that it’s not independent. It’s still dominated by the structures of modern, American imperialism. I thought the one place in Canadian history that the Canadian people actually addressed that problem head-on was in 1837 you have to go back to where they were in 1837, and then you have to do it successfully instead of unsuccessfully. (Wallace 257)

Paul Thompson’s Theatre Passe Muraille Productions stand out from so much other current theatrical work because of a peculiar combination of distinguishing
features a passion for local history and an uncompromised belief in the balance between individual rights and public good. In choosing to look for drama in circumstances rather than personalities, Theatre Passe Muraille becomes subscriber to the view that the theatre’s prime function is to present publicly and in dramatic terms, those conditions which most affect social well-being and stability. The intention of this theatre is to awaken the slumbering social conscience through artistic means. Art and Politics are artistically combined to intersect at the point where men are moved to act for social change. The methods which Theatre Passe Muraille employs are deliberately demonstrational and the attention of its drama is fixed on ethical, political and economic issues rather than on behavioural causes. A character’s rise or demise does not occur to elicit a flow of fellow feeling from the audience; it serves to elucidate the point which the dramatist is making. In the manner of acting also, the players do not concern themselves with amusing the emotional dimensions of the characters, but instead they take part in the intellectual decisions of the play.

1837: The Farmers’ Revolt mixes playing and subject matter rather deftly that provides a good effect. The loss of fundamental social rights and the journey from activism to revolt, is so avertly a political one. The play has the form of a dramatic manifesto from the disenfranchised of Upper Canada who, in 1837, comprised nearly ninety percent of the colonial population. But 1837: The Farmers’ Revolt is not just pointedly the reminder of a neglected past, it is, in a dramatic way, an entertainment.

Passe Muraille’s strength lies in its ability to make social necessity into art while maintaining the appropriate proportions of compassion and idealism. With the character of William Lyon Mackenzie this can be explained. As he appears in 1837: The Farmers’ Revolt, Mackenzie is very much one who takes part in the reform movement. He is a man of action in both the political and dramatic definition, and he
is a character built to human scale. His function in the play is more important and more interesting than the particular set of psychological attributes which have made him a revolutionary. Mackenzie is a vehicle for presenting the case for overthrowing the despotic, makes use of this character skillfully in several ways, all of which are solidly non-illusionistic. Throughout the dramatizing process, history is preserved while the myth is specifically refined.

The other factors which contribute to Passe Muraille’s presentational strength is his strong sense of place, has always been synonymous with its plays. The present touches hands with the historical past in various ways and the place where it all happened is surely one of them. Instead of searching for riches in foreign fields, Passe Muraille has had a habit of uncovering mythology right under the noses of its audience. The people who saw the Toronto version of 1837: The Farmers’ Revolt, found themselves sitting only a few hundred yards from the spot on which Samuel Lount and Peter Matthews were hanged for the part they played in the revolution.

The outline of the narrative remains the same, a partisan, passionate account of the events that led to Toronto’s 1837 rebellion and a grim, impressionistic depiction of the abortive confrontation itself. Thompson, Salutin and the actors have shifted the emphasis towards the rebel farmers, exploring in even greater depth by unrevealing their grievances and casting an eye even more stricken eye at their failure.

William Lyon Mackenzie himself emerges with much more force in this version, vividly impersonated by Eric Peterson. Mackenzie is only one of perhaps a dozen sharply detailed, versatile characterizations provided by the fantastic Eric Peterson. Other important historical figures compellingly recreated: Anthony Von
Egmond, the rebels’ military leader, enacted with a mad, fearful dignity by David fox and Tiger Dunlop, given edge and anxiety by Miles Potter.

History in *1837: The Farmers’ Revolt* is presented panoramically by revue sketch and it is alive. Caricature is pitted against caricature, and the acting becomes twice removed from intriguing when the farmer actors act out the corrupt. It is a fine chance to display dramatic ability, and the five actors who play many roles are exceptional. By interspersing the heated outcry of Mackenzie with sketches of the people who follow him, the play coils and is ready to spring after intermission. Mackenzie’s beautiful voice, sublime in rhetoric, sensitizes the audience for the later revolutionary outcry. At the beginning the play is muggy. As it proceeds it makes a serious impact on the reader’s mind. The epilogue runs on much too long, like that senseless walk at the beginning, and is too stretched out to epiphany. The ending speech is cut short when the two speakers are hung. The imagined snap of the neck tells all. Thus, *1837: The Farmers’ Revolt* is regarded the best in the historical genre of Paul Thompson’s plays.