

## Seeding Consumer Fears in Saskatchewan Dramas

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# Seeding Consumer Fears in Saskatchewan Dramas

SHELLEY BOYD

**A**NNABEL SOUTAR'S PLAY *SEEDS* (2012) has been described by Joel Fishbane as "one of the most important new works to appear on the Canadian stage in recent times" (84). This documentary play explores the 2004 Supreme Court of Canada trial of Saskatchewan farmer Percy Schmeiser and the biotech company Monsanto over patent infringement. Monsanto initiated the lawsuit when genetically modified canola was discovered growing in Schmeiser's fields. One way of identifying *Seeds'* innovation is to contextualize it in relation to two earlier Saskatchewan plays, Twenty-Fifth Street House Theatre's *Paper Wheat* (1977) and Mansel Robinson's *Street Wheat* (2001), which also use documentary theatre conventions. Such an approach distinguishes *Seeds* as a turning point in dramatizations of Saskatchewan farmers' historical struggles in that Soutar targets urban consumers (not rural audiences) to engage with agribusiness by paradoxically encouraging food-related anxieties that stem from their distant relationship with food production. While the plays have different preoccupations — *Seeds* deals with the ethics of genetic engineering and the repercussions for consumers' health, and *Paper Wheat* and *Street Wheat* with farmers' socioeconomic struggles and political mobilization — all three examine historical moments of crisis and warn against the potential consequences of food being understood strictly as a commodity. In doing so, each enacts a distinct food performance through what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes as "the dissociation of food from eating and eating from nutrition" — in other words, a conspicuous departure from everyday food-related activities and behaviours ("Making" 85). This engagement of audiences' senses and emotions through food commodities that defamiliarize acts of consumption is a strategic way of "working on the line between art and life," Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues, which is especially relevant to *Paper Wheat*, *Street Wheat*, and *Seeds*, since all are attuned to documenting their socioeconomic contexts (85). In this transhistorical study, then, I illustrate a shift from a nostalgic celebra-

tion of the co-operative movement in *Paper Wheat*, to a grief-stricken protest against the loss of the family-farm economy in *Street Wheat*, to an anxiety-laden investigation of multinational agribusiness and genetically modified (GM) foods in *Seeds*. In keeping with this trajectory, the plays' food performances dissociate food from sustenance, from farmers, and from consumer health — culminating in a foodscare drama.

### **Foodscare Performances:**

#### **Targeting Urban Audiences and Documenting Change on the Prairies**

The food drama that unfolds across the three plays reveals a late-capitalist system that has transformed not only a province's socioeconomic reality, but also ways of performing stories of farming in the wake of reconfigured audience-communities. In their foundational work on foodscare performances, Emma Govan and Dan Rebellato argue that a performance that fosters community in the wake of a food crisis is a radical gesture because it means challenging human relationships “bound . . . into cycles of exchange and restitution” as well as questioning “the reduction of food to cultural capital” (40). In this context, Soutar's *Seeds* represents an unprecedented step towards community formation by translating the struggles of western Canadian farmers for urban audiences through an affective food performance that activates their senses and emotions. This aim closely aligns *Seeds* with other farm-related performance projects designed to foster dialogue within cities on the topic of food security. In “Performing Farmscapes on Urban Streets,” Susan C. Haedicke examines several European-based performances that reconfigure urban environments through street theatre: pop-up farms and guerrilla gardening provoke residents to reconsider their assumptions about what is possible in terms of twenty-first-century food cultivation. At the same time, these performing farmscapes “address the lack of public awareness about where . . . food comes from and the limited compassion for those people, animals and habitats that are being exploited” (94). Similar to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's conceptualization of food performances, these farmscapes rely on “dissociation,” Haedicke contends, “a rupture in the relationship between sense and sense, between what is seen and what is thought, and between what is thought and what is felt” (103). Just as these farmscapes effect subtle social change through their unexpected presence in city centres, *Seeds* brings a famous legal battle between a farmer and a multinational cor-

poration directly to urban audiences. Where Soutar differs, however, is in her activation of audiences' food-related anxieties and fears that arise out of their remoteness from agriculture. This affective performance becomes especially apparent when *Seeds* is studied in relation to *Paper Wheat* and *Street Wheat* as historically based dramatizations in which producers and eventually consumers lose control of their food. Food-related concerns that are implicit or not as fully developed in the earlier two plays become a central fixation in *Seeds* as it performs food at a distance to initiate dialogue among urban audiences.

The conventions of foodscare performances are especially helpful in shedding light on the Saskatchewan plays' overall trajectory and *Seeds*' galvanizing of public interest in the GMO debate. Following the Mad Cow Disease crisis and other food scares in Britain during the 1990s, Govan and Rebellato noted "a collapse of old narratives" tied to food production and preparation, as "new narratives, new performances were put in their place" to allay consumers' fears (36). Drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject in *Powers of Horror*, they contend that food becomes frightening "when it threatens to pollute and corrupt the wholeness of the individual," and "when the boundary between . . . what you are and what you eat, is unsettled" (33). While Mad Cow Disease resulted in consumers being diagnosed with Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, GM foods are a troubling mystery that *Seeds* examines through its own kind of boundary work when characters unknowingly consume products designed by a company who invented the defoliant Agent Orange — in other words, products that "leave a trail of dead people behind them" (Soutar 94). Foodscare performances try to contain the abject and manage consumers' broken trust. In the case of Britain, Govan and Rebellato point to new television programming featuring larger-than-life chefs who bypassed "those troubled erstwhile professionals: the butchers and farmers" (37). Food was presented as "bound into a system of exchange" with the assurance of financial compensation if anything proved unsatisfactory, and it was never consumed on-screen (37). This dissociation of food from eating was key, because the visual and verbal "elaboration" of the televised food preparation reassured the British public by fostering new habits of critical consumption (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Playing" 3).

Govan and Rebellato's claim that established narratives of food production and exchange break down when there is a crisis of faith on

the part of consumers is directly relevant to the three Saskatchewan dramas. To this, however, I would add that strained rural-urban relations coupled with socioeconomic disparities anticipate a food scare. Whereas *Paper Wheat* and *Street Wheat* fall into Govan and Rebellato's delineation of "old narratives" that precede a food scare as producers witness changes within the industry whose consequences are not yet fully understood, *Seeds* offers a "new performance" that primarily targets anxious consumers and demands scrutiny of food-related concerns. A food scare has a potent ability to "unsettle relations between members of a community," according to Govan and Rebellato, but what one sees across these plays is the fact that the dismantling of a social reality for Saskatchewan's rural communities is a significant precursor to this GMO crisis (32). In other words, as farming communities undergo radical redefinitions, food necessarily transforms with unexpected consequences for both producers and consumers. To different degrees, the three plays represent these changes, for they dissociate food from eating (by highlighting food's commodification), historicize the severance of farmers from food production, and challenge urban citizens' uninformed consumption.

As a foodscare performance, *Seeds'* differences from the earlier plays become especially apparent when one considers that all three turn to documentary theatre to represent historical transitions within the farming industry. At its core, documentary theatre is about addressing profound social change, and these plays highlight moments of crisis, linking an unfolding food drama with such change. In his study of the development of twentieth-century Canadian documentary theatre, Alan Filewod observes that within "the documentary impulse," there is "an implicit critical statement that the conventional dramatic forms of the culture in question no longer express the truth of the society, usually because those conventional forms cannot accommodate rapid social change" (*Collective* 14). This focus on transformative historical moments, according to Carol Martin, has several functions, some of which are directly relevant to the plays in this study: documentary theatre can "reconstruct an event," such as *Paper Wheat's* tribute to the rise of the co-operative movement and the founding of the Wheat Pool; it can "create additional historical accounts," such as *Street Wheat's* representation of the private family-farm experience in the midst of a rapidly scaling global economy; and it can "reopen trials in order to critique

justice,” such as *Seeds*’ examination of the Supreme Court of Canada’s precedent in the Monsanto versus Schmeiser case (12-13).

Whatever the specific aim, all documentary theatre is united by a desire to examine the truth behind actual events, and a paradoxical need to reconstruct the immediate past to perceive it anew and create social change. Martin underscores the point, therefore, that even as documentary theatre draws on archival materials (interviews, court transcripts, media reports, photographs, etc.), there is a process of editorial selection: “transformations, interpretations, and inevitable distortions” occur when it comes to constructing a performance (10). In other words, documentary theatre is a “staged politics” that scrutinizes the past to inform an audience and shape their reaction to an issue or event (10). As Martin summarizes it, “Governments ‘spin’ the facts in order to tell stories. Theatre spins them right back . . . to tell different stories” (14). In the three plays in this study, the “spin” continually changes in keeping with different editorial perspectives that determine which audience is being targeted, which aspects of Saskatchewan history are included, and how problematic food commodities have become with respect to farming communities and consumer health. To guard against documentary theatre being perceived as mere propaganda, Martin cautions that creators must connect with like-minded audiences to persuade them that the performances have something authentic to impart. When examining *Paper Wheat*, *Street Wheat*, and *Seeds* as part of an escalating food scare, one discovers a re-imagining of audience-communities across the plays, with an apparent shift in emphasis from the producer to the consumer, the rural to the urban. This difference is not only about a food scare’s capacity to “unsettle relations,” but also about twenty-first-century Canada’s urban demographics and the need to challenge consumer-audiences’ apathy towards agricultural issues (Govan and Rebellato 32).

### *Paper Wheat*

*Paper Wheat*’s purposeful connection with prairie audiences<sup>1</sup> has led many critics to describe this documentary play as “the authentic voice of Saskatchewan” and the region’s idealized history or “fairy tale” of the co-operative movement (Filewod, *Collective* 81; Kerr 29). When this sentimental vision combines with the play’s food performance, bread and wheat become significant symbols of individual-turned-collective identity and the near-sacred dreams of prairie newcomers.

As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, “The staples of life — rice and bread, among others — are among the foods with the strongest presence, as evidenced in their role as sacramental food” (“Playing” 19). Prairie staples consistently enhance *Paper Wheat*’s nostalgia politics, presenting rural Saskatchewan as an idyllic “melting pot of people” all “swirled together” by the wind in their common goal to secure bread for the table (25<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre, *The Book* 42). The co-operative movement is even communicated through the only appearance of actual wheat on stage (actors silently combine individual wheat sheaves), marking the formation of the Grain Growers’ Grain Company in 1905, the first co-operative elevator company (*The Book* 59). The play consistently links these historic developments to scenes performed around a modest kitchen table that serves as the site of community formation. At one point, the table even stands in for the land itself, suggesting that domestic comfort and sustenance depend on working relationships among neighbours.

While *Paper Wheat* is a celebration of nearly 100 years of settler history, one scene disrupts the earlier symbolism and incorporates food as a performance medium, communicating a problematic vision of the 1970s, the decade concurrent with the play’s original production and a time of affluence when interest in farming and co-operatives was in decline. The scene, which director Andras Tahn ironically titles “Togetherness” (in *The Book* edition), features a tense family meal: the mother yells that supper is ready, the father reads his newspaper and criticizes co-operatives, the son complains about having the usual, and the daughter arrives late. The branded products purchased at the co-operative grocery store chain and the repetition of the word “co-op,” including the father’s use of it as a substitution for swearing, suggest that the mass-produced food world has transformed the once near-sacred spirit of co-operation into an empty, profane brand. In Tahn’s version, the daughter makes an audible “ecck” at her co-op peas, claiming that they are a commercial brand’s rejects and that the label is meaningless since it has become a “multi-million-dollar operation” and is “no different from any other big business” (72). Food as commodity undermines the substance of the meal — a decline that is linked to a co-operative movement that has gone off course. She cautions that there are “only half as many family farms in Saskatchewan as there were twenty-five years ago,” and “if we don’t start fighting back, . . . this whole province is going to be one big foreign-owned corporate farm”

(72). Drawing audiences' attention to their present socioeconomic and cultural moment, "Togetherness" achieves what Martin notes to be a central aim of documentary theatre: to create a performance "contemporaneously with the events that are its subject. It directly intervenes in the creation of history by unsettling the present" (9).

The pivotal moment of "unsettling" in "Togetherness" occurs when the teenage son, Louie, transgresses table etiquette by juggling a dinner roll in order to explain how the industry eats away at farmers' livelihoods. Taking rapid bites (that symbolize the division of profits among retail, milling, baking, and the farmer), Louie shows not only how a loaf of bread moves through the market, but also what he "didn't learn at school" — a comment that discloses society's devaluing of farmers and agricultural knowledge (72). As a performance medium, the dinner roll is consumed in a manner divorced from any nutritional purpose. At the time of *Paper Wheat's* national tour, this scene posed distinct "hazards" for actor Lubomir Mykytiuk, who needed to find "bread rolls that were the proper shape, size and texture. He said it was hard enough to juggle two balls and a bread roll without having them misshapen or crumbly" (Gilchrist 15). During food performances such as this one, actors must "consume . . . under demanding conditions — at high speed, in large volume, or while doing something else," Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes; such practical considerations reveal in part that the act of eating as a "theatrical sign is indeed arbitrary" ("Making" 81). In this case, Louie's carnivalesque food performance temporarily suspends the play's nostalgia politics and idyllic food symbolism. The once longed-for bread meant to furnish the tables of immigrants is now gorged upon, but not for sustenance; it is a vision of food couched strictly in monetary terms. And although Louie leaves the farmer a mere crumb of the profits (which he kicks towards the audience), his disruptive "meal" is quickly contained by a return to the play's heroic vision. The final scene, "The Old Folks," features retired farmers reminiscing about the co-operative movement when they felt they "could change the world" (*The Book* 75). In Don Kerr's analysis, the presence of these humble sobbusters implies that "the fights have to be fought again" (28). What *Paper Wheat* did not fully anticipate was that the players fighting these battles would change so radically with the political struggle eventually being reframed, in the case of *Seeds*, from an urban consumer's activist perspective.



On one final note, it is important to acknowledge that while the majority of published reviews and handwritten responses from audiences during *Paper Wheat*'s 1970s tours expressed admiration for its heroic portrayal of farmers, occasionally dissenting views signalled that some audience members were experiencing their own powerlessness within a changing socioeconomic landscape. As one audience member from a 1979 Edmonton performance wrote, "You've done one on the past and present, now to really help agriculture do one for the future. Challenging isn't it" (25<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre Collection). A review published in Regina's *The Leader-Post* similarly spells out the industry's enormous challenges, but then returns to a reassuring construction of the past-as-present-as-future:

foreign corporate farms begin to take over the small land owners and multinational food chains leave the farmer without a fair return. They felt they could change the world. But the world, it seems, changed without them. . . . [The play] violates a lot of rules. It preaches to the converted. But most of all, it tells the people of the prairies how wonderful they were and still can be. (Ball)

The reviewer's concluding optimism speaks to *Paper Wheat*'s idyllic vision of the past, what Fredric Jameson describes as "the spell and distance of a glossy mirage" typical of late-capitalist cultural expressions (21).<sup>2</sup> In hindsight, though, the criticisms take on greater significance with respect to the unfolding food drama performed across the three plays. While *Paper Wheat*'s nostalgia politics and food symbolism offer temporary reassurance to rural communities that were beginning to undergo a systematic unravelling of their social fabric, the tragedy of Robinson's *Street Wheat* and the food scare of Soutar's *Seeds* capture the utter transformation of the province's farming economy through food performances that intensify the dissociation of food from eating and nutrition by foregrounding the large-scale corporatization of agriculture and food within a global economy.

### *Street Wheat*

If *Paper Wheat* signals a nascent food drama that eventually escalates to a GMO food scare by the time *Seeds* appears on Canadian stages, then *Street Wheat* — which premiered at Dancing Sky Theatre in 2001 in

Meacham, Saskatchewan (70 kilometres from Saskatoon), and toured the province in 2002 — more fully asserts that the compromising of rural communities by agribusiness is in fact a precursor to undermining the safety of Canada's food supply. Robinson's play focuses on the crisis facing farmers with the erosion of the co-operative movement in the years preceding the Monsanto versus Schmeiser Supreme Court decision. Two (fictional) brothers, Gerry and Bill O'Neill, argue over how to avoid bankrupting their farm as they witness the closure of 230 elevators in the wake of the Wheat Pool becoming a publicly traded company in 1996. Low wheat prices, combined with pressures to scale farms into large agribusinesses and purchase high-priced equipment, entrap farmers in debt, leading to the collapse of the family-farm economy.

At the time of writing this commissioned play, Robinson was conscious that *Street Wheat*, a 25<sup>th</sup>-anniversary tribute to *Paper Wheat*, was not following the same process of collective creation that garnered the earlier documentary drama such critical praise. In his successful 1999 Canada Council grant application, Robinson writes that he has begun collaborative research with artistic director Angus Ferguson, and in keeping with documentary theatre's impetus to examine moments of historic significance, he outlines his plan to dramatize "rapid social change" on the prairies precipitated by late capitalism: "the borderless world, massive and increasing corporate power, weakened government, hyper-individualism, the struggle for community" (Canada). In an article published in *The Western Producer* three weeks before the 2001 premiere, Ferguson states that he and Robinson were currently working on the "eighth draft of the play because every time they turn on the radio new events are happening in farming" (Rogers). Ferguson commends Robinson's ability for "taking political issues and turning it into people's stories so it doesn't become propaganda," a comment that speaks to the play's documentary-like aim to tell a truthful story of an immediate, historical moment of crisis, which was authenticated through a performance with direct ties to *Paper Wheat*.<sup>3</sup> While Robinson admits in the introduction that his play is "not accurate in the documentary sense," he clearly sees *Street Wheat* operating in the spirit of this form through his use of anecdotal accounts: Robinson spoke to farmers, eavesdropped on conversations at the Meacham Hotel, and read widely about Saskatchewan farmers' struggles in an effort to tell their story ("Even" 11).

Documenting what has changed for farmers since *Paper Wheat*, Robinson creates a multi-faceted food performance that erodes the earlier play's symbolism of wheat and bread. In *Street Wheat*, prairie staples — those symbols of the province's co-operative history and family-farm economy — are supplanted, as GMOs become a fixture of agribusiness. An alternative to growing wheat, canola is the solution to a financially secure future, but its commodity status is not equivalent to wheat/bread's sacred standing, signalling dire consequences for farmers and consumers. The play makes several references to Monsanto, genetic engineering, and even Schmeiser's court case — all of which are framed as a corporate take-over of the prairies. In one scene, two unnamed farmers (who serve as representatives of the larger group in much the same spirit as the characters in *Paper Wheat*) share a drink at the local Legion Hall and discuss their predicament in terms of larger changes occurring within the agriculture industry:

X: See Percy up in Bruno's still fighting Monsanto.

Y: Need more money than God to take on those boys.

X: Think that seed blew into his fields?

Y: Course it did. Those companies own most of the planet, but they don't own the wind.

X: Not yet.

Y: Not yet. (28)

The speculation that large corporations will achieve the impossible and “own the wind” reflects a corporate-bureaucratic system in which the farmer always loses. The government, Farmer Y complains, is “selling the universities to the chemical companies,” and politicians appear out of touch when it comes to decisions and policies (28-29). Farmer X admits that he has been thinking about growing GMOs, as “Somebody must be making a good dollar” from these crops, while Farmer Y is sceptical, making a comparison to DDT as one of many ill-conceived “things we do to this earth” (28). Like *Seeds*, *Street Wheat* is attuned to the ways in which corporate greed drives science, influences government, and changes the nature of farming. Where they differ is that while *Seeds* questions why consumers were not informed about GMOs being introduced into the food supply and suggests that Round Up Ready canola was “a huge success” because farmers “no longer had to manually weed their fields” (Soutar 20), *Street Wheat* presents GMOs

as inevitable considering farmers' desperation. "Canola makes a lousy sandwich," declares Bryna (Bill and Gerry's sister), and the once-sacred bread of *Paper Wheat* is now absent, just as wheat is no longer economically feasible (Robinson, *Street* 18). Robinson's farmers have their doubts about the safety of GMOs, but they have also been trading in uncertainties for some time, and urban consumers are not innocent bystanders.

Expanding upon *Paper Wheat*'s food-as-commodity performance, *Street Wheat* necessarily reimagines the market system to foreground farmers' own exploitation and the nation's seeming indifference. In other words, while Louie demonstrates how bread moves through the market, *Street Wheat* presents farmers as the objectified material broken down by the global economy. This kind of strategy — in which "artists insert themselves into the food system," as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes it — enables audiences to witness the human costs of globalization, as artists "work with and against" the food system's many stages: "procuring and producing . . . ; storage, distribution and exchange; processing and preparation; consumption; and disposal" ("Playing" 12). Newspaper articles in Robinson's archive touch on a number of interrelated developments for Saskatchewan farmers: the plummet in international grain prices, the shortcomings of federal aid programs, the dramatic rise in suicides, and the exodus of 250,000 people (approximately one quarter the province's population) from rural Saskatchewan during the final three decades of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> These historical changes are reflected in the play when Bryna mourns the suicide death of her husband, Davey, following the bank's foreclosure of their farm. Davey dreamed of being able to furnish a family's table with food, but *Street Wheat* suggests that the only harvests are of the bodies of dead farmers. If the table was the idyllic site of community formation in *Paper Wheat*, then *Street Wheat* highlights its violent dissolution with Davey shooting himself in the farmhouse kitchen. For Robinson, rural commensality is no longer the path to farmers' agency. Now that Wheat Pool shares are being sold on the stock exchange, Gerry recognizes that one's "neighbours" are not farmers, but a "mutual fund manager in Vancouver" who "farms shareholder dividends" (34). Like the disappearing grain elevators that once marked the horizon and created community hubs, Bryna feels that she too is "just some dot in the distance" (43). Her diminishment is echoed in the song "Dot Slash Greed," which evokes the stock exchange and the trading in of a traditional way of life

for “a big McCheese” (44). This new “McFarm” world is genetically engineered for factory-like efficiency (44), but the play pushes audiences to see the human cost. Indeed, one of Robinson’s initial ideas for staging included “dwarf[ing] the actors” with massive farm machinery: “I saw an actor wrapped in the octopus arms of air-seeder hoses,” he writes, as if being physically absorbed by globalization (*Street 2*).

With the family farm no longer viable, Robinson redefines commensality as a scene of death and ritual of mourning. J.S. Woodsworth’s socialist verse “Grace Before Meat,” which gives thanks for the common heritage of the working classes and is spoken by the O’Neill family before harvest-time lunches, now serves as the prayer recited when Davey’s ashes are scattered in the family’s wheat field (83). The reciting of grace usually sanctifies a meal, but in this instance, the merging of Davey’s physical remains with the field (where crops are harvested for public consumption) implies a kind of cannibalizing of prairie farmers by the late-capitalist society. Robinson’s analogy is very much in keeping with other plays’ strategies for critiquing the social injustices of food industries, particularly when Bryna contemplates placing Davey’s remains in a Co-op grocery store refrigerator or in a grain car heading to Vancouver.<sup>5</sup> The significance of a human death polluting the food is clear: everyone is implicated in an exploitative food industry. Even farmer Gerry, who sells his grain illegally across the border (against his brother’s wishes) for a better price than what he would have received through the Wheat Pool, must confront the potential injury that he causes both to himself and others as a result of dividing his community.

Robinson clearly wants wider audiences to recognize their own culpability in this exploitative industry, so he works to close cultural gaps between the rural and the urban, and between the western prairies and central Canada (or Ontario) — the seat of the federal government and the nation’s economic hub. For those closest to the farming crisis at the time of *Street Wheat*’s provincial tour, bridging these divisions was imperative. As one audience member from Prince Albert noted, “When you bring [the play] here to this crowd, you’re preaching to the converted. . . . We need it in schools in Toronto. I’m thinking of people that don’t care or they don’t understand the way of life. Where are they going to get their bread if this falls apart?” (Wiberg). In his Director’s Note, Ferguson echoes these sentiments: “Our culture is quickly becoming urbanized, and values are shifting faster than ever. I don’t want to make

judgements . . . but something is going very wrong when we don't value food, and when we don't value a reliable source for that food. Something is going wrong when we don't value each other." Although *Street Wheat* has not had an extensive production history outside of Saskatchewan, Robinson minimizes the distance between audience and performer to create a sense of inclusion.<sup>6</sup> Similar to *Seeds*, which opens with lab technicians interviewing and filming audience members as if conducting research, *Street Wheat* begins with Bill and Gerry seated in the audience as if attending the auction of Davey's farm. Saskatoon actor Skye Brandon, who played the roles of Davey and the Auctioneer in *Street Wheat*'s 2001 premiere, recalls that an affecting performance was facilitated by the intimate space of Meacham's Harvest Hall: "You're right beside the audience. I remember . . . seeing a 70-year-old farmer weeping by the end of the play. You don't get that anywhere else" (Gabruch).

The character Eddie, a female poet from Ontario who enters into a romantic relationship with Gerry, also bridges the distance between urban and rural perspectives. Reflecting on his own limited knowledge of farming, Robinson notes, "Being an outsider, I wanted an outsider who had to learn the ropes along with me, and since the arts appear to be expendable in the new world order, this outsider became the poet, Eddie" (10-11).<sup>7</sup> Eddie is not cognizant of the work and skill required to grow food, so when Bryna suggests they plant a garden, Eddie is initially resistant:

EDDIE: Anyway, it's cheaper to buy from the Superstore.

BRYNA: Cheap cause Superstore steals the food in the first place.

EDDIE: Well, yeah, but by the time you count your hours, you know, what's the point?

BRYNA: How much do you make from selling a poem?

EDDIE: Usually? Nothing.

BRYNA: Then you'll make a good farmer. (*Hands her a hoe*)  
C'mon. (18-19)

In keeping with Woodsworth's sacrament "Grace Before Meat," Bryna's analogy introduces the notion of a vocation, a higher calling to serve humanity in ways not solely driven by profit.<sup>8</sup> Following Davey's suicide, she later confronts Eddie by underscoring the repercussions of Canadians' lack of engagement with farmers' plight: "Let me guess, Eddie. You boycott Starbucks coffee so the farmer in Columbia will

be paid a living wage. . . . Did you boycott your trendy little bakery so Davey would be paid a living wage? Did you boycott bread, Eddie, because Davey's blood was all over it" (76). Ultimately, Davey's sacrifice brings no deliverance, and the demise of the family farm seems inevitable. Eleven years after *Street Wheat's* original Saskatchewan production, the consequences of farmers' dubious salvation through GMOs would become the focus of *Seeds* when, at the 2012 Toronto premiere, another writer (not a poet, but a playwright) appeared on stage, trying to make sense of Monsanto's power.

### *Seeds*

Never have Canadian audiences seen seeds, plants, and food so out of control as in Soutar's *Seeds*. In a performance that I attended during Vancouver's 2014 Push Festival, a bag of canola seed dropped from the ceiling, landing with a loud bang on a laboratory tray and frightening the audience. Canola plants popped up in unusual places, including the "Playwright" character's drink (as a flowery garnish) when she interviewed weed scientists who testified that canola is an "extremely effective volunteer" spreading itself throughout the environment (52). Monsanto's development of the bovine growth hormone to increase milk production appeared as an overflowing laboratory beaker that became a drinking glass. The audience made audible moans when they witnessed the spilt milk being served. The strange, even startling mobility of these food-related items contributes to the play's foodscare performance and its overall "kinetic staging," which Erin Hurley details as one way "*Seeds* works on the sensate body" of the audience (3). Not surprisingly, the topic of food safety and the figurative language of consumption inform many theatre reviews. One newspaper article refers to *Seeds* as a "frankenfood drama" ("Why"), and Fishbane similarly highlights the "queasy relationship between science and money" (84). Another critic suggests the play's use of scientific and legal discourse is "heavy and undigested" but provides "moral issues to chew on" (Crew). Canadians' foodways appear to have been jeopardized, and the potential consequences are profoundly personal, with Soutar even being asked in an interview if she feeds GMO products to her children (Nuttall-Smith). These responses indicate that Soutar is playing with food's "slipperiness," its "untrustworthiness," in other words, the "alchemical side of the food personality," which according to Gaye Poole's study of food in

film and theatre, makes it an apt means of pollution, revenge, or taboo-breaking (218). In *Seeds*, the unlabelled presence of GMOs in food products is a kind of spectre, an unknown pollution that worries audiences who are informed that “99 percent of the canola grown in Saskatchewan is genetically modified canola” and that it is found in everything from McDonald’s French fries to Hellman’s mayonnaise (98).

While *Paper Wheat* and *Street Wheat* authenticate their documentary performances through close relationships with their farming communities, *Seeds*’ food performance explicitly targets urban consumers to engage with agribusiness by paradoxically encouraging anxieties that stem from their lack of knowledge about food production. It is important to note, here, that at the time of writing this article, *Seeds* has only been performed in major urban centres, and has yet to be performed in front of a Saskatchewan audience. In an interview, Soutar suggests some possible reasons for this:

My sense is that this case is very controversial [there] . . . and it’s divided a lot of people. . . . When theatres look at it, they say, “OK, I have to think of my sponsors, I have to think of my board, and I also think maybe we’ve become saturated with that story. . . .” They feel they know all there is to know and who is this playwright from Montreal who’s come to illuminate something else for them. (qtd. in King)

Soutar’s outsider status is certainly relevant. Even as *Seeds* presents itself as a search for the truth through verbatim theatre (Theatre Porte Parole’s signature style), it is primarily an anxious urban consumer’s investigation. Soutar’s own character, the “Playwright,” appeals to the audience to identify with her editorial vision as she examines Percy Schmeiser’s court case and the relative safety of GMOs. As we move from *Paper Wheat* and *Street Wheat* to *Seeds*, then, there is a marked shift as this unfolding food drama is no longer preaching to the converted (a claim made about the two earlier plays). The hero has become the individual consumer (not a farmer) as *Seeds* deciphers the multi-national food economy and follows the conventions of other twenty-first-century farmscape performances, which address urban citizens’ “lack of awareness about where . . . food comes from,” challenge their “divorced” relationship from the land, and replace “apathy” with dialogue (Haedicke 94-95).



Of all the plays, Soutar's relies the most on a material archive and scrutinizes its questionable "facts" — an approach that allows the documentary form and foodscare performance to intersect by foregrounding urban consumers' lack of knowledge and insecurities about food origins. According to Martin's description, contemporary documentary theatre excels at depicting the "mediatization of everyday life," which accounts for the form's re-emergence during times of crisis when the "truth" is up for debate (13-14). *Seeds'* extensive use of green screens with projections of images, news reports, corporate advertising, and live video enables, according to director Chris Abraham, "the audience to understand the role the media had in the transmission of the story, and how the play, in turn, also manipulates it" (qtd. in Fishbane 83). In other words, *Seeds* invites its audience to question not only what they eat, but also the *food media* they consume, which further alerts them to the multiple ways in which they are distanced from food production. Recently, Filewod has described *Seeds'* investigative journalism as reminiscent of the United States Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspapers of the 1930s. He argues that "*Seeds* establishes authority by drawing attention to the disciplinary process of research" with the ensemble cast (who remain on stage always) performing "the stability of a research group" ("Supercharged" 196). This research group, however, includes individuals who appear dishonest or reluctant to speak openly, as well as corporations and privately funded scientists whose motivations are suspect. The audience certainly "trusts the play," as Filewod argues, but there is also insecurity, which *Seeds* uses to its advantage for its foodscare performance (196).<sup>9</sup> In a world of questionable food and manipulated truths, then, the only person with whom audiences can place their confidence is with the Playwright herself, who advocates for consumers to make informed decisions about what they eat and whom they believe.

Another way that Soutar uses foodscare conventions is by presenting food producers as targets of suspicion. Although Percy is but one small player in a complex GMO industry, *Seeds* continually highlights his conceivable dishonesty. In one scene, the Schmeisers' kitchen table stands in for an upscale Ottawa restaurant as the Playwright interviews Tony Creber, a lawyer and lobbyist for the biotech industry. As the two discuss the statistical impossibility of Percy's claim that wind-born Monsanto seeds contaminated his fields, Percy silently joins them, as if seated in his own home eating dinner. Percy's integrity is up for debate, and his

presence at the table implies the far-reaching impact of both his defensive actions against Monsanto, and the company's monopoly on meals across the country. Having been accused of "brown-bagging" (purchasing Monsanto seed through illegal means), Percy later wanders through the audience, distributing unidentified seeds from a brown paper bag. At the Vancouver performance, some audience members waited expectantly with open palms, while others watched, no hands extended. Through these conflicting representations, Soutar argues that *Seeds* forces audiences to "do their own research, to make their own assessments" as the story "throws the questions back onto their plate" (Nuttall-Smith). Considering the biotech industry's power and the questionable ethics of corporate scientists, Gyllian Raby contends that *Seeds* pushes "the audience to question whether Percy's lie is morally relevant to the big question of 'what is life and who owns it?' The moral conundrum over Schmeiser's use of GMO seeds is dwarfed by the emerging complexities of world food futures" (272). It is important to remember, though, that Percy fixates the Playwright's and the audience's attention. Soutar even describes the ambiguity of his character as "storytelling gold" (Nuttall-Smith). By emphasizing semiotic ambiguity at multiple levels (the uncertain nature of GMO products, as well as the slipperiness of the stakeholders), *Seeds'* foodscare performance suggests there is no definitive recourse to safety. The only reliable path forward, as modelled by the Playwright, is for urban audiences to become activist consumers.

To further expose her fellow consumers' unwitting entanglement in genetically modified foodways, the Playwright's own body assumes a participatory role in the foodscare performance. Because GMOs are not labelled on food packaging and undetectable through taste or smell, Soutar must externalize their presence in ways that push her audience to consider not only the "materiality of food, its dynamic and unstable character" (through the startling appearances of canola plants and seeds), but also food's "relationship to the . . . body, particularly the female body, and its importance to community" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Playing" 11). Fishbane and others observe that "Soutar becomes her play's own hero" with her pregnancy bringing "an urgency to the research" (84). Indeed, when act two opens with the Playwright lying on the Schmeisers' kitchen table, which serves as a medical examination table during a prenatal ultrasound test, audiences must confront the uncomfortable relationship between profit-driven science, food,

and the integrity of the pregnant body in a performance of vulnerability shared by another recent foodscare drama.<sup>10</sup> Directly following the ultrasound, Louise Schmeiser serves the Playwright a bowl of corn chowder, and although Hurley interprets the “cozy Saskatchewan farm” as a place where the “soup is always hot,” creating the “affectively warmer stage-right arena” (compared to the “colder” scientific discussions at stage left), the world of genetic engineering clearly infiltrates the Playwright’s body and daily food rituals (2). Indeed, the two foods (milk and corn) consumed by the Playwright during her interviews at the Schmeisers’ are associated with Monsanto products. By foregrounding the pervasiveness of GMOs, *Seeds* accomplishes what Robert C. Nunn suggests documentary theatre does best: it makes the “theatrical reflection of a real event . . . an alienating device: it renders strikingly visible . . . an aspect of the audience’s reality which has hitherto been so familiar as to be invisible” (55). Thus, just as *Street Wheat* inserts farmers’ bodies into the global economic system to make visible the destruction of the family farm, *Seeds* presents the urban consumer physically caught up in the unknown consequences of the GMO industry.

To reinforce the bodily performance, *Seeds* further dissociates GM foods from healthy nutrition through “verbal elaboration” that corroborates the Playwright’s maternal anxieties (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing” 3). Despite the lack of scientific proof about the dangers of GMOs, the Playwright, by her own admission, includes interview materials that serve her editorial vision. On multiple occasions, Dr. Vandana Shiva speaks to the non-equivalence of GM and non-GM foods, and other scientists express opinions based not on definitive research, but on their own parental concerns. These warnings reinforce the Playwright’s self-protection strategies, such as having her husband buy \$25.00 organic yoghurt because “It’s worth it” (Soutar 85). Purchasing decisions become the main recourse in countering unreliable foodways shaped by untrustworthy farmers, corporate scientists, and weakened regulatory policies. In a food crisis of broken trust, Govan and Rebellato argue that binding food within a system of exchange “seems less dangerous” (37), but ultimately functions as a “late-capitalist gesture . . . of exchange and restitution” (40). Although the high cost of organic food offers some security, the Playwright remains caught up in a commodity culture that is paradoxically both the cause of, and now the tenuous solution for, this food scare. With the issue of GM

foods unresolved, the Playwright's advocacy for her consumer-audience remains at the forefront, especially when she questions members of the Bruno community about Percy's reputation. With their relationship less amicable by the conclusion of the play, the Playwright embraces "one irrefutable truth" — that Percy "ignited a worldwide narrative about GM seeds that continues to sprawl in contradictory directions even today" (127). For Soutar, that narrative takes the form of a food-scare performance in which urban consumers' need for information and reassurance is paramount.

## Conclusion

When one scrutinizes the food performances in *Paper Wheat*, *Street Wheat*, and *Seeds*, an escalating food scare emerges in which food is systematically dissociated from eating and health through an unfolding narrative of socioeconomic crisis and broken trust on the part of both farmers and consumers. This rupture begins when food as a daily ritual and sacred symbol turns into an unappetizing, profane commodity; from here, food becomes a devalued product polluted by the deaths of farmers and rural communities, and eventually transforms into an out-of-control corporate invention of disputed safety. The shifting focus from the rural to the urban, producer to consumer, is a sign that within a globalized food economy dominated by multinational corporations, where and how theatre audiences engage with the topic of farming have necessarily changed. Because of documentary theatre's editorial component, Martin stresses that each play "emphasizes certain kinds of memory and buries others" by adhering to its "own rules of admissibility" (11). As a documentary play about twenty-first-century farming, *Seeds* grapples with a late-capitalist food world, but so too does *Street Wheat* and, to a lesser extent, *Paper Wheat*. The collapse of the co-operative movement and the family-farm economy is key to understanding Monsanto's growing presence on the prairies, but it is also beyond the scope of Soutar's *Seeds* — an omission that necessarily influences how urban audiences assess their own roles, responsibilities, and vulnerabilities within a system of food commodities. "Performances of the senses," of which food performances are a part, "reveal histories," according to André Lepecki and Sally Banes: "In other words: as the senses shift in relation to social and cultural changes, what they also change are the political conditions of possibility" by alerting audiences

to aspects of their worlds that they previously ignored or failed to perceive (2-3). In this light, the argument can be made that as a foodscare performance, *Seeds* is an urban playwright's reactive representation of issues that have long preoccupied farming communities and to which consumers previously paid little heed — that is, until the consequences appeared on their dinner plates. By focusing on her audiences' lack of knowledge about, and distance from, food production while at the same time activating their anxieties, Soutar has taken a critical step closer to engaging urban citizens with life on Saskatchewan farms.

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A series of improvised skits inspired by stories from Saskatchewan residents, the first version of *Paper Wheat*, directed by Andras Tahn, was never published and served as the performance text for the original production in 1977. Subsequently revised by the second cast and incoming director Guy Sprung, the second version toured provincially (1977) and nationally (1979), and was published in *Canadian Theatre Review* (1978). The third version was published as a book in 1982 and incorporated revisions made by Tahn to the *Canadian Theatre Review* edition.

<sup>2</sup> For Jameson, stereotypes of the past compensate for a present in which “we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience” (21).

<sup>3</sup> Saskatchewan actor Sharon Bakker, who had performed in both the original production and in the provincial and national tours of *Paper Wheat*, was cast in *Street Wheat* in the lead role of Bryna. The *Paper Wheat* tours featured champion fiddle player and retired farmer Bill Prokopchuk (Filewod, *Collective* 101), and *Street Wheat* similarly incorporated the talents of prairie musician Rocky Lakner.

<sup>4</sup> Examples in Robinson's archive include Marina Jimenez's “Saskatchewan's Fields of Sorrows” from the *National Post* (1999), and Adam Killick's “Depopulation of Rural Areas Taxes Saskatchewan Cities” from the *National Post* (2000).

<sup>5</sup> In Bertolt Brecht's and Naomi Wallace's respective dramatizations of slaughterhouse workers in *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* (1929-31) and *Slaughter City* (1996), Jocelyn L. Buckner notes that the blood of humans and animals purposely mix: “Audiences must contend with both their own consumption of these meat products as well as their own corporeal fragility” (129).

<sup>6</sup> Robinson “conceived of the play without blackouts, moving immediately” from one setting to the next (*Street 2*), and Dancing Sky Theatre’s production took place “in the round, on the floor of Harvest Hall rather than on the stage” (Hugli). For Robinson, this immediacy was about “the creation (recreation) of community” (*Street 2*).

<sup>7</sup> Originally from Northern Ontario, Robinson lived for several years in Saskatchewan.

<sup>8</sup> With this verse venerating all forms of labour, Kenneth McNaught notes that Woodsworth’s aim was “to ‘secularize’ religion — to make it part and parcel of everyday living” as part of his association with the Labour Church (137).

<sup>9</sup> Filewod quotes Jenn Stephenson, who blogged about *Seeds*’ inclusion of the theatre-making process, to highlight “Annabel’s uncertainty — and her doubts become ours, keeping conclusions at bay” (“Supercharged” 196). While Filewod counters Stephenson, I argue that as a foodscare performance, *Seeds* purposely generates *both* affects (a sense of uncertainty and authority) for urban-consumer audiences.

<sup>10</sup> A similar but more horrific use of pregnancy to augment the potential consequences of GM foods takes place in Jason Patrick Rothery’s reworking of the *Oedipus Rex* tragedy in *Inside the Seed* (2016). The CEO of a bioengineering company must confront physical deformities appearing in newborns that are traced back to genetic mutations in sperm after men consume the product Golden Grain.

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