

# CARROLL AIKINS'S EXPERIMENTS IN PLAYWRITING

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**F**OR THE MOST PART, theatre historians had concurred in assigning Carroll Aikins's contributions to Canadian theatre a lesser rank than did his contemporaries until James Hoffman's 1986 article "Carroll Aikins and the Home Theatre" restored Aikins's profile to a higher level. Hoffman reminded us of the many Canadian theatrical firsts that occurred in 1921 and 1922 at Aikins's theatre on his fruit farm in Naramata on Lake Okanagan; namely, "the first national theatre in Canada"; "the first Canadian Little Theatre"; "the first Greek drama presented in Canada"; "the first Passion play ever given in Canada"; and the first "dome horizon" – a form of cyclorama – to be installed in Canada (Hoffman 1986, 51).

Aikins's Home Theatre was officially opened on 3 November 1920 by Prime Minister Arthur Meighan and closed in August 1922; however, during its brief existence it achieved recognition across Canada. "As an experimental workshop," Vincent Massey (1922, 203) judged it "the most significant theatre" in Canada, from which he expected "significant things to develop" because of Mr. and Mrs. Aikins's "conscientious study of the technique of production and their research into all the problems of the theatre." Sadly, this little theatre, situated on the second floor of a fruit-packing house in the midst of the splendid lake and mountain scenery of the Okanagan Valley, never fulfilled Massey's expectations. The unexpected failure of the fruit market forced Aikins to restructure his finances and abandon his dream of establishing a Canadian art theatre in British Columbia after barely two years in operation.

Even this brief introduction sparks a number of questions. Who was Carroll Aikins? How did he come to be living in the Okanagan? How did a fruit farmer in a remote area of British Columbia come to

establish a theatre that clearly reflected the European influences of Adolph Appia, Gordon Craig, Jacques Copeau, Harley Granville-Barker, and Barry Jackson – influences that were only slowly being introduced in the major centres of the United States at this time by the founders of the Art Theatre, or Little Theatre, movement? And more puzzling, perhaps, what theatrical experience did Aikins have in the years prior to his opening of the Home Theatre at the age of thirty-two? Although this study provides partial answers to most of these questions, its primary focus is on the forgotten, formative years of Aikins's life in British Columbia during which he attempted to understand the new theatre movement and wrote at least four plays.

Aikins was born in Stanstead, Quebec, on 22 August 1888, into a family that was well positioned, with money and prestige, and that moved to Winnipeg when he was an infant. His maternal grandfather, the Honourable C.C. Colby, was member of Parliament for Stanstead from 1867 to 1891, and president of the Privy Council under Sir John A. Macdonald. One of Canada's first appointed senators in 1867, Aikins's paternal grandfather, James Cox Aikins, served as a member of Sir John A's Cabinet as secretary of state (1869-73, 1878-80) before becoming lieutenant-governor of Manitoba (1882-88). His uncle, Sir James Albert Aikins, after serving as a member of Parliament from Manitoba, became, as did his father before him, lieutenant-governor of Manitoba (1916-26), where he conspicuously promoted a love of the fine arts and music throughout the province. Aikins's father, John Somerset Aikins, served as the member for Rockwood in the Manitoba House of Assembly between 1879 and 1883 but declined to run for a second term; rather, he focused his attention on the real estate and insurance interests of his father's Manitoba and North West Loan Company.<sup>1</sup> Coming from an important Manitoba family known for its prestige, wealth, and influence, Carroll Aikins not surprisingly received the broad and enlightened education that would prepare him for a public life. Educated first at St. John's Anglican College in Winnipeg, Aikins began his university training at McGill University. The discovery of a spot on his lungs, which indicated suspected tuberculosis, caused him to leave after only one year. As

<sup>1</sup> "[Another] uncle, Dr. Charles W. Colby, was a long-time professor at McGill University, who specialised in early Canadian history and wrote *Canadian Types of the Old Regime* (New York 1908). His obituary notice in the *Montreal Gazette* (12 December 1945) cites his lifelong 'mingling of academic and business interests,' his 'cultivated mind,' and 'his life of varied service,' an epitaph that in many ways characterized his nephew, Carroll" (Hoffman 1986, 51).

Hoffman (1986, 52) reveals, Aikins spent the next several years living and travelling throughout Europe; unfortunately, however:

Dates and details are hard to find, and there is no record, by his own hand or even second hand, of his discovery of modern European theatrical innovation, whether by visits to the playhouses or by his readings or by discussions with others.<sup>2</sup> It is likely that, as a cultivated person in the process of acquiring a broad, humanistic education, he included an up-to-date theoretical knowledge of drama as part of his learning; and as the thoughts of the contemporary dramatic prophets like Craig and Appia were enunciated in idealistic, even religious tones, they probably greatly appealed to this eager, Anglican youth from a country just beginning to entertain possibilities of a new, national drama.

Upon Aikins's return to Canada in 1908, his father convinced him to move to Naramata, where he began farming 100 acres of hilly, lakeside property, which he named "Rekadom" (which means "house by the water" in Russian). Five years later, on 16 April 1913, he married Vassar-educated Katherine Foster, the daughter of the American consul-general at Ottawa, who "was to become an ideal partner in the Home Theatre venture, performing major roles, directing and assisting with the teaching" (54).

It was probably during Aikins's tour of Europe that he first became acquainted with the new trends in the theatre that had been evolving prior to the First World War. Beginning in the late 1880s (with the work of André Antoine at the Théâtre Libre in Paris, Otto Brahm at the Freie Bühne in Berlin, and J.T. Grein at London's Independent Theatre) and in the 1890s (with the writings of Adolph Appia, the productions of Anton Chekov's works by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Constantin Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theatre, and the early plays of George Bernard Shaw), both a new drama and innovative theatrical theory were evident throughout Europe. A new wave of critics, directors, designers, and playwrights were proclaiming their intention of reforming and finding new modes of expression within the theatre. Although slower to take hold in Canada and the United States, dissatisfaction with the theatre of the day was also growing, as is revealed in numerous articles bewailing the super-

<sup>2</sup> Carroll A. Beichman, Aikins's daughter, noted that "my father did meet [Edward Henry] Gordon Craig in Paris although I don't know anything about the circumstances, save that it was of course pre WWI, probably ca 1907." Correspondence, n.d.

ficiality, commercialism, and arch-conservatism of so much play production. The impetus for these articles lay partly in the North American visits of such renowned European productions as Maurice Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird* in 1910, the Abbey Theatre's *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1912, and Max Reinhardt's production of *Sumurun* in 1914.

Of perhaps even more importance than these productions was the 1915 exhibition of the "new stagecraft" (as the European trends were called), which included designs by Appia, Craig, several of Reinhardt's artists, and models of theatres and stage machinery that visited Cambridge, Massachusetts, New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland. The American commercial interests who controlled the theatre in the United States and Canada failed to realize that a growing number of playgoers had become intolerant of the old-fashioned fare that continued to dominate the professional stage. As a result, an increasingly affluent, better-educated, thoughtful middle class, which subscribed to this new theatrical spirit, began rejecting the mainstream theatre and eventually launched its own brand of independent theatre: Roy Mitchell and the Arts and Letters Players in Toronto (1910), the Washington Square Players (1914), and Alice and Irene Lewisohn's Neighborhood Playhouse (1915) in New York, George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell's Provincetown Players (1916), George Brown's Pasadena Players (1918), and Maurice Browne's Chicago Little Theatre (1919) being but a few examples.

During his twelve years in British Columbia prior to the opening of the Home Theatre in 1920, Aikins followed developments in the United States from a distance, corresponding with the exponents of the Art Theatre movement while experimenting as a playwright. He wrote at least four plays – *The Destroyers* (1915), *The Fullness of Life* (1917), *Real Estate* (1918), and *The God of Gods* (1918) – plays in which he attempted to reconcile the new drama (which had a wide social impact) with the clutter and closure of melodrama. Since these plays provide some of the earliest examples of scripts written in British Columbia (and, indeed, in Canada) that attempted to reflect the theatrical innovations being discussed in various thoughtful journals throughout North America at the time, they deserve greater recognition today.

In his first play, *The Destroyers* (1915), Aikins began by questioning the humanistic values and stereotypical "truths" of Edwardian Canada by looking at the First World War's impact upon individuals. The play, which was never produced, opens as John and Margaret Shear,

a recently married couple in the employ of Paul Solduc, minister of foreign affairs of Cosmopotamia, express their hope of leaving service and owning a home and a business, provided they do not become involved in the threatening war. As John says: "Why should we go to war? We've nothing against those fellows and they've nothing against us – if we spoke the same language we'd be one big family" (*Destroyers*, 4). In the next scene, Solduc, General Marx, and Clement Wraithe, the three men charged with answering an ultimatum from a neighbouring country, debate whether it is "expedient for the nation to go to war" (*Destroyers*, 27). Wraithe alone argues in favour of arbitration: "Would any mother in the land scheme and connive to send her son to battle? Would any father? Would any young man leave his wife or his sweetheart, unless he were stamped into a blood-fury by what we call patriotism?" (*Destroyers*, 24). Solduc responds: "we must have patriotism and we must have war" in order to stamp "our civilization on the remotest corners of the earth." To which Wraithe replies:

That's slavery you propose – thrusting our yoke on the free world. As for your judgment – it will come, not in fifty years – but to-morrow, Paul, to-morrow. You'll see it in the face of every wife, of every mother; you'll find it in the smoke of burning homes; it will be stamped in fire across the pillaged country; and on your head will be the blood of every man who dies in this foul shambles! (*Destroyers*, 34)

Despite Wraithe's objections, the declaration of war is signed and Act 2 begins one month later in the ward of a hospital, where Mary, a Red Cross nurse and the fiancée of Solduc, tends the wounded. Solduc and General Marx enter. The soldiers "eagerly" agree with the general's wishes that they recover quickly and return to action. The general then presents Mary with sealed orders transferring her to the front as part of a field-ambulance detachment. Although worried about Mary's safety, Solduc returns home and tells John, his servant, that he will "have no employment for able-bodied men – who might be in the ranks." Although reluctant to leave his wife, Margaret, and despite her pleas, John enlists.

Act 3 begins a month later; General Marx reveals to Solduc and Wraithe that, during the first two months, 200,000 lives had been lost. He estimates that the war will last at least a year and that the death toll will number 4.5 million soldiers. After Wraithe and the general leave, Margaret reveals that her husband has been one of the

casualties, and she condemns Solduc as the Destroyer who “wanted all common people to be killed – dirt that they are! It was nothing to you – nothing! for you were safe above it all, death couldn’t touch you here, the great man in the great house, with sentries pacing up and down outside!” (*Destroyers*, 116-17).

She then draws a small revolver and threatens Solduc’s life but surrenders the gun upon learning of his impending marriage the next day to Mary. When a servant enters with a communication that reveals that Mary also has been killed, the grief-struck Solduc presses a button on the wall; as his reading light goes out, a special frame-light of intense brightness encircles a full-size reproduction in oil of Henner’s *Christ on the Cross*:

(The picture of Christ on the Cross stands out like fire against the darkness of the room. He moves away from the wall and stares at it. A moment passes. He then staggers towards it.)

Solduc: Christ! (A pause) Christ! Have pity on us all!

(He reels and falls in front of the picture. A few moments pass in silence and the curtain slowly falls). (*Destroyers*, 124)

In spite of the staging techniques in this final tableau, which serves as a precursor to the most memorable production at the Home Theatre, *Victory in Defeat*, which consisted of eleven religious tableaux, *The Destroyers* falls into the category of realistic, or representational, drama. Such realism, an integral part of the Art Theatre movement of the day, is evident in the dialogue (particularly that of the soldiers in the hospital) but primarily in Aikins’s questioning of the massive destruction of life and in the impact of the deaths of the enlisted men upon the people they left behind. Understandably, given the general support for the Great War in Canada in 1915, the play was never produced. Nevertheless, it should be better known because this may be the only Canadian play written during either of the world wars or the Korean conflict to espouse such anti-war sentiment during the actual warfare. Most Canadian plays concerned with the First World War would now be considered propaganda pieces that glorified Canada’s and Britain’s war efforts. Indeed, there is a marked contrast in sentiment between *The Destroyers* and other war dramas being written in British Columbia at the same time: such plays as *Air Raids, or Signals* (1918) and *The Awakening* (1918) by Esther Crosfield of Vancouver; and *A Bolt from the Blue* (1919), *A Daughter of France* (1919),

*A Fight for Time* (1919), *For the Honour of the Service* (1919), and *A Friend of the Enemy* (1919) by Morison Kyle, also of Vancouver. The only other realistic portrayal of the enlisted men in the First World War written by a British Columbia author occurs fifteen years after Aikins's play, when William S. Atkinson of Vernon, British Columbia, writes *Glory Hole* (1930) in response to a British company's cross-Canada tour of *Journey's End*.

Aikins's second play, *The Fullness of Life* (1917), is set in British Columbia's Cascade Mountains and focuses on the distinction between love, free love, and lust. Undoubtedly his best play in the realistic genre, *The Fullness of Life* incorporates British Columbia as an inspiration for characters and setting. Drawing upon his life at Naramata, he created a fascinating picture of people living in British Columbia's remote regions at the time of the First World War. Amy Sorel, who once had dreams of becoming a concert violinist, had become the mistress of the "cruel and beastly" Basil Morton in Montreal; however, when he refused to marry her, she joined a travelling show. Arriving in British Columbia, she met and married Aeneas Rapid, a Siwash "half-breed," and lived with him in a shack on the side of a mountain some fifty miles from the railway. The play opens with Morton's arrival at the shack as Aeneas and David Crashaw, a former Church of England priest, are about to leave on a caribou hunt. Before Amy and Morton meet, however, Amy unburdens her life story to her friend Mary Crashaw to explain why she refuses to have children – the cause of her marital problems. Mary Crashaw then reveals to Amy that she is not married to David and that they had fled to British Columbia after he had left his wife and his parish in England when the bishops refused to allow him to preach his interpretation of love.

Morton intends to bring Amy back to Montreal by any means possible. When he meets Amy, he lies and tells her that he had obtained a marriage licence on the day she left Montreal, that he has arranged for her to study the violin under Stavinski in New York, and that he will advance her all the necessary money "with no strings to it" and let her follow her dream of becoming a concert violinist. As she is considering all this, Morton enters into a conversation with David Crashaw on the concepts of love, free love, and lust. After an argument with Aeneas, Amy agrees to leave with Morton. Act 3 begins at midnight in the forest where Amy and Morton have camped for the night, as Morton reveals that he has deceived Amy again and that there will be no lessons in New York and no marriage. Rejecting

him, Amy announces her intention to return to Aeneas. As Morton begins to force his affections upon her, David Crashaw arrives to announce that Aeneas is close behind and that "It's his Indian blood that's up. You've never seen him as he is tonight." When Aeneas arrives, Amy pretends to faint in order to allow Morton to escape because she does not want Aeneas to be imprisoned for shooting him. Aeneas had detoured prior to his arrival, however, and weakened the bridge that Morton must cross in order to escape. After Morton is discovered to have fallen to his death, Amy falls to her knees before Aeneas to proclaim her love and her desire to remain with him and bear his children.

Aeneas: (gently) Stand up. (He raises her gently and supports her with his arm.) It is not good that you should kneel to me.  
We go together, you and I. Shoulder to shoulder.

Amy: (She looks up into his face.)  
Yes, together.  
Into the fullness of life.

The curtain falls. (*Fullness*, 61)

Throughout this play, Aikins points out the universality of love in its various forms and suggests how it becomes deformed and alienated from its natural goals. Morton represents deformed love, or lust, David and Mary represent free love, and Amy and Aeneas represent married love.

Today's audience probably would not object to the lifestyle of the characters in *The Fullness of Life*, but, at the time it was written, the play did contain, by Edwardian standards, an indisputably immoral act of intimacy without benefit of clergy. As Daniel Frohman, president of the Actors' Fund of America, noted at this time, the romance and sentiment of the nineteenth-century theatre had been replaced by sex and sensation. Had it been produced, undoubtedly a number of clergy and their parishioners would have voiced their concern for what they would have perceived to be an attack on the moral standards of the day. Clergy throughout North America – such as the Reverend John Coburn of Toronto<sup>3</sup> and the Reverend John

<sup>3</sup> John Coburn, a Toronto Methodist minister, organized a mass protest meeting on 1 November 1912 at Massey Hall, which was attended by some 4,000 people and resulted in the formation of the Committee of Forty. This committee had a mandate to mount a campaign to clean up the theatres of Toronto. For a discussion of his censorship campaign in Toronto, see L.W. Conolly (1980).



Roach Straton (pastor of New York's Calvary Baptist Church) – used their pulpits to uphold what they believed to be ordinary, decent, middle-class morality, which they considered to be under attack from the writers being produced by those involved in the Art Theatre movement. The Reverend Mr. Straton maintained that the theatre must be placed under “proper control” because “the three greatest foundation stones of our Anglo-Saxon civilization ... the home, the purity of women, and the sanctity of the Sabbath” (Bordman 1995, 105) were being deliberately threatened by provocative productions. Others, such as Vincent Massey (1922, 200) disagreed with such statements and noted that, with the works of George Bernard Shaw, the “theatre is now fairly rid of the false morality that applauded the polite indecencies of the stage, while it labelled as immoral the efforts of the dramatists to deal honestly with fundamental passions of men and women.” In creating passionate characters in *The Fullness of Life*, Aikins clearly aligned himself with the established writers of the Art Theatre movement and against those who wished plays to be turned into moral tracts calculated to inculcate a certain accepted standard of morality.

On another level, there is a temptation to relate *The Fullness of Life* to specific aspects of the author's life. This compounding of facts and conjectures is useful in that it helps us recognize the basis for Aikins's work, but it is dangerous in that it tempts us to ignore the transmutation of experience that is the primary function of the artist. Nevertheless, one may speculate that Aikins found the inspiration for *The Fullness of Life* in his wife's love for him and in her willingness to accept his life in Naramata. Remembering that Katherine Foster Aikins was Vassar-educated and the daughter of the American consul-general at Ottawa, one imagines that she had faced a choice similar to Amy's – the life of an American socialite or that of a farmer's wife on a fruit farm in remote British Columbia.

If Amy was inspired by Aikins's wife, then Aikins might have found inspiration for the character of Joseph West in *Real Estate* (1918) in his father, John Somerset Aikins, the successful real estate man who had convinced Aikins to relocate to the Okanagan for his health. *Real Estate* is a gentle comedy set in Ottawa. Joseph West is being sued by Everett Sloane, an English gentleman who had purchased fruit farm land from West only to discover that, while two acres were level, the rest of the land consisted of “undulations” down the side of a mountain. West has come to Ottawa hoping that Sir Malvern

Thompson, chief justice of Canada and a friend of West's youth, will quash the suit. A consummate salesman, West attempts to sell BC land to everyone he meets – even in prison, where he tries to sell land to his cellmate, String:

British Columbia. Ever been there? ... Some people call it "The California of Canada." But, I don't agree with them. California's too hot and too dusty. Next to Honolulu, we've got the finest climate on earth. And to my mind, we've got a better climate than Honolulu. It's more bracing. And there aren't any fleas. (*Estate*, Act 2, Page 4)

The major plot complication is that Everett Sloane had met and become engaged to Dorothy O'Donnell, West's stepdaughter, on the boat from England. When Dorothy discovers that Sloane is suing her stepfather, she breaks their engagement. Eventually, Sir Malvern resolves the suit by making West refund Sloane's money – despite West's assessment that Sloane is

the sort of squealing baby real estate plunger that makes me sick. If you weren't satisfied with your lot why couldn't you unload it on someone else and keep your mouth shut. That's what everyone does ... preachers, lawyers, doctors, everyone! That's the game. That's Real Estate. (*Estate*, Act 2, Page 17)

The couple are reunited, and Sir Malvern, finding West guilty of shady practices, sentences him to live on the Sloane property for five years, during which time he is prohibited from entering into any land deals. Always the optimist, West agrees, believing that he will make a fortune growing mushrooms in the dark, undulating crevices of his new farm.

During the 1920s and 1930s the Art Theatre movement transformed itself into the Little Theatre movement, and more than 700 Little Theatres blossomed all across North America. These amateur ensembles, although a source of frequently excellent entertainment, soon lost the urge to experiment that had categorized the Art Theatre movement and, as a rule, were content to mount popular fare that appealed to the local population. *Real Estate* compares favourably to the type of entertainment that these various amateur theatres chose to perform. Indeed, had *Real Estate* been produced at the Home Theatre, an audience composed of people from Naramata, Summerland, Penticton, and other parts of the Okanagan would probably have responded enthusiastically. West's optimism and outlandish claims

for the land of the Okanagan would have brought smiles to the farmers of the area:

I could give you true figures of annual profits per acre on some of those orchards that would make you take the next train West. But, they're exceptions. I never mention them because I don't want my settlers to be disappointed. I merely tell them, conservatively, that they can count on \$500.00 an acre a year when their trees come in to bearing. And when they make a thousand the difference is all velvet and they don't need to think twice about plunking it in to a big seven-passenger car. (*Estate*, Act 2, Page 6)

*Real Estate* demonstrates Aikins's ability to create humour from everyday life, his facility to write popular fare that would appeal to the community in which he lived, and his sardonic take on questionable business ethics.

Aikins's play compares favourably with other plays of this popular, localized genre being written in British Columbia at the time, such as William S. Atkinson's *Meet the Wife, a Farce Comedy of an Okanagan Fruit Ranch*, which was performed in Vernon on 19 February 1925.<sup>4</sup> Whereas Aikins was writing before the failure of the fruit market, Atkinson was writing after that failure. In Atkinson's play, the Resthope Ranch in the Okanagan Valley is suffering through hard times and, to save the ranch, Jim Latimer, who is in partnership with his army buddies Reggie Popple and William Murphy, decides to marry a woman who is rich. Reggie explains this to Mrs. Sheila Trevain, a widow of undoubted wealth:

Reg. We find it somewhat difficult to develop the orchard very much on what is left over from our returns after paying board, irrigation and taxes.

Mrs. T. (Laughing) It must be impossible – I should say. Tell me are you really as hard up as all that?

Reg. Er – well – something very like it. . . .

<sup>4</sup> Upon his return to Vernon after serving with the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the First World War, William S. Atkinson wrote a number of scripts. Atkinson's second play, entitled *Ogopogo, or The Sea Serpent* (1926), also found its inspiration in the Okanagan Valley. Other plays written by Atkinson included the following: *The Man From Saskatchewan* (1927), *Percy of the Prairie* (1927), *The Saving of Gasovania* (1927), *The Cat's Whiskers* (1928), *So This Is Canada* (1928), *The Mean Guy* (1929), *Glory Hole* (1930), *The Chicago Lady Duxington* (1931), *Sentimental Sally* (1934), *Little England* (1937), *Dear Little War Debt* (1941), and *Money from Home* (1941).

Mrs. T. But you are well educated aren't you.

Reg. Yes, but I seemed to learn the wrong things at school.

Mrs. T. I see – to avoid success – take a classical education. But tell me some more, please do.

Reg. Well really, there isn't much to tell. Bill and I expect to be able to jog along for awhile – in fact, until our orchard is in full bearing, providing James arrangements for getting married mature –

Mrs. T. Capt. Latimer getting married?

Reg. Er – yes – At least we hope so. (*Wife*, Act I, Page 15)

After a series of adventures, all three partners end the play by embracing future wives, which do not include Mrs. Trevaine.

Despite the merit in *The Destroyers*, *The Fullness of Life*, and *Real Estate*, Carroll Aikins's reputation as a playwright to date has rested solely upon *The God of Gods*, which was written at Naramata in 1918 and produced at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, first in November 1919 and again in April 1920, by Barry Jackson; then at Hart House Theatre, Toronto, in April 1922; and at the Everyman Theatre, London, in 1931. Upon reading the comments of Ernest A. Bendell, who read and recommended it for a licence to the Lord Chamberlain, it is surprising that the Birmingham Repertory Theatre chose to produce the work:

This is a somewhat mysterious Play with its scene laid in some mountains which are the headquarters of the Priests and Priestesses of an unseen "God of Gods" of the Indians. Much of the action is occupied with the rites of the worshippers of the deity. The rather bewildering story is that of the Indian princess who by the sordid intriguing of her mother is practically sold to the son of a Chief and separated from her lover, whom she is made, by the God's chief Priestess, to kill as a sacrifice to the God of Gods.

In setting and in dialogue the Play is vaguely picturesque and quite inoffensive in its rather incomprehensible illustrations of the barbaric tenets and rites of an Indian faith. ("*Lord Chamberlain's Plays*," 27 October 1919.)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> From his comments regarding the plot, it is obvious that Ernest A. Bendell only gave *The God of Gods* a quick read.

Although the Lord Chamberlain's reader could see little of value in the script, the Birmingham Repertory Theatre – described by Phyllis Hartnoll (1967, III) in *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, in intention and in achievement, as “one of the most significant enterprises launched in the English theatre during the twentieth century” – chose to mount two productions of *The God of Gods*. In discussing the history of the play at Birmingham, Bache Matthews (1924, 24), the theatre's general manager, noted:

It had never been played before, but was selected from the large number of plays offered to the theatre as showing unusual ability in its author ... The dialogue is not everything that can be desired, but it is above the average of the work submitted to us by unknown dramatists, and its theatrical qualities called for stage presentations.

Barry Jackson and John Drinkwater might have been attracted to this play by an unproduced Canadian writer living in rural British Columbia because of the manner in which it treats the relationship between humanity and the supernatural as well as its potential for visual effects. [See Illustration 1.] The latter would permit the Birmingham Theatre to employ the concepts of the new stagecraft that it championed in England.

*The God of Gods* concerns Suiva, a young Indian maiden, who loves and is loved by Yellow Snake, a singer of tribal songs. [See Illustration 2.] Jealous of this love and desiring Suiva for himself, Mablo, son of Amburi, the chief, bribes the aged priestess of the “The God of Gods” to choose Suiva to be the next virgin priestess. By this ruse, Mablo hopes to immure her in the temple to which no male has access but his father and himself. Before her vows are taken, however, Yellow Snake invades the sanctuary and begs Suiva to fly with him. She refuses. When the chief discovers that Yellow Snake had visited the temple, he orders Mablo to kill him and bring his body to the temple as a sacrifice. Suiva, as the new priestess, officiates, but when she discovers the body of her lover, she desecrates the idol and renounces her vows.

[The bearers spring forward and seize the body. SUIVA tries vainly to withhold them.]

SUIVA. He's mine! You shall not! [They topple the body from the altar into the pool. A great cry goes up. The bearers crouch back to their former places. SUIVA bends over the pool and

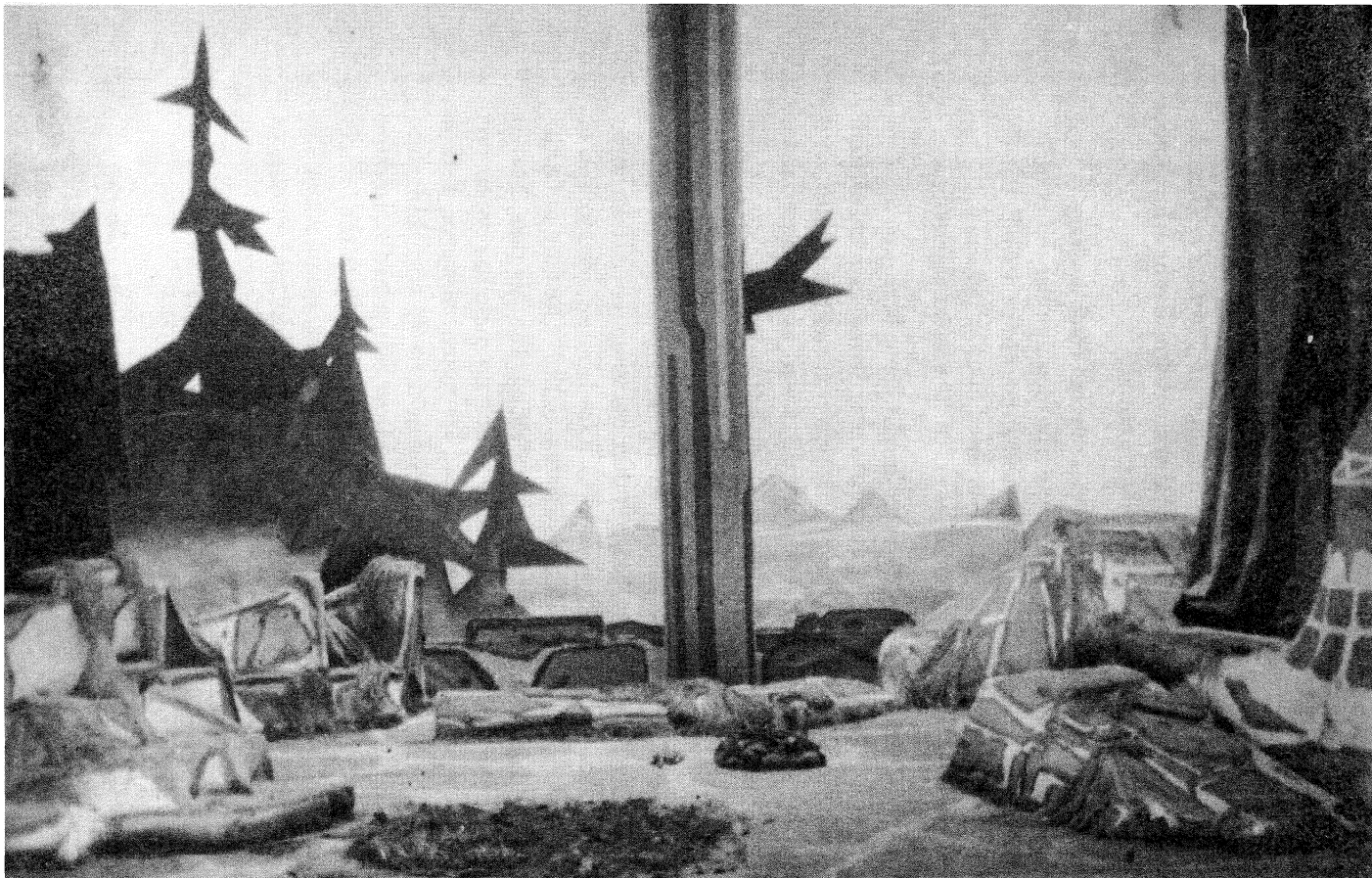


Illustration 1: Act I. "A pine clad plateau." Although neither of "The God of Gods" programs lists the designer, Paul Shelving is listed as the set designer on the back of the photograph. By permission of the Sir Barry Jackson Trust and Birmingham Libraries (Birmingham Repertory Theatre Archive).



Illustration 2: Yellow Snake (E. Stuart Vinden) “climbs a nearby tree and hides in the foliage” to observe Kotwi (Isabel Thornton) and her daughter, Suiva (Susan Richmond), in conversation. By permission of the Sir Barry Jackson Trust and Birmingham Libraries (Birmingham)

when the body strikes the water, some sixty feet below, she  
flings up her hands and turns shrieking on the worshippers.]  
You! You! My people! You have killed my mate! (*God*, 65)

Then, after dashing the sacred wine in the face of the image and  
toppling the sacred fire basket into the pool, Suiva throws herself  
into the pool and is drowned. [See Illustration 3.] At which time,

[The eyes of the image, smeared with sulphur and wet with wine,  
have begun to glow. An old squaw first notices them.]

THE SQUAW. [shrieking]. The eyes!

THE WORSHIPPERS. [in mortal terror]. The eyes! The eyes!

AMBURI. Fall down before him! Fear him! He is angry!

[As they prostrate themselves, LEHRI emerges from the throng. He  
stands looking down at them, and up at the image, and laughs his  
insane laugh. Then, all is quiet for a moment, and the curtain falls.]  
(*God*, 67)

Owing to its contrived plot (which owes perhaps more to *Boys  
Own Annual* than to Freud), it is easy to understand why Hoffman  
and others have described *The God of Gods* as a melodramatic play.  
Indeed, the first production in Birmingham emphasized some of the  
romantic and melodramatic norms that Aikins and others wished to  
reject. For example, although Aikins indicated only occasional uses  
of drums in the play, A.E. Filmer (the director at Birmingham) and  
Harold Mills (the musical director) added an orchestration that was  
not called for in Aikins's script. This orchestration included the  
following musical pieces:

- "Pawnee War Song and Dance" ..... Collected by Theodore Baker
- "Canadian Indian Airs" ..... From Crotch's Specimens
- "Cherokee Cradle Song" ..... Collected by Theodore Baker
- "Chiquito Indian Tune"
- "Dakota Scalp Dance" ..... Collected by Theodore Baker
- "Omaha Tribal Melodies" ..... Collected by A.C. Fletcher
- ..... Arranged by C.W. Cadman
- "Dakota Serenade" ..... Collected by Theodore Baker<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The list of music appears in "*The God of Gods*" program published for the production that opened on 8 November 1919 for two weeks and for the production that opened on 17 April 1920 for five nights. Original programs are held at the Central Library, Chamberlain Square, Birmingham, England.





Illustration 3: Suiva (Susan Richmond) admonishing Mablo (Melville Cooper) and the Worshippers, immediately before she “steps from the altar into the pool.” By permission of the Sir Barry Jackson Trust and Birmingham Libraries (Birmingham Repertory Theatre Archive).

Although the reviewer of the *Birmingham Post and Journal* found this music to be “selected with rare taste and pleasantly rendered,” he noted that it “made the tom-toms sound all the sillier.” “Indeed, the tom-toms, the featherweight corpse, and the cotton-wool stuffing of the idol were all blemishes” (Anonymous, *Birmingham Post and Journal*, 10 November 1919). *The God of Gods* statue does appear to have been pulled from stock scenery and is more reminiscent of an Aztec or African idol than of something created in British Columbia. [See Illustration 4.] In addition, since the war had caused shortages of cloth and since Jackson’s costume shop would not open until 1920, the costumes for the first production were standard off-the-rack Indian dress supplied by J. Burkenshaw and Sons of Liverpool, which made the minor characters “comic in appearance” and defied the authenticity of Aikins’s detailed descriptions: “[Amburi] is dressed in black otter skins and carries an ornamental hatchet in his girdle. He wears moccasins and deerskin leggings” (*God*, 30).

Despite all these staging problems, which resulted from the lack of resources following the First World War and the absence of Barry Jackson, who was still serving in the British Navy, the reviewers recognized the work as an important chapter in the development of the intelligent drama that was to be a hallmark of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. The critic of the *Evening Despatch* commented that Mr. Aikins

has written a play which deserves a wider popularity than, we fear, it will achieve. It is one of those rare artistic delicacies reserved for the comparatively small band of enthusiastic people who delight in “art for art’s sake.” And they should find in Mr. Aikins’s play not only aesthetic nourishment, but matter enough to satisfy that eternal craving which animates all humans for something new. (Anonymous, *Evening Despatch*, 10 November 1919)

Similarly, the critic for the *Birmingham Post and Journal* observed that, “for those who want a play to ‘mean something’ ‘God of Gods’ is an allegory to be interpreted – a whetstone for wits” (Anonymous, *Birmingham Post and Journal*, 10 November 1919). Hector Charlesworth (1922, 7), in his review of the production at Hart House Theatre, expanded upon these reviews:

It is a Voltairean fable designed to expose the methods by which ... established religion has maintained its hold over the ignorant masses everywhere ... The god is alleged to speak through his priestess; ...



Illustration 4. Act II and Act III. "An altar to the God of Gods." By permission of the Sir Barry Jackson Trust and Birmingham Libraries (Birmingham Repertory Theatre Archive).

the tribe or human herd support the established or current religion ... through inherent fear; and also for the promise of reward; – starvation if the god is angry, plenty if he is well pleased. Thus the threefold elements of superstition, cowardice and greed are the foundation stones of the influence which Mr. Aikins’ “God of Gods” exercises, through his priestess over the tribe. There can be little doubt that he intended his fable to serve as a criticism of anthropomorphic conceptions of the deity generally; and that his ideas have a philosophic application entirely unrelated to the romance of the North American Indians.

Charlesworth’s review clearly enunciates the humanistic values and stereotypical “truths” that *The God of Gods* questioned and that the Birmingham critics only suggested. Aikins’s works, like those of Lord Dunsany, Shaw, and other new dramatists of the time, set about to question the near-absolutist assumptions about truth, morality, and acceptable subject matter that had undergirded artistic practice during earlier centuries. Indeed, there is a marked similarity between *The God of Gods* and, for example, *The Gods of the Mountain* and *A Night at an Inn* by Lord Dunsany, examples of the new playwrighting movement.

The works of Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett (the eighteenth Lord Dunsany), now considered melodramatic and quasi-religious, enjoyed great popularity among the leading companies of the Art Theatre movement of the time. When Lord Dunsany visited New York for the Neighborhood Playhouse production of *A Night at an Inn* in 1916, he was “hailed by the theatre world as a princely lion to be baited with lecture tours, meetings, luncheons, parlour entertainments, wined and dined because of his sudden rise to fame” (Crowley 1959, 69). In *The Gods of the Mountain*, seven beggars hatch a scheme to enter the city disguised as the green jade gods who have sat for untold centuries against the hills of ancient Marma, cross-legged, their stone hands pointing eternally to the star. The beggars are received with fear and worship, and, for a time, they enjoy meats and wines presented by the citizens. As night falls, marching feet of stone are heard. Then the stone feet are at the door, and flashes of ghostly lightning reveal glimpses of green jade spectres passing through in a horrible procession. When the sound dies down and the lights come up, the people see that the seven beggars have been turned to stone.

In *A Night at an Inn*, three English seamen, who had torn the greatest ruby in the world from the brow of a god of India, escape to England with their plunder after their two companions have been killed by three vengeful priests. At a lonely inn on the moor, they have murdered the avenging priests who had followed them to England and are celebrating. In the midst of their exultant revelry, the horrific, grotesque jade god enters, puts the ruby back in his forehead, and, with the ruby glowing, walks out into the twilight. The god then summons each of the sailors by name to meet his death. Discussing these two plays, the reviewer for *The New York Times* described each as

a distinctly exhilarating adventure. In each was an intense, mounting excitement, in each a deeply religious appeal, an element almost totally absent from the dramatic literature of the twentieth century. This particular reviewer of theatrical entertainment on his indefatigable round of the playhouses has not in this season seen any other audience so tremendously excited, so fairly lifted from their seats, so transported beyond themselves, as the one at "The God of the Mountain" and the one at "A Night at an Inn." (Anonymous, *The New York Times*, 30 April 1916, 11:7:1).

Lord Dunsany's plays were successful at the time because they, like *The God of Gods*, dealt with mortals who left the gods out of their calculations. Then, with "his exquisite art he [Dunsany] stirs you to your depths, where you really feel, while the spell is on, that certain sacred and very ancient tribal deities have been offended" (Anonymous, *The New York Times*, 30 April 1916).

In spite of the depleted resources available at the Birmingham Theatre for *The God of Gods* in 1919, the original "production of this allegory, which made a strong appeal to the imagination, attracted considerable attention" (Carson 1920, 123). This probably led to Barry Jackson's decision to mount a second production of *The God of Gods* later in the season, with "new scenery and dresses from Mr. [Paul] Shelving's art" (Anonymous, *Birmingham Post*, 19 April 1920). Undoubtedly, war shortages still prevented a total commitment to the progressive staging influences of Gordon Craig and Maurice Maeterlinck, which would become a hallmark of Jackson's later shows; however, the production did include some of the lighting effects of Adolph Appia. The Act One set, filled with abstract trees and devoid

of mountains, failed to suggest British Columbian scenery, but it did permit a variety of cyclorama lighting effects that included “dawns, and sunsets and racing clouds,” which one reviewer found to be the best “we have seen in Birmingham” (Anonymous, *Birmingham Post and Journal*, 10 November 1919).

From the photographs of the second production of *The God of Gods* held by the Birmingham Library, we see that the romantic and melodramatic stage trappings of the earlier production had been replaced with designs that found some of their inspiration in expressionism. It has been argued that expressionistic drama was “a form that found no outlet in England before [Peter] Godfrey opened the Gate in 1925 as a private club in a loft near Covent Garden” (Brockett and Findlay 1991, 262); however, Paul Shelving’s designs for *The God of Gods* antedates Godfrey’s work by several years. In Shelving’s designs, no attempt is made to realize any locality in its literal detail. Pictorially, his tendency is to move away from the photographic reality of Henry Irving, Herbert Beerbohm Tree, and John Martin-Harvey and to move towards a creative stagecraft in which essentials are emphasized by eliminating non-essentials. The elimination of non-essential detail focuses attention where it belongs; that is, upon what the actors do and say. Each scene is harmonious and characteristic in its general effect; instead of distracting the mind, it soothes and inspires it, like an orchestral accompaniment. Although the play is set among the First Nations peoples in the mountains of British Columbia, the universality of Shelving’s setting transcended its particularity. This was true in subsequent productions as well. For, as *The Globe* reviewer noted in discussing the Hart House production, “one is safe in saying that the atmosphere of the play might be anything barbaric, but not Indian” (Anonymous, *The Globe*, 19 April 1922, 18).

In spite of *The God of Gods* productions at the Birmingham Theatre and Hart House, the domination of the Canadian and American stages by New York theatrical interests meant there was little likelihood that Aikins’s other three plays would receive professional productions in Canada or in the United States. Aikins and others realized that, if they wished to have financially successful careers as playwrights, they would need to abandon their commitment to plays that championed the new stagecraft of the Art Theatre movement and write plays acceptable to the commercial theatre of New York. Vincent Massey (1922, 202), in his article “Prospects of a Canadian Drama,” articulated

the restraints placed upon Aikins and the other playwrights who were dedicated to establishing the Free Theatre (another name for the Art Theatre movement in Canada) and made a plea on their behalf:

The free theatre must never forget its duty to the playwright. It must do more than play good plays well; it must seek out new plays and, if they are worthy of performance, pay for them. Excellent plays may, of course, be written for nothing, but sustained, consistent and serious work must not be expected until free theatres are both able and willing to give some compensation for the time and energy involved in dramatic composition. It may be some time before a dramatist can live in Canada on the proceeds of his craft; but if, before long, a writer of good plays cannot derive some economic return for his labour, we do not deserve to have a native drama.

While living in Naramata, Aikins developed his knowledge and skill as a dramatist through his experimentation with playwriting; and his plays *The Destroyers*, *The Fullness of Life*, and *Real Estate* (like *The God of Gods*) deserved productions. In the theatrical climate of the times, however, that was simply impossible.

Realizing that, as Massey argued, “if we are to have a Canadian drama, we must have a Canadian theatre in which to produce it” (Massey 1922, 201-2), Aikins abandoned writing to establish a repertory theatre modelled after the Abbey Theatre – one dedicated to the creation of an environment in which Canadian drama would grow. After consulting widely with the likes of Maurice Browne (of the Chicago and Seattle Little Theatres) and Lee Simonson (designer for the Washington Square Players and a founding member of the Theatre Guild), Aikins and his wife established the Home Theatre on the second floor above a fruit-packing and storage room on their property. With a seating capacity of 100, and with lighting equipment capable of handling 10,000 watts of power to light a concave plaster wall at the back (in order to suggest a cyclorama like that employed in the Birmingham Repertory and New York’s Neighborhood Theatres), the Home Theatre was described in the January 1922 *Theatre Arts Magazine* as “probably the most modern and complete in Canada.”<sup>7</sup>

Following the paths of earlier Art Theatre endeavours, the function of the Home Theatre was not to produce Carroll Aikins’s own plays but, rather, to provide a venue for the education and training of young

<sup>7</sup> For a more complete description of the theatre space and the lighting equipment, see Hoffman (1986).

practitioners. After the staging of their first production – John Millington Synge’s *The Tinker’s Wedding* – with local talent in the fall of 1920, Aikins realized that the recruiting and training of actors capable of interpreting the modern European theatrical innovations must be his first priority. During the winter of 1920–21, he promoted his new theatre by going on speaking engagements, granting interviews, and writing articles for publication. Simultaneously, he was actively searching for students who would defray their living expenses in whole or in part by agreeing to perform manual labour on the fruit farm in the mornings while receiving instruction in a real theatre (with a real stage and the most modern of equipment) in the afternoon. The first official student production took place in June 1921 when two recent American plays, *The Neighbors* by Zona Gale and *Will-O-The-Wisp* by Doris Halman, were produced. The second student production occurred in September, with productions of *The Maker of Dreams* by Oliphant Down and a segment of Gilbert Murray’s translation of Euripides’s *The Trojan Women*. Despite the free student labour, Aikins needed financial help from his family in Manitoba to meet the costs of these productions. The next summer, during the week of 31 July to 4 August, Aikins involved his students in the presentation of “the first passion play to be given in Canada,” entitled *Victory in Defeat* and subtitled “a study in spiritual progress in the life of Christ”:

Miss Aileen Beaufort read appropriate passages from Scripture as the play proceeded. Miss Dorothy Robinson was responsible for the lighting, as important a feature in the mechanics of the modern stage as the music, which was supplied by Miss Monica Craig.

The prologue of the play consists of “The Star of Bethlehem” and “The Adoration of the Child.” The Progress is from “The Consecration,” through “The Steps of the Temple” episode, “Mary of Bethany,” “The Temptation,” “The Children,” “The Woman taken in Adultery,” and “The Betrayal.” The Epilogue is made up of “The Crucifixion” and “The Resurrection.”

(A.H. 1922, 6)

Although the text came from the Bible, the work was “a daring thing to attempt.” As Hoffman (1986, 64) notes, it was “as close as the group ever came to an authentic, original ‘art’ production” and “close to the purist spirit of Craig and Appia.” By reducing everything to



little more than what was requisite to the action, *Victory in Defeat* clearly demonstrated Aikins's ability to infuse modern concepts into a traditional story<sup>8</sup> and produce a piece comparable to those seen in any Art Theatre in Europe or the United States. Finances never permitted him to tour this, or any, production, as he had wished.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, only the members of the local audience, who were privileged to attend the Home Theatre later that year, had the enjoyment of the final productions of his Canadian Players – Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and Anatole France's *The Man Who Won a Dumb Wife* – before financial pressures ended his theatrical experimentation in Naramata.

The content of Aikins's plays challenged the cultural pre-suppositions of the theatre of his age even when presented in the traditional form of the romantic and melodramatic theatre of his day. His stage productions incorporated the progressive influences of Adolph Appia, Gordon Craig, and Jacques Copeau. In studying the playwrights of the period encompassing the First World War and its aftermath, most cultural historians have ignored the plays of Aikins, which clearly show an attempt to incorporate the ideas and practices of the emerging playwrights who were sorting out the rapid changes in the experimental theatres of Europe and North America. Similarly, contemporary discussions of Carroll Aikins's contributions to the introduction of the New Stagecraft (as the European trends were called in America) into Canada have downplayed his experiments in playwriting. Aikins's four scripts and most of his work at the Home Theatre are positioned at the crossroads of nineteenth- and twentieth-century theatre. Either in content or in form, his plays and productions introduced some of the devices of the twentieth-century theatre, in all its manifestations, to Canada. Although economic circumstances curtailed his activity before he had achieved a complete fusion of content and form, Carroll Aikins, who would later serve as Hart House Theatre's artistic director between 1927 and 1929, must be acknowledged for introducing Canada to the Art Theatre movement through his playwriting and his experiments at the Home Theatre.

<sup>8</sup> Hoffman (1986) provides a more detailed description of Aikins's stage effects.

<sup>9</sup> Although Aikins talked of touring his productions, he never undertook such a venture. There were certainly people across the country that would have welcomed an opportunity to view his work. A.H. (1922, 6), for example, in a *Saturday Night* column written after Aikins's production of *Victory in Defeat*, said: "we hope that he will not let another season pass without leading his company out of the wilderness (no disrespect to the farm), and letting us all enjoy some of the wonderful things he is doing."

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