

DISCOVERING THE POPULAR AUDIENCE

Diane Bessai

ALTHOUGH MUSICAL PLAYWRIGHT John Gray denies that “any deeply-felt political nationalism”¹ motivates his creative work, he was doing a pretty good imitation of righteous nationalist anger on the public platform of the mid-eighties. For example, as keynote speaker for the Atlantic Canada theatre conference at his alma mater, Mount Allison University, in April, 1986, he identified the failures of his own education as argument for the thesis that, as willing “satellites” of British or American cultural imperialism, “Canadian institutions stifle Canadian culture by design.” Thus he scornfully recalled his meagre half-year of potted Canadian history in Grade 7; his extracurricular addiction in high school to American Rock and Roll bands named after American cars, and his university education in English literature that failed to mention one Canadian author or artist. Perhaps most scathing of all was his reference to post-graduate theatre studies at the University of British Columbia that trained him in British and American theatre, from British and American instructors. As a result, when he and his friends went into theatre, they were inevitably to repeat British and American experiments. The tone of this ever-darkening story brightened, however, with the account of his visit to an auction barn in Listowel, Ontario, to see his U.B.C. contemporary Eric Peterson perform in the Theatre Passe Muraille collective creation, *1837: The Farmer’s Revolt*. Not only was this Gray’s first Canadian history since Grade 7, it was his very first experience of the impact of Canadian content on an audience in the theatre. Farmers in plaid jackets and John Deere caps were cheering, some tearfully, the Passe Muraille-Rick Salutin vindication of their ancestors in this play.

What astonished him most, he elaborates elsewhere, was how the enthusiasm for the show came from people very like the ones he knew back home in small-town Nova Scotia, “practical people who I assumed thought culture had something to do with germs and must be controlled, not encouraged.” As a result, “I drove back to Toronto with my head spinning.”² The experience not only changed his own life in the theatre, it was his first counter-lesson to the colonial-minded Canadian assumption that culture, the arts, and history necessarily come from elsewhere. As born-again nationalistic polemic, this version of Gray’s personal story of educational misdirection makes good platform hyperbole, especially from the author of

what was to become contemporary Canada's most universally popular hero play, *Billy Bishop Goes to War*. However, it is curious — even ironic — that his own work finds its material in that very cultural colonialism he is deploring: American popular music in *18 Wheels* and *Rock and Roll*, the themes of British colonialism in the sometimes dark comedy of *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, and a nationally embraced musical tradition rooted in the Scottish migrations of Nova Scotia in *Don Messer's Jubilee*. It is, however, also true that Gray has found ways of appropriating this material for the Canadian sensibility by developing techniques he learned working with Theatre Passe Muraille, such as the use of a raconteur, the definition of specific audience, and emphasis on direct performance.

From the hindsight of this achievement Gray is perhaps unnecessarily dismissive of what he sees as the derivative experimentalism of his apprenticeship years in the theatre as a West Coast director. His early career followed the fairly standard Canadian pattern of the early 1970's that often eventually led to bolder efforts in the development of indigenous theatre. Upon completing his theatre training, he quickly discovered that the only way to acquire professional credentials was to start his own company. From 1971 to 1974 he was founding director of Vancouver Theatre Workshop, later renamed Tamahnous (Chilcotin for 'magic'), in collaboration with U.B.C. associates such as Peterson, Larry Lillo, and Jeremy Long. Like other young Canadian theatre companies of that day, Tamahnous did indeed begin by modelling their work on the styles and texts of the radical counter-culture companies of Britain and more particularly of the United States. Their first production was *Dracula II*, based on a Bram Stoker improvisation created by the Stable Theatre, Manchester, and their second, *The Bacchae*, evolved in the intense ritualistic manner of Schechner's Performance Group.³ They were "Grotowski-like" out of necessity, Gray was later to say: "We had to explore what we could do with just the voice and the body in an empty space because that was all we could afford."⁴

In its first years Tamahnous was working towards a flexible ensemble method that would allow for experiment "within the widest possible range of theatre forms."⁵ The text was fluid, and through group improvisation the work would evolve and change in subsequent productions.⁶ Soon the company was working with its own adaptations: for example, Jeremy Long's violently physical *Medea* in 1973, and, in the same year, a group adaptation of *The Tempest* as projected through the mind of Prospero. They also explored original material, including *Bill Durham* by Jeremy Newsome, a vaudevillian satire on the American western, which Gray described to Herbert Whittaker as shaped from "a terrible script with a wonderful plot."⁷ Gray, who was denoted by Christopher Dafoe as a perfectionist, had already taken the work through at least three different treatments at Tamahnous and he was now restaging the show at Global Village in Toronto. At this point in his career Gray had no thought of becoming a writer.⁸ Long was the

resident Tamahnous playwright, following his version of *Medea* with *The Final Performance of Vaslav Nijinsky*, featuring Eric Peterson as the great Russian dancer.

In a retrospective view of these years to Alan Twigg in 1981, Gray emphasized the élitist and formalist nature of his work rather than its cultural colonialism: “Content really wasn’t that important. New theatre forms and staging were just as important to me as what a play said.”⁹ The environmental theatre of the Performance Group type, from which Tamahnous Theatre Workshop took its initial model, was intended to break down the conventional proscenium-audience barrier. For Gray, however, it required Paul Thompson’s populist experiments of Theatre Passe Muraille to make him recognize that “the event of having a particular audience becomes just as important as what’s happening on the stage.” He was discovering a kind of theatre, as he said to Twigg, where: “It’s not like there’s a little glass cube around the stage and everybody sits there and admires the work of art on display” (102). The connection between the audience and the subject matter became for Gray the major element of a contemporary Canadian play. “People go to a Canadian play for its content,” he told another interviewer at that time, even though the work “can be rougher, not as clean and stylish and glinty [*sic*] as one would sometimes hope for.” They go to a British or American play, he added, “for the production values,” sometimes the only element that makes a mediocre piece “workable.”¹⁰ In *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, he was to turn home-spun informality (i.e., legion hall), into a stylistic virtue.

Over the years Tamahnous gradually moved away from its experiments in ritualistic theatricality, where gesture and movement are as important as language, to the more popular and direct social appeal initiated even before Gray’s departure with the Larry Lillo production of Jeremy Long’s *Salty Tears on a Hangnail Face* (1974). Gray wrote the music for this cat’s-eye view of the vicissitudes of hippydom in a Kitsilano commune, a work described by reviewer Bob Allen as showing every possible variety of popular musical production style.¹¹ Eventually Tamahnous was to produce the Vancouver premiere and British Columbia tour of Gray’s *18 Wheels*, his first original work for Theatre Passe Muraille, premiered in 1977. Tamahnous and the Vancouver East Culture Centre were also to co-produce the premiere of *Billy Bishop*, workshopped at Theatre Passe Muraille, in 1978. In their separate ways, both Gray and his original company were moving into more popular contact with the Canadian audience, although the signs were already there in *Bill Durham* and *Salty Tears*. From U.B.C. and Tamahnous Gray learned the theatre craft that helped him “to write things which work on the stage,”¹² but from Theatre Passe Muraille he acquired that new sense of the popular audience, which became the catalyst for his inherently musical creativity.

Gray moved to Toronto in 1975 where he began composing and performing the music at Theatre Passe Muraille: for Rick Salutin’s *The False Messiah*, for

example, premiered in March of that year at the cavernous St. Paul's United Church; in a sharply criticized play and production, Gray's Jewish liturgical music was nevertheless approvingly noted.¹³ Later he composed a country musical score for the revival of *1837*, a brilliant pastiche of sacred and secular songs (which he performed on the electric organ) for the Passe Muraille-Betty Jane Wylie *The Horsburgh Scandal*, 1976, and the same year, the music for the belated premiere of Hershel Hardin's *The Great Wave of Civilization*, directed by Paul Thompson at the Lennoxville Festival. In the meantime Gray kept in contact with the West Coast theatre scene. In May of 1975, he and Eric Peterson were both in Vancouver performing in the New Play Centre's premiere production of Thomas Cone's *Herringbone*, which they presented at the Du Maurier Festival as a one-actor multiple-character piece with piano player — as such, of some importance as precursor to *Billy Bishop*.

THE IDEA FOR *18 Wheels* originated in actor Booth Savage's suggestion for a Passe Muraille collective creation on the life of long-distance truckers. In a manner similar to the development of his earlier hitch-hiking show *Free Ride* (1971), Thompson gave an actor seed money to cross the country (in this case in a truck, not by thumb) with a tape-recorder to gather material that could later be developed by a collective of actors, director, and composer. Gray remained behind to write the songs. The documentary investigation proved too depressing for Savage and the plan for a collective was abandoned, but Gray, inspired by the trucker myths of North American country-and-western sentiment and sound, was continuing to write the songs.¹⁴ The result was the composition of "a conceptual piece"¹⁵ modelled on the musicians' three-set evening gig and the mis-en-scene of local beer parlour or nightclub entertainment. The dramatis personae are the four singers of a country-and-western band who alternately perform feature and support roles in each of the three musical sets. These consist of sung narrative poems on trans-Canada trucking life interspersed with shorter songs, occasional dialogue, and sung or spoken narration.

In effect, Gray was beginning to apply in musical format the basic Thompson-Theatre Passe Muraille principle to which he had responded so enthusiastically in Listowel: the creation of indigenous theatre accessible to a traditionally non-theatre audience. Until Thompson began his collective theatre experiments, it was rare for a Canadian play to acknowledge in both content and style the specific audience for whom the work was being performed. In typical Passe Muraille collective creation at the time, the performers were researching and improvising their material from the specific communities for whom the show was initially designed: *The Farm Show* in Clinton, Ontario, *Under the Greywacke* in Cobalt, *Oil* in

Petrolia, and later *The West Show* and *Far as the Eye Can See* on the Prairies. With special attention to the “textures” of indigenous speech, the community collectives comprised local stories and portraits intermingled with song; they were addressed to the audience in what Thompson described as a Christmas concert format. Gray recognized the creative strengths of the Passe Muraille collective playmaking, but he was averse to the “anarchy” and last-minute panic of the process.¹⁶ More particularly he criticized the “jumble” of language, its quality “that varies with the performers” and “obviates the existence of language as an arrangement of words and sounds that has a consistent mind behind it.”¹⁷ Yet he was strongly indebted to Theatre Passe Muraille for showing him “How powerful a monologue can be.”¹⁸ During his tours with the company in the small towns of southern Ontario, he noted from his stage position that among audiences with no tradition of the absent fourth wall,

whenever an actor played directly to the audience in the manner of a storyteller or sang in the manner of a beer parlour act, the audience members caught in the spill of the stage light suddenly relaxed, watched the stage closely, slapped their knees and laughed.¹⁹

In the balladry of *18 Wheels*, whose audience are the fans of country-and-western music rather than truck drivers, Gray develops variations on the Passe Muraille raconteur style. His thematic concept of the show also provides for a comprehensive variation on that company’s interest in the Canadian geographical identities reflected in their actual travels. Thus *18 Wheels* is a trucker’s-eye map of the country in motion; the opening song, “Do You Wanna Know the Country?,” carries the metaphor of Canada as a concrete river “stretching out from shore to shore” (31). While the individual themes, the temptations, romantic sorrows, and dangers of life on the road echo Nashville and the like, the map is particularized into stories and songs that discover places and people along the route, discoveries lightly informed by regional and nationalistic ironies to which a Canadian audience can readily respond.

Sadie, the Nova Scotia miner’s daughter and “nicest waitress on the highway,” alternates from lyric, rock and country swing, song and rhythmic speech, to render a long balladic account of the mistakes of her youth: rejecting her devoted trucker for the temptations of Upper Canada, she now works in the greasiest spoon in Alberta for the pleasure of serving these “good honest men of the road,” represented by Lloyd and Jim (39-44). Lloyd is the Canadian loser character, an ‘independent’ trucker who, in an entre-act song, tells resentfully of his share in the “Canadian balance of trade”: he gets to haul the offending chicken guts while “The Colonel gets the money” (46). In the third and most dramatically extended set, the story of Lloyd’s loss of his long-suffering wife and trucking partner Molly to the American driver of “a Kenworth rig,” is a romantic object lesson in Canadian complacency and American enterprise. This time two raconteurs (the Jim

and Sadie of the previous sets) guide the audience through the tale, with the interspersal of dramatized moments from the principals, either in speech, song, or mimed comic illustration. As the plot thickens the narrators play other brief roles (Passe Muraille style). They also become chorus to the repentant Lloyd's futile search across the whole U.S.A. for his Molly, now lost forever as an American citizen and one of the best truckers on the road.

In substance the second set, "Night Driving," is closer to a Passe Muraille episode as the true story of James New, a trucker who suffers from the dark memories of a highway pile-up during a white-out on the 400 (Savage had provided coroners' reports on the incident). James New initially addresses the audience directly and factually before breaking into a ruminative song about stark nights on the road; the documentary detail of his memories of the accident is alternately narrated by the other three, who speak to a musical background that is occasionally suspended for effect, for example, during their litany of the names of all those who died (54). The focus alternates between the two narratives: the haunted reflections of James New as he cautiously drives his route in the dramatic present and the narrators' retrospective accounts of the harrowing events of two years before. The two lines merge towards the end as James reveals himself to be the trucker involved and are mediated in the concluding up-beat of "Ridin' with Jesus," a gospel song inspired by Gray's discovery of a truck-driver's magazine, *The Highway Evangelist* (Preface, 22).

Overall, *18 Wheels* shows Gray already working towards the structural flexibility and tonal variety that was to challenge him further in the storytelling of *Billy Bishop* with its reversed proportion of music to speech. In this important shift of format the play most precisely reflects the Passe Muraille influence, in its spoken monologues, its multiple characterization, and in its close attention to Canadian speech textures through the collaboration of a gifted Theatre Passe Muraille improvisational actor, Eric Peterson. In subject matter and tone this play is the natural descendant of the Passe Muraille-Salutin *1837*. Although Gray told Robert Wallace that he came to dislike what he called "the tragic aspect of Passe Muraille plays," specifically alluding to *1837* in this respect (48), the two works share the same mocking view of textbook history that characterizes the Theatre Passe Muraille sensitivity in the 1970's to the issue of lingering contemporary colonial dependence. The difference in Gray's work is in his rejection of the loser theme that ultimately could not be ignored in *1837*; he chooses a hero who wins "Because he was the best" thereby presenting "one image of Canada we don't often see."²⁰

THE GERM OF *Billy Bishop* began in November, 1976, when Gray was still completing *18 Wheels* and also performing, along with Eric Peterson,

for Theatre Passe Muraille in Ottawa. Peterson discovered Bishop's autobiography, *Winged Warfare*, in an Ottawa bookstore, and over the next year they both became immersed in Billy Bishop's extraordinary record as a fighter pilot and related First World War material. They decided on a raconteur one-man structure for a play about Bishop's amazing capacity as a war ace for killing and surviving, with Peterson performing all the parts and Gray playing the music, in the general manner of their production of Tom Cone's *Herringbone* in 1975.²¹ Early in 1978, Gray began the actual writing, completing a script in March for which Theatre Passe Muraille offered a three-week workshop and Tamahnous a production the following autumn. In their joint research Peterson made an important contribution through his interest in the technology of the time and also in his recovery of the popular expressions of the period. In contrast to the usual Passe Muraille collective method of evolving the text from actor improvisation, they worked from written speeches; Gray writes that these were "trimmed and shaped to Eric's speech patterns."²² Eric Peterson's versatility was crucial to the success of the conception and so his seventeen additional roles for the embellishment of the flying adventures of Billy Bishop posed no particular difficulty, especially since, unlike *Herringbone*, no more than two speakers are in dialogue at once. *Billy Bishop* is presented simply as "a champion story" told by "a champion story teller,"²³ its comic ironies and its excitements of fighter combat frankly stated and in large measure directly shared between the speaker and his audience.

Like Passe Muraille's young Donnellys before him (*Them Donnellys*, 1973), Billy Bishop is depicted as a typically unruly small-town boy with no very constructive channel for his energies; his cadet life at Royal Military College is a fiasco and he joins the army only because he is on the verge of expulsion for cheating on exams. As a cavalry initiate in England, he is an accident-prone disaster, his one bright moment occurring at his first sight of a single-seater scout, the pilot warm and free from mud, horses, and officers. That Billy Bishop is both a colonial *and* a hero is the comic contradiction of the work and the essence of its strongest contemporary theme behind the personal story. For a Canadian audience, Gray's best laughs in the first half of the play come from his digs at the colonial inferiority complex: "How can I get into the Royal Flying Corps?" asks Bishop of a Cockney R.F.C. officer. "I'm Canadian. I'm cannon fodder,"²⁴ and at imperialists with sharp eyes for exceptional gifts beneath the "rude Canadian exterior," like Lady St. Helier, the grand dame of Portland Place who perceives in Bishop the "power that will win wars for you" (52-53). If Gray's point is that "there is such a thing as a colonial attitude that makes you try harder,"²⁵ then this benign Lady Bracknell has efficiently tapped this resource when she takes the blundering Billy Bishop in hand, especially since the normal life expectancy for new fighter pilots "is about eleven days." But by the end of the play Billy is so good at killing and surviving that he has to be taken out of active service before the laws of chance against fighter

pilots finally strike him down. As a “colonial figurehead” they cannot afford to lose him since, says General Trenchard, “the problem with your colonial is that he has a morbid enthusiasm for life” (92). The British on the other hand, in Gray’s view, “like their heroes / Cold and dead.”²⁶ The storytelling in *Billy Bishop Goes to War* denotes its essential Canadian structural feature for Gray although it also has a direct origin in the military life as Billy Bishop himself records it in *Winged Warfare*, 1918. Bishop tells of how the members of his squadron used to exchange stories of their air fights in the relaxed atmosphere of the officer’s mess, which indeed is the opening setting of the play. What is particularly relevant is the way they used to tell them:

It was typical of the attitude of these comrades of mine that when a man had been in an exceedingly tight corner, and had managed to squeeze out of it, it was later related as a very amusing, not as a very terrible incident, and as the narrator would tell his story the others would shriek with laughter at the tale of how nearly he had been hit and how “scared” he had been. It was such a wonderful way to take life that upon looking back at it I feel that nothing the future can ever hold for me can excel those wonderful days.²⁷

This is exactly the tone that Gray is so successful at achieving — and then some — through his legion hall version in which the difference is only in degree from what the actual Bishop described. The Billy Bishop of the play, with the musical accompaniment of the piano player, takes the storytelling further, into song as well as dialogue, with characters he gleefully caricatures. But the important thing, especially in the first act, is the note of irreverent conspiracy with the audience; everyone participates in the camaraderie of waggish off-handedness and exaggeration, which is of course a time-honoured public way of dealing with essentially dark matters, the war itself, always from a colonial’s perspective, and Billy’s personal involvement in it.

As a tonal device for shared intimacy with the audience the raconteur technique of the play functions thematically in at least two dimensions that are directly shared between storyteller and audience, and explores a third as far as the limits of the monologue will allow. In the last analysis, Gray’s special achievement in this play is to acknowledge and transcend those limits through the ironic dimension of his songs. In *Billy Bishop* he shows the capacity, not merely to make a song “a natural extension of the narrative”²⁸ but rather to put into a song something that “needs to be said that a character can’t really say.”²⁹ First, there is the shared theme of acknowledged contemporary hindsight expressed in the play’s pervasive comedy of colonialism. Of course the historical Billy Bishop would not sense this with quite the same bemusement in his own day as the stage character confidentially shares with us in ours: both in his self-deprecation as a colonial bumpkin and in his caricatures of imperial condescension, for example, in Lady St. Helier’s patronizing poetic analysis of him as a “typical Canadian”:

I'm awfully sick and tired
 Being constantly required
 To stand by and watch Canadians make the best of it,
 For the Colonial mentality
 Defies all rationality.
 You seem to go to lengths to make a mess of it. (50)

Second, there is Billy's self-deprecating version of himself as the high-spirited perennial bad boy who resents military discipline (especially when he is not having any fun) that fits well within Lady St. Helier's view of him. And he definitely lacks the correct war-time idealism of most of his contemporaries: his momentary enthusiasm inspired by the patriotic fervour of the embarkation at Montreal is quickly deflated by the uncomfortable crossing on "the good ship Vomit." His unheroic view of his circumstances, and of himself as a person randomly swept along on the tide of events, is equally expressed in his burlesque dramatizations of the military figures he encounters. Billy is a winning storyteller throughout the first act because of his robust sense of humour at his own expense as well as of others: in his frank confession of incompetence as an aviator and in his alternating fear, panic, and exhilaration in the struggle for survival under the pressures of this frightening new type of warfare. Almost in spite of himself does he become one of the best fighter pilots of the Great War.

But the disarming raconteur style, of itself, is less adequate to the third motif, emerging in the second act. There are ironies of personal unawareness also evident in Billy's narration, such as the questionable implications of his aggressive pleasure in killing and of his obsession with his rising score. To a point Gray strives to reconcile the dehumanizing note within the theatricality of the legion hall raconteur style by characterizing Billy's mounting enthusiasm for combat killing in the distancing stage language of adolescent game. However, this approach can only serve the need for irony by indirection, for example as illustrated in two contrasting Act II passages that inferentially comment on each other with respect to the war-as-game motif.

The famous one-man German aerodrome raid is deliberately "half-told, half acted out" as "an adventure story" exuberantly presented "as a boy might tell a story, full of his own sound effects."³⁰ At the end of the "adventure" he limps home, his plane in tatters, an exultant survivor who "Never had so much fun in me whole life!" Later, resentful that he is to be withdrawn from active service, Billy is anxious to increase his score in the short time left. This leads to the sobering experience of witnessing his target plane disintegrate in the air with its two occupants still alive and falling. Here Billy experiences his first and only demonstrable qualms about the killing game and so he is "pretty glad to be going after all" (94). While not a sustained moment of moral awareness, it tries to give a certain balance to the character as a still sensitive human being. Yet only briefly does it deflect

from our growing uneasiness about the nature of a militant hero as he now goes off to enjoy the honours heaped upon him by the King.

A more detached perspective on events and attitudes emerges with the aid of the songs and the image patterns of their lyrics. While Gray argues that the play “does not address itself to the issue of whether or not war is a good thing or a bad thing” (Introduction, 12), nevertheless he is conscious of the defence mechanisms of survival under war-time conditions. In the songs these are comprised in two ironic mythic motifs, the romance of war and the romance of imperialism. Sung sometimes in solo by one or other performer, in duet or in choral refrain, the songs provide the foundation for a comprehensive ironic structure that by itself the spoken text can not sustain. This is to say that in *Billy Bishop* Gray is more than merely reversing the *18 Wheels* proportion of song to spoken text. While speech in the latter provides tonal variety within the narrative function of the music, the songs in *Billy Bishop* work more complexly, not only as personal response to event or situation, but also as a more detached counterpointing commentary to the spoken narration.

In the first act’s general movement from innocence towards experience, the songs speak ironically to a succession of evolving notions (either collectively held or individual to Billy Bishop) of the heroic romance of war (ranging from the innocent jingoism of “We were off to fight the Hun” to the chivalric accommodation of dancing together “In the sky”), and of its corollary in moments of stress, the pastoral romance of home (“Thinking of December nights,” and “Nobody shoots no one in Canada”). In the second act’s concern with the realities of survival, the romance of war motifs of the songs take a more sardonic turn (for example, in the mordant stanzas of “the lovely H  l  ne” telling of those who, unlike the cooler killer Billy Bishop, “didn’t survive”). The focus gradually shifts to what for Gray is the overall national issue of the play: not the pros and cons of war, but the romance of imperialism as seen from our own ironic post-colonial perspective.³¹ In “The Death of Albert Ball” (“performed like a Robert Service poem”) Gray examines the doomed fanaticism of an imperial hero, product of a decadent culture, for which, as he remarked to Wallace, “Dying for something is a value,” in contrast to a colonial culture, for which “living for something has value” (52). Billy’s haunting recitation depicts a man who “courted the reaper, / like the woman of his dreams” (77). In the poem Bishop is infected as well as angered by the implications of Ball’s story, bitter at the collective insanity of the martyr principle wherein “Just to be alive is something of a sin,” and yet himself momentarily drawn into the fatal spell of the idealism Ball represents: “And my name will take the place of Albert Ball” (79). While his successful one-man assault on Douai (which Ball had suggested, but did not live to carry out, as their “grand gesture” of heroic martyrdom) asserts the point about the pre-eminence of the colonial “Life-wish,” the seductions of the imperial romance present themselves to Bishop in another

guise: as the celebrated “Number One” *live* hero, “Just a Canadian boy, / England’s pride and joy, / My fantasies fulfilled” (84). Colonials try harder also because they are striving for recognition and success makes them susceptible to the imperial will. Our contemporary uneasiness about the military hero is somewhat redressed by Gray’s broadening emphasis on the theme of colonial co-option. Towards the end of the play we also see how the ironies of the romance of imperialism affect Billy Bishop in his subsequent career as “living colonial figurehead” and, by implication, ‘us’ the collective colonial society, singing chorus to the imperial scheme of things through another world war. The “dance of history” metaphor of the wryly celebratory tango, “The Empire Soirée,” echoes the dance motif of “In the Sky.” The words of the former, sung “sotto and sinister,” speak of an anonymous power behind the scenes forever calling the ominous tune, making social requirements, as it were, like Lady St. Helier of Bishop, that cannot be ignored, least of all by the Billy Bishop basking in royal recognition.

With the aid of the ironic substructure of the songs, the playwright takes the irony at Billy’s expense a little further than his one moment of qualm in the air. In the end Gray targets both the colonial and the imperial mentality, although the former is somewhat softened in the context of the latter. Bishop’s last spoken utterance in the play is a Second World War recruitment speech, which is to say that twenty years later a new dance at the perpetual “Empire Soirée” has begun, but the tune is a repeat, so to speak, as indicated by the reprise of the play’s opening “We Were Off to Fight the Hun” preceding Bishop’s impeccable imperialistic war rhetoric. As a figurehead he has now become the useful colonial voice of the imperial romance, even though he seems a little weighed down by his medals when he speaks. But his final personal note, howbeit slightly bewildered, is ultimately complacent: “Makes you wonder what it was all for? But then, we’re not in control of any of these things, are we? And all in all. [*sic*] I would have to say, it was a hell of a time!” (101). The deeper irony rests in the concluding reprise of “In the Sky,” no longer a lilting reinforcement of the romance of flying, but an enigmatic reminder of the seductive power of myth in the face of the stark complexities of another war-time reality.

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N DISCUSSION WITH ROBERT WALLACE about the destructive side of his Billy Bishop character, Gray remarked that he approached the play “as not being about Bishop but someone I know in Truro, a type of person that is useless in peacetime but whose destructive urge is really useful in war if channelled rightfully” (51). A preliminary stage direction notes that Billy Bishop’s “speech pattern is that of a small town Canadian boy who could be squealing his tires down the main street of some town at this very moment” (19). Gray’s memories of Truro

and what the squealing tires imply explicitly emerge in his next work, the musical play *Rock and Roll* of 1981 which, like Billy Bishop in the one respect, focuses on the undisciplined and rebellious energy of late adolescence. Here the restless young people of the fictional Mushaboom (generic nowhere town), Nova Scotia, of the 1960's escape the stultifying restrictions of small-town life through the liberation of rock and roll. The Monarchs are a memory of Gray's own band, the Lincolns (in which he played from 1965 to 1968) while the frenetic high-flying of the period is epitomized in the ghost figure of Screamin' John McGee, the presiding spirit of local rock and roll whose destructive urge leads to his demise in a spectacular crash at the age of nineteen.

Gray was inspired to write the play after the popular success of a Lincoln's reunion and dance in 1978. The occasion was a catalyst (in modern dress) of the same order as his Listowel experience of audience enthusiasm four years previously; the old fans loved the music because it was "*their band*" and evoked *their* collective memories. Writing in 1981, he was calling this kind of music-making "small town Canadian culture," a popular culture that, like Parker in the play, he had always assumed "you left home to find."³² Only later on the nationalist platform was he to emphasize the derivative nature of this Canadian institution of local American rock and roll bands named after American cars. Borrowed or not, the popular culture *Rock and Roll* explores, the raucous one-night gigs passing for musical performance is wholeheartedly the characters' own way of being young, free, and wicked before growing old and ordinary. The same applies to the fans. In the words of Shirly, the Monarchs' staunchest supporter, "there are a lot of people out there who think you're more important than the Beatles and the Rolling Stones combined" (149). Here in Mushaboom, at their reunion performance, the Monarchs have replaced Screamin' John McGee as local myth.

Framed in the present time (1980) with the Monarchs nervously gathering for their reunion, the body of the play is a retrospective of the 1960's, tracing the growth of the band, primarily through its rehearsals and performances, from eager and incompetent sixteen-year-olds to popular local success by the time they break up five years later. Overall it shows the four Monarchs individually coming to terms with their past and present lives and, in the process, finding a collective meaning in the bond with their local audience, a reality that has nothing to do with riches, success, or the lack of it in their personal lives. Gray has described the personal story lines of the performers as the Monarchs' "unsentimental examination or playing through of 'the time of their lives'" as they put the past and its unfulfilled hopes behind them in the reunion night performance. By "Completing something, the characters can go on." He cites the concluding song "Hello Tomorrow" as "the key to the play."³³

As a play of character growth and dramatically articulated recognitions, the work is slight. Their dramatic reality lies in the needs the band has served each as

an individual type, what each has brought to it, and the disagreements that still comically divide them. One point is clear throughout the retrospective scenes, that except for the sideliner Shirly, the music and the audience are a distant second to their more basic concerns: volatile rich boy Manny and cynical poor boy Chink are in it for the disreputable adventures of the road, aspiring Brent for the money, and Parker for the possibilities of becoming a star (132). Only at the end are these aims (and the ensuing disappointments of the next fifteen years) made to seem less important than the fact of their audience's wholehearted pleasure in their collective return. The playwright does not explore the ironies of personal failure he raises in his characters, but leaves them resting on their laurels in the final moment of union between the band and its audience.

As in Gray's previous work, the structure is clearly designed to establish immediacy with its audience, in this case specifically addressed to the playwright's own generation (at the time of writing between the ages thirty and forty) who, like the characters, are being invited to share in what Martin Knelman refers to as "the ambivalent longings of adults looking back on the joy-ride that didn't take them anywhere."³⁴ For his sense of place Gray draws on the society and townscape of Truro, Nova Scotia, but this conveys the local colour of typical Canadian small-town life generally rather than an argument for specific regional uniqueness, explored, for example, by Christopher Heide in *Bring Back Don Messer*, Mulgrave Road Co-Op, 1980.

The music, of course, has the most direct appeal. Essentially *Rock and Roll* is cast in its appropriate popular performance mode, and like *18 Wheels*, the music is integral to the subject and format of the play. Since the performers are characters who exist both within and beyond their musical material, however, this calls for a number of behind-the-scene conventionally dramatized interactions of the characters for which songs often serve the narrative and theme as expressions of individual character. For example, Parker's "The Fat Boy" solo is essentially a well-placed response to derision about his appearance when he applies to the band as the much-needed singer; his point that one day "you" will be the same and the "Fat Boy" will have the last laugh is only one of the many pervasive allusions in *Rock and Roll* to the brevity of "the time of their lives" (125-26) and that of the audience to whom the song is actually addressed. In the second act, Shirly and Brent (in the privacy of their favourite haunt, the Roby Street graveyard) sing solo and duet on the subject of their future together as "Normal people, living in the normal world," a song that climaxes a predictable romantic relationship (139-40). Gray makes a livelier point through Shirly's private ruminations on the subject of the macho "Boys Club" that in those days excluded girls from participating in the on-stage excesses of rock and roll (117-18). Such motifs help tell the story and also draw the audience into their own retrospection. In keeping with the general format of the play, such songs are presented as performances, since the play is

largely enacted in some variation of a performance setting, although there are two shifts in scene to the graveyard where Screamin' John is, in effect, emcee-performer.

Integrating the recollective dramatization of the story into actual performance event is Gray's most successful method of directly engaging audience in the spirit of the times. For a play largely about performers performing, he incorporates *Billy Bishop's* raconteur style into their rock and roll presentationalism. The work opens, in song and argument, as the rehearsal for the reunion. To initiate the retrospective history, each character, within the frame of the song "Just a Memory," has a spotlight focus for an introductory personal monologue spoken in the manner of on-stage patter of performers to audience (101-04). Over the course of the play, different characters alternate in this raconteur-emcee role, introducing, through their personal accounts and thoughts of the time, the succeeding phases in the band's development demonstrated in the music of the scene. The best example of musical performance as dramatic event is Parker's description in performance (the others playing "as though the band were at a dance") of his first night as lead singer. His actual singing is framed by his graphic narration of events before, during, and after that memorable occasion (126-29). Shirly is the more ruminative raconteur in the opening segment of Act II. The scene begins with Parker's singing of "The King of Friday Night" to underline that the Monarchs are at the peak of their success; however, in her comments, spoken from her perennial spot at the side of the stage, it is clear that their disintegration as a group is at hand. There are also several extended dramatic monologues that further the narrative from individual points of view: Manny's take the form of confession and prayer to a deity whose balance-sheet prerogatives resemble those of his resented father, the local rich man, D.B. (114, 140); Parker's is addressed to his widowed mum at supper, explaining that he has to go to Toronto because "I wanna be something a whole lot different than me" (145).

The enigmatic figure of Screamin' John McGee, identified as the local spirit of rock and roll, hovers nebulously between the performance and the dramatic dimensions of the play. Here Gray seems to be moving ambivalently between the composer's urge to recover the rock and roll cult of his youth and the writer's retrospective compulsion to anatomize its components. Like the performers of *18 Wheels*, Screamin' John is a recurring theatrical rather than naturalistic presence, his role cast in song, musical rhythms, or in verse. As a local rock and roller he is the hero and inspiration of the band, before his grisly accident giving them equipment and teaching them songs — passing on the torch, as it were. As such he fulfils his most coherently realized function in the play as archetypal Performer, principally encapsulating the high energy of the rock and roll craze and at the same time infusing that whole scene with a cautionary edge. He is at once the explicit embodiment of the frenetic side of the *carpe diem* activity and the implicit warning of its letdowns and dangers.

At his first appearance (not yet a ghost) his warning song precedes the rock and roll: seedily dressed in the 1950's performance costume, he sings of himself as a burnt-out joy rider whose "visions of mortality," at the age of 19, include the awful possibilities of capitulation into boring suburban routine (110-12). In this perhaps surprising middle-class concern (despite the potential violence in his tone) he anticipates the doldrums of the later Brent, while his fear of lumps and "pitter-patter" in the chest suggests Manny. In his "shoot the shit" seediness and contempt for small-town restraints he is closest in nature to the cynical and perennially unemployed Chink. His philosophy of release from everyday tedium and adolescent stress is, of course, through motion (112-13). Later, as a graveyard ghost, he reminds Chink, who is in despair after the band's breakup, that "When the situation's out of control / You better rock / You better roll."⁸⁵

At the same time, like Billy Bishop's flying corps companions lamented by the Lovely Hélène, he has not himself survived. In the words of his song in the penultimate scene of the original version of the play, he is "Stuck in time, in my prime, / the ghost of nineteen fifty-nine" (117), a little reminiscent of the fading names on the statues of "Friends Ain't S'posed to Die" in the earlier play. Nevertheless, it is thematically fitting that his signature song, "Play a Little Rock and Roll," is sung at the reunion scene by all, including Shirly, at last initiated into full membership in the cult of local rock and roll (150). He makes a final appearance to sing a verse of "Hello Tomorrow" and thus the spirit of Screamin' John is absorbed into the final performance as part of the process of completion that the reunion is intended to represent.

In a more intrusive manner, the Screamin' John figure also functions at random as a kind of choral commentator in various personal scenes. While this could be rationalized as appropriate, since he also embodies the particular spirit of rebellion that finds its outlet in the music, the effect is to overload the retrospective irony in a rather belaboured effort to exchange reminiscent winks with the audience: for example, as sardonic voyeur and pontificator in verse and song on the nervous gropings of Brent and Shirly (parked in the Roby Street graveyard [119-22]). Later he narrates the cautious negotiations of Parker, "the underage drunk" (and could as well be Parker speaking), sneaking conspiratorially into his church-going household at 6 A.M. on a Sunday morning (129-30). Somewhat out of character, Screamin' John has the playwright's own sharp eye for textural detail and ironic juxtapositions, in his description of the furnishings of Parker's home, for example, or when he establishes the setting for the second act graveyard scene (Brent is about to propose to Shirly): "Oh, there's a bit of a view to the south of the Salmon River, lazily makin' its way to the Bay of Fundy / Carrying the crap from D.B.'s hat factory" (137). While his individual moments are often vividly expressed, his role as ghostly emcee to the audience on a guided tour of Mushaboom is dramatically speaking redundant.

Gray has recently shed some light on the origins of the character (and therefore the problem) as a “parody” of the Stage Manager in Wilder’s *Our Town*: “In Screamin’ John I wanted to create that Stage Manager’s nasty Canadian relative, who has similar insights, but without all the pious wisdom, without all the answers” (Preface, 91); this also helps to account for Gray’s choice of the graveyard as alternative setting. Unfortunately, the overall effect is to diffuse the primary intention of the figure as the spirit of rock and roll, and perhaps to truncate the dramatic potential of the individual living characters. In the light of Gray’s “Canadian-ness” (a term he finds more acceptable than nationalist),³⁶ this points to a burden of unresolved irony in *Rock and Roll*. It has less to do with the implicitly acknowledged “derivative sensibilities” of the local band; as in *18 Wheels*, Gray’s ability to write his own popular music (often with just the smallest suggestion of parodic edge) frees him from the charge of being a colonial sycophant. He uses popular music to reach his audience in familiar ways that, with the help of his lyrics, also reminds them of Canadian difference. Since Gray had already learned how to break through the proscenium from his experience at Theatre Passe Muraille and in the writing and performance of *Billy Bishop*, the Wilder model is itself redundant. In *Rock and Roll*, he is trying to reach his audience on two levels of direct address, the immediate and the retrospective. But what he seems to have temporarily forgotten is the marked difference of effect on the audience between the informality of a good raconteur, Chink or Parker, for example, and the pseudo-literary commentary of a discursive narrator. The parody backfires: not only does the work lose immediacy when Screamin’ John becomes a voyeur word-painter, but Mushaboom is diminished by the intimation of a Canadian *Our Town*, especially since this alludes to a dramaturgical weakness in the play.

GRAY’S NEXT WORK, *Don Messer’s Jubilee*, 1985, commissioned by Tom Kerr for Neptune Theatre,³⁷ is closer to *18 Wheels* in its musical format than to *Rock and Roll*. The piece is not a play, but in Gray’s own words on the program, “a fan letter,” formally cast in an approximation of a typical Don Messer show. He shows two specific intentions in the new work: first, to demonstrate that in their nearly forty years of radio and television broadcasting Don Messer and the Islanders preserved and transmitted an ‘old time’ musical culture expressing the traditional values of ordinary Canadians everywhere; second, to advance a political point, characteristic of his platform stance of the period, that “Canadian institutions stifle Canadian culture by design.” In respect to the latter his specific target is the CBC, whose abrupt cancellation of “Don Messer’s Jubilee” in 1969, despite ten years of continuing top ratings, to him “symbolised the rejection of the whole of Canadian culture.”³⁸ While either point may be ultimately

debatable, the work is nevertheless of considerable interest for its theatrical methods of engaging audience in a further variation of the performance mode that has been Gray's most constant form of creative expression. In this respect *Don Messer's Jubilee* may be regarded as a *Passe Muraille*-like community theatrical encounter writ large, a country-wide collective community of one-time Don Messer television fans.

Before discussing the point however, it is useful to note some telling thematic connections with *Rock and Roll* that in hindsight seem to anticipate Gray's increasing cultural nationalism. One has to do with the Monarchs' discovery of their special place as a local band in their own generation's community mythology. Although Gray himself was to allude subsequently to his own rock and roll days with the Lincolns as "basking in second-hand glamour and borrowed charisma,"³⁹ the general point still stands: a home-grown version has a more immediate audience appeal than an imported one. A related theme from *Rock and Roll* is Parker's insistence to his mother that he must go to Toronto if he is ever to become a singing star. He believes that in Mushaboom he will always remain just "the fat kid on the block" whereas away he can become "a whole lot different." He also feels alienated from the solid small-town values of his parents, specifically expressed in the song "Mom and Dad." In his eyes, parents belong to a simpler and more stable world ("And straight meant no lying. / And gay meant not crying") foreign to him (146).

Through the exploration in *Don Messer's Jubilee* of what he takes to be a rooted rather than a synthetic form of musical culture, Gray seems to be making his tacit apology to Parker's mom and dad for his own generation's natural distrust of the traditional small-town world and that generation's contribution to the demise of the cultural tradition represented by Don Messer.⁴⁰ He is also demonstrating the fallacy of the common Canadian assumption that to be a successful artist one has to become (like the CBC mandarins of Toronto) a 'culturally displaced person.' Thus the new work in effect begins where *Rock and Roll* ends, in down-home cultural territory. But this time it is regionally rooted, the musical and dance traditions brought from the old country by earlier generations and kept alive by rural fiddlers such as Gray's own grandfather. Performers become stars, not by going away and trying to become "a whole lot different," but by remaining home and staying the same. Don Messer, the perennially smiling old-time fiddler; Marg Osborne, homely but wholesome, and Charlie Chamberlain, everybody's stout and slightly raffish uncle, are here celebrated as the modest Maritime performers who, by remaining local in their music and their stage personae as just plain folks, become "Canada in musical form" to a country-wide audience.

Here he is casting his popular entertainment net wider than ever before. Perhaps this causes him to make more sweeping assertions about the universality of British-Canadian down-home tradition than the multicultural complexity and regional

disparities of the country warrant. Knelman writes: “For those who were urban and non-British, any old American sitcom seemed closer to home than Don Messer.”⁴¹ The point that the CBC killed Canadian culture when it cancelled the Don Messer show is satirically asserted more than convincingly explored — a dash of mother-corporation bashing that speaks resentfully of “culturally displaced persons” adorned in Nehru jackets and love beads who believe that programming should reflect “the correct aspirations of those in charge.” In the words of “The Corporation Reel,” as performed by the Buchta Dancers: “We wanna hear the Beatles sing / Messer is embarrassing” (196). Otherwise, within the confines of the performance mode Gray has chosen, he is largely reinforcing collective sentimental memories about the popularity of the show itself and of the stage reality of the performers.

In this work Gray is ostensibly simulating Messer-style performance. Within the performance structure, the Islanders’ clarinetist and emcee Rae Simmons combines his colourful stage patter with an on-going, somewhat editorializing, narration in which he recounts the origins of the band, the traditions from which it comes, and its subsequent history. His story is illustrated by backprojections of actual photographs; in fact photographic icons are the only way in which the taciturn Messer is himself present in the show;⁴² his part is otherwise fulfilled by the musicians. In contrast to Christopher Heide’s earlier play, *Bring Back Don Messer*, in which the playwright demonstrates the importance of the Messer tradition in the lives of a particular fictional family and community, Gray is directly evoking the Messer era in an actual theatrical experience of the show.

However, audience participation is more than merely foot-stomping, applauding, singing “Smile Awhile” and approving of the sarcasm towards the CBC. Despite the emphasis on clever simulation, there is a degree of difference between what Gray and his cast effect on stage and an actual Don Messer television evening. It is on this level of difference that *Don Messer’s Jubilee* best demonstrates his ability to draw the audience actively into the performance. As a community theatrical encounter and as a myth-making enterprise, the work demonstrates its descent from the collective creations of Theatre Passe Muraille. The community is of course a very large one, defined not by regional geography but by airwaves and television signals and consists of all the people who were once fans of the Don Messer show. As a large element of Gray’s audience also, they are invited into a familiar world of popular performance personalities who in their stage representations are not entirely like either the pictures on the backprojections or the remembered figures and voices of the originals. For example, Jodie Friesen in the cross-Canada tour was a disconcertingly slim Marg Osborne, but in the words of one reviewer “in the way she carries herself, sets her feet, and cups her hands . . . she is Marg Osborne.”⁴³ The same sense of recognition is familiar among the audiences of community collective creations when an actor like Eric Peterson may feel that his “line drawing”

of an actual person is “nowhere close,” but the audience supplies the rest.⁴⁴ In such cases the creative encounter between actor and audience is an important form of the participatory process.

Similarly the songs have the familiar sounds and many of the familiar sentiments, but they are, of course, written by John Gray in an approximation of the Messer repertory. This gives the composer-playwright a certain leeway, for example, to articulate the popular performance personalities, particularly of Marg and Charlie, through songs about themselves. In this respect Gray is fulfilling his aim to “mythologize” the Messer group, so that even audiences who never knew them (like the subsequent audiences of the initially specific community collectives) can respond to the characteristics the Messer performers came to represent in the collective mind of their public. The unglamorous Marg is a model in her own way (“Never give up hope, girls / even I became a star” [172]), but she also shares the unhappiness of all the “Plain girls in love with / conceited young men” (186). Charlie, with his “voice like a New Brunswick spring” singing his “songs of old emotion” (such as “My Little Flower”), pumps gas in the summer, presumably to keep himself in beer (175-77). There is a duet of comic behind-the-scenes discord (“It’s Been Going on For Years”) between the prim Marg (“If she’s ever perspired / I would be very much surprised” [194]) and the earthy “slob” Charlie (“Droolin’ on my nice dress / And snappin’ my brassiere” [192]) not entirely in keeping with the soulful tranquillity of their regularly featured “Quiet Time” gospel song. Messer’s physical absence from the show may also be part of the myth-making, specifically in allusion to his role as all-Canadian victim to corporate insensitivity. Certainly by the end of his show Gray exceeds himself on this score by insisting that, in the aftermath of the CBC cancellation, Don, Marg, and Charlie virtually died, not of heart trouble, but of broken hearts.

JOHN GRAY’S WHOLE CAREER in the theatre may be viewed as a matter of going away in order to come home; as a process of discovering or rediscovering the nature of the audience for a Canadian contemporary theatre. His epiphany in Listowel, when the southwestern Ontario bean farmers stood to cheer Theatre Passe Muraille’s *1837*, has been significantly operative because it led him to recognize the appeal of popular culture in its indigenous environment; in this vein his rediscovery of Don Messer’s *Canada* is the most widely (if not the most deeply) evocative as yet. Listowel also led him to formulate his view of the raconteur mode as the native Canadian theatrical expression, a concept that has consistently shaped his creativity in both its verbal and musical components. In three out of his four major works Gray has drawn on his particular gift for witty musical pastiche as the initial point of cultural contact with his specifically identified

audiences: the fans of country and western in *18 Wheels*, the sixties generation in *Rock and Roll*, and the mom-and-dad generation presumably still lurking in the ancestral memories of all Canadians in the old-time music of Don Messer. Thus his most important contribution to Canadian drama and theatre has been in the exploration of Canadian themes and character through accessible popular entertainment modes: the legion hall and tavern entertainment, the rock and roll dance band, and the television variety show. His singular ear for popular music has been a major factor, notably, as in *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, in combination with the wit and irony of his lyrics. While *Billy Bishop Goes to War* is undoubtedly his strongest dramatic work, showing his capacity to work collaboratively with an actor of like mind on the potentials of creative storytelling, it has not as yet proved to be his most characteristic form of expression. Gray's recent completion of a musical version of John Buchan's *Thirty-Nine Steps* (its hero is a Canadian!) seems to confirm that musical theatre rather than drama per se remains his strongest inclination.

NOTES

- ¹ Introduction, *Local Boy Makes Good: Three Musical Plays* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1987), pp. 14-15.
- ² Martin Knelman, "Roots," *Saturday Night* (December 1985), p. 70.
- ³ Renate Usmani, *Second Stage: The Alternative Theatre Movement in Canada* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia, 1983), p. 69.
- ⁴ Robert Wallace and Cynthia Zimmerman, *The Work: Conversations with English-Canadian Playwrights* (Toronto: Coach House, 1982), p. 46.
- ⁵ "Total Theatre," Max Wyman, *Vancouver Sun* (19 March 1976).
- ⁶ See Christopher Dafoe, "The Tamahnous Theatre: scripts are a point of departure," *Vancouver Sun* (5 Feb. 1974), on their retrospective season of that year.
- ⁷ "A Western myth with Canadian point of view," *Globe and Mail* (20 June 1974).
- ⁸ Wallace, p. 46.
- ⁹ *For Openers: Conversations with Canadian Writers* (Madiera Park: Harbour, 1981), p. 102.
- ¹⁰ Audrey Johnson, "Distinguished Visitor doesn't mince his words," *Victoria Times-Colonist* (28 Nov. 1981).
- ¹¹ "Talent in light vein," *Vancouver Province* (9 May 1974). Jeremy Long continued along this line with what was now projected as a musical trilogy, the second of which was *Eighty-Four Acres*, premiered in March 1976; this was a light focus on the threats of land developers in the British Columbia wilderness. In 1978 Bruce Rudell and Glen Thompson wrote *Liquid Gold*, also a musical, telling the story of the formation of a British Columbia fisherman's union.
- ¹² Twigg, p. 103.
- ¹³ Daniel Dematello, *Toronto Varsity* (26 March 1975).
- ¹⁴ Preface to *18 Wheels*, in *Local Boy Makes Good*, pp. 19, 21.

- ¹⁵ Wallace, p. 50.
- ¹⁶ Preface to *18 Wheels*, p. 20.
- ¹⁷ Wallace, p. 49.
- ¹⁸ Twigg, p. 102.
- ¹⁹ Introduction, *Local Boy Makes Good*, p. 12.
- ²⁰ Viveca Ohm, "John Gray," U.B.C. alumni *Chronicle* (Spring 1979), p. 28.
- ²¹ Gray records that Cone had originally written the work for a large cast but was persuaded by Gray and actor Jim McQueen's perception of the work as a one-actor play in which the main character tells his own story by playing all fourteen parts, pp. 46-47; see also Wallace interview with Tom Cone, p. 37.
- ²² Letter to D.B., 22 Nov. 1987.
- ²³ David McCaughna, "Billy Bishop Goes to War," *Toronto Star Week* (17-24 Feb. 1979).
- ²⁴ *Billy Bishop Goes to War* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1981), p. 34.
- ²⁵ John Lekich, "The co-pilot brings Bishop in smoothly," *Globe and Mail* (13 Nov. 1982).
- ²⁶ P. 77; see also Wallace, p. 52.
- ²⁷ (New York: George H. Doran Company), p. 169.
- ²⁸ Introduction, *Local Boy Makes Good*, p. 13.
- ²⁹ Twigg, p. 104.
- ³⁰ P. 85; Billy has already demonstrated the fears and triumphs of his solo flight in a similar manner, p. 57.
- ³¹ "I think the whole notion of war being futile and a bad thing is a smoke screen. . . . It's a device to divert people from the real issue which is imperialism" (Lekich).
- ³² Author's Note to *Rock and Roll*, published first in *Canadian Theatre Review*, 35 (Summer 1982), 68. See also Preface to the revised text (1983) in *Local Boy Makes Good*, pp. 89-90. Unless otherwise indicated, references to this play are from the second publication.
- ³³ Wallace, p. 53.
- ³⁴ "The King of Friday Night," *Saturday Night* (May 1981), p. 71.
- ³⁵ Pp. 143 and 144; cf. the original "It's the rhythm of life, rock and roll. / Follow the beat and save your soul" (113). Gray's later explication of the title relates to this advice: "the combination of words implied an approach to life; an alternating rigidity and flexibility, both of which seem essential if one is to survive life's inevitable and various transitions. Sometimes you have to be a rock; sometimes you have to roll with it. The trick is to know when" (Preface, 90).
- ³⁶ Introduction, p. 14.
- ³⁷ In 1983, Tom Kerr had premiered Gray's one completely non-musical play, a comic murder thriller of mistaken identity (among four Santa Clauses), *You Better Watch Out, You Better Not Cry*, set on Christmas Day in Victoria's Empress Hotel.
- ³⁸ Nora Abercrombie, "Love song: Messer by Gray," *Edmonton Bulletin* (1 Feb. 1986), p. 8.
- ³⁹ Knelman, "Roots," p. 70.

⁴⁰ Cf. Preface, *Don Messer's Jubilee*, in *Local Boy Makes Good*, p. 159.

⁴¹ *Op. cit.* p. 71.

⁴² See Preface, p. 161.

⁴³ Bill Robertson, "Islanders Remembered," *NeWest Review* (March 1986), p. 17.

⁴⁴ In conversation with R. H. Thomson, "State of the Arts," CBC (12 July 1987).

KEATON

Ron Miles

i.

Stories they tell.

I am born in a country church
on a dark and stormy night.

Half a year later
I topple down a flight of stairs
and laugh, at the feet of Houdini
who names me Buster.

I crawl at nine months
onto stage, into vaudeville, tug
at my father's leg
getting his best laugh
of the night.

When I'm three a Kansas cyclone
sucks at a second-storey window
and spits me out three blocks away
unscratched.

I attend one day of school.

My father bills me as a midget
in my seventh year
avoiding the child labor laws
and those who condemn violence
toward minors.

All of these stories should be true.