CULTURE AS CARICATURE

Reflections on a continuing obsession: Newfoundland

Michael Cook

NEWFOUNDLAND OCCUPIES A UNIQUE, and little understood, place in North American history. It was occupied by Irish, English, and Basque fishermen long before that unscrupulous adventurer, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, claimed it for Queen Elizabeth in the dying stages of the sixteenth century. Prior to that, in the tenth century it had been settled for two years by the Vikings, as recent excavations on the northeast coast have proved. It was, however, always a survival culture. Whereas settlement on the Eastern seaboard of the United States proceeded in a somewhat orderly fashion, with studied attempts to re-create an orderly society, Newfoundland always remained an outpost. Permanent settlement would disrupt the business of English merchants, and the Navy, recognizing that people trained to fish in the most violent waters in the world were valuable, used the Grand Banks as a natural training ground for press-ganged sailors. Always destitute, a place from which things were taken, not developed, Newfoundland became a place for the dispossessed: from the famines in Ireland, the land enclosures in England, people came, hid, survived. Their language was, until recently, eighteenth-century Wexford, Cork, the west coast of England. Sea wanderers, they established a commonality of place and tongue unique in North America. There were highly ritualistic rites of passage; the annual seal hunt followed by the summer journey to the cod fishery off the Labrador coast, beset by fog, storms, icebergs. For four hundred years this people moved in ways unknown to the rest of the world, a mixture of Celt and Anglo-Saxon that survived because the nature of the environment determined that it was more important to depend upon your neighbours than it was to keep old animosities alive. Obviously, in survival cultures, art does not flourish, but, with the advent of Union with Canada, roads, radio, television, the inevitable happened, hastened by politicians and bureaucrats who slavered at the prospect of being able to practice planned obsolescence on people. Within two decades, the ritual and mythology, as practised in reality, died. And in the death throes the sleeping, visionary spirit of the soul of Newfoundland mani-

fested itself in the imaginations of those whose task it is to record the joys and agonies of life about them, the artists.

Their emergence coincided, uncannily, with the beginning of the Resettlement Program, an assault upon a traditional way of life unparalleled since the enforced evictions from Ireland, Scotland, and England that had brought so many settlers to the Maritimes. Joey Smallwood and the Ottawa bureaucrats he imported to implement the program loved it. Drag in the people from the myriad outer islands and headlands about the coast, the reasoning ran, pay them a cash settlement — from $1,000 to $3,000 — and bundle them into growth areas where they could join in the great industrial programs that would catapult Newfoundland from the eighteenth to the twentieth century within a decade. Medicare and education would be free for all, and their souls would flourish in magnificent cathedrals erected by soaring technology! Other nations were already instituting programs that used technology to make it possible for those in remote, poorly serviced areas to stay put, and at the same time enrich their lives. Newfoundland did the reverse.

The reality? For many, of course, there were obvious benefits from improved health care and education, and access to social amenities. But for many too, it was also a bitter and heartrending loss. They left behind fine three-storey homes, made by their fathers and forefathers. They left behind instant access to the best fishing grounds on the coast. They left behind noble, high-steepled wooden churches, built by their own hands. They left behind their sense of identification and place and community. They left behind the bones of their ancestors. They left behind their history.

It took time for the reality to sink in but I think, finally, most realized that a blow had been struck at the psyche of Newfoundland from which it might never recover. Many of the attitudes adopted by Brian Peckford and his colleagues, supported by the people, have their roots in the moral and physical anguish created by resettlement, and Newfoundland's continuing struggle for survival.

I APOLOGIZE FOR SUCH A LENGTHY introduction, but indigenous culture cannot be separated from history and those events that profoundly affect a people's lives. It was this program that provided much of the inspiration — if one can call it that — for my play about a failed revolutionary who was hanged in St. John's in 1812 — William Gayden:

> GAYDEN: "I have visions. I have dreams I tell ye. Things I never told ye before — nightmares but they is real. I sees yer children hounded like dogs from their bits o' land, their hovels, their history piled high on carts behind them, the bones o'

> their parents moulderin' behind them. I sees the green hills too, Douell, and the rivers, and the trees full o' birds, and chickens scratching under kitchen tables. But they're not your fields, your trees, and the rivers will never know yer face. The only grass ye'll ever own will be what grows about yer grave. I sees ye, generations of ye, broke backed and sweating to fill others pockets wi' shiny new coins. I sees ye, packed and herded into prisons of cities, chained to the walls, fergetting laughter, and the good work of hands."

Newfoundland is a dramatic, intensely theatrical environment, and I have always been moved by the fact that fishermen leave their stages every day to go forth upon the bitter waters. Logically, it seemed that the stage that imitates life would become the principal form of expression in any cultural revolution. In fact, it was two visual artists, with strong literary connections, who set out to raise the consciousness of Canadians, and their own people. Christopher Pratt exposed, to an astonished country, his immaculate and brooding abstractions of Newfoundland. Aegean seas — not the wild Atlantic — were the background to outport houses ennobled by perfection, yet achingly empty. He would set out to restore dignity to the real artifacts of the province, houses, people, animals, the landscape. His is a vision that, like Samuel Beckett's, often emphasizes the spiritual isolation of man in this corrupt and tumbledown century. An enlarged backdrop of a Pratt painting would match the spirit and intent of "Endgame" perfectly.

Also — out of the strong oral tradititon of Newfoundland, complemented by the mythic intensity of Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner," came David Blackwood and "The Lost Party Series." This young engraver etched the images of Newfoundland's great, and often tragic, annual Rite of Passage, the seal hunt, burning them forever into our own consciousness even as the seal hunt was dying.

In ways beyond their knowing, both of these artists helped create a climate in which, finally, indigenous theatre — unheard of — could flourish. Of course, there had been theatre of sorts. In Newfoundland politics is theatre, and the principal actor since 1949 had been Joey Smallwood whose histrionics could rival any of the great old tragedians. It was not surprising that the first professional company to emerge, The Mummers Troupe, would itself concentrate upon political material.

But there was another figure who had pointed the way to a specific type of theatrical development — Ted Russell. He had been magistrate, teacher, cabinet minister, a wise, gentle man who had created, for radio, a series called "The Chronicles of Uncle Mose," a glowing, golden account of a way of life rapidly disappearing into the fog of history. Here was a richly observed commentary on outport life, peopled with the wise, the foolish, the humorous, the

strong and self-sufficient. This was a world in which a hangashore (a rogue, too lazy to fish) could be brought before a magistrate for stealing a neighbour's hole in the ice. But as the magistrate couldn't get there before all the ice had gone, the evidence had disappeared. It took folk wisdom — not Solomon — to solve that one. Later, a radio play, "The Holding Ground," would become a stage play, produced with great success. In this work too, the essential thesis of the goodness of man, and the stability of society remained the same. Newfoundland men, like the boats in which they roamed, always came back to The Holding Ground, that place on the seabed where the anchor always holds firm, where all is safe and secure. Donald Bartlett, of Memorial University, described Ted Russell's work in *The Newfoundland Quarterly* as: "secluded, predominantly Protestant, restrained and neighbourly." I agree, but it was an idealized perception, recollected with love, and certain darker elements of the Newfoundland reality were not permitted to disturb the idyll. Perhaps this was as it should be, but, in a time when Newfoundlanders have been vilified over the seal hunt, become stock figures for jokes (particularly in Quebec — for long their real allies in misfortune), Russell's perception of them became the one with which they yearned to identify. The consequences still echo on the stage.

As previously mentioned, The Mummers Troupe became the first professional company to concentrate solely upon indigenous material, under the financially shrewd, but often controversial artistic director, Chris Brookes, who had tempered his political theories about theatre as Artist-in-Residence during the turbulent years at Simon Fraser. Paradoxically, it was at the moment of greatest public approval for a theatre that dealt specifically with Newfoundland, that the possibility of a failure of nerve became evident. In 1974 my own play, "The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance," was televised on CBC TV's "Performance." Cast in a tragic mode, the play depicted the end of an era for a tyrannical old Skipper, his retarded son, and his principal crew member and whipping post, his son-in-law, Uncle John. The play had been performed superbly by a uniquely talented group drawn mainly from university ranks, and had been very well received. However, the audience — at that moment in time, although expanding — remained essentially a professional, middle-class one. The TV production would expose the work to a great mass of people who had never been to the theatre. The result was instantaneous, and devastating. The play (and author) were reviled, and it became evident, I think, to everyone working in theatre at that time that the potential audience's image of themselves could not be tampered with lightly. That anxiety still exists and to a large extent has proved detrimental to the creation of a theatre that could have been unique in the country.

The Mummers Troupe concentrated all their resources on collective, politicized theatre, using Paul Thompson's Passe Muraille as a role model. Often, they were

extraordinarily effective. When federal agencies tried to "resettle" people from an area in Gros Morne, the designated National Park, the Mummers moved in rapidly and succeeded in creating a show which so affected public opinion that decisions already determined in St. John's and Ottawa had to be redefined. When Buchans, a mining town in the interior, was threatened with closure, the theatre company again moved in and, supported by the miners' union, created a vivid testament that illustrated the cynicism and inhumanity of corporate giants towards those who have spent, and sometimes given their lives, in their service. They even got as far as Vancouver on a national tour of "They Club Seals Don't They," a show designed to try and educate the Canadian public into the realities of the Seal Hunt.

BUT THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN an essential flaw in the collective process, a flaw exaggerated in Newfoundland because, beyond a handful of amateur groups, there was no other theatre against which one could make comparisons. Once a certain level had been reached, both audience and company seemed frozen in a time warp. The characters in all of the collectives rarely, if ever, changed. Newfoundlanders were perennial victims, were always cast in a heroic and suffering mould. There was the strong-willed, often angry or grieving, Newfoundland woman. There were the boys in the bar, witty, sardonic, knocking everything and everybody. There was the exploited fisherman, the wicked merchant, the ignorant and snobbish mainlander, the indifferent and corrupt politicians. Like cardboard cutouts, with little variation, these stock characters popped up in every play, and their sallies and jibes were greeted with roars of approval by a growing audience who came to see Newfoundland and Newfoundlanders (Good) triumph over the forces of Evil (anyone from away, politicians, *et al.*). In political theatre, the message is deemed to be more important than the development of character or plot — those appalling manifestations of the Deadly Theatre. Unfortunately, what was substituted for those archaic theatrical props eventually was melodrama, sentiment, and, above all, caricature. The promise of a theatrical renaissance, of the kind typified by the great days of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin (inspired by many of the same reasons), had been frittered away. What had been a great opportunity to create a truly National Theatre had been squandered — without anyone realizing it. By the time the Mummers Troupe collapsed, riven by internal dispute and also, I believe, by its refusal to grow, it had developed an audience that had come to depend upon those comfortable, familiar, complacent images of themselves. McDonald's Theatre.

"The modern theatre has died away to what it is because the writers have thought of their audiences instead of their subject" (W. B. Yeats).

"The dramatist has something better to do than to amuse either himself or his audience. He has to interpret life" (George Bernard Shaw).

If this assessment sounds too gloomy, I hasten to add that there were — and are — exceptions to my general thesis. I am thinking specifically of fellow writers Tom Cahill and Al Pittman, but in general, in Newfoundland, it is still easier to mount a collective than a scripted play. There is a profound mistrust of new work, other than one acts workshopped and mounted essentially for an in-house audience. Edmund MacLean, the Artistic Director of Theatre Newfoundland and Labrador, the touring company based at Stephenville on the west coast, has recently gone on record as saying that he dislikes indigenous theatre, it is usually poorly written, and in any case, is a cheap way of attracting an audience. The contradiction of terms is obvious, but it is also a sad commentary, for without companies to put on new works there will be no new works. I also would suggest that behind MacLean's statement lies that nagging sense of inferiority — not unique to Newfoundland but aggravated by isolation — that fuels the notion that imported culture is superior to our own, particularly as it is manifested in the performing arts.

Rising Tide Theatre, the company that is now trying, successfully, to keep professional theatre alive in Newfoundland, has broadened its base to include plays from the Canadian and American repertory in its season, but still depends heavily upon collectives to maintain its good relationship with its audience, and those collectives depend heavily, once again, upon those instantly recognizable stock types. There is a genuine fear of giving offence, of losing the broad base so painstakingly won.

Can a culture interpret itself honestly by caricature alone? Can any indigenous theatre survive without encouraging its artists to interpret life, as they perceive it, in all of its rich manifestations? Are Newfoundlanders going to succumb to the final indignity of other, mainland images of themselves, support it even? On my right, sir, is the Stage Newfoundlander, roaring, boisterous, a song in the heart and a beer to hand, a jolly fellow just like his Irish counterpart. On my left, the Fishing Newfoundlander, stoic, pipe clamped between rugged jaws, clad forever in oilskins spitting seawards. I'se the b'y that builds the boat.

I don't believe it is necessary.

Some years ago, a group called CODCO took every one of the proliferating stock types stalking the stage and turned them inside out in a series of biting satires. Scatological, often deliberately obscene, they took up the medium of black humour, which has always been a part of Newfoundland's survival kit, and parlayed it into an attack upon all that was sacred. The Church and State, unscrupulous landlords and ladies, sexual mores, even basic soul food like fish and brewis was all grist to their mill. Their spiritual mentor might have been Lenny Bruce, but they

were motivated by serious social intent, and were, perhaps, closer to that dark, existential world of the German nightclub in the thirties. For three years they blazed, becoming increasingly outrageous until, as always happens, the group split up and went their separate ways into film, television — the fate, it seems, of most contemporary satirists — to become absorbed by the very establishments they abhor.

Nonetheless, CODCO provided proof that there was a wide audience — equally divided between outrage and hysteria — hungry for images of themselves other than that provided by the collective and, yes, even Ted Russell's gentle perceptions. It is still not too late to learn that lesson. If we are to create a truly National Theatre (and I believe much of our chance of cultural survival depends upon it), then we shall have to challenge both audiences and ourselves more, not less, than in the past. Our theatrical practitioners have no permanent, satisfactory, home. They operate out of houses, shoe boxes, small buildings, renting facilities or co-operating in joint ventures with the director of the arts and culture centres, like the fishermen of old. They have demonstrated courage and tenacity in that situation.

Now I believe it is their responsibility, to their audience, and to that most profoundly human of all the arts, theatre, to create a climate which will elevate, enlarge, and not demean, Newfoundlanders' perception of themselves, and the world's perception of that little nation on the edge of the world itself. All may be well.