

THE NOVELIST AS DRAMATIST

Davies' Adaptation of "Leaven of Malice"

Susan Stone-Blackburn

THOUGH ROBERTSON DAVIES' FIRST LOVE WAS THEATRE, and he was a playwright first, he has achieved greater recognition as a novelist.¹ The reasons for this may have little to do with the relative merit of his plays and novels; the literary climate of Canada in the 1950's and 1960's was more favorable to fiction than to drama. Davies made his novelistic mark with his first three novels, particularly *Leaven of Malice*, in the 1950's, and firmly secured his position as a Canadian novelist of the first rank with the next three in the 1970's. The result is that he is now all too frequently considered a novelist who is somehow willfully straying from his proper calling by writing plays. The plays are often vaguely dismissed as "too novelistic," though nobody dismisses the novels as "too dramatic." Davies' experience as a playwright undoubtedly enhances his writing of fiction; that his experience as a novelist would adversely affect his drama is unlikely, because dramatic expression was so much a part of him before he began writing novels.

Asked how he can tell whether an idea should be developed in the form of a play or a novel, Davies replies,

If you have a playwright's instinct you know without stopping to think. As a general rule a play has a plot that is more simply dealt with than the plot of a novel. The content of a play is not simple, but it should, in its unfolding, follow a simpler line than the plot of most novels, which may have ramifications and by-concerns that would muddle the action of a play. This is why dramatizations of novels such as *Don Quixote* or *David Copperfield* deal only with a few incidents from the whole work, and often leave us unsatisfied. The totality of a play and the totality of a novel are different in kind.²

However, Davies did adapt one of his novels for the stage. *Leaven of Malice*, the most successful of his first trilogy of novels, published in 1954, was rewritten as a play which arrived on Broadway in December of 1960. In adapting it, Davies departed from his usual practice and contradicted his statement about the clear distinction between an idea which is the foundation for a novel and one which

will lend itself to dramatic form. Davies says the adaptation was done "only because I was asked to do it by a New York directing company, and I would have been a fool to turn down the chance."³ In part, I think, he hoped that the recognition his novels had earned him might help to direct attention to his work as a playwright. *Leaven of Malice* is not Davies' best play, but it is particularly interesting as a means for considering the relation between Davies' work as a novelist and his work as a playwright. Moreover, though a close study of the story in both its forms reinforces some of our commonly held suspicions about the limitations on the adaptation of novelistic material for the stage, it also provides some interesting insights into the means of getting such material onto the stage, occasionally even in a way which is an improvement on the original.

Davies adapted the novel for New York's Theatre Guild. The result was called "Love and Libel" so as not to puzzle a New York audience with the Biblical reference of the original title. Tyrone Guthrie directed, taking it on tour for a month, beginning at Toronto's Royal Alexandra Theatre on November 2, 1960, and ending in New York, where it opened on December 7 and ran for only a few days. Reviews were mixed; *Theatre Arts* reported "two tolerably cheerful notices" among the seven daily New York papers.⁴ Tyrone Guthrie and Dennis King, the star attraction, got more notice than Davies did. Individual players, particularly King as the madcap organist Humphrey Cobbler, and individual scenes, particularly the one in which Humphrey, his wife Molly, and their friend Solly Bridgetower all climb into bed to keep warm as they converse about Solly's troubles, won praise. But as a whole, the play was not a success. Toronto reviews reflected an awareness that Toronto was the first stop on the tour and there was yet time for repairs. Herbert Whittaker's review ends, "It's all a dazzlement of good and familiar things that needs sorting out a bit more at the moment." Nathan Cohen's concludes: "There are enough good things in it to make me believe that with the right changes, it can be made to work. And the first and most important change is to give the play a more disciplined and less elaborate shape." A Detroit reviewer also found the play "hodge-podge and episodal," "far too long," despite "many ludicrous scenes, many laughable bits of business."⁵ Davies calls the play "an extravaganza"; the elaborate and episodal shape was part of his design, and he made no attempt to achieve a streamlined structure. Much rewriting he did during the tour, however, mostly to meet the demands of the show's star, Dennis King, who wanted his part expanded. New bits were generated furiously and tried out during the tour, which no doubt contributed considerably to the "hodge-podge" effect. Davies recalls one night when King walked on stage, forgot the lines for a new scene, and turned around and walked off again, leaving Tony Van Bridge on stage to ad lib his way through the gap in the play.⁶ The tour, theoretically an opportunity to improve the play and set the production before it got to New York, seems only to have widened the rift between Davies' perception of

the play and the New York Theatre Guild's notions of what would make a Broadway hit. Davies thinks of it as an ensemble play and believes that trying to put a star into it was the first big mistake.

In the end, Davies was unhappy with the version of his play which was performed in New York, and all the changes which had been insisted upon by management, director, and star did not create a hit. Tyrone Guthrie's official biographer James Forsythe gives him more blame than credit for the production, though he meant well by Davies, who had been a close friend for many years. He was caught in the middle between Davies and the New York management, and he was not strong enough to steer his way through the conflicts successfully. He had suffered a heart attack early in the year. Recovering, he produced Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*, after which, Forsyth says,

this distinguished heart patient went straight on to produce the new play of his old friend of Old Vic and Canada, Robertson Davies' *Love and Libel*. That he made a proper botch of it, all agreed. It was an unwise undertaking, to do a new play when the prognostication had been that he would not be fit enough to do one old one. Rob Davies had been of great assistance in all the Stratford ventures and Tony Guthrie probably felt he owed it to him. But the play and the playwright suffered.⁷

While "Love and Libel" fared no worse than a number of other plays which hit Broadway at about the same time, its reception did nothing to ensure Davies' fame as a playwright.

THE PLAY WAS SHELVED FOR A DOZEN YEARS until it was produced as *Leaven of Malice* at Hart House Theatre in 1973 and again at the Niagara-on-the-Lake Shaw Festival in 1975. For these productions Davies' original script was used. The director of the Shaw Festival production, Tony Van Bridge, had acted in Tyrone Guthrie's production, and his decision to revive the play was testimony that Davies' play was better than Guthrie's production suggested. Van Bridge says of the Guthrie show, "All I can remember about it is that it was chaos." Nonetheless, he decided to do the play in 1975, because he thought it was "one of the best Canadian comedies around," "a first-class Canadian play."⁸ Still, *Leaven of Malice* in both his production and Martin Hunter's at Hart House, got mixed reviews, with high praise for various scenes and characters, but not for the play as a whole. The reason, I believe, lies at least partly in the difficulty of adaptation from novel to play. The most obvious challenge in adapting a novel for the stage is to condense the material to what can be played in little more than two hours. It is clear that unless a novel is dreadfully diffuse, something of value, such as minor characters, episodes which are not essential for the development of plot

or character, and authorial musings on the inner lives of characters or the abstract implications of speeches or events must be cut out in the process of adaptation.

Davies may have felt equal to the challenge of adapting his novel simply because its plot is not essentially complex. "As a general rule a play has a plot that is more simply dealt with than the plot of a novel," Davies observed. What could be simpler than the plot of *Leaven of Malice*? Someone put a false engagement notice in the local newspaper. Its effects on all concerned are explored; in particular, the two young people linked in the announcement find each other and the strength to stand up to their parents. Finally, the culprit is found and his motives discovered. It would seem that the only necessity for dealing with this plot in the scope of a play would be to limit the implications of the "effects on all concerned." Reduce the number of characters affected by the engagement notice, and the plot is instantly simplified. Those most essentially concerned are few. Gloster Ridley, editor of *The Bellman*, in which the engagement notice appears, is technically responsible for the notice; he is not only embarrassed by the fact that somehow the notice managed to slip by his staff without the signature of the person who submitted it, but he is afraid that the ensuing fuss, including a threatened libel suit, may cost him the honorary doctorate from the local university he has hoped for. Pearl Vambrace and Solly Bridgetower are the two young people named in the engagement notice. In fact, they are only slightly acquainted, and Pearl is quite aware that Solly has long been the unsuccessful suitor of another young lady. Solly's mother, Mrs. Bridgetower, and Pearl's father, Professor Vambrace, are both eccentric and demanding parents. The Professor, nursing an old grudge against Solly's father, now deceased, is outraged to have Solly named as Pearl's fiancé — in fact, he would probably be outraged at the idea of losing his daughter to any young man, and having no idea who has perpetrated the hoax or why — except to annoy and embarrass him — he vents his wrath on Ridley, Pearl and Solly. Mrs. Bridgetower is concerned primarily with keeping a stranglehold on Solly, ridden with anxiety that some young lady may win him away from her. Humphrey Cobbler, a Bohemian musician, is involved as the prime suspect in the minds of a few meddlers who believe him capable of anything because he is unconventional in behaviour, appearance and outlook on life. First thoughts about the novel suggest that only one other character is essential; Bevill Higgin, an Irish newcomer to the town who is attempting to establish himself as a teacher of singing and elocution, proves to be responsible for the engagement notice, motivated by malice because he had been snubbed at one time or another by Gloster Ridley, Solly Bridgetower and someone he mistakenly took for Pearl Vambrace. This is only seven characters, a manageable number for a stage production. At first, then, it is a surprise to find that the play retains a number of minor characters from the novel who do not seem to be central to the plot. George and Kitten Morphew are still scuffling and nuzzling on stage, Norm and Dutchy Yarrow still inflicting

awful party games on their guests and congratulating themselves on how normal they are. Altogether, the play includes sixteen characters plus a number of supernumeraries. This is a larger cast than in any of Davies' earlier plays except for *A Masque of Aesop*, written for Upper Canada College and designed to include as many boys as possible.

There are at least three reasons for this large number of characters and the consequent complexity of the play. The first is that the real subject of the novel and the play is not the couple named in the engagement notice but rather small town mentality. Because this involves ancient disputes, gossip, social pride, and petty malice, the subject could hardly be effectively treated through just a few characters. The Yarrows, for instance, epitomize the well-meaning meddlers who are motivated by good intentions but limited by insensitivity and overconfidence in their own perceptions and values. They appear in three scenes. In the first, Dutchy Yarrow is inspired by the engagement announcement in the paper to force Pearl and Solly into embarrassing intimacy in a party game, and they are unable to explain their predicament in the face of the effusive congratulations and sentimental speeches of their hosts. The second scene expands the characterization of Norm and Dutchy as tiresomely conscious of how well-adjusted and determinedly normal they are; this scene prepares for the third, in which Norm, in his capacity as a guidance counsellor, carries out his campaign to smooth Pearl's path to wedded bliss by having a heart-to-heart talk with her father, a professor of classics, about the Oedipus Complex, which he takes to be at the root of Professor Vambrace's agitation about the engagement announcement. This scene is a comic triumph. In addition, it brings the background of the townspeople's gossip about the Vambraces' affairs into the foreground; Norm exposes the ugly face of Rumour with his reference to the episode in which Vambrace broke his stick over Solly's car: "Now about Pearl. . . . They say you were walloping her with a pretty big stick. . . ." Yarrow's interview with Vambrace is also the best opportunity in the play for providing depth to Vambrace's character; his emotional intensity, intellect and eccentricity are shown to good advantage in contrast with ultra-normal Norm's fatuous professionalism. The Yarrows are well-meaning on-lookers who add greatly to the discomfiture of the central characters; they may not contribute much to the plot, but without such people, the "leaven of malice" on which the play comments could not work as effectively.

A second reason for the large number of characters becomes evident in a consideration of Davies' purpose for including George and Kitten Morpew in the play. They and Kitten's sister, Edith Little, contribute to the depth of the characterization of the town as a whole. But, more important, they provide a context in which to develop the character of Bevill Higgin, the outsider who struggles to market his limited talents under the pretense that he is bringing "culture" to Canada. Part of the play's point is that such a small thing as a false engagement

notice affects a variety of otherwise unrelated people in the town. Pearl and Solly hardly know each other; Gloster Ridley, the newspaper editor, is unconnected with either the Vambraces or the Bridgetowers; Humphrey Cobbler, though he happens to be a friend of Solly's, is affected primarily because his natural prankishness makes those who fail to distinguish between highjinks and malicious mischief suspect him of authoring the engagement notice. All can be given life only by being given a context to operate in, which means the introduction of additional characters. Higgin, the true culprit in the case, has only very brief scenes with Ridley and Solly and one in the library with Tessie Forgie, whom he mistakes for Pearl Vambrace. He is hardly given a second thought by those chiefly affected by the false notice; it is important that he have little connection with them. For us to understand who and what he is, then, he must be given life in another context: the home shared by the Morphews and Edith Little, where he is a boarder. There his seductive charm, his ambitions, and his mediocrity are shown. There we see the irony of his crowning triumph in bringing culture to Salterton: the ribald songs in which he has coached George Morphew are a hit at George's club.

I BELIEVE THAT IN ADDITION to bringing small-town mentality to life and providing a context for important characters to function in, there is a third reason for the inclusion of so many characters in the play. One of Davies' greatest strengths in writing both novels and plays lies in his talent for characterization. The real interest of *Leaven of Malice* is not in the plot but in the characters. Having peopled his novel with so many successful creations, Davies must have wanted to include as many as possible in the play. Unfortunately, there is a limit to the number of characters which can be fully realized in the scope of a play. Since there are so many in *Leaven of Malice*, one might assume that they would be quite insubstantially characterized in comparison with their novelistic counterpart. Indeed, old Swithin Shillito, whose immense pride in his nineteenth century journalistic style and whose determination to stay on as resident pest at *The Bellman* until he "drops in harness" makes him the bane of Ridley's existence, suffers greatly in the transition from novel to play, and Ridley too is regrettably reduced. Dean Knapp, of the church where Humphrey Cobbler is organist, is a less significant but unmistakeable victim of condensation. The surprise is that all the others come to life as completely in the play as they do in the novel, and at least one, Professor Vambrace, is a marked improvement on his original.

Characterization, accomplished in the novel in part by omniscient narration, must in dramatic presentation rely wholly on action and dialogue. Or almost wholly; Davies introduces a dream scene in which a montage of five characters' dreams accomplishes very economically characterization which in the novel can be

lingered over and gradually introduced through authorial commentary. Enacted when Solly and Molly and Humphrey Cobbler fall asleep after huddling together in bed to keep warm during their late night conversation, the scene spotlights a series of five characters talking in their sleep. Mrs. Bridgetower's dream accounts for the iron grip in which she attempts to hold her son Solly. She dreams of his wedding to Louisa Hanson (her maiden name), sighing happily, "What a lovely bride! / . . . / A mysterious girl, I seem to know her face / Yet I do not know her / . . . / But I can trust *her* / With my dear son's peace." Gloster Ridley dreams of the distinction he will attain with an honorary doctorate, the cherished hope which is threatened by the repercussions of the false engagement notice published in his paper. Higgin's dream of himself in his youth as a choirboy shows us the peak of his lifetime's accomplishment and conveys the fact that all his life since has been a futile struggle to regain the bliss of his childhood success. Professor Vambrace's dream about Pearl in part parallels Mrs. Bridgetower's about Solly, but it also shows his yearning to be above and beyond and secure from the mob of humanity which mocks him while he attempts to keep aloof and maintain his dignity. The final dream is Molly Cobbler's, extolling the love she and her husband share, establishing her real happiness, despite the oddities of life with an eccentric musician. The farcical effect of Molly reaching for Humphrey in her sleep is that Solly is pushed out of bed, which wakens them all and provides a natural ending to the dream sequence.

The dream scene is one of three scenes especially designed to convey economically on stage information which was provided at greater leisure in the novel. Another scene, which contains a rapid succession of six telephone calls, encompasses a number of scenes from the novel; it moves the plot along efficiently and conveys a sense of waves of interaction among the people of Salterton peaking as the climax approaches. The third is a comic choral scene in which Ridley, Shillito, Dean Knapp, and Tessie Forgie provide many of the novel's reflections on small town mentality, focusing on the newspaper and what it means to the townspeople.

Ridley by himself is a choral figure in the play, opening the first and second acts and closing the third with direct addresses to the audience. In the novel Ridley and his newspaper, *The Bellman*, are central, and many pages are devoted to the work of the newspaper staff and the role of the newspaper in the life of Salterton. Ridley's viewpoint comes naturally from Davies' long experience as editor of the *Peterborough Examiner*. Little of this newspaper motif is found in the play, but *The Bellman* is still the medium through which Higgin works his mischief, and Ridley, as its editor, is still one of the victims of Higgin's malice. The general function of the newspaper in the lives of the townspeople and the particular effect of the engagement notice which appears in its pages are developed in the choral scene, with Dean Knapp and Tessie Forgie, a minor character even in the novel, together with Swithin Shillito and Gloster Ridley acting as voices of the towns-

people and the newspapermen. "They speak," Davies directs, "in the stricken tones of a verse-speaking choir." The solemn rhythm and tone of the others' speeches are punctuated by Tessie's lyrical refrain:

O nose, nose under the wood
 O nose, nose over the lea;
 But nose, nose to nobody's good:
 That's what news means
 To Nosey Me.

The gist of the choral statement, comically couched in poetic lines and elevated diction, is that newspapermen's daily concern is to pry into other people's business, and newspaper readers are more interested in the business of their next-door neighbours than in the news of the Great World. Moreover, who put the notice in the paper is of less interest than the ensuing fuss and the embarrassment of the victims. All conclude together:

Perhaps it may sometimes be true that the world loves a lover;
 And in moments of crisis mankind may achieve magnanimity;
 But most of the time, beneath our external good-fellowship
 Flows a quiet, deep stream of irony, mingled with malice.

Higgin may be the chief culprit, but the nosiness of others, their great concern about personal embarrassment, and their eagerness to discomfit one another exacerbate what was initially simply an erroneous announcement in the newspaper. Higgin could rely on these aspects of human nature; without them, his "joke" would have had little effect. These ideas are dramatized in characters' speeches and actions, but the choral scene emphasizes them, ensuring that the point will not escape the audience.

This choral scene, the dream sequence, and the telephoning scene, are various inventive means of condensing and dramatizing many pages of the novel. The other scenes are all taken more or less directly from the novel with some changes of locale for convenience, some occasional collapsing of two scenes into one for efficiency, and some transferring of function when characters in the novel do not appear in the play. Mrs. Bridgetower, for instance, absorbs the role of the novel's Miss Pottinger, and Molly Cobbler speaks some lines which originally belonged to Mrs. Fielding. A close comparative examination of parallel scenes from novel and play helps to show how Davies met the challenge of adaptation, and it also points up the highly dramatic quality of the novel. With the exception of a very few passages, such as the opening about the appearance of the engagement announcement and a discussion of the quirks of newspaper readers, the novel is constructed entirely of distinct scenes in specific locales. Of course there are far too many of these to allow a simple transition to the stage, but the difficulty for Davies was primarily the need to condense rather than to dramatize what was not dramatic in

conception. Ideas come to him, he has said, primarily in terms of character and dialogue, rather than as abstractions;²⁰ this appears to be true of his novels as well as his plays. Large segments of a scene in the novel consist of dialogue, often direct exchanges unbroken by so much as "he said" or "she replied."

The bulk of the scene between Norm Yarrow and Professor Vambrace in the novel, for instance, consists of five pages of dialogue in which are imbedded only six and a half sentences of description. The scene is adapted for the stage almost without alteration. Some of the looks, actions, and feelings reported in the novel would be conveyed directly by the actions and expressions of characters on stage. Some are incorporated into dialogue: the novel's "Norm beamed. As he always said to Dutchie, they were easier to deal with when they had some brains, and didn't weep, or shout at you"²¹ in the play becomes Norm's line, "I'm glad you're going to take it like that, Professor. It's always easier in these problems of Relationship Engineering when we have to deal with a man of intelligence." A few changes in the dialogue are introduced in the play to make the presumptuousness and superficiality of Norm's assault on Professor Vambrace more apparent, an impression which is conveyed in the novel in part by a narrative description of the intellectual poverty of Norm's professional training. Another change is the addition of eight speeches to do the work of the next scene in the novel, omitted from the play, in which Professor Vambrace asks Pearl why she talked to Yarrow about family, and she replies, "I must talk to someone occasionally." The Professor's grief at his alienation from his daughter is established in this separate scene in the novel; in the play, Vambrace asks Norm why Pearl discussed her family affairs with him. Norm's "Pearlie couldn't talk very frankly to you, I don't suppose" hits home, and the Professor admits that he and Pearl have not spoken to each other at all for three days. After Norm leaves, the scene closes on Vambrace, with the stage directions: "His rage is spent, and now a terrible unhappiness sweeps over him, and we are conscious of the sudden ebb and flow of emotion that makes him what he is. Before we take leave of him, tears are running down his face, and perhaps, under his breath, we hear him say, 'Pearl.'" With minimal alteration from the novel then, this scene transferred easily to the stage and was noted by reviewers as a particularly successful part of the play.

ANOTHER SCENE REVIEWERS PICKED OUT for its success is the bedroom scene between Solly and Mrs. Bridgetower, in which the comic focus is her change into nightclothes with Solly's assistance. The stage directions read "Under cover of a vast bedgown Mrs. Bridgetower removes various intimate garments which she hands to Solly, who hangs them up or puts them away; it is all extremely decent, but achieved only with much bulging, rucking up, accordion-

like expansion and contraction, and modest fuss." Again, the seven pages of the corresponding scene in the novel consist primarily of dialogue, though there are four paragraphs of description. This scene is more extensively condensed and reordered than the Yarrow-Vambrace scene. One long argument over Higgin is replaced by a brief statement by Solly: "You know, Mother, I'd think a long time, if I were you, before I tried to push Higgin into the Cathedral. He strikes me as rather second-rate." Another long exchange focusing on Puss Pottinger, who is omitted from the play, is eliminated. The central point of that passage and of the entire preceding scene in the novel depicting Mrs. Bridgetower's "At-Home," also omitted from the play, is summarized in one line: "Several people this afternoon thought it was that fool Humphrey Cobbler [who was responsible for the engagement notice]." Other passages are rearranged and bits of dialogue added to effect natural transitions. The only substantial addition to this scene of the play is the concluding set of seven speeches. In response to unexpected resistance from Solly when she brings Pearl into the discussion, Mrs. Bridgetower lapses grotesquely into baby talk: "Has Mummy been a baddy Mummy? Does Tolly want to pank Mummums 'tuz she wants to keep the howwid dirls away and have her Tolly all for her own self?" This revealing speech tells a great deal about Mrs. Bridgetower's desire to keep Solly entirely devoted to her as he was in his childhood; the babytalk is partly to cover her embarrassment at such a direct revelation of herself and partly to recreate that eminently satisfactory past. When Solly announces that he is going out, she tries, none too subtly, and unsuccessfully, to get him to report his destination and then makes one more attempt to keep him tied to her: "You won't be late? You know Mother worries when you are out in your car." This addition firmly establishes the nature of Solly's relationship with his mother. In fact, this scene, together with Mrs. Bridgetower's dream in the dream sequence and a discussion of filial loyalty between Pearl and Solly which is expanded in the play, combine to establish Solly and Mrs. Bridgetower's relationship even more clearly in the play than in the novel.

A type of scene which is rewritten entirely for the stage is the memory scene which is simply interior monologue in the novel but is dramatized in the play. Some scenes are presented directly, in sequence, in the novel but occur in the play as "flashbacks": the Yarrow party, for instance. Others, such as Higgin's encounters with Ridley and Solly, are introduced in the novel simply as memories of Ridley and Solly. In the play, these two episodes are introduced as memories but then acted out directly, like the scenes in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* which are projections of Willy Loman's thoughts. In the novel, Ridley's recollection of his interview with Higgin is immersed in his ruminations on the problem of dealing with Shillito. In a long paragraph, the primary subject of which is Shillito, Ridley's refusal to publish a series of articles that Higgin has designed to advertise his services is presented in eight sentences. Davies deliberately obscures its

significance by presenting it from the point of view of Ridley, who attaches little importance to it. In the play, however, Shillito presents himself to the audience and explains his relationship with Ridley. During this speech, Ridley's office is set onstage, and then Higgin, Shillito and Ridley act out the interview. The dialogue is new, and the scene, witnessed directly and occupying two full pages of script, makes a much greater impression on the play's audience than its counterpart makes on the reader of the novel. In particular, Higgin's closing line directs our attention to the significance of the scene: "I wonder," he says to Shillito after Ridley leaves, "if that man has ever been humiliated as he's humiliated me today!" The other two scenes in which Higgin is snubbed — by Solly in his office and by Tessie Forgie sitting at a desk with Pearl Vambrace's name on it — are also acted out in the play and thus have greater impact on the audience than do corresponding passages in the novel. In fact, in the novel Higgin's motive for making Pearl as well as Solly and Ridley a victim of his malicious joke is revealed only at the very end of the story. The necessity to dramatize the incidents which motivate Higgin to retaliate with the engagement notice meant that Davies would have been hard put to make a success of retaining the "whodunnit" approach of the novel. It is clear that he recognized this and decided to take a different approach in the play, making use of dramatic irony instead of suspense. In the play Davies emphasizes the importance of the snubs to Higgin instead of glossing over them. The first act ends after the scene in which Higgin is curtly refused university library privileges by Tessie Forgie and some concluding dialogue between Higgin and the Morphews in which Kitten comments on Higgin's malice: "We don't want to get on the wrong side of this fella." The second act opens with Ridley's direct address to the audience: "Who did it? You know, I'm sure, but it is still a mystery to us."

The play is memorable for individual characters and individual scenes. Characterization, more than function, accounts for the prominence of such characters as Mrs. Bridgetower and Professor Vambrace and, in particular, Humphrey Cobbler. Cobbler is an extraordinary character in both novel and play, raffish, capricious, warm and exuberant, a sort of eccentric Tom Jones whose ruffled appearance and harmless pranks earn him the disapproval of such upright citizens as Mrs. Bridgetower, who considers him an unsatisfactory church organist, despite his musical distinction, because of his levity. In Tyrone Guthrie's 1960 production, Cobbler's part was played by the star attraction, who expanded the part and won praise for his performance, as any competent actor would, because it is a glorious role. Part of the drawback to allowing Cobbler to steal the show, however, is that he has little to do with the plot; he functions primarily as a red herring in the effort to identify the author of the engagement notice, and inflating his part throws the play out of balance. Davies' intention, surely, was to contrast Cobbler's harmless Halloween escapade in the Cathedral with Higgin's spiteful action, using Cobbler as foil to Higgin to show the difference between spur-of-the-moment highjinks

and maliciousness and the mistake other characters make in equating the two. Cobbler's musical virtuosity contrasts with Higgin's "second rate" pretensions to culture, and his cheerful disregard of propriety contrasts with Higgin's pitiful struggle to break into Salterton society. The size of Cobbler's part exactly balances the size of Higgin's in the 1973 version of the play, which indicates that Davies intended the two to be parallel characters.

ALTHOUGH PLAY AND NOVEL HAVE SOME SIMILAR strengths, the different genres dictate differences. Davies has commented on the difference between the part dialogue plays in a novel and its function in a play:

In a novel a whole important scene can be confined to a few lines of dialogue by some descriptive writing; in a play the dialogue must do it all. Dialogue in a play should be economical; audiences quickly tire of talk that moves too slowly. On the other hand, too much economy may be a mistake, because your dialogue may become telegraphic, and the audience will miss something important. A great part of the playwright's art lies in establishing the right tone and pace in his dialogue. It is at the farthest extreme from reporting ordinary speech.¹²

Davies' ability to make dialogue in the play do the work of some descriptive passages in the novel is evident, but of course the dialogue does not "do it all," because a play can convey directly information which a novel can only describe. Davies' witty commentary on characters and mores is a very great asset of the novel version of *Leaven of Malice*, and it can be transferred to stage dialogue only when such a comment can appropriately be made by a character, though in the choral scene and the dream scene Davies incorporates a sort of commentary which passes the limitations of verisimilitude. The play version of *Leaven of Malice*, though it lacks the authorial commentary, makes good use of the visual element: sets, props, costumes, lighting and action. In addition, music and the vocal inflections of the actors do some of the work of the novel's descriptive passages. Davies does not employ stage directions as extensively as many modern playwrights do, but those he does include, together with cues in the dialogue, show that he has a firm grasp of the importance of the visual and aural ingredients of drama. His experience as actor and director has given him a command of theatre which is quite distinct from his abilities as a novelist.

The engagement announcement which launches the action would have relatively little effect if it were simply read aloud. To ensure maximum impact, it is presented visually, not once but twice. In the second scene, as Pearl reads the notice in the paper aloud to her father, a large sign bearing the notice is carried on by masked stagehands. At the end of Act I, as Higgin reads the notice, retrieved from the bottom of the Morphews' birdcage, it is projected, complete

with bird droppings, on a screen. We are reminded again of the engagement announcement when, in the dream scene at the end of Act II, Mrs. Bridgetower's dream is accented by a large engraved wedding invitation announcing the marriage of herself and her son Solly, again carried on by masked stagehands. Action which departs completely from verisimilitude is used to convey abstract concepts. Rumour is depicted by a dumbshow in the first scene. Curiosity and the contribution made to it by the local newspaper are indicated by the choral scene in which each of the four characters carries a copy of *The Bellman*. Many pages of the novel are devoted to characterizing Shillito as a bore and a nuisance; in the play this is deftly accomplished by a brief bit of action during which Shillito settles himself for a rambling address to the audience, though other characters are clearly ready to begin the next scene. Finally, the masked stagehands pick Shillito up and carry him offstage in mid-speech.

Costume is a visual ingredient of the play which contributes to characterization. Ridley opens the play in his doctoral gown, but because the "real" Ridley is not an academic, but a newspaperman, he steps forward out of the gown to address the audience, and the gown, supported by masked stagehands, stands independently. In the dream scene the gown, worn by a stagehand, resumes its separate existence to convey that for Ridley it is a trapping which cannot make him a better man though it can make him seem so. Thus, much of the novel's exploration of Ridley's aspirations to an honorary doctorate is concentrated in a visual device in the play.

A combination of sight and sound gives some scenes more impact on stage than they have in the novel. The early scene of Cobbler's Halloween escapade in the Cathedral uses costume, dancing and music to give us at once Cobbler's *joie de vivre*, his irrepressible spirit and musical *panache*. In a later scene between Solly, Pearl and Vambrace, Solly actually drives his little car onstage. The crash of Vambrace's stick on Solly's car is accompanied by the tinkle of broken glass and the sounding of the horn, both to maximize the effect of Vambrace's rage and to show us clearly the truth of the episode so that we recognize as rumour the later allegation that Vambrace has broken his stick on Pearl.

All the visual and aural possibilities of theatre cannot entirely accomplish the necessary condensation in adapting a novel to the stage, however. Davies calls his play "an extravaganza"; it is a structurally complex collage of sixteen scenes in three acts, and one scene may contain many discrete parts. The last scene of the first act is the most complex, opening with Ridley's address to the audience followed by a short exchange between Ridley and Edith Little, then moving to Solly and Pearl in his car after the Yarrows' party. There is then a "flashback" to the party, followed by the altercations between Vambrace, Solly, and Pearl. Shillito enters to give his version of that episode, which leads into the dramatization of the encounter between Ridley, Shillito and Higgin in Ridley's office. The comic bit of action in which Shillito is removed from the stage effects a transition

to the Morphews' living room, where a conversation among the Morphews, Edith and Higgin, with the insertion of the exchange between Higgin and Tessie Forgie in the library, concludes the scene. The extravaganza incorporates fantasy and memory scenes into present action, at times moving rapidly through a succession of short scenes, at other times lingering over a fuller portrayal of interaction between two or three characters. The rapid succession of scenes requires much ingenuity in staging, and Davies' script shows that he has given careful attention to the physical problems involved, though reviewers seem inclined to give to directors and designers the entire credit for the fluidity of productions.

Condensation of the *Leaven of Malice* story for the stage results in some diminution of character development, which is unfortunate but perhaps inevitable. All Ridley's plans to give "the Old Mess," Shillito, "the silken sack" are omitted from the play, as is almost all exploration of that large part of Ridley's character which is absorbed in overcoming his guilt about his insane wife. The result is that in the play Shillito seems to be an extraneous character, useful only mechanically for starting the rumour that Vambrace broke his stick over Pearl and for discovering the incriminating receipt for the engagement announcement in Higgin's scrapbook. The two references to Ridley's wife in the play are simply puzzling. In Ridley's dream scene, his statement that "we must never mention the title 'Doctor' to Mrs. Ridley. It would alarm her to think of me as any sort of Doctor" is bewildering. The only other reference to her in the play illuminates the first statement, but introduces further difficulties. Higgin explains to Edith that Ridley has a wife who is confined to an insane asylum, but how he, a newcomer to the town, should have stumbled onto this information is not explained, and because its relationship to Ridley's yen for the honorary doctorate is never clarified, the opening scene with Ridley in his doctoral gown becomes nothing more than a rather clumsy device for introducing the main action of the play as an incident which "very nearly kept [Ridley] from getting what [he] so much wanted." *Why* he wanted it so much, the play's audience is unlikely to discern without reading the novel.

Pearl is another character whose development is curtailed in the play, but in this case the play's characterization is perfectly adequate. In the novel, we witness a change in Pearl from a helpless, mousy girl, wallowing in self-pity, to a more independent, determined, self-assured young lady. The play does not show us this marked change in Pearl. In this respect the characterization of the novel is richer, but the play considered on its own merits does not suffer, for Pearl is a consistent and credible character whose role is well defined.

The condensation necessary for the play does not necessarily impoverish its characters, however. While the characters of Shillito and Ridley suffer in the play, Pearl emerges whole, Solly's character is actually enriched, and Vambrace becomes more credible. In a new bit of dialogue in the play, Cobbler tells Solly that his trouble lies in his own self-image, that "for everybody who privately regards him-

self as a prince, there is somebody who thinks he is a frog. . . . You think of yourself as a toad under the harrow." Solly picks up this observation in a later scene with Pearl. After their first kiss, he announces, "I don't think I'm quite ready to be a failure; it's always attractive, mind you — a nice, tear-sodden tunnel of failure — but suddenly I don't *feel* like a failure. I'm sick of being a toad under the harrow . . . I'm going to have a try at being the Frog Prince. Not really wretched you know. Just rather unfortunately enchanted." The metaphor of transformation, linked with Solly and Pearl's discovery of each other, marks a clear and quite credible change in Solly's outlook. In the novel the change is manifested in Solly's decision to become a creator of literature rather than "an embalmer" — a critic — but the play's metaphor (of a toad under the harrow becoming a Frog Prince) simply, economically, and convincingly encompasses a change in Solly which affects his whole character. The same scene between Pearl and Solly introduces dialogue which does a good deal to explain and soften Vambrace's character. Solly admits that Vambrace seems a monster to him, as he does, perhaps, to the audience, judging him by his frenzied actions and raging speeches. Pearl replies. "He isn't like that all the time. That's so unjust. He's a great man, really; a wonderful scholar and . . . , well, never mind. But his standards and ideals are so different from those of most people. There isn't a drop of compromising blood in him. And it sometimes makes him seem so odd that — it's terribly unjust When I was younger it was embarrassing that Father was always in rows about things — things that other people didn't understand or care about. But I know him better now, and the more I know him, the better I understand his worth." Pearl's understanding of her father, which the original character of the novel lacks, assists the audience in understanding the eccentric Vambrace as well and makes him a more credible and sympathetic character. While the necessity to condense sometimes has adverse effects on characters, at other times it inspires Davies to extremely effective dialogue, economical yet packed with information and emotion which contribute to character portrayal.

Leaven of Malice is a play in which most of the individual scenes and characters are delightful, but the parts are more memorable than the whole. The play is long, requiring close to three hours of playing time, and complex in structure and dramatic technique, but it is still less successful than the novel in conveying the mentality of Salterton, representative of small-town Canada. Since this was really Davies' larger objective, not just exploring the effects of Higgin's particular malicious act, his material really was better suited to novelistic development, as he recognized in the first place. Asked whether he would attempt another adaptation of one of his novels for the stage, Davies replied without hesitation: "No, I don't think adaptations make any sense at all. . . . I wouldn't want to try it again."¹³ Still, the challenge of adapting stretched his ingenuity, resulting in a greater command of staging techniques and effective, economical dialogue. It also resulted in

a freer form than the form of most of his earlier plays, and this is a direction in which Davies has continued to move in his latest plays, *Question Time* and *Pontiac and the Green Man*, both of which also contain large casts of characters. One might expect Davies' recent plays to show the same advance on earlier ones in terms of complexity and sophistication as his novels of the 1970's show in comparison with those of the 50's; the experience of adapting *Leaven of Malice*, though it may not have resulted in a totally successful play, did contribute significantly to his command of the dramatic medium.

NOTES

- ¹ Research for this article was aided by a grant from The Canada Council.
- ² Preface to *Question Time* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1975), p. vii.
- ³ Interview with Robertson Davies (February 1976).
- ⁴ *Theatre Arts* (February 1961), p. 71.
- ⁵ Reviews obtained from The Metropolitan Toronto Library.
- ⁶ Interview with Robertson Davies (August 1977).
- ⁷ James Forsyth, *Tyrone Guthrie* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976), p. 270.
- ⁸ Interview with Tony Van Bridge (August 1977).
- ⁹ Manuscript of *Leaven of Malice* in the possession of Robertson Davies. All quotations from the play are taken from this manuscript.
- ¹⁰ Interview with Robertson Davies (February 1976).
- ¹¹ *Leaven of Malice* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1954).
- ¹² Preface to *Question Time*, pp. xi-xii.
- ¹³ Interview with Robertson Davies (February 1976).

ELVIS DEAD

Christopher Wiseman

In a rented Dodge, driving
down Gorge Road in Victoria,
I heard it on the radio.
Elvis is dead.

I though I had
forgotten you but I was shaken.