

TOWARDS A POPULAR THEATRE IN ENGLISH CANADA

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ONE OF THE FEATURES OF THE Quebec theatre that seems to the outsider to be a sign of its healthy development is the broadly based popularity of so much of its drama. Works such as *Tit Coq* (1948) and *Bousille et les justes* (1959) established attendance records which have never been matched in other parts of Canada. These works of Gratien Gélinas, and plays by other Quebec dramatists such as Marcel Dubé and Michel Tremblay have presented French-speaking Canadians with easily recognized dramatic reflections of their lives in a language that closely resembles their own. A particularly striking characteristic of much of this drama is the obvious affection the playwrights have for their characters and (by logical extension) for the audiences for whom they write.

This affection is particularly evident in Gratien Gélinas. Gélinas' work (in his own plays and as Artistic Director of La Commédie canadienne) has always been animated by a strong populist bias. "The ideal dramatic form," he believes, "is the one which will interest the audience in its totality, the one which will reach not only the most numerous, but also the most diversified public."¹ The way to reach such an audience is to be relevant and entertaining. "What is wrong with modern theatre is its detachment from the central facts of our society and from the concerns of the ordinary man. Theatre has become an art in isolation, unlike television and cinema which create a world directly related to the pattern of our daily lives."² For Gélinas, the theatre is not a forum for debate or propaganda; it is primarily a place of entertainment. "If there is a message . . . so much the better. But you can do without the message, and you cannot do without moving the audience or entertaining the audience."³ Furthermore, Gélinas ranks the importance of communication with the audience above the achievement of purely literary or even dramatic excellence. "I maintain that, given not only an equal, but even a vastly inferior dramatic quality in comparison with the great masterpieces of the foreign theatre, past or present, a play of Canadian inspiration and expression will always appeal more to our public."⁴ Not everyone in Quebec agrees with Gélinas, of course. He has been attacked by the critics as being too popular and by the radicals as insufficiently ideological. But because of his own personal popu-

larity and the phenomenal success of his plays, Gélinas has not only been able to create a popular drama in Quebec, he has also inspired younger playwrights to cater to the audience he discovered.

How different is the situation in English Canada! It is hardly an exaggeration to say that a truly indigenous popular drama in English does not exist. Playgoers in Halifax, Winnipeg, Edmonton, or Vancouver seldom see their own lives mirrored on stage, and when works of Canadian inspiration are produced they rarely get transferred to other theatres. There are many reasons for the neglect of popular drama in English Canada, but prominent among these is the strong élitist feeling in the critical and theatrical establishments. The conviction (most succinctly expressed by Ronald Bryden) that the purpose of the theatre is to produce masterpieces⁵ is one that has seriously hampered the development of a robust Canadian drama. The pursuit of "excellence" to the exclusion of almost all else has resulted in a national broadcasting system which produces superior programmes that are ignored by the vast majority of listeners and viewers; it has forced the Artistic Directors of many of our theatres to "justify" the production of popular plays by promising the concerned funding agencies to "educate" their audiences to appreciate the historical or modern "classics" of Ibsen, Shaw, Brecht, or Beckett; it has made the sane assessment of Canadian drama all but impossible by implying that every new play written in this country must be compared, not with the average product of the commercial theatre elsewhere, but with the best dozen or so plays from the last one hundred years. But the most deplorable aspect of the "masterpiece syndrome" is the fact that it is all too often a rationalization for a thinly veiled (or possibly unconscious) contempt for the mass audience.

It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that the history of genuinely popular drama in English Canada is a short and melancholy one. If we exclude such paradramatic successes as the *Dumbells*, *Spring Thaw*, or *My Fur Lady*, then one of the earliest plays to attract national attention was Eric Nicol's *Like Father Like Fun*, first produced at the Vancouver Playhouse in 1966. The play is an innocuous commercial comedy about the sexually inhibited son of a B.C. timber baron who is "educated" by an attractive female artist on the instructions of a concerned father. Vancouver audiences were amused by what they imagined to be references to a certain prominent local family, and the play enjoyed an unexpected success during its limited run. Influenced, perhaps, by the hilarity around him, a Vancouver stringer for the *Globe and Mail* called the play a "masterpiece," and on the strength of such reports, Ed Mirvish decided to bring the production to Toronto and then send it to New York. Three weeks before the Toronto opening, *Like Father Like Fun* had sold more tickets than many major U.S. imports, and it looked as though Mirvish had found a hit.

The Toronto reception proved a shock for promoter and playwright alike. The critics were divided about the play. McKenzie Porter called it "an outstanding

Canadian farce with subtle and serious overtones.”⁶ Herbert Whittaker allowed that it had “a lot of promise in a disarmingly modest way.”⁷ But Nathan Cohen, probably the most influential of the Toronto critics, was withering in his scorn. *Like Father Like Fun*, he grumbled, was “the worst play to be performed in the Royal Alex since the end of World War II.”⁸ When ticket sales slowed, Mirvish began to revise his plans. The New York opening was quietly cancelled and the Toronto run extended. A two-week engagement in Montreal followed, after which the show was closed for the winter. Hoping that the enterprise might somehow be salvaged, Mirvish hired a new director and cast, got Nicol to rewrite the play to eliminate an expensive scene change, and proceeded with his planned invasion of Broadway. The play went into rehearsal in New York and Nicol continued to revise it to meet the objections of the American company. When it finally opened at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre, it met cool reviews and closed after one day.

In retrospect it seems that the New York fate of *LFLF* was inevitable. The popularity of the play in Vancouver depended rather too much on its local allusions. Both the play and its initial production suffered from a kind of provincial innocence that became evident as soon as the work was moved East. The cast (which even McKenzie Porter called “one of inexplicable and excruciating mediocrity”)⁹ could be changed. But the basic situation was essentially foreign to the more sophisticated Eastern audiences. Mirvish might have been warned by the somewhat baffled response of the French Canadian critics, one of whom found the sexual hangups of the young man incomprehensible. “It is good to see English humour of the ‘put down’ variety. Being French Canadian, however, I found the portrait of the artist and the problem of the young man completely unrealistic.”¹⁰

A SECOND PLAY TO ACHIEVE WIDESPREAD popularity across Canada was George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1967), a compelling study of the destruction of an Indian girl by an uncomprehending white society. After its initial production at the Vancouver Playhouse, *Rita Joe* became one of the most widely produced English Canadian plays of the late sixties. It was chosen to open the Studio Theatre at the National Arts Centre (1968); it was broadcast on CBC television (1969), and made into a ballet (1971). It was also produced abroad in Washington, Edinburgh, and London.

Rita Joe was a seminal work in modern English Canadian drama. To begin with, it showed that there was an audience for Canadian plays which attempted to deal seriously with important social issues. The original Vancouver production provoked editorials in the local press and was the subject of an extended open-line radio programme. Secondly, it demonstrated the effectiveness of Canadian (as opposed to mid-Atlantic) speech in Canadian drama. Although there were excep-

tions such as the doughty Nathan Cohen, most critics felt that Ryga had succeeded in transforming the speech of uneducated Indians into a moving, even poetic, dramatic language. Finally, *Rita Joe* was a triumphant vindication of the close collaboration between writer and actors. Ryga, who had written for radio and television, had practically no experience of the stage. During the creation of the play he worked closely with director Malcolm Black and the actors. The result was a fertile interaction in which Ryga's rather amorphous poetic vision was given exciting theatrical form and reinforced by moments of psychological truth contributed by performers such as Dan George. More than any other single work, perhaps, *Rita Joe* combined the new dramatic and theatrical ideas current in the mid-sixties into a relatively accessible dramatic experience. The seventies were to see a rapid proliferation of dramatic activity in English Canada in which the happy balance of *Rita Joe* was rarely recaptured.

The development of Canadian drama in the last decade has been marked by a rather uneasy relation between the playwrights and the theatres. The apparent reluctance of several of the large regional theatres to stage Canadian works led to open hostility on the part of many of the dramatists and the commentators who took it upon themselves to speak on their behalf. Related to hostility (either as cause or effect) was a seeming indifference on the part of many playwrights to the kinds of audiences the regional theatres had, of necessity, to cater to. In their efforts to write "the great Canadian play," to explore the more recherché byways of theatrical experimentation, or to transform the drama into an instrument of social criticism, many of the dramatists seemed to turn their back on the large mass audiences. It is significant, perhaps, that neither Eric Nicol nor George Ryga has repeated his early popular success. Both have continued to write plays, but they have failed to create the kind of dramatic form that would guarantee the communication of their ideas to a large audience.

The reluctance or inability of playwrights to produce the kinds of scripts that the companies felt they needed led some of the troupes to turn to their own resources. Companies such as Toronto Workshop Productions and Theatre Passe Muraille began as long ago as the early sixties to experiment with a process of collective creation. Typically, this method involves the improvisation of a number of sketches on theatrically-related subjects, strung together in chronological sequence. The sketches are frequently the work of the actors themselves who rely on their own research for background. If a writer is involved in these creations, his role is often subordinate, and consists of a tightening or ordering of materials that have emerged in rehearsals.

One of the most interesting (certainly the best documented) experiment in collective creation is Theatre Passe Muraille's influential piece, *The Farm Show*. In earlier productions of this kind, the "research" of the actors often consisted of reading documentary material such as transcripts of court proceedings, newspaper

accounts, or official reports of the events to be dramatized. Inspired, perhaps, by Peter Cheeseman's work in Stoke-on-Trent where the company recorded interviews with local residents, Paul Thompson decided to attempt a more literal dramatic transcription of Canadian life. Accordingly, in the summer of 1972, he and his actors moved to Clinton, a small agricultural community in Southern Ontario, where they mingled with the residents, and learned as much as they could about local history and conditions. At the end of the summer they presented their impressions of the region to their hosts and subjects in a performance in a local barn. The result, an affectionate look at the problems and pleasures of farm life in general and at the lives of certain Clinton residents in particular, was a great success and has become a staple of the company's repertoire.

If collective creations have succeeded in mirroring life in certain regions of the country, they have been less successful in affecting the mainstream of Canadian drama. Most of the plays of Toronto Workshop Productions or Theatre Passe Muraille, for example, have never been produced elsewhere. In part this is a result of the fact that a large part of any single production consists of elaborate pantomime that has been worked out in rehearsal and is difficult to describe in a text. What is true of the actors' "business" is equally true of other aspects of production. There is usually a heavy reliance on music, spectacle, and other essentially theatrical devices and a correspondingly lighter emphasis on text. A number of writers, including Jack Winter, Rick Salutin, Carol Bolt, and Rudy Wiebe, have worked on collective creations. It is my impression, however, that only James Reaney — in the extraordinary Donnelly trilogy — has been able to incorporate the creative contributions of the actors into an organic whole and to impose a coherent vision on the finished work.

A more traditional method of collaboration between theatre and playwright is practised by Bill Glassco at the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto. Glassco is interested in ensuring that the production of Canadian plays will be of the highest standard and to this end he works closely with new playwrights during the period of rehearsals. By far the most successful dramatist to emerge from Tarragon so far is David French who seems in some ways to bridge the gap between the alternative and regional theatres in Canada. It is ironic that his very success has made French suspect among many of the very proponents of Canadian drama whom one would expect to champion him.

FRENCH'S FIRST PLAY FOR THE STAGE (he had previously written only for television) was *Leaving Home*, produced by the Tarragon in 1972. The play became one of the most popular ever written in English Canada and earned French in excess of \$20,000 a year for the next three years. *Leaving*

Home is a "Family play" which deals with the conflict between a father and his sons. As the title suggests, the crisis is precipitated by the younger son's marriage and the decision of the elder one to move in with his brother. This threat of family division triggers long-standing resentments and misunderstandings between Jacob Mercer and his first-born, Ben. The play ends with physical violence and the creation of a final gulf between the two men.

This is familiar ground, and French covers it in a rather faltering way. The causes of the difference between father and son are not brought out as clearly as they might be, and Ben's decision to leave home seems hardly sufficient provocation for Jacob's almost hysterical reaction. The strength of the play lies less in the narrative structure than in French's skillful mixing of comedy and tragedy, and in his reproduction of regional speech. Although obviously related to such plays as *Death of a Salesman* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *Leaving Home* is lighter in tone and more easily accessible than its predecessors. The humour and sentiment in French's work provide a contrast with the tension and violence which is reminiscent of the early plays of Sean O'Casey in which the tragic is counter-balanced by a rollicking sense of the ridiculous.

French's ability to mix comedy and pathos is even more evident in his second Mercer family play, *Of the Fields Lately* (1973). In this work, French continues the story of the father-son relationship a few years after the incidents of *Leaving Home*. Ben arrives to attend the funeral of his aunt only to discover that his father has had a heart attack about which he had not been told. Somewhat against his wishes, Ben allows himself to be persuaded to stay home so that he can support the family while his father recuperates. Jacob is temperamentally incapable of remaining inactive, however, and makes life intolerable for those trying to save him. In the end, Ben realizes that his father cannot be helped, and he returns to Saskatchewan where he has been living. A short time later Jacob dies on the job. Once again, the structure of the play is derivative (French uses a flashback technique which recalls *The Glass Menagerie*), and the characters are presented with a sentimentality that would be mawkish were it not for the humour. But the play reveals a profound love of life on the part of the author, and an affection for his characters that sets French apart from many of the dramatists writing in English Canada.

In his third play, *One Crack Out* (1975), French turns to an entirely new milieu — the world of the Toronto sub-culture — for his subject. On one level, the play tells the rather sordid story of the decline and rise of Charlie Evans, an aging pool hustler. The action opens with the main character both impotent and in a professional slump as a result of (or occurring at the same time as) his wife's infidelity. When Charlie fails to place a bet for a friend he finds himself owing \$3,000 with very little prospect of raising the money. As one after another of his possible sources of funds are exhausted or shut off, he faces the prospect of having his hands or legs broken by an implacable loan collector. Just as he is about to go into hiding,

he discovers that his wife has begged for an extension of the loan period. Both moved by her loyalty and humiliated by his inability to protect her, he challenges the debt collector to play pool for the money owing. The play ends leaving the audience with the conviction that Charlie's problems (both business and domestic) are over.

One Crack Out was not as popular with the critics as French's earlier plays. Some reviewers complained that the action and the milieu were rather too specialized. It should have been obvious, however, that the play is much more than a study in local colour. Indeed it deals with many of French's familiar concerns. Charlie, like Jacob Mercer, is a man who defines himself by a professional code which leads him to behave in ways that seem irrational to an outsider. The Toronto pool shark, like the Newfoundland carpenter, is an example of a man caught in changing circumstances and facing a loss of professional confidence.

French's latest play, *Jitters* (1979), was Tarragon's most successful hit in three years, playing for several weeks in the company's regular season before being transferred elsewhere for an extended run. The work deals with a group of actors opening a new play in a small Toronto theatre, and is based in part on French's experience with *Glassco* at the Tarragon. The story concerns Jessica Logan, a Canadian actress who has returned home after a modest success on Broadway. The last play she had appeared in, however, had been badly reviewed and she is hoping that the present work will be the vehicle in which she will make her triumphant return to New York. She has invited a Broadway producer to the Toronto opening and the imminent arrival of this outside observer provides a focus for the hopes and self-doubts of the playwright and the other actors. When the producer fails to show up, the company is compelled to exercise its own critical judgment. The author turns to the director for reassurance that his play is really "good enough" for New York; one actor exclaims "He was my last chance, he was an American." The end of the play is ambiguous. The actors finally resolve their personal differences and get on with the show. But it is not at all clear that they have achieved the kind of professional self-confidence that Charlie, for example, regained at the end of *One Crack Out*.

Jitters is essentially a light comedy and it would be foolish to probe it too deeply (especially in view of French's acid comments about "academics looking for meaning"). But it would be equally wrong to dismiss *Jitters* as pure farce. Like his earlier plays, *Jitters* is concerned with the problem of integrity — of living one's life according to one's inner convictions in spite of the pressures exerted by family obligations, self-doubts, or the opinions of others. In the Mercer plays, the problem is seen in rather conventional terms, first from the point of view of the son then from that of the father. *One Crack Out* is a new departure in that the "family" in that play is an entire sub-culture in which the conflicts and codes are somewhat broader. *Jitters*, too, deals with a closely-knit group made unstable by tension and

personal rivalries. But the theatrical world of *Jitters* is a metaphor for the world of Canadian culture as a whole. It is not only actors and playwrights who are reduced to a state of forelock-tugging diffidence by the prospect of international recognition.

The rather schizophrenic attitude that condemns the commercialism of Broadway while at the same time envying its success has done much to confuse theatrical policy in Canada. Underlying many of the arguments about Canadian drama is an unspoken assumption that audiences in this country are somehow different from their counterparts abroad. It is the apparently sincere conviction of many people in the arts in Canada that it is possible to create a high culture while at the same time neglecting popular culture. But the hope that Canadian plays in the tradition of the European avant-garde can ever win a large audience here (any more than they have won such an audience elsewhere) is a pious illusion. The only thing that will win spectators away from Broadway and West End commercial comedies are Canadian commercial comedies. If Canadian drama and theatre are to come of age, then it is necessary that we overcome our élitist prejudice against "showbusiness." Artistic Directors, funding agencies, critics, and academics must face the fact that drama is a living but ephemeral art, and that the "masterpieces" that are so earnestly hoped for from our playwrights (when they come) will form a very small percentage of the total dramatic output. It is time to assert the importance of popular, simple-minded, unpretentious, easily-accessible dramatic entertainment. What we need are not more Brechts, Pinters, Becketts or Tennessee Williamses in this country, but a Canadian Simon, Ayckbourn, Rattigan or Inge. We need more dramatists like David French who can be serious without at the same time having to be solemn.

NOTES

- ¹ "A National and Popular Theatre," rpt. in Renate Usmiani, *Gratien Gélinas* (Toronto: Gage, 1977), p. 83.
- ² Gélinas, quoted by Michael Richard in "Gélinas," *The Stage in Canada*, 4, No. 3 (May 1968), p. 9.
- ³ Gélinas in a CBC interview on "Report on the Arts," January 3, 1962.
- ⁴ Usmiani, p. 81.
- ⁵ Ronald Bryden, "Toronto Theatre: *Mademoiselle est partie*," *Canadian Forum* (August 1978), p. 11.
- ⁶ McKenzie Porter, *The Toronto Telegram*, July 18, 1966.
- ⁷ Herbert Whittaker, *The Globe and Mail*, July 15, 1966.
- ⁸ Nathan Cohen, *The Toronto Daily Star*, July 15, 1966.
- ⁹ *Telegram*, July 18, 1966.
- ¹⁰ Yves Robillard, *La Presse*, August 24, 1966.