

GEORGE F. WALKER

B-Movies Beyond the Absurd

Chris Johnson

IT IS NOW TEN YEARS SINCE THE Factory Theatre Lab opened its first season in a makeshift theatre above an auto-body shop on Dupont Street in Toronto. Theatre Passe Muraille had been in operation for two years, and Tarragon Theatre and Toronto Free Theatre were to join the new Toronto "alternative theatre scene" shortly. Together, the four theatres played a major role in encouraging the upsurge in interest in Canadian drama whose impetus we are still feeling. The renewed burst of theatrical activity in Toronto, this time with a distinct Canadian accent, encouraged increased interest in Canadian drama, and a number of Canadian writers who had been exerting their productive energy in a theatrical direction for several years, among them Robertson Davies, John Herbert, George Ryga, and James Reaney, acquired an increased importance in the eyes of those interested in the development of Canadian culture. Encouraged to investigate, scholarly inquiry revealed that there have been in the Canadian literary past a number of playwrights whose work is of more than passing interest. As Northrop Frye notes in his conclusion to the first edition of the *Literary History of Canada*, the deficiency of many individual Canadian literary works has been balanced by the significance of their contribution to the "entire enterprise" of Canadian literature. With the added efforts of Passe Muraille, Factory Lab, Tarragon, Toronto Free Theatre, and the writers associated with these companies, Canadian drama was seen for the first time as an "entire enterprise," a suddenly more impressive whole whose parts deserved more attention.

The new movement also created a new cohesion, a sense of drama in the fullest meaning of the word, not the isolated work of individual playwrights but a body of work linked by emulation, rivalry, and a shared audience. It is little wonder, then, that the similarities and differences between these companies and the theatrical styles they have espoused have had a profound influence on the generation of Canadian playwrights who have achieved maturity in the decade just drawn to a close. It must be understood that any schematic analysis of what was a fairly complex cultural phenomenon cannot hope to explain satisfactorily the full range of activity, and that this brief summary of the aesthetic preoccupations of 1970's alternative theatre in Toronto necessarily omits mention of excep-

tions to the general rules, the numerous examples of crossovers and idiosyncratic experiments: none of the theatres under discussion adheres to the rules of a clearly defined "school." Hrant Alianak's whimsical experiments first saw light of day as "seed shows" sponsored by Theatre Passe Muraille, a company with a much clearer sense of social purpose than Alianak has. David Freeman, a playwright whose work is neo-realistic in the manner predominantly favoured by the Tarragon, had his first production at the Factory Lab, whose bias has frequently been anti-naturalistic. George Walker, closely associated with the Factory Lab during most of that theatre's history, has seen three of his last four plays premiered at the Toronto Free. Still, generalizations have their value as rough guides, and some attempt to sort the trees into woods is in order.

Tarragon Theatre, with a standard of finished production generally higher than that of its rivals, had the greatest appeal to a general audience. The neo-realistic, well-made plays which constituted the bulk of the fare offered were easily accessible, and with the familiar conventions, David French and the other Tarragon playwrights showed audiences the previously unfamiliar, Canadians themselves, or at least facsimiles of themselves that audiences were willing, even eager, to accept. "That's us! That's us!", Greg Leach has summarized audience reaction to French's *Leaving Home*.¹ The Tarragon plays have been Canadian by virtue of their content; this, and their accessibility, recommended them to the literary critics, and the Tarragon playwrights were among the first of the new wave to receive widespread critical reaction. By and large the plays were treated as extensions of Canadian literature rather than as dramatic entities, and comment was usually devoted to incorporating the new Canadian drama within thematic patterns applicable to Canadian literature as a whole.

Passe Muraille's approach has been much more theatrical and much more theatricalist. The docu-drama, the form for which the theatre has become best known, goes a step beyond the "Canadianness" of the Tarragon plays in that the depicted reality almost invariably influences the form of the work itself; if the subject is Canadian, the form will be Canadian too. Passe Muraille's distinctly Canadian and highly theatrical style, its influence on writers who have worked with the company, and its influence on theatre groups elsewhere in the country made the organization a favourite subject of theatre critics, and Passe Muraille followed Tarragon into the general critical consciousness.

The Factory Theatre Lab and Toronto Free Theatre, perhaps the most eclectic of the four, were less concerned with Canadian content, and the plays produced by these companies fitted less neatly into the established thematic patterns of Canlitcrit; at the same time, the internationalist theatre style of the plays did not deviate sufficiently from the European avant-garde model to attract the attention of critics of a more theatricalist bent. Here, in short, was the TISH group of Canadian drama, insisting on cosmopolitan values but at the same time asserting

the right of Canadians to pursue those values and to be heard while doing so. While Tarragon and Passe Muraille realized their objectives earlier and more fully than did the Factory Lab, the Factory Lab's objectives were more elusive and were pursued through policies designed to produce results over a longer period of time. With its aggressively nationalistic decision not to produce non-Canadian plays, its trading off of production polish for larger numbers of plays staged in a year, its comparative indifference to immediate popular success, and its focus on writing, the Factory Lab and its founding Artistic Director, Ken Gass, provided a trade school for Canadian playwrights entirely unprecedented in Canadian theatre history. The energetic creative atmosphere, the opportunities to put works to the test, and perhaps above all, the new freedom to fail from time to time, have all produced over the long run the valuable results Gass and his co-workers originally envisaged; the Factory Lab has fostered some of the most intensely personal, formally innovative, and accomplished dramatic writing in the country. It is the purpose of this essay to examine the work of George F. Walker, one of the best of the Factory Lab playwrights, as a first step toward rectifying critical neglect of the company and its writers, and toward assessing the place in recent Canadian drama occupied by Walker and the theatrical movement he represents.

As well as being one of the most accomplished writers to emerge from Ken Gass's laboratory process, Walker is a writer with a long and close connection with the theatre: his first play was produced in 1971 in the company's second season, he was for a number of years the Factory Lab's resident playwright, and he served for a brief period as the theatre's Artistic Director. He wrote his first play, "Prince of Naples," in response to the Factory Lab's ubiquitous posters calling for new scripts; until then, he had only dabbled in verse and short fiction. The one-act piece, and the full-length play which followed shortly after, *Ambush at Tether's End*, are both clearly the work of a writer new to theatre, of a writer of urban and cosmopolitan sensibility looking to established writers for models in the form new to him.

"Not many prairie landscapes in George Walker's plays," Ken Gass remarks in his introduction to a collection of Walker's plays.² Indeed not. Or as Walker himself puts it:

It would be very dishonest of me to attempt to write any sort of rural play. I had been surrounded by things like movies, television — you know *The World at Six*, that sort of thing — theatre and literature of all kinds all my life. What did I know about the farmer and his wife? And yet I was criticized. Everyone kept telling me I should go to the grass roots and that Canadian plays should be naturalistic or historical. Naturalism was very big in Toronto for a long time. I couldn't help thinking that was one kind of theatre, but there were other types of theatre as well.³

"Prince of Naples" concerns a relationship familiar to every North American, that of student and teacher, and draws extensively on the perspectives of a con-

temporary urban world, simultaneously literate and electronic. The work shows its literary ancestry through its form: in its use of language, transforming pat phrases into extended and volcanic passages of nonsense, in its heavy dependence on a central theatrical image, and in its concerted effort to include the audience within the emotional event the characters are experiencing, the play models itself after the Theatre of the Absurd in general and after Ionesco's *The Lesson* in particular. Walker reverses the usual power structure in the educational process, making the young the instructor of the old, to examine a social phenomenon, the cult of the young and the supposedly liberated, associated with the sixties, and in the process questions the new credo of relativity:

Now the word insane has been reapproached by the wide-eyed armies of time and given a new meaning. The word has been dragged out of the dampness of our mental basement and placed high on the clouds of our consciousness.⁴

The method of employing a form to question ironically the ideas underlying the form became characteristic of Walker's work.

Ambush at Tether's End was Walker's second exercise in the theatrical techniques of the Absurd: this time, the most important model appears to be Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The central character in the play is a corpse (an echo of Ionesco's *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It?*), a poet-philosopher who has hanged himself and who has left a series of notes attacking the values of his friends, challenging them to confront "reality" as he has with a "definitive act" equal to his. While there are similarities linking the friends to Beckett's tramps (Mullaly correctly identifies rhythmic similarities in their speech),⁵ Walker has localized the situation, and has made from the dichotomy depicted by Vladimir and Estragon a more North American opposition of obsessions, those of the ambitious businessman and the sexual athlete. If those who wait are diminished, so too is that for which they wait. Max, the moralizing corpse, endangers his own authenticity through his posthumous showmanship, and the philosophical life is discredited by the dead man's petty rivalry with a colleague. While Galt and Bush are, predictably, destroyed by the dilemma in which they find themselves, there is little to recommend an alternative to their views if Max is the representative of that alternative. Walker sees both the society he satirizes and the modish and pseudo-romantic challenge to that society as inadequate, and in the play constructs a theatrical model of the intellectual quandary in which many of his generation found themselves.

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HE INFLUENCE OF THE Theatre of the Absurd can be seen in many of the plays produced in the Factory Lab's first few seasons, and several critics were quick to identify their derivative nature. In his review of *The Factory*

Lab Anthology, in which *Ambush at Tether's End* appeared, Edward Mullaly writes:

Twenty-five years ago the enunciation of man's absurd situation might have constituted a positive statement. But a similar inability to discover or point out shapes and structures today no longer constitutes experimental, or even interesting, drama regardless of the country in which it is written.⁶

Of Walker's play itself he asks "why Walker has spent his time on a script Beckett had already written with much greater discipline, intelligence, and skill."⁷ While Walker's early efforts are in many respects undergraduate exercises, few saw at the time that they are superior undergraduate exercises, and that in turning the form against its content, Walker avoided slavish imitation.

The Theatre of the Absurd has remained largely a European phenomenon: American playwrights have had as much difficulty transplanting its insights and techniques to a North American *milieu* and audience as have had the Canadians Mullaly criticizes. Martin Esslin attributes the difficulty to history:

the convention of the Absurd springs from a feeling of deep disillusionment, the draining away of the sense of meaning and purpose in life, which has been characteristic of countries like France and Britain in the years after the Second World War. In the United States there has been no corresponding loss of meaning and purpose.⁸

While the statement is undoubtedly less true than it was when it was first written, it is significant that most of the American playwrights whose work had close affinities to the European avant-garde of the fifties and early sixties have subsequently developed in different directions. Thomas Porter advances a more commercial explanation in *Myth and Modern American Drama*. While mainstream American drama consistently portrays the failure of the American Dream, that which has maintained the illusion of "meaning and purpose," the American theatre-going public has an aversion to the next step, a dramatic form which not only discusses but reflects the disintegration of the Dream. In consequence, American attempts to transfer the technique as well as the message have been stillborn.⁹ The American playwrights who have most successfully communicated to an American audience those insights usually associated with the Theatre of the Absurd have been those, like Jean-Claude van Itallie or Sam Shepard, who have taken particular care to couch these insights in an American idiom, who have employed the disjointed nature of American popular culture to display a fragmented theatrical vision of lost "meaning and purpose." Shepard, whose work is most clearly relevant to a consideration of Walker's, has proven particularly adept at employing the trivia of American society as a means of both celebrating the vulgar vitality of that society and suggesting an emptiness beyond.

In Walker's third play, *Sacktown Rag*, he draws on North American pop culture in a manner somewhat similar to Shepard's, and in turning to more auto-

biographical subject matter, discards some of the literary self-consciousness which intrudes in the earlier plays. The structural technique is that of the cartoon: the schoolboy protagonist experiences the traumas of growing up in a world sometimes realistic and sometimes drawn in the lurid colours of the comic strip. While the caricatures of parents and teachers sometimes have the gleeful and scatological energy of schoolboy graffiti, Walker does not entirely trust his conventions and chooses to explain them away with an unconvincing memory frame: the play subsequently loses the impact of the cartoon without gaining enough in psychological insight to compensate. It is probably the least satisfying of Walker's published work.

In *Bagdad Saloon*, first produced in 1973 and subtitled "a cartoon," Walker does not dilute his pop art conventions: the result is a bawdy, sprawling collage of short scenes, music, and *coups de théâtre*. The cartoon figures are less personal than the graffiti of *Sacktown Rag*; characters drawn from American high and low culture, Gertrude Stein, Henry Miller, Doc Halliday, have greater resonance, and extend the implications of the piece beyond itself.

The incident which precipitates the action of the play is the kidnapping of the American legends by a pair of improbable Arabs who want to learn the secret of mythic immortality. The attempt, of course, is futile: Halliday and Miller are frauds, and Stein, while she has visions, proves incapable of communicating what she sees. The American saloon is grafted onto fabled Bagdad, and Aladdin decks himself out as a dime store cowboy in pursuit of a new and neon mythology, even while the efficacy of any myth in staving off the chaos is put in question:

AHRUN: Fame is a fickle commodity. Not bad, mind you. Just fickle.

DOC: So what?

STEIN: Exactly.

AHRUN: It needs to be guided, so to speak. And if it's guided in the right direction, it can create things. Purpose. Glamour. Mystique. (*Pause*) Artists. Or folk heroes. All things which we find very scarce around here.

STEIN: What happens then?

AHRUN: Folk-lore.

STEIN: And then?

AHRUN: More folk-lore.

STEIN: And then?

AHRUN: And then . . . and you can — and then there's always . . .

STEIN: Yes?

DOC: What?

(*Ahrun shakes his head violently. Turns. Leaves. . . .*)

So much for identity, Arab, Canadian, or otherwise.

As Gass points out in his introduction, the first movement of the play constructs the saloon and decorates it in all its crass glory, while the second movement destroys and discredits the structure. Unfortunately, the process is unduly pro-

tracted and Walker is often distracted by his fascination with the decoration; the piece is theatrically inefficient. Still, in *Bagdad Saloon* Walker shows increased control of his new medium, and develops further the talent for stage metaphor revealed in the earlier plays: the image of the all-American hero, sportsman, and pop singer as pathetic, speechless grotesque is an image that lingers long after memories of the irritating meanderings have faded.

IT IS A COMMONPLACE THAT, particularly in matters of structural convention, theatre has been drawing for the last two or three decades on popular electronic forms, especially film, reclaiming the debt that art form owes theatre in general and August Strindberg in particular. Walker has not been the first Canadian playwright to borrow from cinema: Ryga's "liquid dramaturgy" owes as much to film as it does to the folk song,¹⁰ and James Reaney cites Walt Disney as an important influence. The older playwrights, however, use cinematic devices to shape the presentation of their vision of the world whereas for playwrights of Walker's generation, the vision itself is frequently filmic.

Like so many of my generation, my mind is sort of a media garbage bag sometimes. We're all so heavily influenced by television and movies and you don't have to be very perceptive to see it coming out in new plays. The dilemma for me was not to rebel against the problem — it is, after all, a fairly central reality — but to assimilate it and make something of it.¹¹

As Walker suggests, the influence is to a certain extent involuntary, the result of a lifetime's exposure for the generation which grew up with television and whose dreams are, in effect, movies. The process of "making something of it" has involved becoming aware of this mode of thought as just that, an artificial construct rather than part of the natural order (Esslin identifies the post-war generation's frequent inability to make that distinction in the postscript to the revised *The Theatre of the Absurd*); it has also meant exploiting the dramatic possibilities of a contemporary pool of shared understanding, which becomes the basis of a coherent (if not necessarily logical) set of social assumptions to which the social act of theatre can be addressed.

Obviously film is a richer source of theatrical convention than is the cartoon, and provides fuller access to the popular pool of understanding. It also provides, especially through the so-called B-movies, a rich source of images, plot models, and a set of stock characters not unlike those used in melodrama or Commedia dell'Arte, an iconography available to the contemporary playwright to be employed as he sees fit. While Walker uses a number of cinematic structural devices in *Bagdad Saloon*, he makes comparatively little use of filmic iconography; *Beyond Mozambique* (1974) marks the beginning of extensive recourse to the raw material of the B-movie, material characteristic of all his subsequent work. In

employing stock characters and situations as the vehicles for insights and ideas beyond the capacity of the popular form from which they were drawn, Shepard in *Mad Dog Blues* or *Angel City* and Walker in *Beyond Mozambique* and *Ramona and the White Slaves* follow well-established theatrical practice: Beckett and Ionesco draw from music hall and film comedy; Pirandello, Chekhov, and Ibsen drew from melodrama; and, of course, Molière made use of the characters and conventions of Commedia dell'Arte.

The B-movie also provides an ironic mode, an element acquired through the almost accidental manner in which the older B-movies were reintroduced into the mainstream of popular art through late-night movies on television and hence into the imaginations of the generation shaped by television. In this way, trivial work which would otherwise have perished, as do novels unworthy of reprinting or plays not worth reviving, lead an extended life; the extension, the survival of artifacts meant to be disposable, frequently leads to levels of meaning not intended by their creators. The B-movies of the forties and fifties present a vision of life so simple and naive that the effect is comic, while the rapidity of shifts in popular taste gives the films a quaintness which emphasizes the naiveté and heightens the comic effect.

In adapting the world of the B-movie for the stage there are two dangers. The first is that an audience might accept that world at face value, despite the integral irony of a topical perspective out of context. The second pitfall is the temptation to revel in the exuberant awfulness of it all: the result, here, is usually described as "camp." Tom Cone's "Shot Glass" and Hrant Alianak's *The Blues* are examples of plays which duplicate the mood and rhythms of old B-movies very accurately indeed, but which offer almost no perspective from outside the worlds they depict, which remain satisfied with accidental irony, and which therefore succeed as anachronistic replicas, camp artifacts, rather than as original works of art. In *Beyond Mozambique* and subsequent plays, Walker circumvents the perils through the addition of elements from other modes, hyperbole, and explicit comment on the theatrical context.

Beyond Mozambique is a jungle movie, but contrary to the opinions of several first-night critics, it is not just a jungle movie. Set on the porch of a decaying colonial mansion in the jungle, the play throws together six disparate characters, in the best "ship of fools" tradition, and allows these figures, or "masks" as Richard Horenblas describes them,¹² to enact for us the decline and disintegration of western civilization; while its mode is that of the B-movie, its content is not: technology does not triumph over nature, white heroines are not pure, white horses are not all-powerful, and while the embattled whites are not overwhelmed by the forces of "savagery" drumming in the bush, they do succumb to the chaos within, and it is the drumming of that threat which provides the play's rhythm and central theatrical metaphor.

The play's central character, played by Donald Davies in the original production in 1974, is that most twentieth-century of archetypes, the mad scientist. Rocco combines the familiar B-movie archetype and hints of concentration camp "medical experiments," sadism disguised as a quest for knowledge, or, perhaps, the quest for knowledge undisguised; he is both the historical nightmare and the popular rendition of the obsessions in part responsible for those nightmares: in the face of impending disintegration, he can think only of pressing on with his experiments and of acquiring the necessary subjects. While he is horrifying, Rocco is, in Walker's wry view, the most positive character in the play; he has a Kurtz-like integrity which compels him to define, to defy chaos even if in a perverse way, a drive often expressed in gloriously B-movie lines: "There's something about committing crimes against humanity that puts you in touch with the purpose of the universe." Parody makes the line funny; history, and the terrifying possibility that Rocco may be right, given an Absurdist vision of the universe, make it not funny.

Rocco is accompanied by the requisite hunch-backed assistant, Tomas, who is primarily responsible for acquiring the experimental subjects and initiating a one-man crime wave. Tomas says very little, and much of that in Greek (a sardonic combination of classical heritage and bestiality personified), but his presence brings onstage a manifestation of the savagery by which the central characters feel themselves threatened, and makes explicit the erotic and racist implications of all those glistening dark bodies in B jungle movies. As the whites decline, non-white Tomas ascends, expropriating for himself the style and trappings of power. Later in the play, we encounter a third B-movie personage, the failed priest; again the element of parody is present, as Liduc does not go to the ends of the earth to redeem himself, but has been sent by a Church which sincerely hopes he will never be heard from again. His presence makes possible the introduction of the pseudo-philosophical observations so characteristic of the B-movie as a form, and which Walker gleefully deflates and redirects: "Jesus doesn't mind losers but he has no patience for idiots."

To these refugees from a jungle movie, Walker adds figures from other worlds, but worlds no less threatened by the surrounding chaos. Olga, Rocco's wife, is obsessed with the world of Chekhov's plays to the point where she believes that she is the character of the same name from *The Three Sisters*, complete with a sentimental attachment to the artistic traditions of the *ancien régime* (represented in the play by a treasured Renoir which she employs as a talisman against the forces of the jungle), a determination to preserve social form at all costs, and the obligatory yearning for Moscow. In the original production, the part was played by Francis Hyland, further heightening the effect created by introducing high culture into flamboyant pop. The introduction of a Chekhovian character points the pattern of non-communication and obsession in the piece, gives an added

significance to the manner in which characters are isolated from each other, and adds a dream-like memory of bitter-sweet against which Walker can contrast his more garish effects.

Corporal Lance, formerly of the R.C.M.P., brings a distinctly Canadian contribution to the model apocalypse; we, too, get a share in the fall of the West. The Corporal is the only explicitly Canadian character in Walker's work (although the unpublished plays, "Gossip" and "Filthy Rich," are nominally set in Toronto) and it is a reflection of Walker's views on what Canadian theatre ought to be that the character is a very crafty parody: the Corporal is inept (natives have dismantled his motorcycle and he can't put it together again), naive, apparently clean-living, and very Canadian — in the grip of malarial hallucinations, he sees wheat. The character is a good example of Walker's growing ability to manipulate audience expectations. The Corporal is at first merely a comic mountie, who, as we would expect, fails to understand what is happening in the sophisticated world of decadent allusion, worries about not having anything formal to wear but his scarlets ("Am I over-dressed?"), and gives his wholesome all to the battle against subversion. But this quintessentially Canadian joke, which makes possible the uniquely Canadian pleasure of being self-deprecatory and self-congratulatory simultaneously and which therefore neatly disarms a Canadian audience's defence mechanisms, acquires an uglier, more sinister quality as the play progresses: he is so distressed by misery that he puts to death all who suffer, hence making his Canadian wholesomeness an agent of the final destruction. The acute but unkind comment about our national personality is administered while we are still distracted by the reassuring cartoon.

The last of this stranded crew of expatriate whites is both of the world of B-movies and not of that world, thus providing a bridging device and a means of comment. Rita is a porn-movie star engaged in jungle smuggling operations in an attempt to raise the money to finance a legitimate movie and realize her dreams of respectable stardom: "This one is going to be a classic. It'll have sex. But it'll be sex with class." A classic definition of the romantic B-movie, or, for that matter, B jungle movies. Rita is the character most fully aware of the theatrical and cinematic elements of their plight, and the one most given to consciously dramatizing the situation; through her, Walker adds to the devices of hyperbole and film the technique of explicit comment which makes *Beyond Mozambique* more than an exercise in nostalgia and parody:

Sometimes I just pour myself a stiff gin and lean against that big tree outside my tent and just let that sun sink slowly down into the ground while I shake the ice cubes around in the glass. And when I do that I get so deeply into Rita Hayworth I could just about die.

We all play our roles to the death. Rita also prepares the way for the final moments of the play in which the characters become aware of the audience, either making

us the drummers or including us within the circle surrounded by the drummers, and so involving us in this last moving picture show just before the final darkness descends.

BEYOND MOZAMBIQUE is a much more disciplined play than is *Bagdad Saloon*, evidence that Factory Lab's policies were paying off; some of the original writers were dropping away while others, like Walker, pushed doggedly on, learning the language of the theatre. The comparatively poor showing of much of Canada's earlier drama can be attributed to the extremely high proportion of first plays: the early 1970s was one of the few times and the Factory Lab one of the few places allowing a playwright progression from production to production. *Beyond Mozambique* has tighter focus, and a clearer sense of direction, in part created by Walker's continued progress in the creation of the single, unifying stage image, the device which gives Theatre of the Absurd much of its trenchant force. The split between Walker's manic sense of humour and his more serious concerns is effectively healed; *Beyond Mozambique* is splendid black comedy, combining the comic and the grotesque to produce Jonsonesque social comment. And Walker completed, in this play, an important step toward developing an efficient personal style. In his perceptive discussion of James Reaney's plays, Ross Woodman notes that in order to progress from the early pastoral comedies, Reaney needed to develop a "lens" through which his personal vision could be viewed by an audience;¹³ in Reaney's case, the necessary "lens" was provided by childhood games, rituals, and rhymes. Walker, too, needed a "lens," and in *Beyond Mozambique* he discovered that his lens was the B-movie. When watching a Walker play, we, like Leonard Cohen's Nancy, see "the late late show / through a semi-precious stone."¹⁴ The world revealed is eerie, often beautiful, the ordinary made extraordinary by the unnatural hues and the lateness of the hour.

Having used this lens to bring social comment into focus in *Beyond Mozambique*, in *Ramona and the White Slaves* (1976) Walker directs his new instrument on the problems of characterization, an area of dramatic endeavour notoriously weak in much Canadian drama. Set in what is apparently a brothel in a turn of the century, impossibly decadent and chaotic Hong Kong, the play shows us the Madam/Mother, Ramona, and her convoluted relationships with her daughters, their lovers, her crippled son, and a man who may be her pimp, her missing husband, or both. Two frameworks are provided: the piece begins with Ramona's opium dream in which she is raped by a lizard — and there is a strong possibility that the entire play is an opium dream (a drug induced state of mind is another "lens" to which Walker sometimes resorts) — while commentary is provided by a detective ostensibly attempting to solve a murder, one of many, which occurred in the street outside the brothel. The detective (a device Walker also

employs in "Gossip," 1977, and "Filthy Rich," 1979) has a long history as a useful dramatic device, and in addition provides the B-movie lens. Cook's inquiries do not produce the answers he sets out to find, nor do they reveal much biographical information about Ramona, for most spectators guess early in the play the bizarre secret of the ex-nun's history. The search, however, takes us through a tour of Ramona's psyche, the obsessions which compel her to devour her children and which make her, simultaneously, a powerful and compelling figure, a B-movie Medea. Her character provides one of the most rewarding roles for an actress in Canadian drama, a striking presentation of the mother/whore dichotomy so central to Western erotic fantasy, and the play makes an extraordinarily effective use of eroticism.

Walker's growing skills as a social satirist and his developing expertise in portraiture are both brought to bear on *Zastrozzi* (1977). After a period of personal crisis and discouragement, which Ken Gass documents in his introduction to *Three Plays by George F. Walker*, Walker had begun with the preceding play, "Gossip," to alter his tactics somewhat, to make his plays "more generous."¹⁵ *Zastrozzi* is certainly more accessible than all but his earliest plays, and this, in combination with Walker's continued growth as a playwright, has made *Zastrozzi* his most popular work. The play is, unabashedly, a melodrama, and is subtitled as such. It pits good against evil in a plot taken from Shelley's novel, but a note in the Playwrights Co-op edition of the play informs the reader that Walker worked from a description of the novel: therefore the play is not really an adaptation of the original work. In the context of this discussion, it is important to note that there is certainly as much Errol Flynn as there is Percy Bysshe Shelley in Walker's play, and that Walker is continuing to make use of his B-movie lens.

As William Lane, the director of the original production, implies in his introduction, *Zastrozzi* is, in addition to being a melodrama, a contemporary (and tongue-in-cheek) morality play; Walker evidently believes that morality plays are rare in contemporary theatre and ought to be supplied, but is also aware that a contemporary audience is unlikely to accept a naked statement of central propositions: our defensive objectivity or superficiality or materialist disbelief must be circumvented through giving us the opportunity to laugh. "The moral centre of the play is *Zastrozzi* himself — the very one who never has a moral crisis."¹⁶ *Zastrozzi*, in fact, constitutes the moral centre through his implacable desire to follow the dictates of a kind of morality to that point where morality annihilates itself. "Mankind is weak. The world is ugly. The only way to save them from each other is to destroy them both."¹⁷ This is a logical extension of the thinking of both fundamentalist Protestantism and the playwrights of the Absurd. In the plot, *Zastrozzi* is the play's villain, the master criminal of Europe, and the adamant pursuer of his mother's murderer, a man turned saint or fool by the magnitude of the act. Within the play's metaphorical structure, *Zastrozzi* is the prin-

ciple of order, standing as the last bastion against the coming of a new, liberal, “pleasantly vague” world being born at the turn of the century, the time of the play’s events and the beginning of our own era. As William Lane observes:

Zastrozzi is already a figure out of his time. He comes on like some medieval nightmare, wielding his sword and dagger as though they were still the most lethal weapons on earth. . . . Zastrozzi’s attitude is mercilessly aristocratic. His foe is the new middle class with its shiny new liberal education and its fancy for art.

He is, in short, “the master of discipline,” the one who takes it upon himself to supply an absolute, a means of assuring that everyone is answerable.

Evil has great stage presence, and given the theatrical advantages ever afforded the villain, it is inevitable that the eponym seizes and holds the attention, and in some ways, the sympathy of the audience (after all, the murder of a mother is difficult to forgive, even allowing for extenuating circumstances and the fact that the lady herself may have been a killer). Walker himself has expressed some concern over the implications of the attraction a figure such as Zastrozzi commands, compared to the evidently pallid alternative, Verezzi the guilty saint:

There’s been a tendency to think of him [Verezzi] as moronic. I think that’s just a reflection of our own age. We cannot accept God, obsession or goodness, when in fact, a Verezzi has his own power. . . . It’s a sign of our times that we tend to think of Verezzi as a fool, and Zastrozzi as a charming evil villain who’s more in touch with reality. Well, maybe he is, but I still think there’s room in this world for people like Verezzi. At least I hope so.¹⁸

Walker is surely leading his interviewer down a garden path. He deliberately presents the B-movie hero-in-white in such a way that contemporary cynicism cannot fail to judge the character a fool. The man whom Zastrozzi has pursued for three years cannot recognize the danger he is in, choosing instead to fantasize that he is a sort of messiah, complete with invisible followers; most telling stroke of all, he is a sexual flop, and we certainly don’t want to identify with that. At the same time, Walker puts into the mind and mouth of a character we are sometimes invited to despise sentiments with which we know we ought to agree. At first glance, *Zastrozzi* seems to run contrary to Walker’s usual practice of using a form to undermine the mode of thought behind the form: for the play, like melodrama and melodramatic B-movies, makes a clear distinction between good and evil, and gives each side the formalized statements of faith or anti-faith. However, by giving to the villain a passion for order and definition in some respects attractive to the inhabitants of chaotic times, as well as many of the best lines, and by giving to the putative hero qualities which we know cannot stand up to current events or intellectual trends, Walker encourages the wry and condescending smile with which we customarily respond to melodrama (unless it has been updated with the contemporary trappings of T.V. social drama) and with which we reject the melodramatic world of good and evil revealed. Walker’s skilled evocation of the

double response leads us into an old fashioned examination of the nature of good and evil; again, the theatrical hand is quicker than the eye of the audience, who thought they were just watching swashbuckling melodrama and parody of swashbuckling melodrama.

Melodramatic simplicities are further complicated by Victor. In some ways, Zastrozzi and Verezzi are opposites: Zastrozzi is a realist and Verezzi is an idealist. In other ways, they are similar; both shape their lives with absolutes. In this respect, and others, both find their opposite in Victor, servant to Verezzi and failed priest, who, in order to keep a promise does his utmost to protect the victim from the destroyer. Realistic, materialistic, pragmatic, Victor commands respect for his decency, resourcefulness, and courage. It is here that Walker's growing powers of characterization are most impressive, for despite all his decencies (and decency is notoriously boring on stage), Victor is an interesting character; he is the one who, as Lane points out, has the moral dilemma, and he responds to it in a manner with which most members of the audience would agree. He calls a madman a madman, acts instead of hypothesizing, and, alone among the characters, is possessed himself of a sense of humour. We identify with him; he is like us. And like us, he is wrong, and the error results in his death. His secular faith also has its limitations, and his balance, his moderation, is ultimately his undoing.

We therefore agree intellectually with one character, feel we ought to respond spiritually to a second, and identify most closely with a third. While B-movie conventions would lead us to expect an either/or proposition, we are given three poles, and ambivalent poles at that. Walker uses the rest of the cast of stock characters to extend the central issue, and to comment upon it. An assistant villain is present not only to facilitate the plot in the usual manner, but to demonstrate the difference between ideological evil and mere thuggery. The presence of a villainess and a purer-than-white heroine gives a sexual shape to the contest, reducing the cosmic struggle to "naughty" *vs.* "nice," and at the same time adding a strong strain of eroticism to help bring the point home, to bed. Zastrozzi's imaginary seduction of Julia is a very compelling scene indeed.

THE VALUES WHICH EMERGE from Walker's work seem to be those of a small-"c" conservative, the technical trappings of the *avant-garde*. Zastrozzi ultimately asserts that evil does exist, is not the product of environment, and must be confronted. In "Prince of Naples," the easy assumptions based on a facile acceptance of relative values are pilloried, and *Bagdad Saloon* dismantles a system of value based on the publicizing of subjective fantasy. Walker is a champion of language and definition, a concern that has increased as his career progressed, and he rejects naturalism, in part, because it has forgotten how to reach

areas of human experience accessible to older dramatic forms. In this, he resembles Eugene Ionesco, who claims not to be of the *avant-garde* at all; Ionesco dismisses much recent drama, finding "Ibsen heavy, Strindberg clumsy, Pirandello outmoded," and wants in his own work to return to the theatre of the Greeks and the Elizabethans, a large than life theatre "concerned with the human condition in all its brutal absurdity."¹⁹ That is what we are left with at the end of *Zastrozzi* as the villain surveys a positively Jacobean heap of corpses, enjoying his impersonal Greek blood revenge. The form is contemporary but the clash of forces therein depicted is an old and vital one.

While *Zastrozzi* is a continuation of Walker's earlier thematic explorations (there are, for instance, striking similarities between the obsessions of Rocco and those of *Zastrozzi*) and of the playwright's technical development (the manner in which Victor is employed to manipulate audience expectations differs from the way in which the Corporal was used only in that the technique is elaborated in the later play), it is at the same time a meticulously constructed and highly successful piece of entertaining theatre: to be truly successful, parody must be as skilfully constructed as that which it parodies, and in this respect *Zastrozzi* is a literary in-joke — poker-faced, Walker demonstrates that he is perfectly capable of writing a well-made play, and does so without sacrificing his personal, non-documentary vision.

This new concern with "generosity" is evident in Walker's other recent plays. "Gossip" and "Filthy Rich" appear to be detective B-movies, and can be enjoyed at that level, but they are really contemporary comedies of manners, high comedy revived. *Rumours of Our Death*, first produced in 1980 and published in the *Canadian Theatre Review*, No. 25, is, on the surface, a Ruritanian romance-cum-spy movie, and was given punk rock treatment in the original Factory Lab production, but it introduces politics through a tantalizing political fable which at times seems to apply to Canada, and at others (no doubt as a result of the playwright's intention) snatches the easy and national answer away by interrupting the pattern. Walker is using popular forms, primarily B-movies, as a means of exploring old dramatic verities, rather as John Gray does in *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, as Maynard Collins does in "Hank Williams: The Show He Never Gave," and as the Hummer Sisters do in their video-theatre-rock-and-roll extravaganzas.

The man who appears to be among Canada's most abstruse and esoteric playwrights has, in fact, a thorough grasp of populist techniques, and can use the forms of popular theatre as both popular vehicle and as a means of sharing with a broader audience a more demanding dramatic view. In this ability to speak to a more general audience, Walker resembles the populist docu-dramatists of Passe Muraille or the Tarragon playwrights, who address a popular, middle-class audience within the conventions it knows best, and in the process, he gives them some penetrating analysis of themselves. The tendency to commercialism in recent

Canadian drama and commercialism in the artistic policies of many Canadian theatres has been decried, as it should be, but commercialization should not be confused with a movement underway in Canada for some time, a movement whose aim has been to take theatre to a larger audience, abandoning the coterie audiences of the regionals and attempting to reach instead an audience previously unaccustomed to attending formal, legitimate theatre. The venture, should it prove successful, could help to change the status of theatre as mere social status symbol, to which it has unfortunately so often been relegated in twentieth-century North America, and to restore to the theatre the power of broad appeal which has traditionally given drama an edge over other literary forms. This increased ability to reach out to an audience is one of the directions which theatre has taken in response to Esslin's question, "After the Absurd, what?" And it is a direction to which Canadian drama has been a major contributor. Seen in the context of these larger movements, Walker and the Factory Lab are not mavericks at all, but the source of one of the most theatrically potent streams within the new Canadian drama.

NOTES

- ¹ "Tarragon's Trademark was Script Development," *That's Showbusiness*, 4, No. 24 (January 1976), p. 1.
- ² *Three Plays by George F. Walker: Bagdad Saloon, Beyond Mozambique, Ramona and the White Slaves* (Toronto: Coach House, 1978), p. 9.
- ³ Myron Galloway, "George Walker — Resolving the World's Chaos," *Montreal Star*, 3 March 1979, p. 18.
- ⁴ George F. Walker, "Prince of Naples," in *Now in Paperback: Canadian Playwrights of the 1970's*, ed. Connie Brissenden (Toronto: Fineglow Plays, 1973), p. 76.
- ⁵ Edward Mullaly, "Waiting for Lefty, Godot, and Canadian Theatre," *The Fiddlehead*, No. 104 (1975), p. 53.
- ⁶ Mullaly, p. 51.
- ⁷ Mullaly, p. 53.
- ⁸ *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), p. 266.
- ⁹ *Myth and Modern American Drama* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1969), p. 255.
- ¹⁰ Peter Hay, Introd., *Sunrise on Sarah*, by George Ryga (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1972), p. 6.
- ¹¹ John Fraser, "Walker Turns to Murder With Comedy," *Globe and Mail*, 19 April 1977, p. 23.
- ¹² Richard Horenblas, "Playnotes," *Scene Changes*, 3, No. 10 (October 1975), p. 8.
- ¹³ *James Reaney* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972), pp. 48-49.
- ¹⁴ "Nancy," *Leonard Cohen: Live Songs*, Columbia Broadcasting System, 65224, 1973.
- ¹⁵ Fraser, p. 23.

- ¹⁶ William Lane, Introd., *Zastrozzi: The Master of Discipline* (Toronto: Playwrights Co-op, 1979), p. 5.
- ¹⁷ *Zastrozzi: The Master of Discipline* (Toronto: Playwrights Co-op, 1979), p. 12.
- ¹⁸ Chris Hallgren, "George Walker, The Serious and the Comic," *Scene Changes*, 7, No. 2 (March/April 1979), p. 24.
- ¹⁹ Esslin, pp. 164-65.

WILD HORSES

Roo Borson

There are horses of sorrow that
never change their expressions,
their faces hang like shadows, as if
suspended from something bright,
bright horses whose shadows
these faces are, horses
that rammed like an ocean wave across the plains
and left them bare, and the sky tells nothing
of where they went, the sky is too bare.

The horses (the dark ones) stand now in a stable,
no one comes to release them,
each face framed in its stall
of beaten wood, wood marred by weather
and the flanks of these horses
that have been here too long, restless,
with nowhere to go.

Now and then riders come to ride them
over the plains, but their expressions do not change,
fixed in the fixed wind, though they are roving
over territory those others owned
when they lived here, they are saddled with riders
and their shadows, they are shadows.