# GEORGE RYGA AND THE LOST COUNTRY

*Neil Carson*

GEORGE RYGA first attracted my attention as the author of "Indian", a half-hour television drama produced on the CBC-TV series "Quest" in 1962. This powerful short play about an encounter between a transient Indian labourer and an official of the Department of Indian Affairs seemed to me at the time one of the finest one-act dramas on a Canadian theme that I had seen. If it was perhaps a little too reminiscent of Edward Albee's *Zoo Story*, it nevertheless revealed a dramatic talent of great promise. Now after two novels and numerous television and film scripts, Ryga has written a major play for the stage. "The Ecstasy of Rita Joe" was commissioned by the Playhouse Theatre in Vancouver, where it was first performed in 1967. More recently audiences in the East had an opportunity to see it at the Opening Festival of the National Arts Centre in Ottawa in June. It was broadcast on CBC radio in August and plans call for a television version to be shown sometime in 1970. In my opinion, "Rita Joe" establishes Ryga as the most exciting talent writing for the stage in Canada today.

This is not, it must be admitted, an extravagant claim since the competition is not keen. Of all the fields on the Canadian Literature farm, drama is surely the most barren, the most uncultivated. This is partly because the extravagance of the drama has never seemed congenial to Canadians. Until recently the theatre has played a very minor role in our national life and few writers have been attracted to it as a medium. This does not, however, justify the continuing indifference of many literary critics and historians who still tend to concentrate their attention almost exclusively on the printed word. Since very few of those original Canadian plays which have been produced in the last few years have been published, there is a growing body of vigorous writing which remains largely unknown. Ryga seems particularly worth discussing in this context because "The Ecstasy of Rita Joe" has been more widely seen and heard than many new Canadian plays and because it is closely related to his published work, especially his novels *Hungry Hills* (1963) and *Ballad of a Stonepicker* (1966).

The play is about two representative Indians, Rita Joe, an accused prostitute and Jamie Paul, an advocate of Red Power, who are destroyed in a hostile white environment, in this case Vancouver. Opposed to them on the one hand are the rather papier mâché figures of white authority, the magistrate, the police, the priest, the social worker etc. On the other stands the patriarch Indian Chief, David Joe, a symbol of the old way of life which, however heroic and dignified in the past, is no longer viable. Although much of the time Ryga seems too emotionally involved in his subject to raise it above the level of a propaganda piece, there are many moments of fine dramatic writing. These reveal Ryga's extraordinary talent for creating an approximation of Indian dialect which is capable of immense poetic effect. Like Synge, he has formed out of the speech of a remote group a dramatic medium of far greater range than either simple realism or the "poetic" dialogue which is usually thought of as the only alternative. Two examples will illustrate the sort of thing I mean. The first is spoken by Chief David Joe directly to the audience:

> But when I was fifteen years old, I leave the reserve to work on a threshing crew. They are paying a dollar a day for a good man . . . an' I was a good strong man. The first time I got work there was a girl about as old as I . . . She'd come out in the yard an' watch the men working at the threshing machine. She had eyes that were the biggest I ever seen . . . like fifty-cent pieces . . . an' there was always a flock of geese around her. Whenever I see her I feel good. She used to stand an' watch me, an' the geese made a helluva noise. One time I got off my rick an' went to get a drink of water . . . but I walked close to where she was, watching me. She backed away, and then ran from me with the geese chasin' after her, their wings out an' their feet no longer touching the ground . . . They were white geese . . . The last time Rita Joe comes home to see us . . . the last time she ever come home . . . I watched her leave . . . and I seen geese running after Rita Joe the same way . . . white geese . . . with their wings out an' their feet no longer touching the ground. And I remembered it all, an' my heart got so heavy I wanted to cry . . .[1]

The second is also spoken by the chief to Jamie Paul and to his silent daughter, Rita Joe.

> FATHER: You're a good boy, Jamie Paul . . . a good boy . . . (*To Rita, talking slowly, painfully*) I once seen a dragonfly breakin' its shell to get its wings . . . It floated on water an' crawled up on a log where I was sitting . . . It dug its

> feet into the log an' then it pulled until the shell bust over its neck. Then it pulled some more... an' slowly its wings slipped out of the shell... like that!
> *Shows with his hands how the dragonfly got freedom.*
>
> JAMIE: (*Angered and deeply moved by the father*) Where you gonna be when they start bustin' our heads open an' throwing us into jails right across the goddamned country?
>
> FATHER: ... Such wings I never seen before... folded like an accordion... so fine, like thin glass an' white in the morning sun...
>
> JAMIE: We're gonna have to fight to win... there's no other way! They're not listenin' to you, old man! Or to me.
>
> FATHER: ... It spread its wings... so slowly... an' then the wings opened an' began to flutter... Just like that — see! Hesitant at first... then stronger... an' then the wings beatin' like that made the dragonfly's body quiver until the shell on its back falls off...
>
> JAMIE: Stop kiddin' yourself! We're gonna say "no" pretty soon to all the crap that makes us soft an' easy to push this way... that way.
> *Rita Joe is now reduced to a child before her father.*
>
> FATHER: ... An' the dragonfly... flew up... up... up... into the white sun ... to the green sky... to the sun... faster an' faster... Higher... HIGHER![2]

(The second passage also illustrates fairly well the social protest sloganeering which is one of the unfortunate features of this play.) Together they show Ryga's continuing concern with themes that are far deeper and ultimately more troubling than the hiring policies of B.C. industry or the alleged dishonesty of the Vancouver police. In the evocative description of the geese — symbols of doom or possibly sexual passion — as well as in the aspiration implicit in the symbol of the dragonfly, Ryga returns to two ideas that are central to much of his published work — the elusive nature of love and the search for meaning or for what in *Ballad of a Stonepicker* he calls "the country".

Love as it is usually understood by the readers of women's magazines or the more lurid modern novels is rarely fulfilling in Ryga's works. Although it calls forth some of his most sentimental writing —

> I pulled her to me and kissed her on the mouth, and her friends looking on. Then I turned away and went home, blind, because my eyes were full of tears and I couldn't stop them coming...[3]

more often his tone is bitterly ironic. At the end of *Ballad of a Stonepicker* a girl who has been made pregnant by a man who has deserted her murmurs over the grave of the narrator's father, "It's love that'll make it all wonderful. Find love quickly — today." Far from being a fulfilling experience, love (and especially sexual love) is shown more frequently as a destructive, almost perverting force. In *Hungry Hills* it is embodied in the incest of the Mandolins, *In Ballad of a Stonepicker* it is represented by the pathetic infatuation of Clem the blacksmith and Freddy the idiot, by the disappointment of Helen Bayrack and, perhaps most vividly, by the coupling of Marta Walker and Hector in her father's tool shed made safe by the killing of the watch dog. Physical love indeed seems to be presented as a weakness into which the disappointed or the fearful escape. The narrator of *Ballad of a Stonepicker* feels that it is only after he has "killed the animal in himself" that he can bury his father without shame.

IF RYGA REJECTS romantic and physical love, he does not conclude that meaningful human relationships are impossible. On the contrary he frequently shows a bond between individuals which he clearly believes to be more exalted than love in the usual sense. Ordinarily this is a relationship in a family (between brother and brother in "Indian", father and daughter in "Rita Joe", boy and aunt in *Hungry Hills*). Occasionally, as in the father's grief over the loss of his horse in *Hungry Hills* and in the comic episode of Timothy and his ox in *Ballad of a Stonepicker*, the relationship may be between man and animal. Indeed it is the potential strength of this latter bond that makes the slaying of the dog by the sexually aroused Marta and Hector so chilling, and Minerva Malan's coolly efficient slaughter of the rooster in *Ballad of a Stonepicker* so symbolically right. But in the world Ryga writes about there is little enough even of this second kind of love. It comes fleetingly, in moments of crisis, or in flashes of understanding, but is never indulged and often not even acknowledged. Ryga's vision of the fragility of love is perhaps most poignantly conveyed in his description of Mary and Peter Ruptash in *Ballad of a Stonepicker*:

> They'd been married fifteen years before they had a kid — a girl with one missing arm. Pete had built a playroom ten years earlier for her coming. The playroom had wallpaper with rabbits on it, a small crib, rocking toys and a little desk with a chair. And then this baby came.
>
> It had learned to walk and was able to say 'mama, I busy' and 'da-da' when it caught diphtheria and died. Pete had to beat his wife with his fists to take the kid away so he could bury it.[4]

If Ryga's characters are partly tormented by their need for love in a world that denies it or corrupts its expression, many of them are even more profoundly troubled by existential longings. In *Ballad of a Stonepicker* the narrator attempts to describe his feelings at hearing of the death of his father. "I felt I was in a strange town," he says, "... trying to find the gates of the country."[5] This is an echo of an earlier passage in the novel describing the feelings of the scholar son, Jim, just before his suicide in England. In his last letter home he speaks of himself as "a young man who lost one world and never felt at home in another." The sense of spiritual homelessness is common in Ryga's work and many of his characters define themselves by their relationship to a country they have lost or one they never find.

In his early work, this country seems to represent the lost time of youth, innocence, and happiness that is replaced by the cares of maturity and responsibility. The crisis is often a moment of choice which is precipitated by outside factors but which is faced by the protagonist with full awareness. In "Indian" the transient labourer speaks of such a moment.

> I ... kill ... my ... brother. In my arms I hold him. He was so light — like a small boy. I hold him ...rock 'im back and forward like this — like mother rock us when we tiny kids. I rock 'im an' I cry ... I get my hands tight on his neck, an' I squeeze an' I squeeze. I know he dead, and I still squeeze an' cry, for everything is gone, and I am old man now only hunger an' hurt left now ...[6]

Here, although the situation is symptomatic of social injustice, Ryga is more concerned with understanding the existential consequences than with attacking the evil itself. To a large extent, the Indian's identity is a product of this action and his compulsion to recount the murder is intimately bound up with his own sense of who he is.

A similar concern with identity and with growing up is evident in *Hungry Hills*. Snit Mandolin, after spending some time in a Welfare Home and later as a mechanic in a garage in Edmonton, decides to return to his home in the Alberta foothills. He cannot articulate his reasons for going home, but the rest of the story concerns his search for his origins and his final attempt to create a life of dignity for himself. One thing he learns is that the misfortunes of his family are not only the result of the hostility of outsiders but also of deliberate choice.

> "We done it ourselves, Snit — don't you see?" There were tears in Aunt Matilda's eyes now. "We done it long ago, and other folks had no part of it — it started long ago, when two sisters and a brother came on this farm. There was no proper life for anyone when the work was done. But instead of going out and doing what we shoulda done, saving ourselves for a good life, we turned ourselves inside

> out, killing everything we touched until we didn't know what was right or wrong any more. Your pa and ma paired off, and you were born. I was one of the outside folks then, and I hada start taking care of things. I could been like your ma — could've come and gone in the same way — just like your pa did. I was saved for a taste of life — but it came too late, Snit!"[7]

Although here too Ryga shows the conflict between man and his neighbours, he is more fundamentally concerned with man's struggle with himself. The "heroine" of the story is Aunt Matilda who has learned to endure the consequences of her choices.

> ... she stood erect and proud, like nothing would knock her down — nothing she saw or lived through.
>
> "I gotta die, Snit — same as anybody else. But I ain't gonna die easy. My conscience won't let me!"
>
> "Ya' ain't alone — I'm with ya. I don't want to hear anymore!"
>
> "But you've got to listen, Snit — you've got to understand. Once you've made up your mind, there's no turning back."[8]

In *Ballad of a Stonepicker*, there seems to be far less emphasis on conscious choice. Although the father is destroyed by his decision to give excessive financial support to one son, most of the characters are shaped by forces over which they have no control. The stonepicker asks, "when had the boyhood gone, and when did the man take over in me?" Here the protagonist no longer recognizes the crucial moment of decision and is caught instead in a process which he does not understand. The impression of passive suffering rather than deliberate action is conveyed further by the structure of the novel itself. Reminiscent of the ballad form, it consists of a number of apparently random memories told by an anonymous narrator. The central character is essentially faceless, a symbol of the inarticulate victim. "I've stood for hours out there in the field," he says at one point, "the wind blowing all around me, drying the soil and sapping the water out of my flesh. I've felt it all, but could never tell others how it felt."[9]

But if Ryga is suggesting that suffering is only partially explicable in terms of our own choices, and that many men are victims of a Fate they cannot control or comprehend, he does not seem to deny the possibility of meaning altogether. For the narrator's attempts to find relevance in his seemingly unrelated memories are not entirely unsuccessful.

> Then it came to me — the truth I had never realized before — the truth Nancy Burla saw when she married the doctor. These arms were all I had and all that anybody had ever wanted.... they were the reason for my life. Here was my

> strength and my food and my bed. There was no other part of me worth anything — never had been. In so short a time they raised their Jims, their babies, their invalid mothers and fathers — and then they shrivelled and brought unhappiness to the man willing to work but not able because his visions twisted downwards into a patch of earth no larger than a grave.[10]

Whether or not these twisted visions are the only visions possible is not made clear in the novel. Ryga himself seems temperamentally caught between the romanticism of hope and the romanticism of despair. But the intensity of his writing (in this novel at least) suggests that, although the stonepicker has lost his way, a way does nevertheless exist.

"The Ecstasy of Rita Joe" seems at first to be far less complex than the novels which precede it. In outline its conflicts are simple, the alternatives apparently black and white (or perhaps red and white), the target for outrage clearly designated. In this play (unlike in "Indian") a great amount of time is spent in describing the injustices of white society and proportionately little on the deeper, more perplexing issues. But it would be a mistake to see the play as nothing more than a social protest melodrama.

In structure, it closely resembles *Ballad of a Stonepicker* or Arthur Miller's *After the Fall*, being a dramatization of memories and a search for identity. On one level Rita Joe makes a sharp distinction between the remembered happiness of childhood in the country and the harsh realities of adult life in the city. The reservation where love cannot be bought for a thousand dollars is contrasted to the city where love seems to be purely commercial. Rita Joe's fate in her own memory has been caused by white prejudice and bureaucratic inefficiency. But Ryga shows that Rita Joe's memories often deceive her and that she sees in them only what she wants to see. As the Magistrate points out, "The obstacles to your life are here, in your thoughts . . . possibly even in your culture."[11] Although Rita Joe does not articulate the idea, both Jamie Paul and David Joe know that Indian culture cannot survive unchanged. They know that "If we only fish an' hunt an' cut pulpwood . . . pick strawberries in the bush . . . for a hundred years more, we are dead."[12] David Joe puts his faith in education. Jamie Paul in Red Power. But it is not clear that Ryga shares either view. In the end it is uncertain what new country the dragonfly will find or if indeed his escape from the shell is anything but momentary. Perhaps the only certainty in the play is the inexorability of time. As Rita Joe says, "I wish we could go back again then an' start livin' from that day on, Jamie."[13] Or in the words of the song that closes the play,

The blue evening
Of the first warm day —
Is the last evening.

"The Ecstasy of Rita Joe" is one of the products of a new working relationship between the professional theatre and creative writers in this country. An increasing number of regional theatres are looking for original Canadian plays and some of them are working closely with local authors to get them. A grant from the Centennial Commission made it possible for Ryga to be associated with the Playhouse Theatre during the production of "Rita Joe". It is to be hoped that some such relationship can be continued. For Ryga has that very rare gift for writing dialogue that has the sound of ordinary speech but the resonance of poetry. If he can master the technical and structural demands of the stage, we may yet have a Canadian play worthy to be mentioned in discussions of contemporary drama.

### FOOTNOTES

[1] "The Ecstasy of Rita Joe" (Unpublished playscript, May 1969), p. 41.
[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.
[3] *Ballad of a Stonepicker* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1966), p. 123.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 23.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 153.
[6] "Indian", *The Tamarack Review* (Summer, 1965), p. 17.
[7] *Hungry Hills* (Toronto: Longmans, 1963), pp. 98-99.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 164.
[9] *Ballad of a Stonepicker*, p. 124.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 156.
[11] "The Ecstasy of Rita Joe", p. 23.
[12] Ibid., p. 55.
[13] Ibid., p. 20.