NOTHING SACRED

Humour in Canadian drama in English

William Solly

IT MAY WELL BE that the drama is the most difficult literary form to master, but in Canada it is certainly not for this reason alone that one finds it to be the least practised of all the arts. Plays do not exist without productions and audiences to watch them, and though it is by now a well-worn excuse for the anæmic state of our theatre to say that our audiences have been lured elsewhere, it is nevertheless quite true that prolonged exposure to the skills of Broadway and American films has given rise to a widespread conviction on the part of Canadians that their drama will not only be inferior but, worse, amateur. There are other reasons, of course: the size of the country, the scarcity of theatres, and the high costs of production make it next to impossible for any theatrical venture to tour Canada; in more recent years there is the blow that television has dealt the theatre — crippling enough everywhere else, but in Canada all but mortal (except in so far as it has encouraged playwrights of its own); and, finally, can we not with justification blame the very temper of the country? — is there not a certain national lack of self-confidence, pride, and romance which has refused to allow our drama to develop?

Whatever the reasons, Canadian playwrights are in a difficult situation. Serious drama is barely tolerated, and hence usually not written. One comes with surprise upon something like Merrill Denison's *Marsh Hay,* which is a quite reputable play admirably sustaining tense drama for four acts — but one is not too surprised never to have heard of its being produced. As if aware of this situation, Lister Sinclair's *Return to Colonus,* a relatively esoteric drama, never had any commercial aspirations to begin with. The same author's *The Blood is Strong* might at

first appear to be the exception: it is a moving story about early settlers in Cape Breton Island which has enjoyed a considerable success on stage, radio and television. But integral to its success and what no doubt first helped to attract its Canadian audiences is the fact that it contains a good deal of humour. Humour occupies an important place in Canadian drama in English and most of our plays — and nearly all of our best plays — rely heavily upon it. Our best dramatist, for instance — Robertson Davies — works exclusively in comedy. Whatever the reason behind this preoccupation with the comic — whether it is that our audiences are especially prone to laughter, or that the Canadian situation is such an absurd one that our treatments of it cannot be wholly serious — its results are of a sufficient quality (and quantity) to bear examination, and they might even be expected to throw on the Canadian character their own special share of light.

According to the various ways that humour is employed in them, our plays may be roughly divided into three groups. The first is chiefly a satirical one where plays invariably deal with distinctly Canadian subject matter: it is popular, often commercially successful and generally too busy making fun of national problems to prescribe remedies for them. At the opposite end of the humour spectrum there lies another kind of satirical drama, which will be considered last here: its subject matter is again invariably Canadian but the humourous treatment differs, frequently taking the form of skilled sugar-coating for a didactic and often bitter pill. (Surprisingly enough, however, this dubious technique usually results in the best drama that Canada produces.) Between these two comic frontiers lies a middle area, a proportionately vast field of relatively gentle comedy, most of which is so dull and undistinguished as truly to merit this prairie description. Characters, themes, and settings for these plays are, in contrast to the above, frequently of an ambiguous nationality, and the entire field may be said to owe its existence to the number of one-act play festivals and competitions which dot the Dominion and which explain why so much Canadian drama in general is cast in the one-act play form.

WITHOUT DOUBT the most consistently rewarding period of Canadian playwriting took place some years ago during the heyday of C.B.C. Radio when Canada had a radio drama of unique excellence and a whole roster of impressive playwrights: Lister Sinclair, Len Peterson, Tommy Tweed, Andrew Allan, Mavor Moore, Bernard Braden, Joseph Schull and Fletcher Markle, to

name only a few. It is to these that we must look for some of the best of all three types of comedy outlined above, but especially for that of the first type, the rollicking irreverent satire which may be good-natured but is not in the least interested in being constructive. Unfortunately, few of these radio plays have yet been published, nor are copies of them available to me, and memory alone cannot hope to indicate the way so many of them employed this kind of humour (the way it was used, for example, in Tommy Tweed's *The Man from Number 10* — a satire on Canada's apathy and lack of allure as seen through the eyes of a Newfoundlander whose country has newly joined the Dominion). Of the few radio plays of this type which have been published, however, one at least is a splendid specimen and it will serve to give a closer look here at the nature of this first kind of humour: it is Lister Sinclair's *We All Hate Toronto*:

NARRATOR: Once upon a time there lived a young man called Charlie. Most of the time, he was a very ordinary young man who did very ordinary things, but one day he made a dreadful decision:
CHARLIE: I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.
NARRATOR: He called for his poor, old, leather-faced father:
CHARLIE: Father, dear father, I have something to tell you.
NARRATOR: And he sent for his poor, old, wire-haired mother:
CHARLIE: Dearest mamma, I have something to tell *you,* too.
NARRATOR: And he told them both his dreadful decision:
CHARLIE: I have decided to go to Toronto.
MOTHER AND FATHER: (*A dreadful shriek apiece*) ! ! ! ![1]

The innocent is informed that everybody hates Toronto, especially those who have never been there. When he is fitted out for the journey and for the Toronto weather ("Many are cold but few are frozen"), he is also told about the people who actually do live there:

As is well-known, few indeed are the people who are true-blue, copper-bottomed, aged-in-wood, natives of Toronto. There are six hundred thousand people living there, but they're all from out of town.

Charlie persists, however, and arrives in Toronto on a Sunday; his voice echoes in the vast deserted canyons of Union Station, and when he ventures outside, turning "up Yonge Street, stretching away straight as an arrow (and about as wide) all the way up to Hudson Bay, the Arctic Circle and North York", he meets a girl:

[1] *A Play on Words and other Radio Plays* (Toronto, Dent, 1948) contains all the Sinclair radio plays quoted from in this article.

> There she was sitting on the curb in King Street with the tallest building in the British Empire right behind her, and the largest hotel in the British Empire a couple of blocks away, and the dullest Sunday in the British Empire going on all around her.

The girl tells him that there are thousands of pairs of eyes watching them from behind closed blinds:

> CHARLIE: I thought people only did that in small towns.
> JULIA: Toronto is the largest small town in the British Empire.

Finally, after a number of depressing experiences, Charlie meets a tramp in Queen's Park who sets his mind at rest:

> MAN: Toronto is the greatest unifying influence in this country today . . .
> CHARLIE: But we all hate Toronto.
> MAN: That's just it. We *all* hate Toronto! It's the only thing everybody's got in common. You hear a dreadful quarrel start up between English, Canadians, and French Canadians, or Maritimers and Manitobans, or some such thing. Just when they're going to cut each others' throats, somebody mentions Toronto. And what happens? . . . As soon as anybody mentions Toronto, all enmity is forgotten, all scars are healed, all thoughts of violence and discord are swallowed up in warm brotherly love, and united at last in friendship, the erstwhile rival disputants can weep joyfully on one another's shoulders, as in a sublime chorus they lift up their voices in abominable vilification of Toronto, the Queen City! Long may she continue to rot!

I have quoted at such length from Sinclair's play because it draws attention to a number of features typical of this first class of dramatic humour whose free-wheeling spirit has confronted the indifference of the Canadian public, proved irresistible and earned itself a popular success. The first and most obvious feature is the Canadian institution or presumably sacred cow under fire. Another is the innocent hero or heroine through whose eyes the satire is experienced: our playwrights seem especially fond of this device of introducing Canada to this interested and usually virtuous novice. It might also be worth noting here that the innocent does not attempt to escape: no matter how disillusioning the revelations afforded him about Canada may be, he invariably manages to extract some value from them and remain.

In Sinclair's play two other typical features are noticeable by their absence. One of these is a distressing one and his play is well-rid of it: this is that curious partiality for imitation which lends a hybrid and hence not very original quality to a good deal of this kind of satire. As early as 1874 it appears in such a work as William H. Fuller's *The Unspecific Scandal,* a political spoof whose humour

relies largely (and shakily) upon reworkings of well-known lines from Shakespeare and in new lyrics for such old songs as "Scots Wha Hae", "After the Ball", and "Yankee Doodle Dandy". Later the same author presented *H.M.S. Parliament* (1880), a rather amateurish reworking of Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore* which, in its labour to recast Gilbert's lyrics and libretto in a Canadian political setting, all but loses whatever satirical intentions it originally had of its own. Affection for this kind of imitation in the drama is still (and lamentably) very much with us today.

The other feature of Sinclair's play which may not be typical of the class in which I place it is the fact that its satirical barbs, bold though they may seem to be, are not nearly outrageous enough. His satire here is, in essence, double-edged: that is, while it joins with its audience to laugh at an institution made to look ridiculous, at the same time it laughs also at the very people with whom it seems to side. This may well make it a superior piece of satire but such a technique is not, I think, typical of its class — which is usually so disrespectful that Sinclair's play seems timid by comparison.

I am speaking largely of revue, a dramatic institution which flourishes in Canada, and which is also a fairly recent phenomenon. Thirty-five years ago, in fact, Vincent Massey noted a total absence of such farce in Canadian theatre: "Is this by accident," he asked, "or are we, after all, a serious — even a solemn folk?" But today we have the unbridled, even at times sensational, revue satire of Toronto's annual *Spring Thaw,* Montreal's intimate club shows, sketches by writers like Eric Nicol, Pierre Berton and Mavor Moore, and even some of the comedy of Wayne and Schuster on the C.B.C. Although once again unpublished — perhaps because much of it is only topical for its time and dates quickly — this kind of writing nevertheless displays extraordinary range and vitality, and seems to consider nothing too sacred to be laughed at.

At its best this kind of Canadian comedy has about it a self-consciously wicked quality that one might well term undergraduate, albeit a kind of undergraduate humour displaying unusual strength. And so it is not surprising that the most successful comedy of this type should have been a college show, McGill's Red and White Revue of 1957, *My Fur Lady*. Here we may find embodied once again all the features outlined above. To begin with, there is the innocent to whom Canada is introduced — an Eskimo princess who must seek a Canadian husband in order that her Arctic nation will not be annexed. And, like the other innocents in *The Man from Number 10, We All Hate Toronto* and countless revue sketches, she remains in Canada; in fact, she marries the Governor-General (the first

Canadian one, that is; the character, "G.G.", was a thinly-disguised caricature of Massey), and her action is a splendid example of the outrageousness of this kind of humour. Elsewhere in this musical plot is dismissed completely while just about every Canadian institution is made fun of: the cultural exhortations of the Massey Report, pretensions of regional poetry, National Defence, Ottawa debutantes, Canadian history and politics, and, especially, the galling problem of a Canadian flag. The latter is debated to music in a scene in the House of Commons where each member demands his own particular emblem:

> Saskatchewan wants shocks of wheat!
> The Maritimes want ships!
> The West wants mountains topped with snow!
> P.E.I.'s for potato chips!
>
> Calgary wants a head of steer!
> Niagara wants the falls!
> (Ottawa needs a mayor!
> You can have Montreal's!)
>
> The Yukon wants a polar bear!
> Keewatin wants a moose!
> Baffin Island wants a seal!
> Gander wants a goose!

The affection for imitation mentioned above with regard to Fuller also appears in *My Fur Lady* but, happily, it does not go much further than the spoof in the title. Finally, there is also present here perhaps the most significant feature of this type of comedy and one which has not so far been mentioned. This is the humorous putting-into-words of a common national problem which usually gives rise to enormous feelings of recognition and relief in the laughter reaction. A good example of this is the speech justifying the national hate of Toronto in the Sinclair play quoted above. In another Sinclair play, *The New Canada,* it takes the form of an airing of a common Canadian dilemma:

> NARRATOR: Canada, as you can plainly see, is large . . . It is, in fact, larger all round than the United States. That's why we get a little hurt at this sort of thing:
> AMERICAN: So you're a Canadian, eh?
> CANADIAN: That's right.
> AMERICAN: Come from Canada, eh?
> CANADIAN: That's the idea.
> AMERICAN: What part of Canada do you come from?

CANADIAN: I'm from Halifax.

AMERICAN: Halifax, eh? Hmm! I know a fellow from Canada; expect you've run into him.

CANADIAN: (*Smiling*) Well, you never know.

AMERICAN: Oh, sure you'll know him, both of you being Canadians. He lives in Vancouver.

CANADIAN: (*Protesting*) Yes, but you see . . .

AMERICAN: Fellow by the name of Ted Richmond.

CANADIAN: (*Astounded*) Ted Richmond! Ted Rich . . . Well, of all the coincidences! As a matter of fact, I *do* happen to know Ted Richmond! Isn't that fantastic?

AMERICAN: (*Unconcerned*) I don't see why you're so surprised. You're both Canadian, aren't you?

In *My Fur Lady* there is a line of this sort which never failed in performance to elicit laughter and applause from its Canadian audiences; it had to do with the familiar problem of Canadian identity and was delivered with a happy helpless shrug:

> The trouble with Canadians is they spend half their time convincing the Americans they're not British, and the other half convincing the British they're not Americans — which leaves them no time to be themselves.

Rough and undisciplined though it frequently may be, this first kind of comedy is important here because its typical features are basic to the Canadian approach to dramatic humour (it is possible, for example, to recognize the characteristics of our more serious comedy as simply refined variations of these basic features); but it is especially important because of the popular audience response it is usually able to provoke. The latter indicates that the Canadian temperament is not at all disapproving of satire: one would almost think that, having forgotten the fact of their nationality, Canadians are so pleased to be reminded of it in a theatre that they do not care how much the reminder may be at their own expense. Certain subjects — even for such mischievous satire as this — are still taboo, it is true: we shall have to look to a more serious work like Robertson Davies' *Hope Deferred* for any attempt to deal humorously with the Church, for example. But the scope of the less serious kind of satire is a wide one. If *My Fur Lady* can make even a French-Canadian audience laugh at the literary imbecilities of a prairie poet, the form in which the satire is cast is surely not to be ignored or underestimated.

WE MOVE NOW for the moment out of the realm of Canada's satire and into the hinterland of its gentle comedy — which is well-published and frequently performed by amateur groups. There is an abundance of plays here in one act, and one might quite understandably wonder if this is not the particular dramatic form in which Canadians excel. Due to the scarcity of three-act plays, however, and the inferior quality of so many of these shorter ones, one is sadly forced to conclude that what might at first look like this country's plethora is just any other country's quota and not nearly so good. Indeed, when one also considers how it is short revue sketches which predominate in the category just dealt with, it would seem that we are simply not fond of doing things in a big way. But is it our audiences — or our writers — who cannot sustain the greater length?

Many of these plays do not deal with settings or even characters Canadian, their milieu and dramatic style instead ranging anywhere from British to Chinese. They do not concern me here — for I am only interested in the way Canada is reflected in our dramatic writing, however obliquely, and in this respect these exiles reflect only bewilderment (when the plays are incompetent) or flat rejection (when they are not); nor do they illuminate any Canadian attitudes toward other countries since they merely absorb and imitate the conventions of those countries and make no comments from without. Nevertheless, towards the turning out of a good play this approach is not at all unrewarding for some, and indeed success along this line is often outstanding enough to be disturbing. In passing, I would note particularly the one-act plays of Norman Williams, collected in *Worlds Apart* (1956), worthy of attention in any context, but especially striking examples here of the flat rejection of native material paying off most handsomely.

Certainly the most difficult problem facing the Canadian playwright is how to write about the people and the places he knows and understands when these do not come to him equipped with any vividly recognizable trappings of race and tradition. If he chooses not to grapple with this problem, his local references, for example, no matter how casually dropped, only seem embarrassingly self-conscious, and it is a sad truth that his play will be much better off with a setting in the United States. Hence a number of Canadian playwrights take advantage of the ambiguously North American environment at the disposal of their American colleagues and make their own dramatic milieu an anonymous one, dispensing altogether with nationality and any reference to actual place names. But,

unfortunately, this technique can hardly be said to be successful: the results, usually mild drawing-room comedies with stock themes and the kind of unrealistic treatment found in inferior magazine stories, are uninteresting and quite devoid of any dramatic strength. And where the writing is insipid, of course, the humour is insignificant.

The majority of Canadian comedies of this second type, however, do deal with Canadian material, and, happily, the native approach usually seems to be a more rewarding one, resulting in a fair amount of dramatic success. But, curiously enough, that success is frequently achieved here only within a distinctly limited point of view, and over a narrow range of subject-matter. Note, for instance, the extreme popularity of old people as protagonists for these plays, or at least as the characters with whom the playwrights' sympathies are most actively engaged. There would seem to be a genuine, even an instinctive, predilection in our drama for the problems of the aged, for the spectacle of crusty, sometimes cantankerous souls, dogged by frustration and inactivity, and, accordingly, for plots which focus on such things as domestic stagnation, garrulous gossips, hen-pecked husbands, peacefully smouldering feuds, wrangles over inheritances etc. To say the atmosphere is Chekhavian is not really an exaggeration: these are lives of quiet desperation, and even when the characters are forced to act, when there is held out some bright hope of release (the device of the sudden unexpected windfall of money is extraordinarily popular with these plays), some way to reject or avoid the escape hatch is invariably found. And beneath this determined evasiveness, by the way, it is often possible to find the same dogged sense of responsibility (to Canada?) already noticed in some of our frivolous satires. There is not space here to go into one of these plays in detail (although Robertson Davies' *Overlaid,* a good example, will be examined below), but it is tempting to speculate why so many should choose this limited point of view, this concentration upon the twilight of age. Perhaps it is only because the juxtaposition of the new and the old (the one in setting, the other in characters) is æsthetically pleasing; but, more probably, it is because the juxtaposition is a necessary dramatic balance, that the only way many of our playwrights can cope with the spectacle of a young fresh land is by peopling it with the tired and the senile.

But even should less mature characters dominate the scene, the field of dramatic exploration is limited here a second time by a general reluctance to deal with any kind of sophistication. When these plays choose to depict a community, for example, the preferred setting is usually a small town, not a big city — presumably because life in the latter cannot easily be distinguished from the same

thing below the border. But most often, and no doubt in search of an environment more distinctively Canadian, settings are strictly rural — the bush, the prairie, the North. Characters inhabiting these wastes are similarly homely, and the only urban types who might venture upon this rustic scene are painfully at a disadvantage, like the tourists in the work of Merrill Denison.[2] Indeed, the homely heroes of the latter's plays, in their ceaseless contests with these tourists, seem to belong to an "essential" Canadian type — the same stock Canadian, in fact, who has been idealized in so many other literatures. Here, at home, where the literary regard is more candid, he is slow-moving, slow-witted and illiterate, yet endowed with a kind of frank simplicity that is most impressive in an argument and which, when exploited humorously by a writer, can be irresistibly funny. Syd, one of the backwoodsmen in Denison's *Brothers in Arms,* is a good specimen. He has at his mercy a Toronto couple, the Brownes, stranded in a log cabin at the end of their vacation and desperately in need of a lift to the train station. But Syd is not easily persuaded to co-operate in this matter, nor even to supply information about his taxi-driving colleague:

BROWNE: It's been dark half an hour. How long would it take him to get back?
SYD: I figure it'd take him about half an hour if he had a boat.
BROWNE: Half an hour, eh? Should be here, then, soon. (*thinks*) Did he have a boat?
SYD: No . . . . He didn't have no boat.

It is one of the points of the play that, in contrast to the supposedly civilized but bellicose ex-officer Browne, his "brother-in-arms" Syd could see no point in the discipline of the army and was consequently discharged as useless. Syd is typical of his kind which simply cannot be bothered with tradition or organized society and prefers instead to live apart as a hunter in the bush. Although he is frequently depicted as both young and attractive and may well have an instinctive appreciation for the beautiful in nature (the plainspoken Barney in Sinclair's *The Blood is Strong* is a good example, a slightly more heroic version of the type), nevertheless he is usually both unimaginative and shrewd, sometimes living just outside the law, operating a still or engaged in petty thievery. Whether or not this frequently ignoble savage can be said to be particularly Canadian (there might well be justification for considering him as indistinguishable from the American hillbilly), the fact is that the best of our gentle comedy, whose business is character,

[2] Denison is no doubt the best native playwright to have dealt with this kind of gentle comedy; most of his plays are collected in *The Unheroic North* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1923).

works most successfully when dealing with unsophisticated people of this type.

Apart from speculation on why they should be so fond of certain subjects, it is impossible to extract from plays like these any kind of expressed attitude, toward Canada or anything else. Of course this is partly because so many of them lack any dramatic strength to begin with. But even those which have been neatly made remain curiously timid and mute: having carefully eschewed any provocative subjects, they are equally careful not to comment on anything which might smack of importance. Intended for a family audience, perhaps the plays must be puritan and comfortable, but their diffidence becomes extraordinary, unparalleled in other cultures: even such "comfortable" American comedies as Gore Vidal's *The Best Man* and F. Hugh Herbert's *The Moon is Blue,* for example, still make their respective comments on American politics and sex. Our gentle comedy is more like some particularly innocuous Hollywood films, anxious to offend no one, cautious and flat, mortally afflicted by a misguided gentility. Indeed the only really interesting thing about these plays is why they should turn to the mood of comedy in the first place, turn to it so instinctively, as if it were the only grease that could make the dramatic machinery function. But is this to their credit — or does it merely follow, from their general inability to consider any serious subject, that they simply cannot consider any subject seriously?

> OH SWINISH and contemptible men of Delphi! I have laboured for forty years to lighten your ignorance, diminish your selfishness and increase your happiness! And I have failed — not for lack of wisdom or struggle but because you are beyond the power of wisdom to cure. The curse of baffled and wretched Aesop be upon you! O Apollo, let me die, for my life is bitterness!

A great teacher's life work has been rejected and persecuted and the mob is howling for his blood. Torn by frustration and despair, he at last loses his temper and delivers this stirring denunciation. The words quoted are those of the hero of Robertson Davies' *A Masque of Aesop* (1952),[3] but the significance of the dilemma for Canada is obvious and they could well also be the words of any of our baffled — and best — playwrights.

The stern didactic tone underlying serious satire and comedy in Canada is unmistakable, but, strangely enough, rarely makes them pompous or detracts

[3] Dates following play titles are those of publication, not necessarily of first performance; Davies' publisher is Clarke-Irwin of Toronto.

from their entertaining qualities. In short, the humour used is really more than a mere sugar-coating, and we can truthfully be said to be skilled in satire.[4] Usually this satire is directed against ourselves and is both reproving and corrective. Canada's response, however, is nothing so electric as Aesop's Delphi and, unlike Aesop as well, our Canadian satirists have no Apollo who will come along and proclaim the nobility of the prophet to the populace; and so the result is that the apathy, dull-wittedness and indifference of the country inevitably become the chief targets for the satire.

We are attacked for our intolerance, hostility and distrust — of beauty, wit, grace and poetic wisdom — and for our inability to appreciate the wonderful. Just as the theme of the curious innocent is a favourite device of our more frivolous satire, so to make the point here there is a tendency to employ some kind of Christ figure who is misunderstood, abused, destroyed or, worse, merely refused admittance by our aloof suspicious land. Jack Gray's *Ride a Pink Horse,* performed in Toronto in 1959, featured a centaur who was crushed to death by an intolerant mob. Lister Sinclair's *All About Emily* is an instructive radio fable which names no proper names, but it is obvious for whom its message is intended. Here the extraordinary visitor is Emily, the proverbial goose who lays the golden eggs. Emily's beneficiaries make quite a fuss over her: after they have soothed their feelings, outraged by Emily's daring to be different, they promptly put her owners in jail and proceed to wrangle over her gold, even forming a corporation to exploit it. Never once, however, do they express a jot of wonder, admiration or gratitude for her generous talents. Eventually, because of the threat she causes international finance, she is murdered and a perfectly ordinary goose is substituted in her place. But the Phœnix note is gloriously sounded when it is announced that the new goose has laid "in quick succession no fewer than *three* golden eggs, each studded with diamonds!"

Robertson Davies' martyrs are less fantastic, and consequently, like his Aesop, more poignant. In *Hope Deferred* (1949) the Governor of New France has created something truly wonderful: he has had a native Indian girl educated in Paris to perform Molière in the classic style of the Comédie Française. He is doomed to be disappointed, however, and is informed by two of his bishops that

[4] And bold as well — even when the target lies outside our national boundaries. Ruben Schip's *The Investigator,* for instance, first presented on the C.B.C. in 1954, caused a small sensation: it was a thinly-disguised attack on the late Senator McCarthy, and a recording made from the programme had a considerable black market sale in the United States.

such a performance will only serve to corrupt the morals of the Canadian French and confuse the Indians. The Governor argues for the goodness and greatness of art but he is up against a state of mind that is unswervable:

> The innocent native arts of basketry and beadwork are given reasonable encouragement, [says one of the bishops] and I am told that the squaws at Catarqui are preparing a set of altar frontals made wholly from dyed porcupine quills. These pursuits are innocent enough; even the most abandoned spirit is incapable of expressing contumacity or salaciousness in beads and quills. I tell you frankly, I am glad that much of that nonsense called art is far away in the old world . . . A new land has not time for amusements which may be destructive.

In *Fortune, My Foe* (1949) the figure in whom art is embodied is a dedicated Czech puppetmaster who is minus a working permit and in danger of being shipped back to Europe. A group of intellectuals who are thrilled by his delicate skill attempt to find an audience for him in Canada. They fail, of course, but the play ends hopefully with the artist determined to remain in Canada, despite everything. Nicholas, the hero, tells him:

> If you can stay in Canada, I can, too. Everybody says Canada is a hard country to govern, but nobody mentions that for some people it is also a hard country to live in. Still, if we all run away it will never be any better. So let the geniuses of easy virtue go southward; I know what they feel too well to blame them. But for some of us there is no choice; let Canada do what she will with us, we must stay.

Except for *A Jig for the Gypsy* (1954), all of Davies' plays feature variations on some of the problems involved in this decision, and they are consequently well worth examination here. But I shall concentrate only on one of them — *Overlaid* (1949), perhaps Davies' best play, and one especially useful for my purpose since it manages to contain within its short one-act length a remarkable number of the characteristics of Canadian humorous drama to which I have attempted to draw attention.

The story of the comedy is straightforward and simple. An old farmer lives in a dull rural community with his widowed daughter. Both the community and the daughter attempt to suppress his strong appetite for such "things that make life worth livin' " as the Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera in New York. An unexpected windfall of money from his insurance policy suddenly gives him the chance to go to New York and enjoy all the exciting things he has so sorely missed. His nagging unimaginative daughter is outraged and accuses him of being selfish, and when he forces her to tell him what she

most wants in the world, a granite tombstone for the family plot, he gives the money to her. The humour of the play deals superbly with the daughter's narrow mentality and her pathetic dream, makes an endearing figure of the old man, and supplies enormous sympathy for his plight:

> There's always a gol-danged necessity to get in the way whenever you want somethin' purty . . . I want what's warm an' — kind of mysterious; somethin' to make you laugh an' talk big, an' — oh, you wouldn't know. You just sit there, lookin' like a meat-axe, an' won't even try to see what I'm drivin' at. Say listen, Ethel: what d'you get out o' life anyways?

There are a number of familiar features here: we have already noticed the affection Canadian playwrights display for the problems of older people, the rural setting, and the theme of the sudden windfall.[5] Further, the old man may be regarded as a slightly refined variation of the above-mentioned "essential" Canadian. The sacred cow under fire is Canadian life itself, with its determined dullness. And just as our other kind of satire is able to put into pithy words a galling national problem, here it is the desperate position of the Canadian fighting to possess the beautiful that is so vividly delineated — and brilliantly rendered in the opening scene of the play where the old man, dressed in a battered "op'ry" hat and wearing white cotton workman's gloves, joins in with the applause of the Metropolitan audience coming to him over his antique radio. And finally, there is the dilemma of whether or not it is possible to "stick" Canada, whether to give in to the temptation to escape or, instead, to remain — in a country where one must inevitably be "overlaid" by ignorance and tedium. The old man is forced to make the choice — between the excitements of New York and the depressing dream of his daughter — and of course it is the ties of kin that win. To live in Canada, then, presumably requires a dogged sense of responsibility, even dedication — for to succumb involves sacrifice. Thus *Overlaid* ends sadly, with the old man giving up his beloved opera broadcasts:

> Naw. Turn it off. [he says] Don't want it now. I been overlaid and I got to get myself back in shape. Maybe I been emotionally overstimulated. But I ain't overlaid for good, Ethel, an' that stone'll rest lighter on me than it will on you.

[5] This latter feature may not be particularly significant (it is a popular kind of *deus ex machina* in drama anywhere and is usually regarded as a hackneyed one too), but, as a device forcing a reassessment of values, it does intrude rather frequently upon the Canadian dramatic scene — along with the innocent who provides perspective, the martyr who upsets the routine, and all other visitors and intrusions which foment the action of our plays.