

## Book Reviews

*Saskatoon Pie*, by Geoffrey Ursell (99 pp.); *The Plainsman*, by Ken Mitchell (55 pp.); *Talking Back*, by Don Kerr (106 pp.) and *Roundup*, by Barbara Sapergia (81 pp.). The Florence James Series. Regina: Coteau Books, 1992.

As Rita Shelton Deverell explains in a biographical note to each play in this series, Florence James was a theatre activist who came to Saskatchewan in 1954 after being blacklisted in the United States for "politically relevant cultural activity." Her work with amateur theatre companies, Deverell argues, sowed the seeds of a brand of "living" political and social theatre that "flourishes" in Saskatchewan, a theatre, in James's own words, "by, for and of the people."

The four plays in this series extend this ideal into the professional theatre of the province. Not all are recent: the first production of *Saskatoon Pie* was in 1982; *The Plainsman* was first produced in 1985 for one of Saskatchewan's anniversaries (in this case a dubiously conceived "celebration" of the 100th anniversary of the North-West Rebellion, which had seen ancestors of some modern Saskatchewan residents attacking and hounding to death ancestors of other modern Saskatchewan residents). Somewhat more recent is *Talking Back* (1988), while *Roundup* is a virtual new arrival (1990).

However, each is by a Saskatchewan-born playwright; each had its first production before a Saskatchewan audience, and each takes as its topic events from the history or the current cultural and social climate that define Saskatchewan.

Ursell's *Saskatoon Pie*, a musical comedy, won the Persephone Theatre (Saskatoon) national play writing competition. Set in Regina in 1906, it is a sometimes unabashedly silly, sometimes numbingly earnest, look at such timelessly topical issues as corruption in politics and opportunities for women in the political, professional and economic life of the province.

Its sympathies are clear. As male politicians decide the location of the provincial legislature (personal profit their prime motive), the women gather to hear a new suffragist speaker named Letitia (Nellie) McClung. In a typical melodramatic configuration, the men are all villains (and stupid) while the women are largely virtuous (and brilliant) — though the play avoids the question of how such brilliant people ever lost political power in the first place.

In the end, the women let the men pull off their real estate deal — but claim a chunk of the money to further women's issues. This would seem to place the suffragists on dubious moral grounds themselves, but this also slides by in the general silliness, though at times the form nearly buckles under all the relevance Ursell tries to freight it with.

In performance, what carries the day are the songs, especially the songs of gleeful corruption by Mayor Raker of Regina and his cronies. In the original production, however, Andorlie Hillstrom won over the house with

the title song, in a performance that did not give in either to its overt sentimentality or to its potentially ribald subtext (something I seem to recall the 1986 tour playing up).

Ken Mitchell's *The Plainsman* is the final piece in his Great Plains Trilogy (which also includes *Davin: The Politician* and *The Shipbuilder*). Its two acts avoid the "big" events of 1885. They are in the future in the first act, and painfully in the past in the second. Instead, Mitchell recreates the domestic relationship and political and cultural arguments between Gabriel Dumont and his wife, Madeleine, as a microcosm of issues confronting the Metis in 1884, just before the Resistance, and in exile in the gathering winter of 1885, after the fall of Batoche.

Two other figures fill out the microcosm, bringing in other facets and points of view. The first is their friend Michel Dumas, a fiddle-playing joker who needs to be played deftly to avoid reducing part of Metis culture to almost mawkish music hall clowning. The second is Charles Nolin, the elected president of the nation of St. Laurent, and known to history as a turncoat and a deserter, someone who ran when the firing started. Mitchell tries to give him a more tragic status as someone betrayed from within himself, for all his good intentions, but someone with courage and convictions.

The main dramatic action is Gabriel's learning curve as he is forced to adapt to a new reality — the end of the buffalo hunt as a way of life — and to a new political order. He has to learn a new kind of heroism to match the new circumstances, while still retaining hope for a time when his people will again flourish on the Plains. The play ends on such a vision, a prophetic dream to match symbolically against current realities.

The problem with the play is that with only four characters and two short acts, the scope of debates and lessons remains cramped. It seems little more than a sketch of a larger piece, unable to develop fully its range of themes to match the longer plays in the trilogy.

Kerr's *Talking Back* emerges out of a tradition of epic and documentary theatre, as it traces the background, creation and early problems of the CCF (Co-operative Commonwealth Federation). While the action and the history are not restricted to Saskatchewan, the CCF and its descendant, the New Democratic Party, have been a dominant force in Saskatchewan politics for over fifty years.

The structure is fairly typical of Canadian history plays that assume they need to explain the event to an audience that might not know the story: Act I, the exposition to show why the main action became necessary; Act Two to show the people taking action in their own interest, Act Three, the consequences. Each of its three acts requires its own theatrical style (or styles) to enact and comment on the historical documents Kerr has incorporated (including the Regina Manifesto) and to play out dramatized scenes around such evidence.

The key word in reference to *Talking Back* is "show." The presentational theatricality belongs on the stage more than in a text (though Kerr has taken

advantage of publication to include a scene that proved too difficult to stage in the play's one production at Saskatoon's Twenty-Fifth Street Theatre).

Finally, Sapergia moves the series into the present with *Roundup*, which dramatizes the strains on the family farm in the mid-to-late 1980s. This is "farm-kitchen sink realism" on a grand scale, as the characters spend their two hours on the stage preparing a meal for ten or more while they relive their past and try to anticipate their future.

At its best, *Roundup's* debates and arguments involving the Petrescu family and their neighbours echo the dialectical drama of Shaw, as the characters try not only to do the right thing, but to discover what the right thing may be. At other times, it echoes the tragi-comic ambience of Chekhov. Certainly, when a wealthy *nouveau riche* corporate farmer, Harvey Flint (by his own estimation a formerly poor local-boy-made-good) offers to buy the Petrescu farm, and to let the previous owners continue to work it for him, after he bulldozes all the buildings, we seem back in the world of *The Cherry Orchard*. Like Lopahin dealing with the Mme. Ranevsky and her brother, Gaev, Harvey cannot see why they do not leap at the offer.

However, while many concerns emerge, at times they do so without a convincing sense of historical or topical density. Instead, on occasion the issues get sketched in, or enter the dialogue in Saskatchewan cultural shorthand as lists of grievances or tables of statistics, rather than as fully grounded concerns of the characters.

Sapergia also occasionally takes slapstick shortcuts, which undermine the otherwise strong sense of dialectical fair play. Harvey raises several strong arguments for his style of agriculture, and counter arguments about such problems as his overuse of pesticides ring rather hollow, almost as an obligatory nod to environmentalism. But after he has proven himself still a capable farmer, by taking part in the action out in the corral, his exit involves walking squarely into a cow pie that has been left on the front walk, waiting to play its predictable role.

More subtle is the overall comic structure Sapergia works within, as the story ends with not one but two "wedding announcements." One involves a pair of seniors, Uncle Pompiliu and Mrs. Gibson, who decide to move in together "to see how things work out." The other involves Darcy and Greg, a pair of high schoolers who have arranged a pregnancy to force the issue. They want to start a farm family of their own, but have had to overcome the objections of her mother, Verna, a female "blocking character" whose interference has sprung from her own disaffection with the life of a farm wife.

The double matchmaking expresses double optimism for the future from the generation that has created the family farm and from the generation that will have to work out a new future for this fading prairie institution.

The Florence James series suggests something of the range of issues that have confronted and that continue to confront the province, and something of the range of dramatic and theatrical styles playwrights have adopted to

address these issues. As a final note, the four writers are all much of the same generation, the one that originated professional theatre in Saskatchewan in the mid-1970s. A future series might want to include works by some in the second or later generations, to see how they perceive the issues from the other side of the baby boom, to see how the younger half "lives, perhaps even to explore some of the contemporary *urban* issues of Saskatchewan.

Don Perkins  
Department of English  
University of Alberta



*Theatre Lethbridge: A History of Theatrical Productions in Lethbridge, Alberta (1885-1988)*, by George Mann. Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Ltd., 1993. Pp. 239.

*Theatre Lethbridge*, subtitled "A History of Theatrical Productions in Lethbridge, Alberta (1885-1988)," is a mighty undertaking. The word "comprehensive" seems almost inadequate. George Mann's book lists every play ever presented in that southern Albertan centre. As if that was not enough of a challenge, Mann includes references to dance schools, circuses, concerts, magicians, ice shows, entertainers, even Elvis impersonators. The tone of the book is serious and scholarly, resembling a draft of a doctoral thesis. The author is a social scientist by profession. Not surprisingly, therefore, he relies heavily upon charts and vast appendices, which make up almost a third of the book. They confirm the academic credibility of his research, but do little to tell his story.

Mann employs a very straightforward approach, beginning at the beginning with the establishment of the settlement and proceeding towards the present. Each chapter is similar: opening with a look at the changing community and then examining facilities, amateur activities, professional theatre and mass entertainment.

Occasionally when warranted chronologically, these sections are augmented by looks at drama festivals, moving pictures, electronic media, youth theatre, and, very cursorily in the final chapter, Canadian theatrical development as a whole.

Is the story of Lethbridge theatre worth telling, especially at 428 pages? Most certainly. Speaking as a theatre historian, this is just the kind of volume needed as groundwork for understanding our theatrical past. Luckily over the past two decades scholars have completed a number of similarly detailed studies of cities in several parts of the country. So much of Canadian theatre history has been mobile. Now increasingly it is becoming feasible to trace tours, follow individuals as they move from one home town to another, and to compare communities.

If I can be excused a personal digression, upon graduation from the