
UNIT 25 CANADIAN DRAMA: THE GENERAL DRAMATIC SCENE

Structure

- 25.0 Objectives
- 25.1 Canadian Drama: Brief General Introduction
- 25.2 Conclusion
Questions

25.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit general remarks about Canadian drama would be offered stressing its recent emergence and its thinness.

25.1 CANADIAN DRAMA: BRIEF GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Canadian drama has been the youngest and thinnest of fully developed Canadian literary forms. The situation has been better in the last quarter of a century or three decades. The key year was 1967 when James Reaney's *Colour in the Dark*, John Coulter's *The Trial of Louis Riel* and George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* were all commissioned for the centennial celebrations. Another major dramatic work of this recent period is David French's *Leaving Home* (1972). There is also Sharon Pollock's *Walsh*. A major First Nations play is Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters*.

When we talk of Canadian drama in terms of fully developed literary form, an implication is that theatre and stage plays as an activity in Canada has been quite widespread but indigenous plays with full-fledged literary pretensions have not been many. Stagings have mostly been of established English and Americans plays with Shakespeare grabbing the lion's share.

Canadian drama after 1967 compares quite favourably with British drama of the 1950s and 1960s in which Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, John Osborne, Arnold Wesker etc. were big names.

The 1960s witnessed the appearance of what came to be called 'regional theatres.' These theatres, based to varying degrees on the model established by the Manitoba Theatre Centre, Winnipeg (1958), offered audience – development programs in each locale, maintained high production standards, and employed artists from across the country. Although most of their plays were chosen from an international repertoire, the regionals added to the momentum fostered by a decade of public funding of the arts, which combined with the nationalist spirit surrounding the Canadian Centennial to create increased opportunities even for Canadian playwrights. The period is marked by its affinity for history and Canadian individuals and events became a focus after the late 1960s in a body of history plays.

In Newfoundland, Michael Cook used early Canadian history in a somewhat Brechtian way to comment on present-day social and political injustices. His major plays, like *On the Rim*, or *The Curve* (1977), despite all their richness in theme and language, have their dramatic effectiveness muted by a diffused focus. Cook's less historical plays which include *Quiller* (1975) comment philosophically on present-day Newfoundland life. Other Canadian history plays worth mentioning include John Tomas McDonough's *Charbonneau and le Chef* (1968), James Nichol's *Sainte-*

Marie among the Hurons (1977), Ron Chudley's *After Abraham* (1978), and Alden Nowlan and Walter Learning's *The Dollar Woman* (1981). At the same time the lure of foreign history drew Canadian writers: Munro Scott to a Chinese fold tale in the engaging play *Wu-feng* (1971); Stewart Boston to Queen Elizabeth I in *Councillor Extraordinary* (1972); and Michael Bawtree to aristocratic Russia for his dull play *Last of the Tsars* (1973).

The naturally small amount of early Canadian drama in English is shaped largely by foreign models, as in the case of Lt Adam Allan's *The New Gentle Shepherd* (1725). A Pastoral drama in Scottish dialect, "reduced to English." Seventeenth-century English heroic tragedies, such as John Dryden's *The Conquest of Granada* (1670, 1671), were the obvious antecedents for George Cocking's verse drama *The Conquest of Canada* (1766), a sometimes engaging verse drama depicting the defeat of the noble savage. The anonymous "Acadius," staged in Halifax in 1774 and extant as a 2-act extract in the *Nova Scotia Gazette and the Weekly Chronicle* (1744) dramatizes wealthy Boston merchant's extramarital activities and his black servants' attempts to cope with their exploitation.

The common impression that closet poetic drama was the 19th century's dominant dramatic genre can be challenged, as more plays are found in other modes. Certainly, authors with literary pretensions did write poetic dramas and 'dramatic sketches' not intended for the stage, many of them published in the *Literary Garland*. The anonymous "The Queen's Oak" (1850), is typical. Eliza Lanesford Cushing is the most notable of the *Garland* contributors; among her 10 plays is "The Fatal Ring" (1840), about a virtuous countess seduced by an alluring, womanizing king. The uneven quality of its blank verse and its moral tone are evident also in Cushing's biblical drama, "Esther" (*Lady's Book*, vols 16-17, 1838). One of the first plays printed in monograph, Charles Heavysege's *Saul* (1857), gained the respect of both John A. Macdonald and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, among others, but, like Heavysege's *Count Filippo* (1859), this bulky, sententious piece has fallen into a well-deserved obscurity. Thoman Bush's sprawling *Santiago* (1866), one of the most ambitious poetic dramas of the age, suffers from obscure allusions, passages of incomprehensible blank verse and melodramatic excess.

The end of the century saw poetic dramatists using indigenous subjects with greater frequency, but the quality of their expression improved only slightly. *Tecumshe* (1886) displays Charles Mair's minor poetic talent and his fervent patriotism. Sarah Anne Curzon, whose poetic talent was more limited than Mair's, also follows a patriotic bent in *Laura Secord* (1887). John Hunter-Duvar in *De Roberval* (1888) tries to dramatize too many themes. Foreign and indigenous elements often came together in poetic drama, a fact well illustrated by the range of William Wilfred Campbell's work for example "Daulac" (1908) presents Dollard Des Ormeaux's brave defence at the Long Sault. As is characteristic of the genre, Campbell's 5 plays suffer from ponderous "Shakespearean" verse and weighty philosophy which render them for difficult to stage. The practice of publishing political or social satire in newspapers created a lively topical drama early in the century, as illustrated by "The Charrivarri" (*The Scribbler* vols 3-4, 1823) by Samuel Hull Wilcocke "The Triumph of Intrigue" (1833) *British Colonist*, 1839 attributed to Hugh Scobie. Similarly biting sketches such as William Henry Fuller's "The Unspecific Scandal" (*Canadian Illustrated News*, 1874) and Curzon's "The Sweet Girl Graduate" (*Grip Sack*, 1882), which exposes sexual discrimination against women at University of Toronto, continued to appear to the end of the century. Topical satire appeared in monographs by mid century. *The Female Consistory of Brockville* (1856) allowed its anonymous author, "Carolli Candidus," to attack hypocrisy in the Brockville Presbytery. "Sam Scribble" wrote both *Dolorsolatio* (1865), a burlesque *King of the Beavers* (1865) in which Fenian and conspire to attack Beaver land. *The Fair Grit* (1876) by Nicholas Flood Dorvin is an enjoyable satire on party politics.

Government figures played a significant role in the development of Canadian drama. In Ottawa, Lady Dufferin organized dramatic entertainments between 1872 and 1878 in the theatre in the Governor General's residence, Rideau Hall. Frederick A. Dizon, author of the comic operetta, *The Maire of St. Brieux* (1875), was one playwright whose work she encouraged. Dixon's masque, entitled "*Canada's Welcome*" (1879), which chronicled pioneer settlement in the Canadian wilderness, was presented for the marquess of Lorne and Princess Louise at Ottawa's Grand Opera House in 1879.

Musical dramas were important entertainment in the 19th century. *Nina* (1880) byk Thomas Herbert Chesnut is a "nautical comic operetta" influenced by Gilbert and Sullivan. Musical parodies and burlesques prevailed, the most famous being William Henry Fuller's *H.M.S. Parliament* (1880), which borrowed from *H.M.S. Pinafore* to satirize Canadian politics and political figures. Jean Newton McIlwraith showed more originality exploring Canadian identity in the context of the 'annexation' issue in her comic *Ptarmigan* (1895).

The century produced plays in a number of other genres. Catharine Nina Merritt's prose history *When George the Third Was King* (1897) celebrates loyalists who settled in Canada. Stage melodramas are represented by pieces like John Louis Carleton's *More Sinned Against than Sinning* (1893), a meaningless formula play which became an annual treat for several years. Like Harry Lindley's inferior *Chick* (1893) or W.P. Wood's sketchy scenario *Minnie Trail* (1871) these melodramas suffer from the genre's weaknesses without having its strengths.

The Man Who Went (1918), a wartime spy thriller, is typical of Tremayne's formulaic plays for the American commercial stage. Children's plays and scripts for educational temperance or religious purposes were prevalent during the early 20th century, as were humorous dramatic sketches, adaptations from Dickens, and Stephen Leacock's burlesques of outdated theatrical modes. After World War I Canadians wrote in the environment of the amateur movement that grew up across the country. In *Canadian Plays from Hart House Theatre* (2 vols, 1926-27) editor Vincent Massey gives us examples in various genres of this "little theatre" activity, including 3 short, ironic comedies, "Balm," "Brothers in Arms" and "The Weather Breeder" by Merrill Denison, the first significant playwright of the century. His "Marsh Hay" a 4-act realistic drama published *The Unheroic North* (1923), treats important Canadian themes.

One-act plays in a variety of styles became the predominant form of the time. *One Act Plays by Canadian Authors* (1926) collects 19 plays, of which only "Come True" and "Low Life" bear mention, these chiefly because they are by Mazo De Ea Roche. They antedate *Whiteoaks* (1936), the conventional drama, adapted from her novel, which ran for over 2 years in London, England, before the War. Lillian Thomas's amusing *Jim Barber's Spite Fence* (1936); and *The Lampshade*, an English murder story by W.S. Milne. In his 4 *Plays of the Pacific Coast* (1935), A.M.D. Fairbairn dramatizes West Coast Indian Stories and the collision of white and Indian cultures. The Quebec legend of Rose's dance with the devil is rendered into rhyming couplets in E.W. Devlin's *Rose Latulippe* (1935). The hardships of the Great Depression inspired Eric Harris's domestic drama *Twenty Five Cents* (Toronto, 1936) and Lois Reynolds Kerr's *Open Doors* (1930).

The Depression also led to numerous "Worker's plays." Dorothy Livesay, whose "Joe Derry" (*Masses*, 1933) is a narrated pantomime, was the most famous author involved. *Eight Men Speak* (1934) by Oscar Ryan, E. Cecil Smith H. Francis and Mildred Goldberg, was the most notable play. Its importance is both historical and as an example of the effective use of presentational techniques. Aside from "Worker's Plays," the most daring experiment was Herman Voaden's "symphonic expressionism." His ballet-music-dramas were described at the time as compelling on stage, but now may seem dated, their image-laden language stilted. Len Peterson's radio play, *Burlap Bags* (1946, published 1972), also deserves being mentioned for its portrayal of an alienated, absurd postwar world. It seems a transitional play between the Expressionism of the 1930s and the Existentialist drama of the 1950s and 1960s.

The last twenty years have seen a remarkable flowering of Canadian literature in all forms, and, quantitatively speaking, drama has kept up with this development. There are now more theatres and actors, and as a result more Canadian dramatists and plays. Whereas it was difficult in the not-too-distant past formative plays to gain a hearing, the situation has now changed so drastically that one dramatist recently claimed Canada as 'the easiest country in the world' in which 'to get a play produced'. This is not, of course, a situation that necessarily ensures quality. In recent years, the tally of plays that may reasonably be expected to form part of a permanent repertory is still disappointingly small.

Many reasons can be offered to explain this sorry state of affairs. Theatrical awareness cannot be learned overnight, and many of our contemporary dramatists lack the basic experience upon which to build. Time and again, young playwrights display a depressing ignorance about the traditions of their craft. Thus one admits to discovering Ibsen after he was himself a supposedly established playwright; another recalls that 'the second live play I saw was one of mine'. The absence of a Canadian dramatic tradition has been equally unfavourable. The modest comedies of Denison and Ringwood have little to offer the 1980s, while Davies and Reaney, among Canadian most substantial playwrights to date, are both notoriously individualist. They have discovered in theatre an outlet for their particular talents but, although many dramaturgical tips could be learned from them, they are of little use as formal models.

Robertson Davies was the first writer to bring unquestioned verbal skills and intellectual originality to the service of Canadian drama. Significantly, before he began writing plays he had obtained a firm theoretical and practical grounding in all aspects of the theatre. While at Oxford he wrote a thesis on Shakespeare's boy actors, thus exploring the history of both drama as a form and acting as an art, and he went on to gain valuable experience both on-stage and back-stage with the Old Vic Company in the season immediately preceding the Second World War. Thus he returned to his native country with personal familiarity with an established dramatic tradition. In Canada the Dominion Drama Festival (DDF) had been inaugurated in the 1930s as an attempt to foster and encourage dramatic activity, and it was within the DDF, and for the Peterborough Little Theatre, that Davies first participated as director and dramatist.

His early one-act plays such as *Overlaid* (1948), with their simple plotlines and homely comedy, clearly belong with the work of Denison and early Ringwood. What distinguishes them is a firmer dramatic control, a subtler variation of language, and above all a profounder intellectual basis. In *Overlaid* Pop's enthusiasm for opera, his dreams of both the culture and fleshpots of New York are amusing in themselves. Characteristically, the three characters in the play all have individual traits but also represent aspects of the Canadian consciousness: George Bailey, the average materialist and sensual man; Ethel, the narrow advocate of a religion that has turned sour; Pop, hungry for greater imaginative experience but uncertain how to acquire it. Beneath the comedy is a genuine pathos that touches deeper levels than the superficialities of plot, and makes a play of ideas out of what might have been no more than an entertaining pastime.

While *Overlaid* gives at least an illusion of realism, *Eros at Breakfast* (1949) illustrates Davies's *penchant* for imaginative exuberance and anticipates his later experiments in theatrical fantasy. Sub-titled 'a psychosomatic interlude', it presents a departmental office within the whole bureaucratic organization that regulates a man's body and soul. It is a witty, zany, but very intelligent play about the complex psychology of love. Davies has tried to play down his debt to Shaw, but it is evident in the way in which ideas are embodied in dramatic characters, in his relish for exposing the absurdities of his times, in the lucid and smooth-flowing rhetoric that

makes up his dramatic speech, in a satisfying formal artifice, and above all in the creation of an imaginative world between the extremes of realism and total fantasy.

Davies's theatre is an argumentative theatre full of intellectual debate and witty clashes of ideas in high-spirited argument always learning towards what is described in *Question Time* as 'a world of another reality'. (Act 1). Increased dramatic activity in Ontario at this enabled Davies to attempt more ambitious full-length plays, *Fortune My Foe* (1948) and *At My Heart's Core* (1950) were performed in Peterborough and Kingston respectively, and three plays of the 1950s, *A Jig for the Gypsy* (1954), *Hunting Stuart* (performed 1955), and *General Confession* (written 1958), were written for the Toronto Crest Theatre, a professional repertory group. In these plays we discern the characteristic pattern of Davies's mature dramatic work. All blend realism (or the closest Davies ever gets to realism) with an element of wonder. In *Fortune My Foe* the latter is represented by Franz Szabo, a European puppeteer whose traditional and delicate art goes unappreciated in the New World, though many of the characters, like Pop in *Overlaid*, show that they hunger for the imaginative sustenance he can provide. And in *At My Heart's Core*, a historical play about Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Trail, a Byronic figure complete with a whiff of Satan tempts the protagonists with larger dreams and ambitions. Davies is a polished entertainer who offers amusement and the pleasures of watching the variety of civilized skills that comprise traditional drama, but he also provides food for thought and an opportunity for his audience to expand its horizons.

The later plays carry this development still further. Magic becomes a common ingredient, but a magic that reveals the realities of our world instead of allowing us to escape them. At the climax of *A Jig for the Gypsy* (which might be categorized as a Welsh *John Bull's Other Island*), a fortuneteller, a conjurer, and a poacher drink a toast, 'The Magic forever' (Act 3); together they represent a positive if unconventional alternative to the shabby politics dominating the plot. In *Hunting Stuart* two characters are taken back into the past to live out sections of their ancestors' lives. And in *General Confession* (a play that on one level evokes 'a realm of magic' (Act 2) and on another recalls the Shaw of 'In Good King Charles's Golden Days') the protagonist Casanova, no less – confronts not only his past but aspects of his psychological self.

What is remarkable about the later plays is Davies's exploration of them in intensely theatrical terms. When Henry Benedict Stuart, an unimpressive Ottawa Civil Servant, temporarily becomes his illustrious ancestor Bonnie Prince Charlie, taking on royal authority (and to some extent even dignity), Davies creates a superb opportunity for a talented actor. Similarly, the actor playing Casanova in *General Confession* must play out the character's youthful past as well as he aged present, while those representing the three externalized aspects of himself 'the Comedy Company of the Psyche', to use a phrase from *The Manticore*, Part 2, Ch.11) play a number of different roles in the charades in the second act. No Canadian writer before Davies had used the potentiality of the theatre so effectively.

By 1960 Davies seemed about to blossom forth as a prolific and important Canadian dramatist, but there were various reasons why this did not happen. First, a dramatization of *Leaven of Malice* failed on Broadway and discouraged him from concentrating all his efforts on the theatre; a little later, his appointment as first Master of Massey College entailed time consuming duties and responsibilities; and later still his success as a novelist with the Deptford trilogy channeled his creative energies into other areas. As a result, his recent dramatic output has been small, the most important being *Question Time* (1975). This play begins freshly and inventively, and promises to develop into a witty and satirical look at Canadian politics. But it turns more serious and even solemn as it raises issues of personal and national identity. It contains some impressive theatrical moments and its basic ideas obviously connect with the Jungian concerns that had produced *The Manticore* a few years earlier. The stage devices, however, especially the parliamentary debate in which Peter Macadam acts as both prime minister and leader of the opposition seem confusing and clumsy. Oddly enough, the playrooms perilously close to closest-

drama, the stage directions suggesting effects that could hardly be achieved in most theatres. Moreover, its Canadian emphasis in this case proves limiting; *Question Time* never transcends the national situation to become a more universal comment on the relation between politics and the personal life.

Davies has consistently emphasized the importance of craft in play-writing; his own plays are at least as well made as Ringwood's, and in the special dramatic ethos he creates, the world of wonders celebrated in his novel about theatre-folk, this is an advantage. As in his fiction, he chooses characters who, whatever their education and attitudes, can talk readily and effectively. In his notes to *At My Heart's Core* he insists that 'variations of accent and niceties of pronunciation are important', that the play 'is written to be *heard* as well as seen'. Davies's most important contributions to Canadian theatre are qualities that other dramatists tend to neglect: concern for dramatic speech, a theatrical intelligence – above all, a sense of style.

James Reaney is the first Canadian poet of any consequence to turn to the theatre and he brings to it the whimsical but often powerful quirkiness that is so evident in his poems. Unlike Davies, he embarked on this new venture with little practical experience of drama; moreover, he began to write plays – ironically, just as professional Canadian theatre was expanding in scope – with a decided preference for the amateur stage. These factors account for the freshness and some of the weaknesses of his dramatic writing.

The Killdeer (1962, radically revised 1972), *The Sun and the Moon* (1962), and *The Easter Egg* (performed 1962) conveniently represent his early phase. Like his early poetry, they are rich in references to rural south-western Ontario but soon create their own strange world of fantasy and dark fairytale, inhabited by egg-girls and comic clergymen, abortionists and diabolical sinners. In Reaney's theatrical never-never-land of archetypal polarities, the pendulum swings constantly between a heightened innocence verging on naivety and an evil-minded experience that on occasion seems little more than immature nastiness. Filled with quaint characters bearing names like Manatee and Kingbird, the plays also contain horrifying intimations of violence and cruelty, both physical and mental. The sympathetic characters, generally sensitive youths, are initially oppressed but always triumph through their faith in a redeeming imagination. There are drastic shifts of tone from rather obvious satire through melodramatic suspense to a resolution that often seems close to wish-fulfillment.

Reaney's dramatic effects are poised on the razor's edge between imaginative charm and between imaginative charm and irritating silliness. While he frequently succeeds in establishing a poetic reality in which we are temporarily prepared to suspend disbelief, it rarely becomes more than an insubstantial pageant. There is an operatic quality about Reaney's plots, and it may not be accidental that the most consistently satisfying of his early dramatic ventures was his libretto for *Night-Blooming Cereus* (1962), written in collaboration with the composer John Beckwith.

In 1960, Reaney attended a performance of the Peking Opera in Toronto, and this experience profoundly affected his own dramatic writing. It opened his eyes to the rich possibilities of mime and a consequent expanding of the audience's imagination; more practically, its dramatic artifice allowed for effects that could not otherwise be achieved on the stage. It freed him from the constraints and expense of elaborate stage-sets encouraged a dramatic fluidity that fitted his own talents. As usual, however, there is an ambiguous oddity surrounding this development. The Peking Opera at that time was one of the most rigorously professional theatres in the world, its reputation built upon generations of experience and training. Reaney proceeded to adapt their effects not only for inexperienced amateurs but even for school children. The results, though original and stimulating, were hardly comparable with the model.

The first two plays to be notably influenced by this development were *Listen to the Wind* (performed 1966) and *Colours in the Dark* (performed 1967). In both a comparatively small cast plays a host of characters, and the former is grounded in a play-within-a-play situation. Both look back to the partly innocent, partly by no means innocent world of childhood. In *Listen to the Wind* a group of children stage a play based on one of Rider Haggard's melodramatic novels. It is a play of intrigue, villainy, and infidelity, and the implicit motive for the performance is to bring together and reunite separated parents. The unhappy 'real' situation of the frame story (full of allusions to the Brontës Haworth) is reflected in the tortured plot of the staged play. But Reaney's enthusiasm for what most modern readers consider crude and unsubtle melodrama raises problems. He merely asserts in the printed production notes that 'the patterns in it are not only sensational but deadly accurate'.

Colours in the Dark, which gave Reaney his first professional success when it was produced at the Stratford Festival during Centennial year is structured upon a complicated and somewhat artificial division into the days of the week with their balancing planets, colours, flowers, parts of the alphabet, etc. The play absorbs some of Reaney's earlier published poems into a new imaginative context. Its subject is a child's developing view of the world, and Reaney himself has emphasized in an introductory note how it grew out of the idea of a play-box, a childhood image that has always been important in his poetry. Perhaps best described as a poetic review, *Colours in the Dark* combines sentiment, chilling insight, archetypal patterning, quaintness, and fantasy to a theatrical potpourri that, whether one reacts with enthusiasm or reservation, is quintessential Reaney.

Reaney's chief claim to success as a dramatist rests upon the *Donnellys* trilogy, comprising *Sticks and Stones* (1975), *The St. Nicholas Hotel* (1976), and *Handcuffs* (1977). Here his dramatic talents are firmly grounded in a solid if mysterious historical event. Perhaps part of an inter-Irish feud extending back for over a century, the murder of the Donnelly family in 1880 in Lucan, most far from Reaney's Stratford, is one of the most sensational and unsolved crimes in Canadian history, and has taken on mythic overtones in the intervening years. Reaney dramatizes the story at length, and brings to his trilogy all the dramatic expertise he had developed during the previous decade. A series of recurring images – ladders, burning barns, and especially the sticks, stones, and handcuffs that appear in the titles – give unity of texture to both script and dramatic action; the plays are interspersed with ballads, songs, and other music; ingenious improvisations of dramatically intractable material dexterously turn liabilities into virtues. Above all, Reaney is able to sustain a tonal suspense in no way lessened by the audience's awareness of how the story must end. This is a dramatic subject explored with an abundance of theatrical audacity and inventiveness.

Reaney never makes up his mind whether he is telling the truth concerning the Donnellys or creating his own myth about them. He attempts to turn the Donnellys, so often portrayed as monsters, into heroic figures, and their opponents necessarily take on the role of villains. Reaney's notorious weakness for melodrama reveals itself in his polarized characterizations. The binary groups of which Reaney is so fond continually undermine his persuasiveness as an interpreter of the historical events. Although *The Donnelly's* provides absorbing theatre, it is hardly subtle.

Reaney's more recent plays, though developing his newly discovered ability to exploit local history, have been decidedly less successful. *Wacousta!* (1979) is very melodramatic. Reaney has a superfluity of dramatic inventiveness but little tact; he is well endowed with vitality but sadly lacking in self-discipline and self-criticism. While in some ways an infuriating figure, he is for many a disarmingly lovable one. For all his miscalculations he has certainly opened up exciting new possibilities for Canadian drama.

25.2 CONCLUSION

Drama in Canada is poorer in comparison to other genres but has started picking up lately and is doing well now.

QUESTIONS

1. How does Canadian drama in the post-1967 period compare with British drama since the middle of the twentieth century?
2. Write a brief note on recent developments in Canadian drama on the general level.

UNIT 26 INTRODUCTION TO WRITER AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY

Structure

- 26.0 Objectives
- 26.1 George Ryga: A Brief Introduction
- 26.2 *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*: Act-1
- 26.3 *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* : Act-2
- 26.4 Conclusion
Questions

26.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall touch upon briefly Ryga's life and then go on to the structure of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*.

26.1 GEORGE RYGA: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

George Ryga is the author of Canada's best known English-language play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. He is also one of Canada's most prolific authors. Having embarked on a career as a professional writer in 1962, he has maintained a taxing work programme as a short story writer, novelist, radio and television dramatist, poet and film scenarist, not to mention ventures into the world of ballet and opera. Fourteen years of this disciplined regimen have resulted in 190 plays, two cantatas, five screenplays, two long-playing albums, three novels, and a book of poetry, as well as a considerable body of unpublished and unproduced work.

His controversial play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* was commissioned by the Vancouver Playhouse for Canada's Centennial Year, and was the first play performed in the new National Arts Centre in Ottawa in 1969 before an audience which included Prime Minister Trudeau and the assembled provincial premiers. It has been broadcast and televised by the CBC. Commissioned by the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood to mark the centenary of the signing of Indian Treaties. A ballet version of *Rita Joe* was presented by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet at the Centre's Opera House in 1971. Since its debut, this outstanding Canadian play has been frequently produced both abroad and across Canada and always to acclaim. Furthermore, it has achieved the remarkable distinction of crossing the Canadian cultural barrier, having been translated into French by Gratien Gelinas. This translation, "the sole occasion on which Quebec's leading playwright has translated the work of an English-Canadian playwright", demonstrates the stature of Ryga's talent and his place in contemporary Canadian culture.

26.2 THE ECSTASY OF RITA JOE: ACT-1

Act-1 of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* has a number of exchanges between Rita and the Magistrate. One example is :

MAGISTRATE My sons can go in any direction they wish...into trades or university...But if I had a daughter, I would be more concerned.

RITA What's so special about a girl?

The Ecstasy of Rita Joe:
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MAGISTRATE I would wish...well, I'd be concerned about her choices... her choices of living, school...friends...These things don't come as lightly for a girl. For boys it's different....But I would worry if I had a daughter...Don't hide your child! Someone else can be found to raise her if you can't!

RITA JOE shakes her head, a strange smile on her face.

Why not? There are people who would love to take care of it.

RITA Nobody would get my child....I would sooner kill it an' bury it first! I am not a kind of woman, mister judge!

MAGISTRATE at a loss I see....

RITA a cry I want to go home.....

Another example is:

MAGISTRATE Don't blame the police, Rita Joe! The obstacles to your life are here... he touches his forefinger to his temples. ...in your thoughts ...possibly even in your culture....

RITA JOE turns away from him, searching the darkness behind her.

What's the matter?

RITA I want to go home!

MAGISTRATE But you can't go now. You've broken a law for which you will have to pay a fine or go to prison.....

RITA JOE begins to move away from him, crossing the front of the stage along the apron, her walk cocky. The light spreads and follows her.

You can't walk around in old clothes and running shoes made of canvas... you have to have some money in your pockets and an address where you live. You should fix your hair...perhaps even change your name. And try to tame that accent that sounds like you have a mouthful of sawdust.... There is no peace in being extraordinary!

A third example is:

MAGISTRATE annoyed at himself, at her. There is nothing here but a record of your convictions....nothing to speak for you and provide me with any reason to moderate your sentence! What the hell am I supposed to do? Violate the law myself because I feel that somehow...I've known and felt...No! turning from her You give me no alternative...no alternative at all!

The MAGISTRATE packs up his books.

RITA I'll go home...Jus' let me go home. I can't get out of jail to find the highway...or some kind of job!

MAGISTRATE standing Prison and fines are not the only thing....Have you, for instance, considered that you might be an incurable carrier? There are people like that..... they cannot come into contact with others without infecting them. They cannot eat from dishes others may use.... They cannot prepare or touch food others will eat... the same with clothes, cars, hospital beds!

The Magistrate keeps mouthing cliches but is unable to see the obvious which is right under his nose. He is unable to see or admit the injustice of the whole system and the total one-sidedness of the utterances of those who accuse Rita of acts like vagrancy theft, prostitution etc.

Rita's problem is that she can't and won't be saved. She is unable to take crucial decisions or is rather prevented from taking such decisions by the system and her own mental make-up. Her companion Jaimie Paul is very defiant and rebellious. She is less so but these streaks are there in her also. Her father and the priest are unable to have a breakthrough with her. Her sister Eileen's experiences also serve as a deterrent of sorts. Eileen can't find proper work.

In any case Natives do not get work at least not the kind of work they would like to do. Even for manual jobs their so-called 'lack' of education is cited as a reason for rejection.

To add salt to their wounds there are hypocrites like Mr. Homer. The exchanges between Mr. Homer and Jaimie Paul are at the core of the play's thematic concerns. Jaimie expose the pseudo-humanitarianism of people like Mr. Homer. Mr. Homer runs a 'centre' and offers clothes and sandwiches to Indians. He says to the Indian:

If you want food, eat! You need clothes, take them that's all.... But I am running this centre my way, and I mean it!

Jaimie Paul's answer is:

I came to say no to you... that's all. ...That's all!

Jaimie wants Rita and other Indian also to say 'no' to Mr. Homer. He says:

I don't want no other to come...I don't want them to eat here...if we got to take it from behind a store window then we break the window and wait for the cops. It's better than... this!

Mr. Homer says to Rita:

Rita Joe... where'd you pick up this...this loud mouth any way?

Rita says (slowly and firmly):

I think...Jaimie Paul is right

One of the statements made by the Magistrate is:

You're here and your well-being were protected. The roads of the city are open to us. So are the galleries, libraries, the administrative and public building. There are, buses, train...going in and coming out. Nobody is a prisoner here.

Rita's response (delivered with humour, almost a sad sigh) is:

The first time I tried to go home, I was picked up by some men who gave me five dollars. But then they arrested me.

A little later Rita says:

I can't leave town. Every time I try they put on in jail.

The communication gap between Rita and the Magistrate is quite wide. She talks of the terrible conditions in jail but he goes on pressing the charge of vagrancy against her. He tells her she'll need witnesses and gives her eight hours to produce them. There is a brief scene with Rita's sister Eileen Joe who has been without work too.

Through all this Rita is tired and feels sick. She wants to sit. She says: 'I don't feel so good, mister.' A little later the Magistrate says to Rita - 'The charge against you this morning is prostitution.'

She calls the charge false and draws his attention to her pathetic condition. She says:

Everything in this room is like ice... How can you stay alive
working here? : I'm so hungry I want to throw up...

She makes it clear that three policemen had forcibly had sex with her in a car and then they stuffed five dollar bills in her pockets. She asks the Magistrate - 'Can I bum a cigarette someplace?'

The Magistrate disallows that. Then she says - 'Then give me a bed to sleep on.'

A male witness (who is also one of the murderers) testifies against Rita. A second witness (also one of the murderers) testifies against her.

Jaimie Paul is later going to be thrown in front of a train by the murderers. In anticipation of that the Singer sings:

Oh, can't you see that train roll on,
Gonna kill a man, before it's gone?
Jaimie Paul fell and died.
He had it comin', so it's alright.
Silver train with wheels on fire!

A policeman appears and the charge now (against Rita) is that of stealing. She admits her having stolen but adds that was because she was hungry and had no money.

A little later Rita says:

I'm tired an' I want to eat, mister! I haven't had grub since day
before yesterday... This room is like a boat on water... I'm so
dizzy... What the hell kind of place is this won't let me go lie
down on grass?

She actually doubles over to choke back her nausea.

The Magistrate's response to Rita's blaming the police is typical. He says:

Don't blame the police, Rita Joe! The obstacles to your life are
here... he touches his forefinger to his temples. ...in your
thoughts...possibly even in your culture....

The scene between Rita and 'The Teacher' is significant. The Teacher is described as a shy inadequate woman, who moves and behaves jerkily, the product of incomplete education and poor job placement. She tries to remind Rita that Canada is 'melting pot' (underlying the need to conform). She gives up and says:

You will never make bronze! Coming from nowhere and going no place! Who am I to change that?

She charges Rita with 'pawing the ground for men like a bitch in heat!' Rita denies that.

From there to the end of Act-I there is a brief scene between Rita and her father but all around them are dead ends. The Teacher repeats her testimony against Rita. Mr. Homer also adds to the case against her. All accusers join in blaming her. When the Magistrate repeats the charges at one go, her answer is :

I was hungry when I stole something.... an' I was hollerin' I was
so lonely when I started whoring....

The Act ends with the Magistrate giving Rita a sentence of imprisonment for thirty days.

26.3 THE ECSTASY OF RITA JOE: ACT-2

For Act-II a brief quick recapitulation will do. There is a scene in which Rita Joe's father appears. Then there is a Priest and a policeman. She is sceptical about his sermonizing. Then Jaimie Paul comes on the scene. Rita and Jaimie talk. Mr. Homer appears. The talk between him and Mr. Homer takes a turn for the worse. We are told in the stage direction that Jaimie is in a provocative mood, seething with rebellion that makes the humour he triggers both biting and deceptively innocent. The young Indian men respond to him with strong laughter. One scene involving him and Mr. Homer goes like this:

MR. HOMER cutting bread You're a tough man to cross, Jaimie Paul.

JAIMIE ignoring MR. HOMER, to the YOUNG INDIAN MEN
Boy, I showed that bastard who he was talkin' to!

RITA Did you get the job?

JAIMIE turning to her, laughin boyishly. No! he called the cops
an' they threw me out!

They all laugh. The YOUNG INDIAN MEN go to the table now
and rummage through the clothes.

MR. HOMER Take whatever you want, boys...there's more
clothes comin' tomorrow.

JAIMIE PAUL impulsively moves to the table where the YOUNG
INDIAN MEN are fingering the clothes. He pushes them aside and
shoves the clothes in a heap leaving a small corner of the table
clean. He takes out two coins from his pockets and spits in his
hands.

JAIMIE I got a new trick.... Come on, Mister Homer.... I'll
show you! See this!

He shows the coins, then slams his hands palms down on the table.

Which hand got the coins?

The Ecstasy of Rita Joe:
Drama

MR. HOMER Why...one under each hand...

JAIMIE Right! turning up his hands Again? He collects the coins and slaps his hands down again. Where are the coins now? Come on, guess!

MR. HOMER is confident now, and points to the right hand with his cutting knife. JAIMIE PAUL laughs and lifts his hands. The coins are under his left hand.

MR. HOMER Son of a gun.

JAIMIE You're a smart man.

He puts the coins in his pockets and, laughing, turns to RITA JOE who stands uncertainly, dressed in the red sweater. She likes the garment, but she is aware JAIMIE PAUL might resent her taking it. The YOUNG INDIAN MEN again move to the table, and MR. HOMER returns to making sandwiches.

MR. HOMER There's good pair of socks might come in handy for one of you guys!

A YOUNG INDIAN MAN pokes his thumbs through the holes in the socks, and laughs.

JAIMIE Sure...take the socks! Take the table!

He slaps the table with his hands and laughs.

Take Mister Homer cutting bread! Take everything!

MR. HOMER Hey, Jaimie!

JAIMIE Why not? There's more comin' tomorrow, you said!

RITA Jaimie?

MR. HOMER You're sure in a smart-assed mood today, aren't you?

JAIMIE pointing to the YOUNG INDIAN MAN with the socks, but talking to MR. HOMER Mister, friend Steve over there laughs lots.... He figures....the way to get along an' Live is to grab his guts an' laugh at anything anybody says. You see him laughin all the time. A dog barks at him an' he laughs... Laughter from the YOUNG INDIAN MAN. Laughs at a fence post fallin'..... Laughter. Kids with funny eyes make him go haywire... Laughter. Can of meat an' no can opener...

One of the later stage directions reads:

JAIMIE PAUL puts the brassiere over his head, with the cups down over his ears and the straps under his chin. The YOUNG INDIAN MEN are all laughing now and moving close to the table. MR. HOMER makes a futile attempt at driving them off.

Suddenly JAIMIE PAUL's expression turns to one of hatred. He throws the brassiere on the table and gripping its edge, throws the table and clothes over, scattering the clothes. He kicks at them. The YOUNG INDIAN MEN all jump in and, picking up the clothes, hurl them over the ramp.

When the Magistrate tries to reason with Jaimie in his own hypocritical way then Jaimie says to him:

JAIMIE spitting Go to hell!... I can die an' you got nothing to tell me!

Mr. Homer calls Rita and Jaimie names. The Magistrate sentences Jaimie also to thirty days of imprisonment. Jaimie says: 'Gimme back my truth!' A sentence later he says:

Teach me who I really am! Y've taken that away! Give me back the real me so I can live like a man!

A little before the end there is a tense scene between The Magistrate and Rita. It goes like this:

The MAGISTRATE enters. There is a light on RITA JOE where she stands: There is also a light around the MAGISTRATE. The MAGISTRATE's voice and purpose are leaden. He has given up on RITA JOE. He is merely performing the formality of condemning her and dismissing her from his conscience.

MAGISTRATE I sentence you to thirty days in prison.

RITA stoically Thank you. Is that right? To thank you?

MAGISTRATE You'll be back...always be back...growing older, tougher...filthier...looking more like stone and prison bars... the lines in your face will tell everyone who sees you about prison windows and prison food.

RITA No child on the road would remember you, mister!

The MAGISTRATE comes down to stand before her. He has the rambling confidence of detached authority.

MAGISTRATE What do you expect? We provide schools for you and you won't attend them because they're out of the way and that little extra effort is too much for you! We came up as a civilization having to...yes, claw upwards at times... There's nothing wrong with that... we give you X-ray chest clinics...

He turns away from her and goes to the apron of the stage and speaks directly to the audience.

We give them X-ray chest clinics and three-quarters of them won't show up... Those that do frequently get medical attention at one of the hospitals.

RITA interjecting My mother died!

MAGISTRATE not hearing her But as soon as they're released they forget they're chronically ill and end up on a drinking party and a long walk home through the snow.... Next thing...they're dead!

The Ecstasy of Rita Joe:
Drama

RITA quietly Oh, put me in jail an' then let me go.

MAGISTRATE turning to her Some of you get jobs..... There are jobs, good jobs, if you'd only look around a bit....and stick with them when you get them. But no...you get a job and promise to stay with it and learn, and two weeks later you're gone for three, four days without explanation.... Your reliability record is ruined and an employer has to regard you as lazy, undependable... what do you expect?

RITA I'm not scared of you now, bastard!

MAGISTRATE You have a mind...you have a heart. The cities are open to you to come and go as you wish, yet you gravitate to the slums and skid rows and the shanty-town fringes. You become a whore, drunkard, user of narcotics.... At best, dying of illness or malnutrition... at worst, kicked or beaten to death by some angry white scum who finds in you something lower than himself to pound his frustrations out on! What's to be done? You Indians seem to be incapable of taking action to help yourselves. Someone must care for you... Who? For how long?

RITA You don't know nothin!

Then the murderers close in around Jaimie and Rita. They beat him badly. An oncoming train crushes him as he is thrown on the track the muderers rape Rita. She dies. They slink away.

Ryga's stage direction at this point reads like this:

One of the MURDERERS has grabbed RITA JOE. The remaining two raise JAIMIE PAUL to his feet and one knees him viciously in the groin. JAIMIE PAUL screams and doubles over. The lights of the train are upon them. The MURDERERS leap off the ramp leaving JAIMIE PAUL in the path of the approaching train. JAIMIE PUAL's death cry becomes the sound of the train horn. As the train sound roars by, the MURDERERS return to close in around RITA JOE. One MURDERER springs forward and grabs RITA JOE. The other two help to hold her, with nervous fear and lust. RITA JOE breaks free of them and runs to the front of the stage. The three MURDERERS come after her, panting hard. They close in on her leisurely now, playing with her, knowing that they have her trapped.

After that there are recorded and overlapping voices:

CLERK The court calls Rita Joe.....

MAGISTRATE Who is she?..... Let her speak for herself...

RITA In the summer it was hot, an' flies hummed...

TEACHER A book of verse, a melting pot....

MAGISTRATE Thirty days!

FATHER Barkin' to beat hell....How! How!

JAIMIE laughing, defiant, taunting You go to hell!

PRIEST A confession, Rita Joe...

**Introduction to
Writer and the
Structure of the Play**

The next stage direction reads:

Over the voices she hears, the MURDERERS attack. Dragging her down backwards, they pull her legs open and one MURDERER lowers himself on her.

Rita dies soon after. Jaimie is dead too run over by the train. The two deed bodies are placed together: there is a death chant. Finally Eileen appears. Her final words are:

When Rita Joe first come to the city, she told me...the cement made her feet hurt.

26.4 CONCLUSION

Ryga's life is interesting because he was genuinely interested in social causes. The structure of the two acts of the play is somewhat repetitive but variety is there because variations on similar concerns are offered.

QUESTIONS

1. What is interesting about Ryga's life?
2. How is the structure of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* different from that of a long play of 3, 4 or 5 acts?

UNIT 27 *THE ECSTASY OF RITA JOE*: THEME AND CHARACTERIZATION

Structure

- 27.0 Objectives
- 27.1 *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*: Theme
- 27.2 *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*: Characterization
- 27.3 Conclusion
Questions

27.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall discuss theme and characterization in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. Ryga's social concerns are touched upon and his allegorical way of presenting characters is underlined too.

27.1 *THE ECSTASY OF RITA JOE*: THEME

The theme of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* is the destruction of an Indian woman by the urban white society and the general apathy of Canadian whites towards Native Indian Canadians. Two lines that underline this thematic thrust recur in the play. These are:

God was gonna have a laugh
An gave me a job in the city!

The Magistrate's attitude is quite representative of the attitude of the whites. He refuses to see the obvious. This means that he is quite oblivious to the plight of the Indians and the cruelty and injustice meted out to them. He must interpret the law in a dogmatic way and refuses to see Rita's actual suffering. Rita craves communion with the people and with the Magistrate. She is frustrated in this.

One of the statements the Magistrate makes (addressing Rita) is:

Don't blame the police, Rita Joe! The obstacles to your life are
here....in your thoughts possibly even your culture.

Collectively the Magistrate, the Teacher and Mr. Homer contribute to the image of Rita as a vagrant, as a prostitute, as lazy, as a thief and so on. For Rita there's no escaping this kind of one-sided labeling. What ultimately happens to her is a culmination of this kind of process.

Jaimie Paul reacts quite vocally to all the injustice but his ultimate fate is no better. Rita's father is weak. He can't help much. The helplessness of Native Canadians in general and the 'dead-end' nature of their life in general are also part of the thematic thrust of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*.

27.2 *THE ECSTASY OF RITA JOE*: CHARACTERIZATION

In Ryga's handling of character there is a touch of the allegorical method. The play is constructed like a parable. Rita is the heroine. She suffers the most. She can't and

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27.2 *THE ECSTASY OF RITA JOE*: CHARACTERIZATION

In Ryga's handling of character there is a touch of the allegorical method. The play is constructed like a parable. Rita is the heroine. She suffers the most. She can't and

(almost) won't be helped. She protests but nobody listens. She has her own dreams and longings but everything comes to a naught with her ultimate mass-rape and death. She is partly lost and partly unbending but most of it is beyond her control anyway. Her father David Joe is weak and helpless and so are a few others. Evil forces dominate and these are represented (among others) by the murderers. The teacher is a victim of the state of the education-system and her own limitedness.

Jaimie Paul loves Rita but cannot fit in with urban ways and the ways of the white society. This also leads to a tragic end. He says at on point:

Go tell it to the white men: they are looking on for Indian that stay proud every where they hurt... but so long's they don't ask for their rights!

To the Magistrate he says:

Go to hell!...I can die and you got nothing to tell me.

He spits in court as he utters these words.

Jaimie reacts quite strongly to Mr. Homer's offer of help. He says to Mr. Homer:

I do not believe nobody...no priest nor government....they don't know what it's like to...to want an nor have...to stand in line an nobody sees you.

Jaimie Paul stands for defiance. He is crushed ultimately. He exposes hypocrites like Mr. Homer just as Rita (in her own way) renders the Priest impotent. The Singer is an important character. She serves as a kind of chorus too. The stage directions at the start tell us that she serves too as an alter ego to Rita Joe. The stage directions reads:

A circular ramp beginning at floor level stage left and continuing downward below floor level at stage front, then rising and sweeping along stage back at two-foot elevation to disappear in the wings of stage left. This ramp dominates the stage by wrapping the central and forward playing area. A short approach ramp, meeting with the main ramp at stage right, expedites entrances from the wings of stage right. The MAGISTRATE's chair and representation of court desk are situated at stage right, enclosed within the sweep of the ramp. At the foot of the desk is a lip on stage right side.

The SINGER sits here, turned away from the focus of the play. Her songs and accompaniment appear almost accidental. She has all the reactions of a white liberal folklorist with a limited concern and understanding of an ethnic dilemma which she touches in the course of her research and work in compiling and writing folk songs. She serves too as an alter ego to RITA JOE.

No curtain is used during the play. At the opening, intermission and conclusion of the play, the curtain remains up. The onus for isolating scenes from the past and present in RITA JOE's life falls on highlight lighting.

Backstage, there is a mountain cyclorama. In front of the cyclorama there is a darker maze curtain to suggest gloom and confusion, and a cityscape.

The Magistrate swears by the law but cannot see Rita's obvious misery. All the accusers are biased and totally one-sided.

The Ecstasy of Rita Joe:
Drama

One question which is not easy to answer is whether Rita Joe is tragic. Is she able to retain her selfhood with a stubborn resistance that can transform her death from a sordid ritual of rape and murder into the 'ecstasy' of a martyr? Or is she merely a passive victim whom her culture, birth and her own feeble resignation have all doomed to the fate she meets?

The rural past, though pastoral in Rita's memory is beyond retrieval. The urban present holds only degradation misery and hardship. There is one rich fantasy which Rita and Jaimie indulge. That is their dream of having children in the city. It collides with the ugly fact that Clora Hill has had to give her children away. The scene that starts with the implied promise of love-making in Jaimie's room ends in despair and frustration. The scenes with Eileen are tender but full of a kind of pathos.

When we come to the darker side of humanity, we find that those white thugs who rape Rita and throw Jaimie in front of an oncoming train figure here.

Ryga likes to paint his characters in black and white shades. He mostly presents them in an allegorical light. Most of them represent one or the trait that is part of the over all parable structure which Ryga uses. That in turn, goes well with the didactic side of Ryga's dramatic art. He is a dramatist with a message and likes to hammer it down in a loud and clear tone.

The two major characters Rita and Jaimie have lives that are governed by desire of various kinds. They want love, togetherness, and a minimum of comfort. They also want basic needs of life. They need meaningful employment. They need respect and dignity. The White society denies all these to them. The gap between the native way of life and white way of life is too big. A number of characters are out to frame Rita. One examples comes in the form of the following words of the policeman:

POLICEMANE She was born and raised on a reservation. Then came a brief period in a public school off the reservation...at which time Rita Joe established herself as something of disruptive influence...

Rita sees and imagines things which are not available quite a few of other characters. The Magistrate talks a lot about the need for personal hygiene but most of his words take on a sinister meaning because he and Rita are at cross-purposes. The clash between the two in a way represents the clash between two cultures. The dominant white culture refuses to fully appreciate and make room for the dominated native culture. There is a breakdown of communication. Quite often she tries to draw the Magistrate's attention to the fact that she isn't feeling too well but he pays no attention to that. At one point she says :

Everything in this room is like ice... How can you stay alive working here?... I'm so hungry I want to throw up...

A number of things which mean a lot to Rita do not make any sense to the Magistrate. In the same way the Magistrate's empty talk about the law does not much impress Rita.

Rita and Jaimie have is life with more spontaneous relationship than is available to city bread white people.

At one point at the early part of the play we are told that Rita craves communion with people and with the Magistrate. It is clear that she does not succeed in this wish of hers.

27.3 CONCLUSION

The Ecstasy of Rita Joe: Theme and Characterization

The theme of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* is the destruction of a Native girl by the white city culture. Characterization in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* is largely on the lines of parable with white and dark shades dominating.

QUESTIONS

1. Comment on the thematic side of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*.
2. 'Characterization in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* follows allegorical writing in its accent on white and black shades of characters.' Comment.

UNIT 28 DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE IN *THE ECSTASY OF RITA JOE* AND THE BRECHTIAN ANGLE

Structure

- 28.0 Objectives
- 28.1 The Broad Technique-related Thrust of the Play and Ryga's Eclecticism
- 28.2 Expressionism and 'Theatre of Cruelty'
- 28.3 Who is Brecht?
- 28.4 Brechtian Departures
- 28.5 The Extent of Ryga's Debt to Brecht
- 28.6 Conclusion
Questions

28.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall look at Ryga's dramatic technique as it emerges in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. The famous German dramatist Bertolt Brecht's work has some influence on Ryga's technique. That influence will also be touched upon.

28.1 THE BROAD TECHNIQUE-RELATED THRUST OF THE PLAY AND RYGA'S ECLECTICISM

Ryga's play is quite short in that it has only two acts. In some ways the compactness of the play almost makes it a one-act play. The two acts enact more or less similar concerns and problems. One problem is that of the breakdown or absence of proper communication. A number of words, expressions and sometimes songs get repeated often.

The predicament of Rita Joe is quite harrowing and most of what happens to her emanates from the city and from the ruling white majority. The effect is one of getting choked and constricted. Rita's soul cries for relief and for justice but hardly any attention is paid to her.

She is dying to get a proper heaving from the Magistrate but fails in that because he is deaf, blind and uncommunicative where she is concerned. He is incapable of understanding her plight. He has peculiar notions and spells them out awkwardly and in a way which helps no one and nothing. He mouths clichés and homilies but is a cruel and heartless person who insists on following the law to its last detail.

The starkness of the situation gets highlighted by the instructions Ryga gives about the staging. He works by sudden movement, by foregrounding and by startling contrasts. Desire plays a big role in the underlining of what Rita's and Jaimie's real needs (and problems) are. They want to marry and have children but the Natives' past record in the matter of having children has been dismal. Bringing in Eileen helps to highlight Rita's misery. Eileen never got proper work and the alternatives she found were terribly inadequate and unsatisfying.

Natives do not find right work. They are targeted and victimised. They are expected to have qualifications that are beyond their reach. A woman can lose a job if she resists being exploited (sexually and otherwise) by an employer.

**Dramatic Technique in
The Ecstasy of Rita Joe:
The Brechtian Angle**

Rita has her own dreams and nightmares. The Magistrate has his own ideas. Ryga ironically gives the following stage direction:

The Magistrate gropes for words to express a message that is very precious to him.

A little earlier, one exchange between Rita and Magistrate is significant. The Magistrate says to Rita 'Tell me about the child?' Rita says: 'What child?'. The Magistrate says: 'The little girl I once saw beside the road'. Rita reply is:

I don't know any girl Mister. When do I eat, why does an Indian wait even when he there first thing in the morning.

In this way we find that the Magistrate and Rita are at cross-purposes. The play is not so much interested in form as in the message.

Ryga's techniques shows a lot of 'eclecticism', which means drawing from a great variety of sources. Ryga did just that and European influence on his drama is quite marked. The major influence is of course that of German dramatist and theorist Bertolt Brecht but Ryga does draw from other sources as well especially from German 'Expressionist' drama. There is also a touch of 'Theatre of Cruelty' which was an idea floated largely by the French dramatist and theorist Antonin Artaud. Ryga uses the stage imaginatively. His dramatisation often portrays the phantasmagoric within the characters' minds. On the whole his play emanates a crude power

28.2 EXPRESSIONISM AND 'THEATRE OF CRUELTY'

In *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* Expressionism and the Theatre of Cruelty (both European developments) affect Ryga's technique substantially. Both believe in shocking the audience through violence, distortion and exaggeration. 'The Theatre of Cruelty' was coined by the Frenchman Antonin Artaud (1896-1948). It aimed to communicate with the audience at a primitive, subconscious level by means of gesture, movement, sound and symbols.

As for 'Expressionism', it was originally meant to define an artistic movement which flourished at the beginning of the 20th century in Europe especially in Germany. The exaggeration and distortion which this involved induced unease in the viewing public. When it comes to viewing expressionism as a theatrical move, its origins are to be found in the work of a number of German dramatists who wrote between 1907 and the early 1920s. Carl Hauptmann and Ernst Toller were the leading figures. Steinberg was one of the idols of the movement. Expressionist elements come from Ryga's ability to shock, startle and jolt people into awareness.

The nightmarish quality of Rita's experience, her feelings of entrapment and unaccountable guilt go back through Kafka to early Expressionist drama. The American dramatist Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* also comes to mind. Rita claims to have seen God in the sky. She is told to call the Air Force. Jaimie sees a TV commercial that show a knife 'cutting off good shoes like they were potatoes.'

'Theatre of Cruelty' as envisaged by Artaud, involved exaggeration and being relentless in the presentation of extremes. *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* has in it that element also.

The Ecstasy of Rita Joe:
Drama

Another trend popular in the 1950s in Europe and Britain was 'Theatre of the Absurd'. Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter were main figures in it. To someone like Ryga what would not have appealed much about 'Theatre of Absurd' was its relatively apolitical stance and its (largely) seeing the world as being beyond reform. The absurdist 'angst' is quite metaphysical and existential. Ryga's orientation was different. He was an activist through his drama. In 1954 he was forced to resign his job as a radio producer in Edmonton on account of his public protest against the Rosenberg trial.

In matters of stagecraft, Ryga's technique is quite pathbreaking. He uses a circular ramp and varied lighting effects. Violence and rape are shown on stage. Songs are used repeatedly. The singer has a chorus-like function. She foretells Jaimie's fate. She talks about the harshness of its life.

Some of the stage directions read as follows:

A circular ramp beginning at floor level stage left and continuing downward below floor level at stage front, then rising and sweeping along stage back at two-foot elevation to disappear in the wings of stage left. This ramp dominates the stage by wrapping the central and forward playing area. A short approach ramp, meeting with the main ramp at stage right, expedites entrances from the wings of stage right. The MAGISTRATE's chair and representation of court desk are situated at stage right, enclosed within the sweep of the ramp. At the foot of the desk is a lip on stage right side.

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No curtain is used during the play. At the opening, intermission and conclusion of the play, the curtain remains up. The onus for isolating scenes from the past and present in RITA JOE's life falls on highlight lighting.

Backstage, there is a mountain cyclorama. In front of the cyclorama there is a darker maze curtain to suggest gloom and confusion, and a cityscape.

x x x x x

A sudden crash of thunder and a lightning flash. The lights turn cold and blue. The three MURDERERS stand in silhouette on a riser behind them. EILEEN cringes in fear, afraid of the storm, aware of the presence of the MURDERERS behind them. RITA JOE springs to her feet, her being attached to the wildness of the atmosphere. Lightning continues to flash and flicker.

x x x x x

A cold white light comes up on the playing area directly in front of the MAGISTRATE's chair. A MALE WITNESS of dishevelled, dirty appearance steps into the light and delivers testimony in a

whining, defensive voice. He is one of the MURDERERS, but apart from the other three, he is nervous.

X X X X X

Some YOUNG INDIAN MEN run onto the stage along the ramp and join JAIMIE PAUL and RITA JOE in their dance. The MURDERERS enter and elbow into the group, their attention specifically menacing towards JAIMIE PAUL and RITA JOE. A street brawl begins as a POLICEMAN passes through on his beat. THE MURDERERS leave hastily.

X X X X X

She shakes her head to indicate no, she is staying. Suddenly JAIMIE PAUL runs away from her diagonally across to the wings of rear stage left. As he nears the wings, the four YOUNG INDIAN MEN emerge, happily on their way to a party. They stop him at his approach. He runs into them, directing them back, his voice breaking with feelings of love and hatred intermingling.

X X X X X

With deceptive casualness, the MURDERERS approach him. One of them makes a sudden lurch at JAIMIE PAUL as if to draw him into their circle. JAIMIE PAUL anticipates the trap and takes a flying kick at the MURDERER, knocking him down.

They close around JAIMIE PAUL with precision, they attack. JAIMIE PAUL leaps, but is caught midair by the other two. They bring him down and put the boots to him. RITA JOE screams and runs to him. The train sound is loud and immediate now.

One of the MURDERERS has grabbed RITA JOE. The remaining two raise JAIMIE PAUL to his feet and one knees him viciously in the groin. JAIMIE PAUL screams and doubles over. The lights of the train are upon them. The MURDERERS leap off the ramp leaving JAIMIE PAUL in the path of the approaching train. JAIMIE PAUL's death cry becomes the sound of the train horn. As the train sound roars by, the MURDERERS return to close in around RITA JOE. One MURDERER springs forward and grabs RITA JOE. The other two help to hold her, with nervous fear and lust. RITA JOE breaks free of them and runs to the front of the stage. The three MURDERERS come after her, panting hard. They close in on her leisurely now, playing with her, knowing that they have her trapped.

A number of British dramatists of 1950s and 1960s like Arnold Wesker and John Arden made use of Expressionistic techniques and were influenced by Brecht in their use of a singer. Plays like *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* have a special openness about their form as opposed to the constricted breathing space of a typical absurd play by Beckett. At the same time Pinter was the one who gave us 'Comedies of Menace'. Such menace is there in Ryga too but he is influenced by virtually everybody. The trial of Rita has a bit (only a bit) in it of the trial of Saint Joan. She and the Magistrate are always at cross-purposes.

The form of the play is that of a parable and it uses allegory to good effect.

28.3 WHO IS BRECHT?

To understand *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* better and to get a better grip on Ryga's dramatic orientation, the students need to know a little about the great German 20th Century dramatist and drama-theorist Bertolt Brecht.

Brecht (1898-1956) was born on February 10, 1898 in Angobury, Southern Germany. Two of his most famous plays are *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939) and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1945). His main theoretical treatise was *Little Organum for Theatre* published in 1949. Against the 'magic' and 'emotionalism' of the traditional theatre he puts clarity, simplicity and objectivity of a didactic stage.

In a sense the bleakness of the bare stage in *Mother Courage*, the distancing effects, linical lighting and 'alienated' acting, were designed as 'a withdrawal course for emotional addicts' from the narcotic excesses of German theatre under the Third Reich.

28.4 BRECHTIAN DEPARTURES

Brecht as a theorist of drama is famous for his theorising about 'Epic Theatre'. In general 'Epic Theatre' was a movement in the German theatre of 1920s that asserted that the appeal of theatre should be to the intellect of the audience rather than to it emotion. Brecht was its main exponent.

Between conventional drama and Epic Theatre many differences are there. A list provided by Brecht himself is quite instructive:

Dramatic Forms of the Theatre

direct action
involves the audience in
 action on stage
uses up their activity
facilitates emotions
experience
the audience is projected into
 an action
hypnotic suggestion
the feelings are conserved

man is taken for granted
unchangeable man

suspense as to the outcome
one scene leads to another
linear development
evolutionary necessity
the world as it is

man as a fixed entity
thought determines existence
feeling

Epic Form of the Theatre

narrative
makes the audience into
 observes, but
awakens their activity
enforces decisions
image of the world
the audience is confronted with it

argument
are impelled to the point of
 recognition
man is the object of inquire
man as both the subject and object
 of change
suspense as to the process
each scene a separate unit
in a series of curves
leaps
the world in the process of
 development
man as a process
social existence determines thought
reason

28.5 THE EXTENT OF RYGA'S DEBT TO BRECHT

Dramatic Technique in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*: The Brechtian Angle

Brecht is an important influence on Ryga who was a Ukrainian. The important thing to remember is that Ryga is very eclectic and draws inspiration from a great variety of sources. There are Expressionist elements and there are Brechtian elements. He uses the stage imaginatively. His dramatic action often portrays the phantasmagoric within the character's mind. The play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* exudes a crude power.

Brechtian influence is more or less direct in Ryga's use of songs, his didactic intent, his awareness of the element of alienation. 'Alienation' was very close to Brecht's heart. The performative aspect is strong. The structure is intensely rhythmic.

Brecht's influence is pervasive in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* but it still remains only one of the main influences. The play is so eclectic that it draws its inspiration from a great variety of sources including German Expressionism.

Brecht's influence at the more visible level is in Ryga's incorporation of songs in his play. Here let us just note that the killing of Jaimie by an oncoming train is anticipated by the Singer who also talks about the city's harmful role in Native people's lives.

28.6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion one can say that Ryga is a very versatile dramatist, who values social concerns and vocally opposes injustices of various kinds. He was a Ukrainian himself. His sympathy for the natives come to quite forcefully in this play. The play is one of the most notable achievement of Canadian drama which otherwise has a thin body of work. Canadian drama does not compare very favourably with Canadian poetry and Canadian novel. Still in recent times Canadian drama had manage to carve out a place for itself in Canadian writing as a whole.

QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the main influences on Ryga's dramatic technique?
2. Which one has the upper hand in Ryga's drama? Is it form or content or is it the case that both work equally to produce a powerful statement?

SUGGESTED READING

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