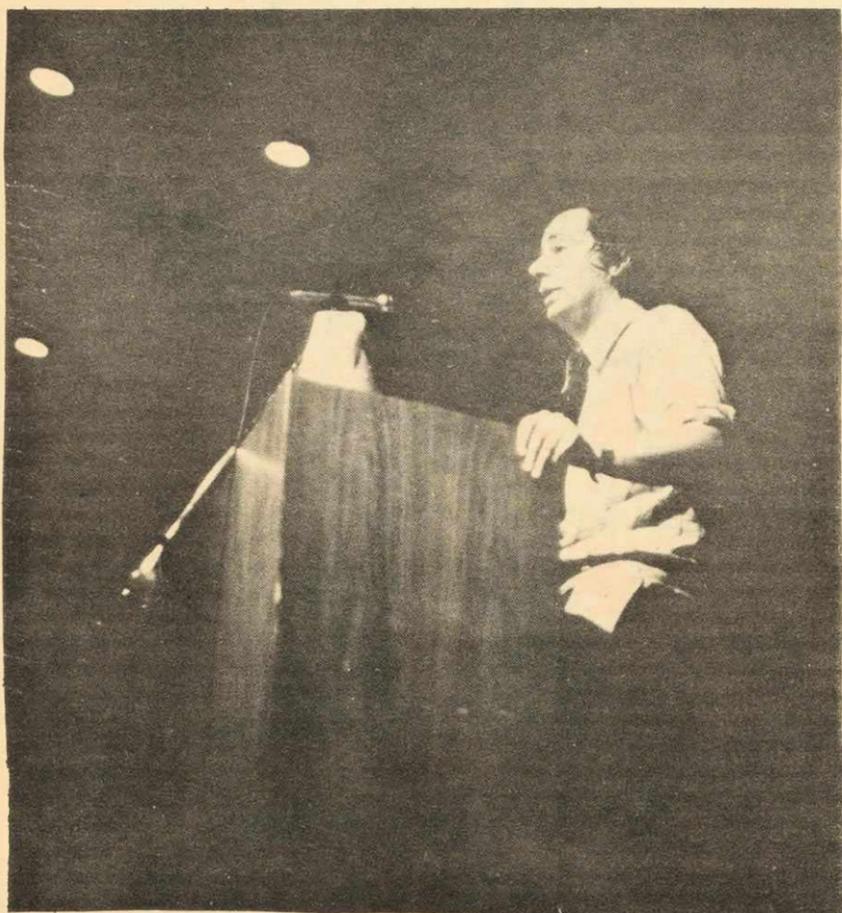


Richler

Attack on cultural nationalism



Dal Photo / Mooney

by Christine McLean

"They are overselling cultural geese, proffering them as swans," says Mordecai Richler. Referring to the bias in favour of "home-made" products, he sees it as blighting the Canadian publishing industry and as well as our literary critical approach.

An attack on Canada's cultural nationalism was the focal point of the well-known novelist's 45-minute presentation "Writing in Canada".

Addressing over five hundred people in Dal's McInness Room, Richler riddled his talk with caustic and sometimes amusing remarks on what he calls the Canadian "victim complex".

A conscious display of informality briefly delayed the beginning of the writer's talk. After he removed his suit jacket, rolled up his sleeves, hitched his baggy trousers and made various other adjustments to fit his image, one was

expecting a rather casual approach to the topic to follow. However, Richler surprisingly read a thoroughly prepared speech.

His introduction was a rather sarcastic account of his lack of scholastic inclination. Of note was his particularly low opinion of Concordia University (then Sir George Williams). Such remarks as, "It was run, and still is, by the YMCA", appeared typical of Richler. It is difficult to tell whether such unabashed criticism is the result or the cause of his well-known antagonism for the press.

"There is no international prejudice against Canadians", Richler avows. Twenty years spent living outside the country (in London) gives full weight to this statement. Showing little sympathy for writers selling abroad, he suggested that Canadians rather have the important advantage of writing in a widely used language.

For those writers who stayed at home, Richler has little esteem. To these "faint-hearted" he addressed several harsh remarks, calling them "big bats in the minors for evermore" or those who are "marvelously long on integrity but conspicuously short on talent". Such a lengthy tirade as was presented at times was uncomfortably suggestive of self-justification. That is not to say this was Richler's intention, but a balanced argument is evidently not characteristic of the man.

"It was and still is a small pond." Richler continued to cut the Canadian literary image down to size, insisting that the best poetry is not being written in this country. "We have produced no writers of more than domestic significance." When asked to comment on the artistic

plaint of Margaret Atwood, he commented only that she was "very clever but not very honest."

Richler soundly attacked the double-standard he sees operating in the publishing industry. "We want to be read because we have something fresh to say about the human condition or not at all."

The commerciality of writing in general, also came under fire. In Richler's words one must be "dishonest and non-literary" to appeal to large audiences. He was quick to note, however, that it is the large commercial successes which allow publishers to afford "baubles" like himself.

Richler's success nonetheless has not been small. Already one of his best received novels, "The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz" has been made into a movie, while he tells us that yet another book "St. Urbain's Horseman" is to be released to cinemas in the autumn.

Richler repeatedly emphasized that he is not gloomy about the future of writing in Canada. He feels that we are going through a period of self-discovery at present, citing the turbulence in Quebec as the most obvious symptom.

Richler, although at least is at times entertaining, took no pains to endear himself to the audience. This was most obvious during the question period. Evidently defensive, at times intimidating, he did not appear to enjoy this exchange with his listeners.

For all his abruptness and sarcasm, Richler more than any other living Canadian author exposes the comic side of the Canadian national attitude. We do not enjoy being snickered at as Canadians, but perhaps we need to laugh at ourselves a little more.

Wood defends Lear

by Judith Pratt

On Tuesday January 18th in Studio One of the Dalhousie Arts Centre critic met creator in an animated discussion of the Neptune Theatre production of *King Lear*.

John Wood, artistic director of the play, opened with a short history of the theatre company's production, outlining its conception from an appraisal of jute costuming to its opening night. Accentuated by enthusiasm, Mr. Wood's description of his stage translation of Shakespeare's play ended with the statement that his production was "an adventure".

Freelancer Marjory Whitelaw-agreed, adding that she personally found the sound track by Alan Laing impressive. She calimed that, as a new-comer to *King Lear* on the stage, she believed the sound track lent "another dimension to the play", which, added to the unique costuming, produced an exciting and stimulating production.

Visiting theatre specialist from the University of Bristol Glynn Wickham gave an authoritative outline of the production's flaws. Having seen most of the major stage productions of *King Lear*, Mr. Wickham commenced with a comparison with such interpretations as Gielguld's and Olivier's and concluded that the Neptune staging was admirable. He did state that the director owed it to his audience to assist them in comprehending the action and though that Wood's indistinguishable costuming was, although artistically unique, confusing. What with Goneril, Regan,

Cordelia, and Lear all possessed of a retinue, the lack of identifiable livery led to uncertainty as to a character's affiliation.

Mr. Wickham also criticized Eric Donkin's portrayal of Lear. Short of presence in Act I, short of voice in Act III, and short of passion before Act IV, Donkin's Lear did not appear to comply with the metaphor used in Act I, Scene one: "come not between the dragon and his wrath". Hence Mr. Wickham's conception of Lear as "metaphorically an unvested, an unrobed and spiritually and physically stripped figure of a man, reduced from a king to a poor animal" was not fulfilled.

When Mr. Wickham declared Schofield's *King Lear* most representative, as "a piece of rock and ice", John Wood interrupted with his own observation of Lear as "a silly, foolish old man." Wickham and many in the audience audibly disagreed. To Mr. Wood, the tragedy is not the fall of a king from authority, but the blindness of both youth and old age in their intimate dealings with each other. In this light then, Neptune's *King Lear* is an adequate illustration of the director's theatrical conception.

Informative, often fervent, and certainly enlightening, this discussion held by the Noon Hour Theatre organizers allowed for both defence and criticism of *King Lear*, and enabled the public to achieve an awareness of both Neptune's production and those of other companies now established in the history of noted stage interpretations of Shakespeare's play.



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