

COFFEE SPOONS

by David Schleich

We've discussed it several times since and it's Morgan's contention that his sudden craving for fame among his contemporaries certainly motivated the entire enterprise. I knew nothing about his plans until three spiders from the Downtown Chamber of Webs came to visit him. Morgan didn't invite me into their conversation but I did pick up a few phrases. One of the well-groomed business-spiders spoke of Morgan's "maturity" and of his "clear record of industry, honesty, integrity." For a while I was completely confused. Gradually, though, I sorted out what was going on. I think I was so quiet about it all because I was so surprised.

There followed a frenzy of activity after this short meeting. The telephone rang continuously. Letters from spiders' guilds and spiderettes' sororities, spider fraternities, and secret societies, foundations and so forth flooded Morgan's mail box.

First came the long hours of research as Morgan prepared his campaign speeches. Then Morgan's articles to local newspapers on the fashionable issues of the election. When I read Morgan's article on the pollution problem I was duly impressed with its impeccably researched proposals. Morgan wrote letters to the editor about crime, unemployment among young, healthy spiders, voters' rights and abortion. Primed, prepared and from the looks of things, popular, Morgan had only three days to go before the election. From what I could gather, Morgan was sure to win. His supporters had an elaborate victory dinner prepared to take place in one of the plushest pantries in town.

One night Morgan decided to speak to me about his activities. Morgan was wearing a cravate and had taken to smoking a pipe. He seemed to be very confident, very relaxed.

--Morgan, I began, this political ambition of yours has certainly changed your life.

--Yes, yes, he replies, but there comes a time in a spider's life when he has to leave his complacent web and get out and do something for spiderkind.

The day before the election Morgan received his first hate call. It upset him greatly. He thanked the caller with the accepted political indifference and retired to a far corner of his web. He was in deep thought. Later that same day a delegation of spiderettes arrived to see him. For over an hour they badgered my little, frowning friend about free abortion clinics and equal employment opportunities. After they left Lady Spiders' Guild of Temperance arrived to admonish Morgan for his stand on abortions and equal employment opportunities for lady spiders. However, it was when the delegation from the *Fruit Flies of Canada League* arrived at Morgan's web that both Morgan and I lost our patience.

The *Fruit Flies of Canada League* didn't come in at first. They chanted and shrieked slogans about imperialism, exploitation, discrimination, injustice and brotherhood. I was watching from a safe distance when Morgan finally lost his political collectiveness. He threw a dead beetle at the leader of the delegation. It knocked him over. The seven flies of the delegation became heated, almost riotous. Morgan, I'm sure, was theoretically correct in his action. After all, who wants political opposition in one's won web? In any case, the seven flies attacked Morgan directly, descending on him near the centre of his web. Morgan cowered lower and lower. I knew that he was deciding between retaliation and political cool. A fruit fly should know that you can only push a middle-aged spider so far. The fruit flies pelted Morgan with insults and bits of garbage.

I was about to intervene, to come to my little friend's rescue when he suddenly darted forward. Spin one, spin two, spin three, spin four, spin five. Just like that! Zip! Zip! Hadn't lost his touch at all. Morgan was tying up the fifth one when the last one decided to flee. But not soon enough. Morgan spun them together near the far right corner of his web.

A few hours later Morgan and I were sipping coffee and discussing his bankrupt political career.

--You realize that because you lost your temper you've pretty well shot down your political career? Maybe you shouldn't have lost your temper, Morgan. Now you'll miss all the speeches, the glory of the office, the grand victory dinners, the champagne.

--Well, replied Morgan, his eyes closed, his snout somewhat high, his fore-legs folded, actually things didn't turn out so badly. My political career has been rather brief, but I rather enjoyed eating up the opposition.

And then Morgan burped.

The Ecstasy of Rita Joe

Coming home after having seen Studio Theatre's fine production of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, I could have wished for only one final thing: That the play's creator, Canadian playwright, George Ryga, had sat down and written the whole damn thing over again.

By this, I don't mean that *Rita Joe* is a particularly bad play. Quite the opposite. *Rita Joe*, as a play, has everything to offer. It is by a Canadian about Canadians. Its theme, the plight of the Indian in a whiteman's society, thanks to Jean Chretien, is crucially relevant. There is violence. There is love. There is passion. There is humour. To these basics you can add Ryga's brilliant use of street dialogue and his uncanny ability to, in spite of himself, somehow involve his audience in the anguish and anger of his characters. Unfortunately, however, all of these positive points are displaced, if not destroyed, by a single annoying fact: *Rita Joe*, although not a bad play, is very definitely an unfinished play.

A wise man once said that what you leave out of a play is as important as what you put in. In the case of *Rita Joe*, Ryga might have done well to listen to the old bird. For one of the main problems with *Rita Joe* is that there is just too much coming at the audience too fast. The parts, although of good to excellent quality in themselves, are too disparate within the context of the whole to give the audience any feeling of continuity. No sooner do you get a look at something promising than it is nudged aside by the next scene.

Ryga needs to pare down his play, to hone it into a single 'action'. As it is, *Rita Joe* is expedient, experimental and speculative in structure--a play whose parts are far greater than its whole. Instead of presenting the audience with one unified work of art, Ryga has written



the drafts of three or four possible plays. By cutting the creative process off too soon, he presents his brain-child to the audience still attached to its after-birth.

It is however a tribute to Ryga as a playwright that, despite the obvious flaws in his play, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* is still a compelling piece of drama. I found that days later I would remember a word or a gesture from one of the play's many fine parts and that this memory would somehow reassert the dilemmas, the anguish and anger endured by Ryga's characters. Ryga's failure is one of form, not of substance.

Much of the credit for *Rita Joe's* success, such as it is, must go to the actors themselves. Although her accent is more Slavonic than Indian, Jo Ann McIntyre gives a fine performance as the denigrated, defiant Rita Joe. In a gesture as small as the lighting of a cigarette, she captures the audience and convinces it of the uncompromising reality of her character. Mark Connors as the Magistrate puts in a performance strangely reminiscent of Don MacQuarrie, one of Edmonton's finest actors. Tom Wood as Mr. Homer, the grubby white manager of the Indian centre,

lends surprising depth to his role by playing successfully 'the hostile old man', a part that he played unsuccessfully in Theatre Three's production of *The Homecoming*.

Allan Strachan, who plays Jamie Paul, Rita Joe's brotherly lover, deserves special mention. For it is through his performance that the play almost achieves the unity that it lacks. Despite the obstacles thrown in his way by the playwright, Strachan manages to develop his character from innocence to anguish to anger in a rising crescendo that almost, but not quite, makes the play the success that it should be. In the end he literally knocked off by a passing freight train. Strachan, nevertheless, deserves recognition for his valiant effort. I'm looking forward to seeing him in something equal to his talents.

The Ecstasy of Rita Joe by George Ryga will be playing at the Studio Theatre until Saturday, October 30th. Performances are at 8:30 p.m., with one matinee on Saturday, October 30th at 2:30 p.m. Anyone with a student's card can pick up a free ticket at Room 312, Corbett Hall.

W. N. Callaghan, Jr.

Life is a Dream

The time: October 20th, 7:00 p.m.

The place: Theatre 3.

The event: The world premier of *Life Is A Dream* by Ben Tarver.

A wild man emerges from a cave, dressed only in animal skins. Black and in chains, he looks upward and addresses the audience: Have you ever considered the importance of dreams? That fine line between reality and illusion? Or perhaps that we're all made of dreams? The wind howls. The wild man turns. "I once had a dream," he says. Darkness.

It is clear from the outset that Mr. Tarver, a professor in U. of A.'s drama department, knows what will and will not work in theatre. By using the dream as the core around which to build his play, he works with the forces that make drama unique. The play is a fiction acted out by real people, and illusion aimed point-blank at reality. In other words, drama is the ideal medium for the message: Life

(reality) is a dream (illusion).

In *Life Is A Dream*, Mr. Tarver exploits the paradoxical relationship between reality and illusion in the theatre to the full. It is, for example, this paradox which forms the basis of his plot:

Basil, the old king of Poland, allows his son, Segismund, who has been kept chained in a cave since birth, one day on the throne on the off-chance that the latter will prove himself a worthy heir. Segismund, tortured by the thought of his former isolation, becomes a tyrant, killing a courtier and almost raping the heroine, Rosaura. He is subsequently sent back to his cave where, drugged with opium, he awakes thinking that all that has passed was only a dream.

By this skillful manipulation of the plot, Tarver throws his hero, Segismund, directly into the paradox created by the relationship between reality and illusion in the theatre. For him, the real becomes the illusory -- the dream. The matter is

complicated further when it is realized that the events of the play, even later, when they ultimately become real to the Segismund caught up in their vortex, are really the events of Segismund's dream: "I once had a dream". And the matter is complicated even further when Segismund addresses the audience, not as the illusory character of the play, but as David McIlwraith, the real actor playing the illusory character of Segismund. Thus Tarver, working with the illusion (or dream) reaching outwards to the audience. Whether or not these rings of illusion end at the audience, forms the theme of his play.

Segismund is black. This fact brings Tarver's characters out of the realm of illusion and into the real world. The oppression suffered by Segismund at the hands of his father mirrors the oppression suffered by the black man in America at the hands of the well-intentioned white

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