

Gordon Pinsent's 'John & The Missus'

by J.L. Round

In *John & The Missus*, both book and play, Gordon Pinsent has created a work complementary to its predecessor, *The Rowdyman*. In fact, its main character, John Munn, is a spiritual carry-over from Rowdyman Will Cole, though an older and more tarnished version.

Pinsent's story is about Munn, his wife, son and daughter-in-law; it is about the conflict between young and old; it is about life in a dying mining community.

John Munn is a captive of time—he won't go forward and he can't go back. He has spent a lifetime mining, like his father before him. He expects his son to do the same. When the mine peters out and leaves John disabled he begins to question whether his purpose in life has been right or wrong. And when his is confronted with the possibility that his life may have been a mistake, wasted on a mine that gives nothing in return, John lashes out. He can't accept that.

Circumstances work against John. Time conspires to undermine the beliefs that he has gathered throughout his life. His son, Matt, marries a girl whose ambitions don't include being a Newfoundland missus; she wants to move, to escape the fears and frustrations of being a miner's wife; the mining company wants to close the mine; and the younger generation doesn't want to stay. To the youth of the community, the mine and town are a dead end. They want the freedom of choice that would give them the chance to escape a physical and spiritual death trap. Eventually, John is forced into a recognition of a

change of time and a change of purpose as one generation is exchanged for another.

John & The Missus is full of a rollicking crew of characters. They speak in the rough, bawdy humour of the Newfoundland tongue. The handling of the play by the large cast is good though there are flaws, which is to be expected of such large numbers. Frank Maraden appears in what might be a re-run of his performance in *Misalliance*, none the worse for having changed plays.

Frank Moore as Matt gives a fresh break in the play's tense moments with his Bogart-like cynicism. The boyish behaviour of Matt is well-coupled with the more sober element in Brenda Devine's portrayal of Faith. But, of course, Pinsent and Florence Paterson are the stars of the show and the revelry and terse poignancy of their John and Missus is largely responsible for the play's ultimate success.

Susan Benson has designed an ingenious set for the play. It is a beautiful creation of thatched wood with various levels and planes and angles made such that it resembles the solid rock shore and the wooden architecture of the buildings. It serves the purpose of many settings in the play's diverse scenes.

Kenzie MacNeil's good down-home type of music is enjoyable and fits the performance well. I, for one, was left wishing for more.

Having read Pinsent's book before seeing the play, I cannot say that it added to my enjoyment of the production. Rather, it detracted from it. It seems that in the

transition from book to play the work has undergone a remarkable change of opposites; Pinsent has improved upon its weaknesses and detracted from its strengths.

Naturally, it loses the harsh, rich poetry of Pinsent's prose, but also, with so many short scenes, it fails to get into the same depths as the beautiful mental soliloquies of the book.

Mr. Fudge, the haunting apparition of the story who symbolizes to John what he himself might eventually become, seems not so much to have been strengthened but, rather, to have been silhouetted and made to stand out more from the background of the play. He is like the ghost in *Hamlet*, taunting, teasing, bringing on the eventual misfortunes that befall. But, unlike the ghost, Fudge is directly involved in the hero's death, enticing him, leaving him grasping, grasping for something he can never hold—time.

For the play Pinsent has decentralized things. He has turned it into less the story of one man's life and more of a story in which that man's life is instrumental. This extroversion of the novel holds up in that it is designed for performance. The flaw, however, is that he has made John less of a strong man, less of a force, in the play. In his book, Pinsent takes us through the soul of an extraordinary man during the time of an upheaval and quest for answers in his life. In the end he allows John Munn and us, his readers, to return to a recognition of Munn: the hero, the tyrant, the man. In the play, however, there is

mainly a change of heart and a breaking down of John's resolution which, although expedient to the story, is not explained in terms of character.

When John walks away from the mine he has reached an impasse. He knows in his heart that he can't return. That has a shattering effect on him. He finds himself alone and seemingly helpless and useless. His despair and rage well up inside him and erupt into a fury of destructiveness which he expands on himself and the objects around him. Matt comes to him then, compassionately, wanting to show his love for his father and at the same time assert himself in this great man's eyes. This helps John to gain the self-respect and assurance he needs and enables him to shrug off the past and move forward. Pinsent, in leaving out of the play this revelation that explains John's changes, thereby tears the heart out of the book and simultaneously discards a very admirable climax.

The novel, for all its flaws and weaknesses, has a freshness and vitality that the play glosses over with a pop slickness. It seems to say that Pinsent has been encumbered by a diffidence, in that he has underestimated his audience or, worse, his own story, which led him to oversimplify and overstate things in the play. That is not to say that the play is bad after all, but that, compared to the novel, it should have been better. It is good theatre at the expense of good drama.



These four wild-looking characters are actually The Purcell Quartet from Simon Fraser University here for a performance at the Cohn Dal Photo / Jensen

"Echoes Of A Summer" not quite Shakespeare

by Lisanne Murphy

"Echo's of a Summer" may not win any academy awards this year, but it was still a pleasure to watch, if only because of its setting.

In fact it often seemed that the familiar scenes of Chester, Nova Scotia interested the audience far more than the movie's plot. Cries of "Hey, there's Maggie!" and "There's Ben Hiesler's place." signified how involved people were in the actor's dialogue. Richard Harris, playing his role as the grief stricken father of a dying girl with all the drama of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, can be held at least partially responsible for this lack of involvement. "Echo's of a Summer" is a far cry from Shakespeare, and its lack of dimension causes this fine actor to appear somewhat melodramatic, as he goes from scene to scene with mouth agape and eyes turned heavenward.

Lois Nettleton's portrayal of the girl's mother is more successful, however it is the two children, Jodie

Foster as Dierdre, the dying girl, and Brad Savage as her young friend, that carry the show. Jodie Foster is a fine actress, and has to be, to handle some of the lines written for her. (I still have not determined the meaning of her final speech, thought it sounded impressive.)

Brad Savage provides some of the most enjoyable moments in the film. He makes his character, an eight year old with the mind of a forty year old philosopher, seem perfectly believable. He and Ms. Foster join in some humorous exchanges and complement each other's roles perfectly.

To be fair, perhaps many people would have been more involved if they were not looking for a glimpse of "Uncle Joe", or some familiar landmark.

Many who enjoy a movie that provides a few smiles and a good cry will find this film a pleasant one to watch.

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