

Words for the heart and mind

Truth comes in many voices and many tongues

Laurie Kruk
Harbourfront's Third International Festival of Authors (October 19-24) was a well-run event and a gratifying success, if it can be judged by the fifth night of the series, a programme featuring Gillian Clarke, Philo Bregstein, Per Jersild, Njordur Njardvik and Mordecai Richler. The Brigantine Room was full; the audience interested and alert. A book table in the back corner did brisk business throughout. Greg Gatenby, coordinator of the Festival, handled all introductions and announcements with cool expertise; much of the Festival's success no doubt due to his able stage management. The first reader was Philo Bregstein of the Netherlands. In a fairly thick accent he introduced his work, an autobiographical novel *The Flying Dutchman*. He read the first fifteen lines in Dutch, and then continued in English, unfortunately warping into obscurity many familiar words and so hindering audience understanding. But they never let on, and the applause was warm and courteous. Next was Per Jersild, "one of Sweden's foremost satirists" (said the programme). Looking like a youthful Sigmund Freud, he read a startling passage from his novel *A Lavender Shell*, written from the point of view of a human brain floating in a medical aquarium and meditating on the intellectual benefits of being body free. This bizarre story was told in surgically-sharp, neutrally-voiced prose, and brought many astonished--and uneasy--laughs from the audience.

Next was Welsh poetess Gillian Clark, reminiscent of Gwendolyn MacEwen in looks and writing style, though possessing a beautiful speaking voice and poise all her own. She clearly conveyed Wales in her crisp image: "cruel stones of the sun" and in her poem about the Welsh birds, *Choughs*: "wings flick open/a stoop away/from the dawn teeth of the sea."

Language, all languages, played a key role in this session, as Njordur

Njardvik, author and President of the Writers' Union of Iceland, came on stage following the brief intermission, and began his reading with some Icelandic words of introduction. Translating, he told us that his novel was based on a historical incident of witchhunting (in the 1600s) in his native country. The scene of torture he read came horribly alive in the silent room, each listener empathizing with the alleged witch's pain, so calmly detailed by Njardvik. Several of his poems were repeated in Icelandic; underling for us the importance to the writers of their own country's words and sounds. Bregstein did the same with his Dutch introduction and Clarke with her interspersed Welsh.

But then it was Canada's turn, and Mordecai Richler came on stage, looking ruffled, but unperturbed by the photographers who suddenly popped up, flashing furiously. He looked, in fact, like Peter Falk without his "Colombo" trenchcoat, and we loosened up immediately--a little less formal, a little more relaxed, ready to laugh. He announced that he was reading from his novel-in-progress *Solomon Gerskey Was Her*. This satiric account of a wealthy capitalist and his circle appeared to take liberally from the life of Sam Bronfman, founder of the great Seagram's Empire. There were many sharp comments about North American capitalists, ostentatious birthday tributes for old tycoons and the Jewish upper-class in Montreal. At the end of the first chapter, Richler closed his notes, thanked us for listening and the evening was formally over. Greg Gatenby invited us to mingle with all the authors present in the adjoining room. The authors were asked to join together on the stage for a group photo or two. Talking together and smiling shyly out over the stage, they appeared really human now. Mordecai Richler looked particularly uncomfortable, standing sideways, not even looking towards the

cameras, but carefully at the glass of beer in his grip, as if fearing he might drop it. These were some of the "International Authors" who had contributed significantly to world

literature. They seemed accomodating enough if mildly amused at their status. True artists, after all, never look for fame; their aim is higher--for some taste of the

truth--and that is the reason for the success of Harbourfront's international Festival of Authors for 1982. They offered us that taste in many different literary languages.

The Decameron in Hell These actors laugh to survive

W. Hurst
Traditionally, the theatre audience and actors get a short respite from the onstage action during the intermission. They don't get off so easily at the Bathurst Street Theatre.

In Alex Hausvater's production of *Decameron*, the stage darkens but the actors remain in place and the auditorium floods with a naked glare. The audience is exposed and confused; casual conversation doesn't start immediately, if at all and few people leave their seats.

This and other unsettling effects make this a unique *Decameron*.

This production focuses on a troupe of Italian actors who have been imprisoned by Nazis for supposed communist sympathies. These prisoners are commanded to perform their pre-war repertory, which includes Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

Their captors insist that the actor's survival depends on the

quality of the performance whether or not they can make the Nazis laugh. However, the actors real survival depends on their sense of artistry and dignity. Their performance becomes their refuge from denigration and abuse. Within their artistry, they regain their self-worth; the Nazis did not expect that.

Boccaccio's *Decameron*, set in the 14th century, is a group of irreverent tales told by travellers to avoid the Black Plague. Transposition to the 20th concentration camp establishes a discomfiting symmetry. The actors are surrounded by barb wire and flood lights. A barking voice constantly interrupts the *Decameron* vignettes. This voice coerces the actors to humiliate each other: woman is violated by a man's fist; a man assaults his fellow actor; a couple arouse each other to get bread and tea.

Astonishingly, the performers get laughs with the *Decameron* material. This laughter is another

disquieting aspect of Hausvater's production. The Bathurst Street Theatre audience becomes the audience to whom the prisoners must play. Hausvater creates not only a play within a play, but also an audience within an audience.

The cast of five francophones is superb, especially France Desjarlais. She plays a fornicating abbess, murderous brother and other roles succinctly and believably. However, all actors achieve the incredible: They elicit raucous laughter in one moment and horrified silence in the next.

The production is flawed by language that sounds awkwardly current and the songs in French may go unappreciated by an Anglophone audience.

However, this *Decameron* is vital, rivetting theatre. Hausvater and his actors declare that artistry is not only the solace of humanity, but also its essence. Oppression may confine, may abuse, but it cannot obliterate. The oppressor is unequal to the task.



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