

# A ghost of yesterday

by J.L. Round

Review of "The Collected Works of Billy The Kid", playing at Neptune Theatre until Nov. 22nd.

Well, now that we know what Americans think of a Canadian treatment of one of their legends of the last, great west, describing it variously as "bland", "pretentious", "banal" and "tedious", please excuse me for putting my nose, and a very Canadian nose at that, into it. I feel Michael Ondaatje's play, "The Collected Works of Billy The Kid", transformed from his volume of poetry that won the Governor-General's Award in 1971, has been given the once-over-lightly, once too often.

First, let me say, the cast was excellent - agreed (the Americans told us so). Their singing was not good (with the exception of P.M. Howard, who was good indeed) but it was not bad, either. Neil Munro - Billy The Kid - was the man who knocked audiences out last year with his excellent portrayal of Hamlet.

"The Collected Works" is essentially a ghost-story. This was evident from the start: a ghost-like figure swelled out of the darkness of the curtainless set onto the forestage and spilled a bucket of snooker "Cherries" onto a pool table. Then, the figure, Billy, moved over to a blanket-draped object and drew off the blanket. The object was a skeleton, poised, with bow and arrow. Billy looked it over, toyed with it knelt by it, and began to chuckle softly, seeming to say, "Ah, yes! I remember." From this point the audience was escorted, through poetry and song, by the various "ghosts" of the story in a tour of the last years of Billy The Kid.

The poetry in the play is visual. It has guts. It has the power to reach out and grab you, shake you, make you shiver. The images are stark, simple impressions, sometimes beautiful, sometimes ugly, just like everything else about the atmosphere of the play.

The main part of the set, a large, wooden, two-story contraption used as a parlour, a barn, a house, and a hotel in various scenes, although practical, was not interesting. This is one of the difficulties of the play. The set has to be kept simple, and it has to be adaptable. Add interesting to this and you have a problem.

The story is narrated, acted and sung by its characters, who relate events anecdotes about Billy and themselves. These characters are friends of Billy - Sallie Chisum, the lovely, symbolic woman in white - lovers - Miss Angela D, with her mouth like a bee - fellow gang-members - Charlie Bowdre - and sometime-enemies - Pat Garrett, in particular.

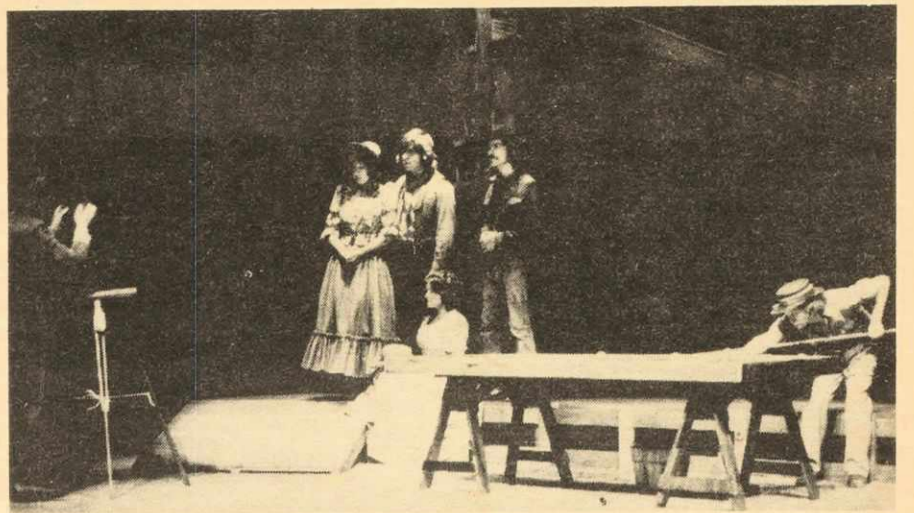
The play, if viewed as simply a play, lacks a rising-action. It is a series of events put together to form a narrative, not simply a story with a set of occurrences that have a snowballing effect. When viewed as a representative cross-section of events from a long and complex story, the play finds its own form. It is not until the fore-mention of Billy's death, early in Act II, that the production becomes more like a normal play, with a plot hastened and developed by foreshadowing.

Although some of the memories and incidents are out of sequence in their occurrence - characters dying and returning in later scenes - in the final scenes, all the characters and events merge and culminate in the death of Billy.

Until the point of Billy's death the play has been kept unrealistic, dream like, where guns merely "click" people to death, the dead get up and walk off stage

afterwards, and no attempts were made to show real blood. Then, came a stark change. The lights went out; a flash, and Pat Garrett's gun growled a retort. When the lights return, Billy is covered in brilliant blood streaming from the bandana tied around his head. The blood has spilled onto his chest, his shirt, his pants. It is realistic, now, as if we have somehow returned to the present, out of the dreams and fantasies of the past, to reality. Billy dies, is carried away in spirit, while the ghost of Billy watches his body being removed and, later on, witnesses his funeral. The ghost ends the play on an eerie note, describing the night after his death, standing alone in the bloody spotlight, he chuckles, and the lights go out. The ghost has relived his past once again.

Neil Munro, as Billy, is the focus of the play's action, but the other characters do not stand in his shadow. Although Billy is onstage



more than anyone else, when the other actors come out, they hold their own without competition in "The Collected Works" unlike "Hamlet" where the prince's presence dominated the show most of the time.

There are many excellent pieces in the production but Billy has several of the play's best scenes alone, specifically one, in which Billy relates a horse-trek across the

desert, after his capture by Garrett. This is the scene many took offence to, resulting in a good deal of controversy in the States. Here, Munro took the words and recreated the story in front of us with amazing strength and delicacy and a violent tenderness, in one of the most intense moments of drama I have ever seen. And, damn it, Munro knocked me out again.



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