

The Arts

Finding French theatre in Montreal

Albert Millaire, actor and director at the Theatre du Nouveau Monde, Montreal, recently talked to Michael Leech about the range of theatres, large and small, at which Canadian French drama can be found in that city. It is not always so easy to discover what's on, but if you persevere there's a feast of it.

"The exciting thing about theatre in French Canada," says actor-director Albert Millaire, "is that it is a young people's theatre. They are very talented, they are dedicated, they do exciting work. The young people want to do their own thing and for me it is really something to see that they are much more open-minded than they would have been eight years ago."

Tough new spirit

Albert Millaire was born in Montreal and, except for two periods when he lived in Paris and London, has always lived there. He is a working artist, dividing his time between acting and directing at such large companies as the famous Théâtre du Nouveau Monde (TNM), working for television, radio and films, and occasionally making forays into English-speaking Canada to work with such organizations as the St. Lawrence Centre in Toronto. The theatre is his life, and he is very proud of the tough new spirit in Quebec's companies — indeed he is in the process of having a new company of actors and writers formed around him. It is as yet so new that it doesn't have a name, though he is a sort of unofficial artistic director. But to Monsieur Millaire that's one of the most stimulating aspects.

"After going to L'Assomption College until I was 17, I went to study at the drama conservatory in Montreal, which had just opened in 1955. I tell this because before that date there was no drama school in French Canada so really almost no activity from young people. I did two years at the Quebec Conservatory and I was in the second graduating class. Now it's very well organized, has a three-year course and is in Montreal and Quebec City. Later came the National Theatre School at the end of the 'fifties, and their French Section now is actually more fiercely pro French-Canadian than the Conservatory! That remains a bit classic, and serious you know! But the Theatre School is very pro- Quebec language, what we call *joual*, and into encouraging Quebec playwrights — it's really very lively."

Wasn't the initial idea of the Theatre School being in Montreal to encourage mixing between the French-Canadian and English-Canadian students?

"Yes, it was, but it never worked that way. People thought it would be nice culturally and that the two factions would melt — but nothing like that happened. I have directed English-speaking students who spent three years at the school — and hardly spoke a word of French!"

Do French-speaking people still have the sense that they are being forced to speak English?

"Not at all! It's all very much changed and without being fanatical some people decided they would just speak French. After all it's a city that is 85 per cent French-speaking so it's not surprising that most of the theatre is in French."

Is there, then, a lot of French-speaking theatre in Montreal?

"Yes — but not enough of course for all the artists who graduate every year. But that is a problem in every country and it wasn't until 1965 that students started to do their own productions; I mean when I came out of school we put together plays in order to work — we were the first to produce Beckett in Canada in '56 and I

Albert Millaire.



remember that *Waiting for Godot*, the whole production, cost us about £6! For a long time I had the impression that the young people coming out of the schools were expecting work to be handed to them, instead of saying to themselves 'let's do something.' Now they are working for themselves and it's very good, very stimulating. They realise now that a company like TNM will not be hiring more than 75 to a 100 actors for its productions over the year, to do six shows, so they create work for themselves."

The TNM is not then a repertory company like Britain's National Theatre or Royal Shakespeare?

"No — there's no permanent company like that. You bring in a complete cast for each show and the director selects his cast; then the play runs for five weeks and a half, and it is finished. Of course if it is a big success it can be redone for another theatre, or later go on tour."

Is it a pity that repertory theatre doesn't exist in Quebec?

"A pity? No, we don't have this tradition of repertory theatre. It's not taught this way for us. Perhaps it would be a good thing, but it is a matter of budgets — it's very expensive. To do theatre in North America now — phew, it's terrible!"

New plays

Most of the plays a visitor going to Montreal this year could see would be new ones. The young companies often have playwrights working with them and the plays, are mostly on Quebec themes, while the actors are apt to be very intelligent and socially involved.

"You cannot imagine one of these companies *not* doing new plays. They are well-trained and responsible and they have a taste for working with new forms — and taking chances."

Are such plays, which must sometimes be failures, always sure of attracting an audience?

"Oh yes — you will always have a thousand people in a city like Montreal for a new production. The theatres themselves are, of course, very small."

So a visitor, in this year of the Montreal Olympics, could find a good deal of indigenous theatre. But what are the names of the companies one should look out for, and how does one find out what is going on in the province of Quebec?

"It's not very organized I have to admit, but most of these new companies play in small theatres that are well known. It's difficult to name them, since they change, and there are always new ones. There really isn't a newspaper that lists them all, though if you read the Saturday editions of the papers you can find what's playing. The reviewers of *La Presse* and *Le Devoir*, and the *English Star*, are all very sympathetic to these companies and give them coverage. Or if you look in the restaurants and the lobbies of the big theatres you will see

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