

arts

The true writer has nothing to say. What counts is the way he says it.
—Alain Robbe-Grillet

Passe Muraille playwright passes the Butt to the critics

By JASON SHERMAN

Something bothers Robyn Butt a great deal. It is an attitude that has been prevalent in Canada for at least the past 10 years, the need for Canadian content. For the 24-year old former York student, now one of two playwrights-in-residence at Theatre Passe Muraille, the blame for instilling this attitude can be passed on to one particular group of people: the critics. "Unfortunately," says Butt, "I think because the critical community has had to be conscious of what's Canadian content, the generation of artists that were influenced by those critics have had the same sort of self-consciousness. So when I hear somebody complain 'Oh, it's so Canadian,' they're probably responding to the people who have been influenced by critics who think 'OK, I've gotta have this Canadian content'."

The issue can be reduced to a simple formula, Butt believes: "If you're going to write well, you just write out of your context, and if you're born in a certain place in a certain time it's going to be of that place and time."

Anyone who has seen Butt's second play *Bad Taste*—either her own production at York or Clarke Roger's at Passe Muraille—will know she is not merely propounding untried theories. *Bad Taste* uses Terry Fox and James Dean as symbols of a society caught up in symbols, ever dependent upon heroes; a society of parasites eating away at, and destroying their hosts in the same way that cancer ravaged Fox.

Butt depicts a society so intent on form that it forgets content, so hungry for the future that it creates that future out of the comfortable remnants (mythologized or otherwise) of the past. This is the message in her work, both her creative and theoretical writings.

"Life is the raw material of art. I think both artists and critics forget about art and life, there's no art without life."

In her *Dinosaur Manifesto*, a pared-down, carefully-considered version of Butt's in-house criticisms for Passe Muraille, the playwright grappled with "the ideal making of art," which she came to realize "wasn't just the making of art, but living. It was about rejecting the immediate artistic past. What I found around me was a lot of embalmed artistic impulses, things I thought had been around long enough that we had learned something from them, and it was time to express, something new."

"Then I recognized of course you can never say anything new. You can just say something that seems different because it hasn't been said for a while."

Butt is not as quick to dismiss her personal past. Born on a Woodstock, Ontario farm, surrounded by parents and seven brothers, she soaked in "like a J-cloth," all she saw and, especially, all she heard. She recalls her early "fascination" for words: "I remember telling myself stories, making stories up, before I could write."

She also attributes her "impulse to apologize" to her experiences in public school, when she would read her stories to classmates, stories they all appreciated with what Butt considered "false admiration." Whatever it was, it certainly presaged her prolific output of fiction that continued until she switched to playwriting during her second year at York.

Her creative writing class was something of a disappointment

"more than anything" in finding a direction for her writing. As did her stint as *Excalibur's* drama critic.

"Everything I did," she explains about her journalistic venture, "I took with a passionate seriousness. I assumed that everybody did what they did, if it was under the guise of art at all, with the same passion."

"I often wonder if being a critic doesn't predispose you to looking for things that critics are good at seeing, like form, like structure, and blind you at first to things like passion and intent. When I go to a play what I look for first is conviction on the part of the artists. Depending on how strong the conviction is, sometimes I don't even care if the (other elements) are lacking."



PHOTO ROMAN PAWLISHYHN

Butt's *Bad Taste* was given the kiss-off by most critics.

Would that the same could be said for Butt's critics. Jay Scott, in the *Globe and Mail*, claimed that *Bad Taste* was "not a play at all . . . what Miss Butt has written is a scathing journalistic critique of journalistic excess."

Not that Clarke Rogers paid this any attention. He asked Butt to stay around at Passe Muraille and, after learning of a new grant system, got her some money and a title. The money isn't all that good and the title isn't indicative of what her role is, which is to work directly with the technicians, actors and directors to get a "practical" feeling for the theatre. The script that has resulted from this involvement, *Excavating Jesus*, will probably be produced at the theatre's BackSpace sometime this season.

Set in the Royal Ontario Museum, the two-act play has as its heroes a hydroencephalic punk escaping from Rosedale and a young hockey star escaping media attention, both of whom hide at the ROM looking for Jesus. The villain is a sadistic tour guide who uses and abuses them. The punk and the player resurrect a mummy (excavate Jesus) while the guide gives a tour to the blind (his "biggest gig ever").

"Life," Butt muses, "is the raw material of art. I think both artists and critics forget about art and life, that life comes first, there's no art without life. So when you think art comes first, it's the same thing with the critic—you start giving it more importance than it really needs to have. You give it more power to hurt than it really needs to have."

(Butt will be reading Jan. 15 with other local writers in the first of a series organized through PM3, the theatre's self-contained writers' group.)



PHOTO ROMAN PAWLISHYHN

Buttin' in: Former York creative writing major Robyn Butt will be getting a lot of exposure in the next few years. She's writing at Theatre Passe Muraille and reading around town. Her new play *Excavating Jesus* will be among the works she'll read Sunday at the theatre.

Glendon's German art exhibit gives tedious, disappointing overview of period

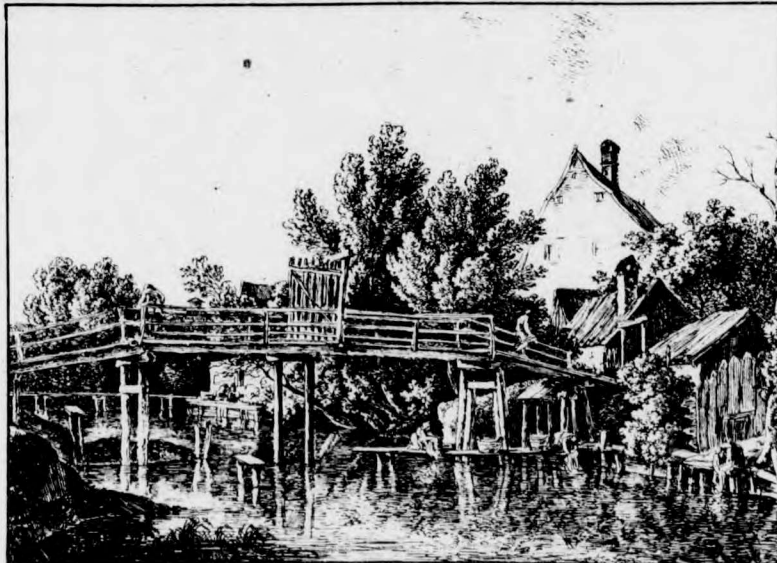
Gallery may be revisiting Eden but show of Romantic art far from a garden of earthly delights.

By LORRAINE WHELAN

It is strangely sobering to enter a small gallery filled with images in black ink on yellowed paper, from days long past. One wonders what, if anything, makes these severe prints relevant enough for contemporary showing. The Art Gallery of Ontario regularly displays dull graphics from earlier centuries and sometimes circulates them in shows such as *Eden Revisited: Graphic Works by German Romantic Artists* currently showing at the Glendon Gallery.

Although the show is broad, (61 works representing 43 artists whose lives span the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries), it is at least selective. The pieces are hung in groups according to chronology and theme, which give an overview of the Romantic movement in Germany.

The groupings are: "The First Awakening of Romanticism," including works by Angelica Kauffmann and J.H. Fueseli; "New Sensibilities for Nature's Mysterious Forces," which are largely lush landscape etchings with lesser figures; "German and the Ruins of Antiquities"—topographical "postcard" views; "Artists Discover the Picturesque Aspects of their Native Land"; "New Piety and strong Patriotism" which includes work by Friedrich Overbeck, and one of the more worthwhile prints in this show, a lithograph of "St. George in Armour" by Ferdinand Piloty; "Depiction of Animals as part of the Romantic Identification with Nature"; and the "Exceptionally Close Collaboration of Artists and Poets," which contains the most commercially illustrative of



Georg Von Dillis' "The Little Bridge Across the Isar" and Ferdinand Piloty's "St. George in Armor."

all the prints on view.

The overall significance of the graphic works lies in the fact that printmaking was a cheap and accessible form of art which allowed for an easy flowing of ideas. At that time it was almost revolutionary to be working in landscape. Self-expression, too, was a new goal for the artist, and in the German states the desire for this was strong.

Unfortunately, the exhibition is not strong. There are a few



gems—Fueseli's 1818 etching, "Paolo and Francesca" (from Dante's *Inferno*), the previously mentioned Piloty lithograph, and the comic "Auction of the Cupids" by Johann Heinrich Ramberg.

Although the Romantic movement, exemplified by German graphic artists is worth reading about, it is far from being visually spectacular. Until January 29, a visit to Glendon Gallery is likely to be a quick and uninspiring one.