

Book review

# Glassy sea

by Heather Myers

Searching for identity and fulfillment, growing up and rebelling against one's family and society, and coping with life in the present by coming to terms with the "disastrous baggage of the past" are common enough themes in contemporary fiction. But the plot and heroine/narrator of Marian Engel's most recent novel are so unusual, and the prose so readable, that **Glassy Sea** is thoroughly unique and engrossing even where it handles familiar material.

The book is the story of Marguerite Heber's life, told from the perspective of middle age at a time when she is living as a recluse in a farmhouse on the Atlantic coast.

The "half-world" of Rita's childhood is protected, warm, solitary, and mundane. Her family are rural, puritanical United Churchgoers. They are hard-working and (particularly her mother and grandmother "Grammacre") pious and bigoted to a degree that brings another century to mind rather than Ontario thirty years ago. For them and for Rita, Catholics, Indians, and "foreigners" are barely acknowledged. A small Baptist univer-

sity only 60 miles away holds "reefs of worldliness" Rita must guard herself against. Aunt Mary, who has time to grow roses and brush Rita's hair, is not a "suitable" model for her niece.

Beauty is suspect, it seems; pleasure is frivolous. But to Rita, a child of intense imagination, afraid of the mysterious "mossy forbidden cistern" in the cellar, embarrassed by the walls the "colour of pee" in the plain United Church, life cannot be reduced to hard work, temperance, church, family duties and school. Shy, socially inept, increasingly afraid of sex and marriage as her mother presents them and as she correctly envisions the union of her cousin John and pregnant roommate Christabel being, she is drawn to the Anglican Church for the poetry of its service. When she meets Sister Mary Rose and falls in love with the harmony, good sense, and simple beauty of the Eglantine Order, she admits to her friend Philip, "It wasn't faith that got me to the nunnery, it was taste".

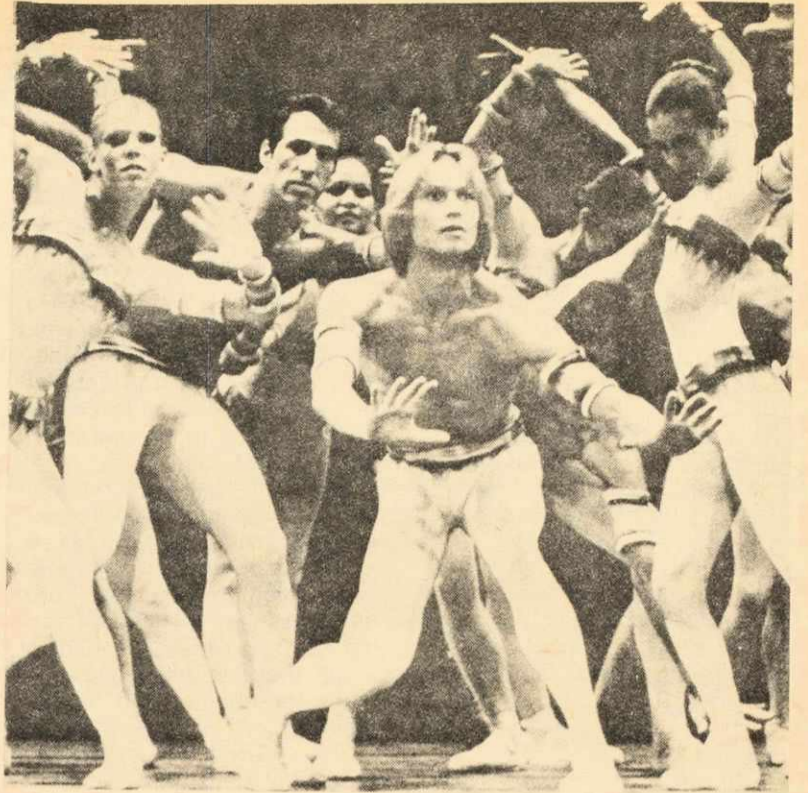
In a novel of such brevity, (only 164 pages), it is not surprising to find some characters, events, and subjects

scantly developed. One example stands out in **The Glassy Sea**. Chummy, the beloved hydrocephalic son to whom Rita devotes her time and energy all the five years of his life, remains annoyingly unreal; we never know precisely what he says and does but must be satisfied with Rita's assurances that he was sweet and affectionate when he was well, wild and unmanageable when he was not, and that she loved him.

Another incongruity is the outburst of muddled feminist theory at the end of the book. While the topic is neither worthless nor irrelevant to Rita's life, she has said nothing previously to prepare the readers for her tirade against the "hundreds and thousands of... men who are afraid of giving women any power."

But these flaws do not detract from the novel's impact as a whole. Despite the remarkable compression of the story, one learns enough about several of the minor characters to wish that a novel could be written about each of them: cousin John the philosopher and his chaotic years with Christabel; Sister Mary Elzevir, a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp who became a Christian "not to betray her people but to pray for her dead"; and even "Ash Bone" Asher Bowen, the unlikeable Toronto lawyer with the "perfect profile" that Rita unwisely marries.

The success of **The Glassy Sea** ultimately depends on what we make of Rita—Sister Mary Pelagia by the end of the book. From dreamy child, loner, diligent student, and invalid, to nun of the Eglantine Order, ex-nun and wife and mother, then a casualty of a painfully broken marriage, she is finally a woman in her forties of some composure and much lingering doubt. There is however a subdued triumph in her hard won ability to accept the world and her own nature. Appropriately, as director of a new secular task for the revived Eglantine Order, she insists that the nuns not wear rings, for "We will be what we are, not brides of Christ".



# Ballet strained

by Donalee Moulton

Double splashes of lipstick red, flower pink, pale peach and barnyard rust provided Halifax audiences with their first glimpse of the Ballet de Caracas this season at the Rebecca Cohn. Billed as a contemporary and classic ballet troupe, Caracas opened with the semi-classical dance "Our Waltzes". Overly made-up, the dancers particularly, Zandra Rodriguez and Manuel Molina, appeared strained. While technically perfect, the dance lacked the naturalness associated with ballet; artificiality replaced ease. Only two of the corps members—Eva Millan and Yanis Pikieris—had any joie de vivre, and gave an ecstatic and intense performance.

The second movement was a symbolic interpretation of music. Using six male dancers the piece became a lesson in advance acrobatics and control. Zane Wilson and Yanis Pikieris were like the finely tuned instruments they repre-

sented—rigidly exact yet fluid enough to allow for the choreographers ingenuity to shine. No so however with Manuel Molina who spent his strength smiling not dancing. Likewise Dale Talley would make an excellent gymnast; I remain unconvinced about his genius as an interpretive artist. Contemporary ballet remains open to innovation, it is a stylistically relaxed form of ballet but it is still ballet and much of what Molina and Talley strutted wasn't. In comparison to Pikieris' rendition of the bongos and Wilson's tambourine, the others were forced and phony.

The Ballet de Caracas closed with synoptic, enlivening portrayals of such immortals as "The Age of Bronze", "The American", "The Torso of Adele" and "The Crouching Woman". Particularly powerful was "The Kiss" with Rodriguez and Wilson. All the troupes' dances centered on the sexuality of man/woman (whether intentionally or not). It remains unfortunate that dance can be labelled contemporary, new and "open" yet continue to rigidly slot men and women in traditional and negative positions ("The Burgers of Calais" deals with the theme of homosexuality and as such may be said to break the stereotype male/female role images. The conclusion of this dance however refutes any objectivity).

The Ballet de Caracas of Venezuela has in the few short years of its existence risen to the top. And deservedly so. Choreographer Vicente Neb-rada is a masterful teacher: his dancers are technically expert, (some are even able to transcend the sensual aspects of ballet and make their dance a spiritual experience). For the most part though, the audience leaves feeling that they'e just watched a beautiful, carefully staged, meticulously orchestrated and very rigorously rehearsed ballet. The word that comes to mind is contrived: the word that should come to mind is wow!

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