

entertainment

"Breakthrough" unconvincing play

By Michalina Trigliani

There is always an added excitement in viewing a Canadian play dealing with well known personalities and local surroundings. The public delights in seeing an aspect of its culture staged and Toronto audiences are progressively being entertained with more works of this sort.

Breakthrough, which premiered last Saturday at the Bathurst Street Theatre, is a play of this type. Spanning three seasons in the life of painter Tom Thomson (Richard Donat), the story unfolds during the summer of 1914 in Algonquin Park and comes to a close in the winter of 1915 in Toronto.

While working as a guide at the park, Thomson rescues an upper-class Englishwoman, Frances Warren (Suzette Couture), from drowning and the two enter into an odd sort of love relationship precipitated by her growing need for stability and by his dry artistic period. The tale is not a true one, but author Bryan Wade makes use of it as a means to expose Thomson "as an artist and as a legend" and to write a play that "would have human beings caught in the landscape of their time".

The other people exposed in the play include painters Lawren Harris and Arthur Lismer, Frances' cousins Margaret and Billy, and three rustics working at the hotel - outdoorsmen Ezra Pond and his son Fred and Kate Smythe, a waitress. The landscape is at first the serene, expansive beauty of the park and then that of the fast-moving city.

Three themes dominate the time or era - the development of the artistic style of the Group of Seven, the concept of Canadian nationalism and the outbreak of World War I.

Certainly there is enough solid material here to develop into an interesting play and one which would appeal to a large audience. But Wade has perhaps outdone himself and packed too much into *Breakthrough*. He wants his play to show a wide range of human emotions, "laughter, friendship, jealousy and tragedy". But often, these feelings are merely spoken in an artificial, too deliberate manner by underdeveloped characters rather than growing naturally out of the interplay of the personalities and incidents involved.

It may be quite true that Thom-



L. to R.: Peter Millard, Richard Donat, Sandy Crawley, Suzette Couture, Fatia de pena in *Breakthrough*, which premiered at the Bathurst Street Theatre last Saturday.

son was a quiet, enigmatic man who spoke through his paintings but Frances' long, wordy, melodramatic speeches become wearisome and almost comical pitted against Tom's grunts and guffaws.

Harris and Lismer often introduce a scene debating a contemporary issue - either their art, the

war or Canadian identity - but these arguments are usually never developed or significantly related to the plot, and consequently become feeble attempts at depiction of an era.

The often rambling dialogue and poor character development restrains the actors' performances.

In addition, director Alan Richardson has drawn overly exaggerated, over-theatrical renditions from the cast. In the case of cousin Billy (the sophisticated sissy constantly snapping photographs), exaggeration is effective. But most of the other players' outbursts merely draw laughter at some of the most tense moments in the play.

The script of *Breakthrough* definitely needs some work - especially in the area of unity. In spite of this, various aspects of the play are quite entertaining. The allusions to Toronto are interesting; Brenda Clark's costumes are very effective; it is the right length; the actors do a fine job regardless of the material and Tom Thomson's mysterious personality is alluring as subject matter.

But as the play quickly comes to a close, the author's message is somehow never clarified and uneasily we must ask, "But what was the point of it all?"

One of the actors later suggested that everything in the play leads to and revolves around the "breakthrough" the major characters make by the end. Perhaps I missed it all, but the actor sounded coached and not very convincing.

West Indian political novel

The Prime Minister by Austin Clarke. General Publishing Co. Ltd. \$6.95 paperback. Reviewed by Norman Faria.

In a poignant scene in the movie *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, an idealist Southern senator (James Stewart) stands forlornly on the Senate floor surrounded by letters from his supporters. Suddenly, he realizes how much more needs to be done to break the power of wily politicians and their businessmen friends. There is a certain affinity with the failures of John Moore, the main character in Austin Clarke's latest novel, *The Prime Minister*.

Moore is a West Indian poet, an expatriate for the last 20 years, who returns to his former island home to take up the post of Director of National Culture. Soon after his arrival, he is caught up in the petty machinations and gossip mongering which result from, and in turn preserve, the brutal rule of one of the island's political parties.

Moore's concepts on culture are soon found to be at variance with those of the entrenched government. He is totally frustrated in his attempts to create a new cultural outlook and institutions. While the tourists, flocking to the island in increasing numbers, praise the island's charms, Moore himself soon realizes how much worse is the situation in his island home.

Even his sympathy with local "grassroots" politics only ensnares him in an equally pernicious anti-government group plotting a coup. Knowing he will be made a scapegoat on its failure, he returns to Canada.

For Austin Clarke, the only West Indian Canadian who writes extensively of West Indian immigrant life in Canada, this is by far his most absorbing work. As in his other novels, it is full of Clarke's warm humour and clearly shows his appreciation for the West Indian vernacular.

Possibly there is also a strong autobiographical streak. Born in Barbados, Clarke came to Canada in 1955 and studied at the University of Toronto. In the early 70's, Clarke left Toronto to become manager of Barbados' T.V. station. He resigned soon after failing to get a number of changes made in the station's

programming - one of them being a reduction in the screening of North American situation comedy shows.

In *The Prime Minister*, Clarke has done more than create a typical political thriller in which a government plays an incidental role.

Clarke widens the dimension of the involvement of political forces, suggesting that it is not only the local rulers who are at fault. One character wonders about Canada's foreign policy which, he says, may be "imperialist" after all. We get a sense of the continuing difficulties West Indians face when, returning from training overseas, they must deal with governments' displays of favouritism and in-

competence. Clarke explores the economic and psychological impact of the tourist industry.

Many West Indian islands have to be satisfied with a small fraction of the revenue generated by the industry. For example, most hotels and guest houses are foreign owned.

Commonwealth West Indian politics has been steeped in the British parliamentary tradition, with most of the island premiers starting out from the Fabian-inspired trade union movement. It is to Clarke's credit that he ridicules what is left of the "Victorian anglophilism" as Professor Gordon Lewis puts it in his book *The Growth of the West Indies*. But we

soon see that it is in the interests of the island government and others to keep it that way.

We get the impression that the island's unions will always be as hopelessly corrupt as the government.

The recent revelation that the CIA attempted to assassinate Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley on numerous occasions is perhaps only one tangible sign of the reaction against the movement for a new society for West Indians. In *The Prime Minister*, Austin Clarke has touched on what is happening there. It is a novel worth reading by concerned West Indians as well as by others who plan to vacation there.

COME MEET JEWISH STUDENTS FROM SOUTHERN ONTARIO, MICHIGAN, OHIO AND UPPER STATE NEW YORK.

AT

THE 6th ANNUAL JEWISH STUDENT CAN-AM FEBRUARY CONFERENCE February 16-19, 1978

Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada

sponsored by The Jewish Student Federation, York University B'nai Brith Hillel Foundation, University of Toronto



RETURN TO:

Jewish Student Federation
York University
Ross S101
4700 Keele Street, Downsview, Ontario M3J 1P3

only \$28.

B'nai Brith Hillel
c/o YMHA, Room 202
750 Spadina Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5S 2J2

Yes I will participate in the February Conference in Niagara Falls. Please find enclosed my Cheque for \$ _____ and reserve _____ spaces.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

PHONE _____

SEX _____ Are you a Vegetarian Yes _____ No _____