

Under the leadership of York Professor Don Rubin of the Theatre department, the theatre world will soon have its first comprehensive chronicle of the dramatic arts' accomplishments. One hundred countries will be contributing material on their national theatres, providing an unprecedented collection of information which will take seven years to collect and organize.

Excalibur's Rebecca Cann spoke to Professor Rubin about the origins of the massive project, and its implications for the theatre, the world over.



York global exclusive

Theatre and society catalogued in York-based project

York University has become the heart of a project with international scope. On the second floor of the Administrative Studies Building, theatre professor Don Rubin receives phone calls from Mexico, letters from Eastern Europe and telegrams from Africa. Rubin is the executive editor of the *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre* (WECT), a seven-year, \$2-million project to research and document the theatre of the last 40 years in 100 countries around the world.

Based on the belief that the relationship between theatre and society is a significant one, WECT was the brainchild of Dr. Roman Szydlowski, the leading theatre critic in Poland for many years. "Roman was one of those theatre critics who made it his life's work to travel," says Rubin. "He believed that theatre was world-wide, that each country had its own voice and only by travelling around the world could you understand those voices. He suggested the only way to understand the world was to understand each society and the theatre within each society."

"One of the things he tried to do while he travelled was to get as much information as possible on each theatre. But he found, over the last 20 years, that the number of countries that have come into existence was staggering and the information he had on so many theatres in the world was simply out of date. Roman's idea was a reference work which went to a country and said 'can you provide us with good, solid, up-to-date information?'"

In 1982 Szydlowski took his idea to the International Association of Theatre Critics (AICT) of which he was president. They supported the idea but declared it to be too big a project for anyone to undertake. He then presented it to the publications committee of the International Theatre Institute (ITI), of which Rubin was the chairman. The response was the same. Having by this time gained the support of the International Federation for Theatre Research (FIRT) and the International Association of Libraries and Museums of the Performing Arts (SIBMAS) Szydlowski presented his idea to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). "I thought that would be the end of the project, because that's the way these projects work," states Rubin, "but they came back to me a year

later and said 'we love the idea—can we try to make it happen?' That was the beginning of the project."

The first organizational meeting took place in 1982 in Copenhagen with members of the four supporting organizations. Rubin and Szydlowski were both made members of the board and the latter was elected president. One year later Szydlowski died. The encyclopedia, when it finally comes out, will be dedicated to his memory.

Rubin became the executive editor of WECT "totally by accident." Rubin had been editor of the *Canadian Theatre Review*. After the initial idea of WECT had been brought to his attention, Rubin went to the University of Toronto Press to learn about publishing an encyclopedia. With contacts around the world, Rubin was soon approached by several members of the first organizational board to accept the position of executive editor. "I guess the people at that meeting (Copenhagen, 1982) thought I knew something about the field. I had never done anything more than a year or two in advance. This was to be seven years, it was on a huge international scale and I just thought there was someone *out there* who would do it. My first reaction was to say 'no thank you.'

"Somebody finally said to me, 'if you accept this you're going to kick yourself for the next seven years because you can't do anything else. If you turn it down you're going to kick yourself for the next seven years because nobody's going to do it the way you would have done it. The difference is, at the end of seven years, if you accept, you'll have something to show for it.' So I accepted. I thought that made perfect sense."

With an \$800 grant from the Ontario Arts Council Rubin set off to the first organizational meeting of the now-official WECT.

In 1983 WECT was established as a non-profit corporation in Canada and the three board levels were set up to provide the foundational structure of the project. The Corporate Board functions in Canada and looks after fundraising and legal aspects of the project. The International Executive board consists of members from ITI, AICT, FIRT and SIBMAS and looks after the setting of policy. The third level is that of the International Editorial Board, consisting of the executive editor (Rubin) and regional and specialist editors. For the project, the world has been divided into seven regions—Latin America, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Southern Asia, Africa, the Arab world and the Far East. Specialist editors currently cover the areas of dance theatre, music theatre, design and a bibliography.

It is this final board which offers insight into the unique characteristics of WECT. The editors are from all over the world and are responsible for organizing and collecting entries within their regions. This material will be written by researchers, critics and scholars living in the various countries represented in the encyclopedia. In the past, theatre encyclopedias have generally been compiled by a group of experts within a handful of countries, attempting to understand world theatre from their home-base. The results have been poor. An encyclopedia published in New York in 1972 contains an entry on Canadian drama four paragraphs long stating, "Canadian drama, which is generally unknown abroad, has been more commonly produced by amateur and community groups (many affiliated with universities) . . ." Most entries on Canadian theatre in world encyclopedias discuss the Stratford Festival, perhaps the Shaw Festival, and little else.

The majority of past encyclopedias have been heavily biased towards one region of the world (usually the Western world) or have attempted to cover the history of theatre from its roots. WECT is the first encyclopedia of theatre to go to the sources for its materials. It is, as Rubin states, "the largest international research project ever undertaken in the history of the world theatre."

"What we are doing is recognizing that the world has changed since '45," says Rubin. "New countries, new cultures have emerged, and there are very few reference works which even acknowledge this development." WECT's aim to view theatre within the context of the society it exists in, is being developed in what are termed 'national entries.' One of these entries will exist for each country represented in the encyclopedia and will give an overview of their theatre as it stands today, as well as an understanding of its development since '45. The national entries will be the lengthiest in the four-volume work, alphabetically included, along with entries on theatrical theory, practice,