

## Canada's Orpheus reaches another milestone

One of Canada's most distinguished writers, Robertson Davies, is 75 years old this year and the occasion will be celebrated this autumn with the launch in London of his latest novel, *The Lyre of Orpheus*.

Born at Thamesville, Ontario, Davies developed an interest in drama at an early age, and after completing his studies at Queen's University and Balliol College, Oxford, in the late 1930s, he became an actor.

In 1940, he joined the Old Vic playing minor roles and doing literary work for the director. The same year he got married and returned to Canada to become literary editor of *Saturday Night*.

His next post was as editor of the *Peterborough Examiner*, which lasted 13 years. During this time he wrote several plays, including *Eros at Breakfast* which in 1948 won the Dominion Drama Festival Award for the best Canadian play. He went on to help Tyrone Guthrie launch the Shakespeare festival at Stratford, Ontario, in the 1950s.

Following in the tradition of fellow Canadian Stephen Leacock, he also wrote humorous essays under the *nom de plume* of Samuel Marchbanks. These first appeared in the *Examiner*, but were later collected together and published in book form. Later on in his career, he published collections of essays on literature.

### A novelist of international standing

However, Davies' reputation does not rest on his abilities as a playwright or essayist, considerable though they are, but on his fiction.

In the 1950s, he turned his attention to writing novels. His first, *Tempest-Tost*, appeared in 1951, and was followed by *Leaven of Malice* and *A Mixture of Frailties*, which together form *The Salterton Trilogy*. A recurrent theme in these novels is the difficulty of sustaining a cultural life in Canada.

In 1960, he joined the University of Toronto, where he taught literature for the next 21 years. During this time, he produced more novels, including the highly acclaimed *Fifth Business* (1970), which expresses Davies' conviction that spiritual matters are more important than worldly concerns. The novel was followed by two sequels, *The Manticore* (1972) and *World of Wonders* (1975).

By the 1980s, Robertson Davies had gained an international reputation. At the beginning of the decade he was elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and in 1987 the National Arts Club of the United States awarded him its Medal of Honour. Davies is the first Canadian to receive this distinction.

His reputation soared on this side of the Atlantic when his novel *What's Bred in the Bone* was shortlisted for the 1986 Booker Prize. The hardcover edition of the book topped the *New York Times* bestseller List for ten weeks, and enjoyed considerable success in the UK, too.

Davies is one of the leading exponents of a school of writers whose work is recognisably Canadian, and this may be the key to his universal appeal. He has demonstrated that the days when Canadian writers needed to look to Europe or the United States for inspiration have long since gone. ♦

## Canadian art also comes to London

### Video art and Wieland retrospective

Londoners will also have an opportunity to become acquainted with a variety of Canadian visual art forms.

One of the most intriguing exhibitions will be of video art at the Chisenhale Gallery. Some of the videos to be shown are quintessentially Canadian, such as Vern Hume's *The Lane of Milk and Honey* with its preoccupation with Alberta history, and *Up to Scratch* by Craig Condry-Berghold and Clive Robertson which is based on a bus ride through Canada.

Others deal with more universal themes. Joe Sarahan's *Rise and Fall of an Empire* investigates aspects of youth culture and its relationship with the mass media. Susan Rynard's *Absence* depicts a young woman searching within a void created by her own self-abnegation. W made by Edward Mowbray examines patriarchal myths and realities.

One of the most prolific Canadian video-makers, Paul Wong, will also be featured at the Chisenhale Gallery. His videos have been exhibited all over Canada, in the United States, Italy, Yugoslavia, Japan, Holland, Germany and France. He is also no stranger to Britain, having appeared at the AIR Gallery in 1984 and the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow in 1985.

For people who prefer art that stands still, the Joyce Wieland retrospective at the Canada House Gallery will definitely appeal. Born in 1931, Wieland has developed into one of Canada's most prominent artists with a versatility that is second to none. Her opus consists of paintings, drawings, portraits, sculpture, collages, quilts and films, which often give expression to her deeply held views on ecology, feminism and patriotism. 'I think of Canada as female,' she comments. 'All the work I've been doing is about Canada.' ♦