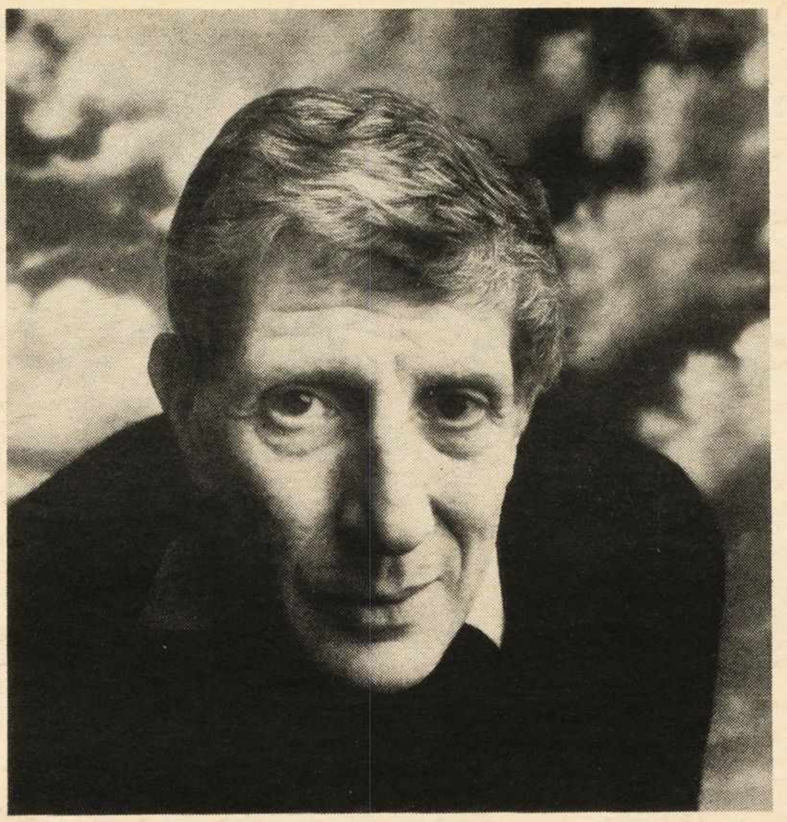
CULTURE

Three class acts: Miller at Dalhousie

By GLENN WALTON



While much of Halifax was in the beginning throes of Mass hysteria, another man came to talk to a different kind of audience at Dalhousie University.

Hundreds turned out to hear three lectures by international lecture circuit star Janathan Miller, author of the book and TV series *The Body in Question*, and director of several of the BBC Shakespeare series plays.

The man resembles an overgrown English schoolboy. He is fiftyish and tweedy but communicates a delight in learning that is infectious. His love of correct use of the English language is one of the more pleasant discoveries about him. That said, it is impossible to label Miller, since his mind is a free-ranging organism that perceives connection between all fields of human endeavour, and their responsibility to each other.

The title of his first lecture was "Medicine, the Public and Bedside Manner," but Miller used it to present his reflection on the public's refusal to be defined by medicine merely as organisms to be cut open, hooked up to machines, theorized about and otherwise abstracted from any subjective sense of power.

The doctor put to rest any complacent view on the part of the medical profession's effect on population patterns in our history: except for perhaps vaccination, Miller says it's hard to think of any medical advance up until recent times that significantly altered the welfare of a people.

The sudden increase in population in the 18th century must be attributed not to medicine but to a moral change of mind linked to the Romantic idea of the individual.

Inspired by the writings of authors like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and William Blake, society began to view each child as peculiar and distinct, the individual as something to be nurtured. When this change of mind was accomplished, then things like hygiene, ventilation and sewage systems became important, as did the rational upbringing of children, the washing of their clothes and the participation of the father in wet nursing. These advances were far more important than any pediatrician's theory or medical advance.

"I'm trying to subvert any sort of medical pride in the accomplishments of doctors," said Miller.

Medicine's accomplishment, Miller says, has been to view the body as a mechanism susceptible to intervention. This bestows a certain authority on medical practitioners from the public, the type of authority that derives from the appeal to rational skills.

Paradoxically, in an age that knows so much more than any previous time about the body, there is increasing "leakage" to what Max Weber called the charismatic authorities: the various religions, the quacks, reincarnationists, hypnotists, mesmerists—anything that well restore to the public a sense of subjective will. The "possitivistic" world of medicine must be kept accountable by the existence of another world that allows the mind a primitive priority, mental wills and urges, says Miller.

Miller sees a danger in neglecting the world of the imagination in favour of the supposedly more "rational" fields of empirical facts. Students are frequently bored in their first and second years because they fail to understand the conceptual basis behind the isolated facts they must learn, history being the understanding of this basis.

"We are catching people too young and making them into mechanists instead of humanists," he said. "As agents we feel ourselves to be active, free agents. A subjective sense should be paid more attention to."

Read novels, read poets, says Miller, wagging his finger at the future medical elite. "They are inescapable representations of the human, and you as doctors neglect them at your own peril."

The topic of the second lecture was the "Role of the Arts in a Technological Age." Dr. Miller wonders why he is constantly asked to speak to this topic. "The request is indicative, I suppose, of the thought of bringing together the two aspects of my life," he said, letting the audience know he fell into performing and directing by chance.

Ignorant of what stage blocking was, he directed plays. Ignorant of musical notation, he staged operas. Success greeted him on both fronts, but he practically disclaims any responsibility.

"My whole career is a series of people knocking on my front door asking me to come out and play," said Miller.

He rejects the often heard argument that art is just an ornament, a decoration on the surface of life which can be stripped off in times of trouble. Art is no less than the measure of a moral and human universe, while the positivistic alternative had its dangers.

He ascribes the ascendancy of science to techniques and methods that can be physically verified. Accordingly, there is a regrettable tendency in arts faculties of our universities to borrow the techniques of science in their prose, so that the dreadful, para-scientific vocabulary which has infected sociology, for example, becomes possible. No credibility is gained by such obfuscation, and much is lost.

Why is art important? Miller says because it is a more accurate description of humanity than the sciences. The world of physics has one face to be studied objectively, while human affairs have a double face.

Miller makes a crucial connection with our use of language as the ultimate touchstone of human behaviour. The truth about ourselves is contained more in common discourse than in scientific language. Brute facts are unable to explain psychological, intuitive, and institutionally determined actions which presuppose nouns that have no existence in the physical world.

"How can we describe the movement of a bride up the aisle and down again except in instituional terms, terms related to marriage that everyone understands intuitively? Much of our behaviour is simply indescribable by science, and we render ourselves more human in the arts."

Miller's final lecture, appropriately enough, took place at the Theatre Department. He was to talk about the problems a director and producer face. Ever aware of broader issues implied, however, he ended his Dalhousie series with a discussion about what makes the reproduction of the classics worthwhile in a modern age.

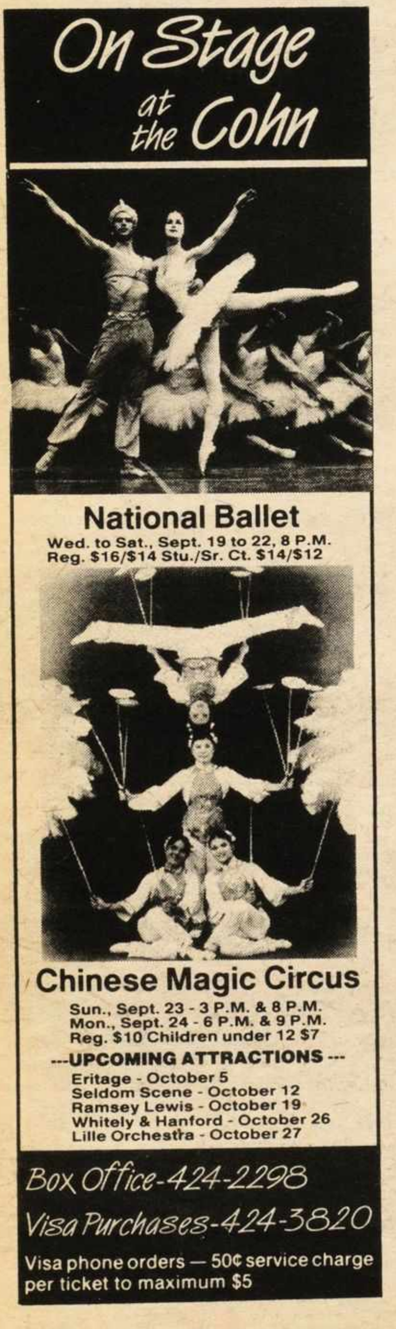
The future is a relatively modern concept, and those writers like Shakespeare and Cervantes, when creating their art, seldom worried about posterity. Our age has been the first to grapple with the aesthetic issues involved in producing the classics, which at the time of their appearance were part of a contemporary context.

We don't want to produce archival versions of *Hamlet* or *Don Quixote*. It is not within our power to write a 17th century novel now anyway. Any work of art is produced within the context of all the works written up until its time, so any attempt to reproduce a classic in its orginal form would fail. There can be no more first nights of *Twelfth Night*.

To illustrate this point, Miller told the story of a forgery of one of Vermeer's paintings that was accepted as the real thing in the 1920's, but nowadays could be picked out by any ten-year-old as a fake. This was possible, not because we are more clever or perceptive than the people who lived in the past, but because any forgery extracts those qualities in the original that appeal to its age. In retrospect, the qualities become patently obvious. When a film was made of Elizabeth and Essex in the 1930's, the star, Bette Davis, was groomed like any woman in the 30's. In the 60's, the Juliet in the Zefferelli version of *Romeo and Juliet* looked like a flower child. We of a later time can easily pick out these period-determined influences, but the time itself only saw the differences and not the similarities.

"The whole history of forgery is the history of failure," Miller said, and if you lined up all the Rembrandt forgeries since the 16th century they would all share some aspect of Rembrandtness but all look different from each other as well as the original.

What is it, then, that makes the production worthwhile? Relevance is a vulgar term, says Miller. Our task is to produce a historical context to see how much past cultures resemble us, but also how they differ. Something of the original should survive in any production, and the director sifting the work through an interpretation and design notion, must be careful not to cut the audience off from the original. Ultimately it is an endless struggle to determine just what it is that gives life to the plays: it's not sets or costumes or actors, or even language (Shakespeare survives translation). Something intangible propels them about, and Miller, like everyone else before him, is unable to define exactly what that essence is. □



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Deferred future: Developing countries

Deferred Future: Corporate and World Debt and Bankruptcy
by Dan Dimancescu
Ballinger, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1983

By GEOFF MARTIN

In a recent article in *La Presse* of Montréal, it was stated that the five major Canadian chartered banks (Montréal, Nova Scotia, Commerce, Toronto Dominion and Royal) have loaned over 15 *billion* dollars to just four Latin American countries—Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and Venezuela.

This is three times the amount which has been loaned to the troubled Dome Petroleum, and it is just a drop in the bucket of one *trillion* dollars which the banks of the developed world have loaned to the world's impoverished countries.

The tragedy, of course, is that none of this money will ever be paid back, since the countries in question now cannot even afford to pay the interest.

The banks now make paper transactions which involve the transfer of more "loans" to the countries in question, which the banks then record in the form of interest payments, a recent supplement to the *Wall Street Journal* revealed.

In *Deferred Future*, Dimancescu discusses the history behind this quiet crisis, which began during the Vietnam War and continued through the concentration of *Petrodollars* in western banks during the 1970's.

Of course this money has been frittered away by the tyrannies in question (e.g. Soviet Union, Poland, Philippines, Zaire, etc., etc.) and most of the book attempts to grapple with the concept of "national bankruptcy" and the possibility of steering the banking system through the present stormy waters.

In a sense the author spends too much time talking about corporate bankruptcy and indebtedness, but I suppose it does help in understanding the incredibly mysterious world of international debt and bankruptcy. □