

# The Amish from an Amish point of view

**Quiet in the Land**  
Citadel Theatre  
til October 27

review by James MacDonald

The best known thing about the Mennonites, Hutterites, Amish and other rural Canadian religious sects is that they are little understood. We've all seen and wondered at a Hutterite horse-drawn buggy putting down the highway as we sped past in our motorized monsters. The Amish people of mid-eastern Canada and the United States were, in many people's opinions, dealt a major wrongdoing in the movie *Witness*, released last spring. Those of you who share this opinion will be pleased with *Quiet in the Land*, Anne Chislett's 1982 Chalmers Award winner (Outstanding Canadian Play) which opened the Shotor season last week. The Amish are portrayed as simply and as honestly as their lifestyle denotes them to be.

The play deals with the lives of two Amish families in the final two years of World War I. The congregation faces two major challenges: one is an increasingly mechanized society, which divides the group into traditionalists and those who are willing to adopt new ways to better compete and fit into society. The other problem is the impending conscription crisis, possibly forcing these pacifistic people to give up their status as the "quiet in the land," and bear arms. Being of German origin, still maintaining their language and customs, also brings racial conflict. The varying opinions of the Amish population are expressed in the differing characteristics of each member of both families.

*Quiet in the Land* boasts a collage of very good actors. Eric Schneider and John Jarvis are both excellent as the traditionalist bishop and the pious, would-be reformer, respectively. Tom McBeath and Joy Thompson-Allen also turn in good performances, McBeath as the bishop's old friend who is torn between the factions, and Thompson-Allen as the simplistic wife of the upstart. John O'Kraney portrays well the rebellious soul of the bishop's son, though he tends to overplay, as does Wanna Shaw as McBeath's wife. The cast works extremely well together, however, aided by excellent direction from James Roy. Roy uses his cast very well in conveying the simple farm atmosphere necessary to the production.

There is an interesting mixture of light-heartedness and drama present in this play, which sometimes works, and sometimes doesn't. The comedy in it works well to make the characters more human, more endearing. It sometimes detracts from many dramatic scenes, making it impossible for the play to mount any dramatic highpoint. McBeath and Shaw are both very funny in roles often designated for comic relief. The mixture of joie de vivre and seriousness provides for strong character development in all characters, and it makes the human aspect of this play (which is so important to the subject) all the more real and enjoyable. The light-heartedness does, however, convey a certain aspect of frivolity in the congregation, in contrast to the often solemn impression given in other scenes. Perhaps this frivolousness was necessary to liven up the play, perhaps it actually exists, I don't know. In any case, this seems to be the only area in which Chislett's description of the Amish is unclear.

The Shotor stage is well used by Roy and co-director Linda Moore, as are Willie Heslop's excellent sets. The set design is simple, yet it goes along with the underlying rusticity of the people. This along with the games, feasts, and other traditions such as harvesting carried out onstage create a fabulous atmosphere. Lighting left something to be desired, but there also seemed to be a few technical problems in this area the night I was there, so perhaps it will be cleared up. Overall, the atmosphere created adds to the already established feeling of reality and humanity.

The only real problem with this play worth mentioning is its failure to make a clear choice of direction. The statement it makes is quite obvious, and is a point well taken, but the curious comedy/drama combination makes the play something of a lightweight. I'm not saying that I disliked some of the lighter atmosphere; on the contrary, I rather welcome it, but it does bring about a rather serious misplacement of dramatic effect. For this reason the message is somewhat weakened, though it probably makes the play much more enjoyable.



photo Alex Miller

*Quiet in the Land*: (from left to right) Tom McBeath, Wanna Shaw, and Jay Thompson.

In short, the play's strong suit is its seemingly accurate description of the realities of this fascinating culture. It is true, ignorance breeds dislike, and as such the heightened knowledge we receive from this play is a valuable lesson to all Canadians (and Americans) who ever looked upon the Amish, or Mennonites, or any other culture which they didn't understand, with disdain or even hatred. This is done most effectively by Chislett in that she chooses to view the Amish from an Amish point of view; elements outside this small society are kept to a minimum in terms of interaction with them. This means that the elements of Amish society which set it apart are not only expressed in dialogue, they can be seen in terms of stage action. As a result, the small slice of life portrayed in this play becomes a microcosm of the realities of Amish society, and it is here

where Chislett (though not Amish herself) succeeds most admirably.

*Quiet in the Land* is easily accessible to most, and has many enjoyable components. It is well written, well acted, well directed, and well worth seeing.

## Skilful direction and stunning plot twists

# Spider Woman celebrates spirit

**Kiss of the Spider Woman**  
Island Alive  
West Mall 8

review by Elaine Ostry

At last. A movie that doesn't revolve around the plot of "Gutsy-Heroine-Saves-Family-Farm" or "Precocious-Teens-Have-Wacky-Scientific-Adventures" or "One-Ugly-Hulk-Bares-Chest-And-Kills-Lots-Of-People." At last a movie without stereotypes. At long last a movie that is totally original. What is this rare find? It's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*.

No, it's not science fiction. It is a movie that celebrates the human spirit. Oh, right, you say, very original. But it is.

The movie takes place in a South American prison and revolves around two inmates, Molina (William Hurt) is a homosexual charged with corrupting a minor. Valentin (Raoul Julia) is a macho revolutionary jailed for his politics. At first the two barely tolerate each other. Gradually, friendship grows between them, finally turning into love. The growth of their relationship is handled skillfully and sensitively. And tastefully.

Molina wishes he was a woman. He escapes into fantasies, telling the tale of an old French war movie and of the Spider Woman. He is weak in body and in will. He is emotional, complaining: "Why are only the women allowed to be sensitive?" He is a very lonely person. Flashbacks to his past show his futile search for love for a Real Man.

Valentin is Molina's opposite. He is not wrapped up in himself as Molina is; he is dedicated to his cause. Other emotions are secondary to him; he keeps his feelings to



Raoul Julia

himself. He is a tough realist. He scorns Molina's fantasies and homosexuality.

It is Valentin who introduces the theme of the movie with his definition of a Real Man: one who does not humiliate those around him.

As the men grow closer, they sympathize with and learn from each other. They even adopt some of the other's characteristics. They influence each other to become better people. When Valentin is sick, he is touched by the compassion Molina shows toward him. Valentin learns to respect Molina, and he becomes a kinder and more sensitive man. At the end, he even escapes into fantasy as Molina did at the start.

When Molino leaves the prison, Valentin tells him: "Don't let anyone humiliate you again. . . . Make them respect you." Valentin's courage and strength of conviction amaze Molina. His influence gives Molina dignity, and the courage to live his own life, and to . . . no, I'm not going to tell you. And I'm not going to tell you who/what the Spider Woman is, either. Go and find out yourself.

The acting is excellent in this film. William Hurt deserves an Oscar for his role of Molina. In fact, he received the award for Best Actor for this film in the Cannes Film Festival this year. Hurt has got that kind of face that shows subtle changes of emotion with the slightest movement. You can't take your eyes off him. He provides hilarious comic relief with his narration of the melodramatic French movie (in which Sonia Braga is perfect as the leading lady).

Raoul Julia does a fine job as Valentin, showing his transition of character very smoothly. Both characters are shown in depth. The chemistry is just right; the bond that forms between them is strong and subtle. You forget that they are two men — you see them as two human beings.

The direction is skillful in showing the men's relationship and their grim surroundings. The plot is unpredictable, with some stunning twists that command your attention. It takes a lot of courage to produce a movie this different-and guess what? It's from Pan-Canadian Productions!

The risk of producing this movie paid off. Quality acting, directing, and writing combine to make a movie that will fascinate and surprise, leaving you to stumble out of the theatre somewhat dazed.