

Time Out

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THE BRUNSWICKAN—13

Risque Renaissance on CBC

You wouldn't believe what they were up to in the Renaissance when they wanted an heir, and nature wouldn't co-operate! Niccolo Machiavelli, a wickedly accurate observer of human nature, revealed these goings-on in his raunchy comedy, *Mandragola*, and the world has been chuckling ever since. *Mandragola*'s sly fun and joy of life so delighted Pope Leo X that he ordered a theatre built especially for the show. That was in the early 1500s.

More recently two young Canadians turned *Mandragola* into a two-hour radio musical with Machiavellian wit and abandon. Special Occasion presents its premiere on CBC Radio Sunday, Oct. 16, 2.05 adt.

The book and direction are by Alan Gordon, Toronto stage, film, radio and TV actor-writer. The score, which includes some of the most hummable music CBC Radio has ever presented, is by Doug Riley, pianist, organist, composer conductor and arranger who founded the Dr. Music instrumental group, and has his own

recording company in Toronto. Production is by Michael Snook. Host: Alan Maitland.

The cast features Mary Ann McDonald (acting) and Sharon Lee Williams (singing) as Donna Lucrezia; Martin Short (acting) and Cal Dodd (singing) as Callimaco; Jack Duffy as Nicia; Helen Hughes as Sostrata; Don Franks as Ligurio; Allen Stewart-Coates as Fra Timoteo; William Osler as Machiavelli; Andrea Martin as a widow; and Jack Newman as the Chorusmaster.

The hilarious, romantic plot is supposedly based on an actual happening in Italy in 1504. An elderly lawyer, Nicia, and his beautiful young wife, Lucrezia, are anxious to have a child, but she is sterile, and no potion or treatment has helped the situation. Callimaco, a handsome young blade from Paris, has seen Lucrezia coming out of church, and has fallen in love with her. But she is virtuous, so his infatuation seems hopeless. Ligurio, a roguish mutual friend of Callimaco and Nicia, dreams up a complicated intrigue to satisfy both gentlemen. It involves the mandrake root (*mandragola*), which is supposed to produce fecundity in women. Callimaco is to pose as a new doctor in town. On Ligurio's advice, Nicia is to consult the doctor about his wife's sterility. "Doctor" Callimaco will suggest a dose of *mandragola* for the luscious lady. All goes as planned. That's step one.

Nicia is delighted with the idea of the potent potion. But there's a hitch. That's step two. Ligurio warns him that the first person to sleep with a woman who has

taken *mandragola* will absorb the poison and die seven days later. This makes the old boy have a ponder. But Ligurio and Callimaco are ready with a solution. What is needed, they insist, is a victim to sleep with Lucrezia, a 16-year-old off the streets, at the height of his virility and... disposable. Nicia takes a lot of convincing, but finally agrees. Callimaco, disguised as a raggedy young minstrel, makes sure he is chosen as the teenager. But the next problem is trying to persuade the religious Lucrezia to take a young ruffian into her bed. That's step three. Her mother, Sostrata, and her confessor, a mocking monk called Fra Timoteo, are recruited to help. And the complicated fox-trot romps to a happy conclusion, with some surprises for the audience.

This fast-moving entertainment is full of amusing one-liners and bawdy humor that would give the Marx Brothers a run for their money. But don't get the idea that the show will offend more delicate Canadian sensibilities. Any naughty lines are handled with such high spirits and humor that they add up to a good time for all.

The music is sophisticated and melodic, in many styles and tempos, and even includes a brief Gregorian chant in pig-Latin! If you're tired of hard rock and like to go away from, a musical whistling its tunes, then *Mandragola* should give you happy encores.

Niccolo Machiavelli, who leads this scamper through some of the Renaissance's lustier moments, was a brilliant Italian writer, diplomat, unscrupulous opportunist, and a born cynic who still loved a joke and a gossip. He was an astute observer of life on all levels, and constantly scissored his fellows with the sharp surgery of reelingly accurate words Bacon defended him by pointing out that Machiavelli "set forth openly and sincerely what men were wont to do and not what they ought to do—hence his evil fame arising largely from misapprehension of his purpose." With *Mandragola*, Machiavelli used an amusing situation to expose the questionable morals of Tuscan middle-class society. He was really preaching a sermon—but what fun for those in the pews! Voltaire rated the play above all of Aristophanes. Macaulay thought that only the very best of Moliere topped *Mandragola*. And noted Victorian critic J.A. Symonds called it "the ripest and most powerful play in the Italian language."

Alan Gordon, who wrote the book for the CBC version, says *Mandragola* is the best comedy he ever read. He first encountered it as a student at the University of Toronto, and immediately was struck by its possibilities for a musical. He dropped it into his idea tank for future reference. He recalls: "When I attended a theatre conference in Montreal there were complaints that Canada isn't producing new theatre writers. An artistic director in Edmonton said he'd be glad to commission a play from a young

writer. I spoke up and said I'd always wanted to do a musical version of *Mandragola*. It just popped out. 'Terrific!' he said. 'Send me an outline!' I did, and approached Doug Riley to write the music—we'd done jingles together. He agreed and we went to work. We had three songs, roughed out and the music for them written when we heard that the funding had fallen through in Edmonton. But we were so keen that we went on with the music and book anyway. When we had a bit more done, we made a tape of it, played it for the CBC Variety Department, and were told to go ahead. We were both busy with other things, and last May, when we learned that the show would be taped early in July, we had only 27 pages of dialogue written (for a two-hour show!) and only seven strong songs. But we got busy and completed the script and score in time. Working on the show was the best professional experience I ever had. The whole cast contributed to the dialogue and suggested amusing bits of business and sounds, not only for their own parts, but for each other's, too."

Now Snook, Gordon and Riley are talking of doing a musical version of Aristophanes' *The Birds* for broadcast on Canada Day, 1978.

NB poet comes into own

A well-known Canadian poet, Elizabeth Brewster, was in Fredericton last week to give a reading of her poems. Originally from Chipman, N.B., she lived in Fredericton during her university years, and is now a professor at the University of Saskatchewan.

Her literary career began early. "The first poem I had published, my father sent to the Saint John Telegraph when I was twelve. My parents were quite interested in what I wrote." During the time she was attending high school, there were several teachers Miss Brewster remembers as being of particular support to her, and in university, she belonged to the Bliss Carmen Society, a small group of students interested in poetry, which eventually established the "Fiddlehead" Magazine. "Those of us who were interested in poetry probably thought of ourselves as rather peculiar, or perhaps others thought of us as rather peculiar." The mutual criticism and kind of companionship she found in this group were of tremendous encouragement to her.

Miss Brewster was one of the seven original students who started the Fiddlehead Magazine at UNB, which was then a student-run publication. "The first magazine was produced entirely by us—it was really a kind of private little magazine." The present Fiddlehead is not a student-run publication but is still

published on campus. It is "intended to be a national magazine for poetry and also for fiction." She still contributes to the magazine and recently had a short story accepted, to be published in a recent issue.

Of course, behind every poem is an idea, and the poet says she gets her ideas from various places. "Many of them come in a wave from memory, from experience. I've tended to write poems after an experience from the past. Also from observation, I suppose, and often from ideas one might get from books. I'm quite fond of writing poems based on dreams."

"I began of course as everybody does writing in a very imitative way, but I think I've developed my own style by now. I've certainly had favorite poets at one time or another, but I can't really think of a specific one that would be so much of an influence that it would be overwhelming."

Miss Brewster said that she has written about five times the number of poems that she has had published. "Perhaps I publish a higher proportion now than I used to, but there certainly are a lot of poems in old notebooks that have never been published." These old poems often serve as material to be revised or rewritten into new more acceptable poems.

"Sunrise North" has been her biggest money-maker but she doesn't think she could make a living as a poet. She said probably no one in Canada makes a living by just being a poet, but some might by doing related things like giving public readings. "I don't think I'd be happy with that, it would be a little too much!" she commented, although she does enjoy giving occasional public readings, as it gives her a sense of an audience, which is frequently absent to writers.

When she was a student, she had a number of poems in the Brunswickan, and also contributed a book review column, which ran for at least a year. "Somebody sent me a Brunswickan maybe two or three years ago, and I liked it at that point, but of course it's changed a lot since I worked on it!"

She's had poor reviews of her books before, but doesn't really worry about them as "critics tend to contradict each other so much, they balance each other off. Earlier on they made me rather miserable but now, I think only if somebody whose opinion I value very much didn't like a book for a good reason, that that might worry me."

Elizabeth Brewster has two comparatively new books out, "Sometimes I think of Moving", a book of poems, and a book of short stories, "It's Easy to Fall on the Ice". Her current favorite is "Sometimes I think of Moving", which is about moving, both literally and metaphorically. "There are many poems in the book about moving from place to place, about restlessness, also about death, which is a kind of move, I suppose."

Her book of short stories is a collection which centers around a theme of isolation and communication. The title is both literal, referring to the "kind of February icy day you get here in Fredericton, and also the difficulty of communicating between people."

(John Hamilton)

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