

Mavis Gallant's first play

# Working women's laughter masks tragedy

Sheree-Lee Olson

Confusion is both motif and metaphor, and irony is the method in the Tarragon Theatre's production of *What Is To Be Done?*, a long profuse depiction of the pursuit of two young women of socialism and friendship in wartime Montreal.

This first play by award-winning short-story writer and long-time expatriot Mavis Gallant, weaves cliché and archetype into a subtle fabric reminiscent of prose. However, the essential ambiguity of Gallant's stories can be confusing when translated to the stage, where flesh and blood actors efface the line between illusion and reality. On the surface, the confusion can produce hilarious effects, but on a deeper level, its significance is tragic as this shifting of mood constitutes both the play's weakness and its strength.

Molly (Margot Dionne) married and "laid 13 times" before her husband was shipped overseas, can't remember the age of her baby son and in conversation tends to confuse Stalin, her idol, with Franco, the Fascist. Jenny (Donna Goodhand), a somewhat impatient virgin in the Appraisements and Averages Department of a local paper, bends figures to "work out" the ideal meal for men, but cannot work out the ideal man. Instead there is the shy Willie (Rod Beattie), to whom Jenny and Molly go for Marxist "instruction". Willie fought in Spain and was "blackmailed by the Trotskyites in Glasgow" but "seems too confused" to be a "real Stalinist". There is Karl-Heinz (Jack Messinger), Willie's lascivious war-buddy just out of internment camp, who interrupts a monologue about prison escapes to assert that "in all countries, women are like the food". And there is Mr. Gillespie, the unseen editor of Jenny's paper whom she telephones constantly with heartfelt but sometimes absurdly redundant story ideas which are always met in an oblique and patronizing manner.



After the war: "Tomorrow we'll have to say different things."

On all levels the major confusion is war--its shifting allegiances reflected by a confused radio announcer's ludicrous attempts to pronounce the foreign allies' names; eventually, he spells them in exasperation. Radio static, misnumbered letters, and the

various accents Molly puts on while calling her mother about her son, emphasize the isolation and unreality. "There's a war on," says Molly, "no one has a life"; but ironically, these women do have a special life together. Needing a place to talk on New Year's Eve, the

women bribe their way into an "Austro Hungarian Friendship Club", which they naively assume is left-wing. There they dance a hilarious polka while the barman keeps peace with a pistol. When they flee at midnight, the audience discovers the place is a Nazi stronghold.

But if Gallant reduces grand aspirations to absurdities, she raises clichés to universal truths. Jenny hops ecstatically at the sight of two Red Army colonels at a rally and dismisses their gold-filled teeth and bourgeois shoes, saying, "What mattered was what I felt when I believed. I've never felt so happy."

What will happen when the war ends is the play's major question and theme. And its title is really the name of a treasured but unintelligible communist pamphlet Molly's deserter father acquired in WWI. The pamphlet symbolizes the women's confused politics, which Molly, on all fronts a little less naive, rejects first. Letters to her absent husband suggesting socialist strategies are answered with descriptions of executions and his own sexual fantasies--if he's killed

he will have had her the night before. When the men come back, Molly tells Jenny, they'll want their jobs, they'll get rid of us. Thus she gives Jenny the pamphlet on the eve of V-day.

The grandest irony is that the war symbolizes and allows Jenny's idealism and innocence--the implications being that only in the disruption of the normal order could women indulge such yearnings. The armistice is like the loss of virginity. When "it" finally happened with Willie, Jenny tells us in the last scene, "I said, is that all there is?" She has awakened on Victory Day with her first hangover and a voice grown husky to find that Molly's prediction is true--"Tomorrow we'll have to say different things". With this, the play becomes a tragedy in which we all share--that no one ever knows "what is to be done". That is why, like Jenny in the final scene, we give up and give in. The darkness that descends around her in the final moments is all the more dissatisfying because, lulled by laughter, we weren't expecting it. But Gallant, in this marvellously-acted play, meant more than laughter all along.

## Kim Mitchell picks up where Max left off

Barry Carson

When the Kim Mitchell Band played at the Nag's Head North on Friday, the staff of the club had to turn people away.

Fronted by former Max Webster star Kim Mitchell, the band features Paul Butler on guitar, Paul DeLong on drums, Peter Fredette on guitar and background vocals and Bob Wilson on guitar and background vocals.

The band hit the stage at 11:30 with their song "Universal Juveniles", and continued with a strong set of new material and old Max Webster tunes.

Mitchell blasted out a few songs from his *High Class and Borrowed Shoes* album, sending the crowd to its feet. Wanting an encore, the fans chanted "Mitchell, Mitchell, Mitchell." While the band returned for two encores, the crowd still wasn't satisfied.

After the show, Mitchell discussed the break-up of Max Webster. "There were a lot of reasons that caused a lot of problems." He

mentioned a European tour. "The fans in Britain liked us so much that we were going to go back and headline in six months." But, he said, "It was two years before we returned because of disorganization."

About his reaction to the break-up, Mitchell commented, "I'm happy with the way things are going. Webster was great, but it's over and now it's part of musical history."

Mitchell discussed his plans for the new Kim Mitchell Band: "I'm going to be touring the smaller clubs in Ontario for now, and maybe Buffalo and Syracuse before I hit the bigger halls."

"We are a new band. We are not Max Webster; we'll have to start at the bottom and prove ourselves as a band before we reach the top."

If you liked Max Webster, you'll be intrigued by The Kim Mitchell Band. But you better catch them in the bars because it won't be long before this band will be playing the Gardens.



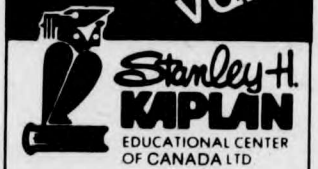
Photo: Barry Carson

Kim Mitchell: Max Webster is 'musical history' but he is keeping the sound alive with the new Kim Mitchell Band.

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