

Robertson Davies...

Illusionist conjures "Wonders"

The face - all attention drawn to the longbeardstreaked with two daggers of white; the voice - all deep and mellow control; the man - scholar, actor, journalist, playwright, outstanding Canadian fiction writer.

For those who watched Robertson Davies at a reading he held in the city recently, the impressions were all there and they arrived with the force of immediate and intimate contact. Taking an excerpt from his newest novel, "World of Wonders", author Davies was able to enchant and hold his audience spell-bound for the full three-quarters of an hour during which he read.

This new work, which completes a trilogy begun in the novel "Fifth Business" and carried on in "Mantecore", is "about a man who becomes a very remarkable conjurer and illusionist and who is led to a very remarkable destiny," as Davies put it. It lends itself to public reading very well, written as it is with an exotic flavour and vivid style, and Davies' fluent and dramatic manner served to

make the somewhat fantastical passage very real for his listeners.

The passage concerns the maturation of the conjurer at a time in his childhood while he is working in a circus. The script calls for the appearance of an aged gypsy woman to aid the maturation process, and calls up various other 'creatures' of the circus, including a monkey named Rango who is killed by an ill-tossed knife, a nauseated fat woman, and a dead strongman under the Big Top.

When asked whether he felt the 'realism' of modern prose might not accomplish his goals in a better way, Davies replied, "I have no use for realism ... for realism seems to me to be a deception. I work with fiction, or fantasy if you prefer, because that is my way. I like to think that my works are about life and discover some of the truths about life. In order to do that, I utilize fantasy because I am not interested in surfaces but what lies below them."

In discovering material with

which to portray what happens in life below the surface, Davies can draw upon an extremely varied range of experiences from his own life. Born in Ontario in 1913, Davies' schooling extended from Upper Canada College and Queen's University to Oxford University, where he studied English Literature in Balliol College. From Oxford, Davies went to London for a short time to work as an actor and literary aide with the Old Vic Company.

He then returned to Canada and took the post of literary editor with Saturday Night magazine, following which he became editor of the Peterborough Examiner, where he remained 23 years. In 1963, he was appointed First Master of Massey College at the University of Toronto, where he has remained until this date. He has been writing fiction throughout the entire period from his university years onward.

As a result of his literary work Davies has published six folios of plays, three volumes of the editorial

musings of Samuel Marchbanks (a figure taken from his period at the Examiner), and two series of major prose works, the "Leaven of Malice" trilogy and the "Fifth Business" trilogy.

His experience in psychological work also provides him with an perhaps more subtle understanding of human nature; he is currently Vice-President of the Analytical Psychology Association of Ontario. But as Davies himself explains, "my greatest asset is that I watch carefully when I go places ... at the circus I watch the clown's face when he hears he has two years left to live, instead of watching the fire swallow while he does his act."

Davies' fluency with the English language and understanding of human motivation gives his work a considerable power. For those privileged to see and hear him in person, his physical presence served only to re-enforce and re-affirm that power.

Kevin Gillese

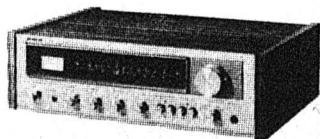
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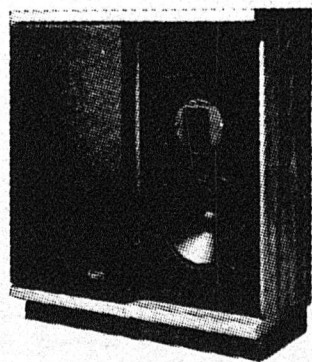
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