

Theatre Mitchell prospects his past for stories

by Randal Smathers

Every Canadian kid has read something of W. O. Mitchell's. The most popular choice is *Who Has Seen the Wind?*, but there is a lot more to Mitchell's work than one novel. His latest play, *Back to Beulah*, is now showing at the Citadel.

Mitchell, looking fit and healthy at the age of 70, sipped tea and took snuff during the interview, which seemed far too short at an hour. As prolific a talker as he is a writer, the interview covered territory from salmon fishing to his writing.

Mitchell's works are based on his ability to tell a story, and this showed when we started talking about salmon fishing. He told about his grandson catching a salmon in Mabel Lake, BC, where Mitchell has his summer house. "He hooked onto one. Here's this rod," said Mitchell, showing how the fish pulled the rod under the boat with a swoop of his arm, "and here's this ten-year-old, and I'm hollering at him 'Jimmy! keep your rod tip up! Pull it up then wind as you bring it down. You've got to play it out.'"

Mitchell paused for effect here. "One half hour. We finally landed it... we released it,

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and his mother came over from the other boat — she hasn't even had a strike in ten years — and we laid it out." Here he pointed at one edge of the table. "Now there's the bow. The tail was in under that bow, and here — he gestured vaguely at a spot some three or four feet away — "my friend, I'm not exaggerating, is the head. Like a god-damned dolphin. I would guess it to be at least forty-five pounds."

The whole point of this is probably that Mitchell draws from his own life for his stories. How much of his work is autobiographical?

"Initially, totally," said Mitchell. "As a teacher of creative writing, one of the points

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I have made it that you don't skim off the top, you don't blueprint and do a poem in a weekend [just] because it's short.

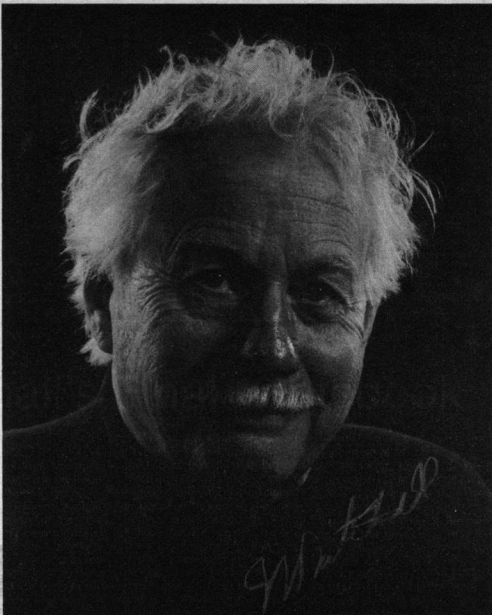
First you have to prospect your own past, find bits of actual people that you loved or hated. Smells, sights, sounds, touches, feelings — this is true of playwriting too — but that's only the beginning, that's finding, but you put it outside of yourself, and then there's a creative leap. Life never gives you anything that serves thematically and narratively and everything else.

"Then your past grows — with lots of false starts. That's why it takes me three to four years to write a novel, and I'm talking every goddamned day. Any writing I take seriously, whether it's my own or somebody else's is autobiographical.

"But", says Mitchell, this idea "frequently gets mistaken, and my young proteges in writing hear me repeat and repeat 'Life ain't art.' It starts out to be autobiographical, and is totally so at the beginning, then they become unreal people for all kinds of artistic pressures."

We finally got around to discussing the play that brought Mitchell to Edmonton.

"*Back to Beulah* is very close to actuality. I had three life models for my three mad women, for twenty years," Mitchell elaborated — beginning as any good story teller



Canadian writer W. O. Mitchell loves those fish stories.

Photo Ed Ellis

does, at the beginning.

"My first twelve years were in Weyburn, Saskatchewan. After the war, a Dr. Austin, an internationally-famous psychiatrist was wooed by the old CCF government to come of all places, to the billiard table, and head up the Weyburn mental hospital. One of the first things he did was put in a big beauty parlor, and set up dances where the attendants danced with patients. He started the cottage approach, releasing patients to live in town."

"One of the first to come out was named Mildred, to [live with] my brother and his wife, so Mildred brought up their three kids. Two of Mildred's best friend came out — one was Betty and one was Agnes. Now Agnes was manic depressive — she was my life model for Harriet in *Back to Beulah*."

"Three times a week she came, with a beret pulled down, gloomy as hell, to do the housecleaning for my elderly mother. Indeed, my mother had a cuckoo clock, I remember. My mother went in to lie down when Agnes was working. As soon as mother would go into the bedroom, Agnes went up and stopped that fucker. And then an hour or so later, my mother would come out and pay Agnes, and Agnes would leave, and my mother wouldn't say anything, and she'd go up and set the hands again. In *Back to Beulah* one of the first things Agnes clips to give to Anders is a cuckoo clock she shoves up her skirt. So you plagiarize actuality, but it becomes something much different.

"I was fond of the play *Madwoman of Shalott*, and Myrna would say to me "When are you going to do your *Three Mad Ladies of Weyburn*?" Finally I did. I did it first as a 90-minute film for the CBC. It was pretty damn good." (Myrna is his wife.)

Madness is not normally treated as a comedy. I wondered why Mitchell had written *Back to Beulah* as one, instead of a tragedy.

"Death is a very bad subject for comedy," Mitchell said. He then proceeded to illustrate how it could work. "Can you tell me why in *Hamlet* Shakespeare has the gravedigger scene? Why did William Shakespeare do a whole scene that is utter slapstick comedy, dealing with Ophelia's drowning? Well, I can answer that.

"Life is not totally funny, life is not totally

tragic. Now if I could attend my own funeral, even though I'm the guy there in the coffin, there'd be something funny happening. Anybody can remember being in church and getting a fit of the giggles. It's life. It's a chord — it's high notes, low notes; joy, tragedy. It's called comic relief. If you want to make something sad, then get your chord effect. It'll be much more poignant."

"This play isn't poking fun at the people in Bedlam. It's not puritan. The play ends up with Harriet, with the assistance of the two others, going to do a kitchen hysterectomy, to cut out "the foul spot" — that ain't comedy. I would hope that at the end, that there wouldn't be many dry eyes in the

Newest W. O. Mitchell play

Crazy characters in *Beulah*

Back to Beulah
Citadel Theatre (Shoctor)
Run ends April 17

review by Roberta Franchuk

Are you bothered by mysterious noises? Do unexplained, frightening sounds make you feel like you're going crazy? Don't worry — if you're in the audience for W.O. Mitchell's newest play, *Back to Beulah*, rest assured that it's all part of the show.

For the three mentally-disturbed women in a half-way house, the threat of going back to Beulah (the mental hospital from which they had been released) haunts them. The three have been working towards recovery, with the help of their psychiatrist Dr. Margaret Anders (Sharon Bakker). It is obvious from the first time we meet them that they still have a long way to go.

Harriet (Florence Paterson), religiously strait-laced, still sings hymns while maneuvering her rocking chair around the room. Betty (Betty Phillips), a scatterbrained grandmotherly type, plays croquet with Winston Churchill and serves tea to Bette Davis. Agnes (Hillary Strang), sees sexual innuendo in stuffed animals and paintings of angels.

house."

I wondered how Mitchell viewed prose versus drama. I mentioned that one of my professors preferred to write prose because he didn't like losing control of his work. Mitchell's response was immediate and dramatic.

"That professor is in trouble. I've got news for him, and for you. It's much more fun writing stage plays." To Mitchell, writing a novel is "spending three years by yourself in a fucking office, and not know whether your darts are hitting the board or not.

"But when you finish a play, you're only half done. Mind you, his experience might have been very bad — he didn't pick carefully or wasn't able to pick who would be his director, or what theatre he would be working with. Most bad directors are would-be playwrights. The director better not be suggesting changes which are playwright changes."

If the director is good, however, then suggestions could be helpful. Says Mitchell, "The best example [of this] is Bill Fisher, here at the Citadel, with a play of mine called *The*

"Hit a good director, kiddo, and you've got it. I can call my shots, always have and always will."

Kite. One of the characters (Daddy Sherry) is the oldest man living in the world. The bugger's 117 years old at the time. I had to keep jumping it up — there was some sonofabitch in South America, and then another in Central Europe that were supposed to be older, so I finally got him up to 117.)

"Old Daddy Sherry's sitting looking out into what would be the street. Ramrod! Ramrod, is that you?" And Bill Fisher said to me, "What do think of taking the old man on the porch, and making it the opening of the play?" "Well my blood ran cold, the hair lifted on the back of my neck... it was 'Why the fuck didn't I think of that?'"

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Mitchell is currently working on a novel. "It does have a character in it that could be a serial killer; that's part of the energy."

Despite the fact that Mitchell is frequently known for one or two works, this does not bother him. "It's a matter of time. A good break-even sale is about 5,000 copies in Canada. Before Christmas I generally hit about 30,000. But it takes time and persistence for things to become successful."

The patients have been taken into the house in an experiment. They live in an apartment in the same house as Dr. Anders, who monitors their behaviour and medication. The typical W.O. Mitchell crotchety-old-man character appears in the form of Joe, the caretaker (Wally McSween).

The three women are left by themselves over Christmas as Dr. Anders is going to Lake Louise with her colleague, the (married) Dr. Wilson... "to ski," Harriet says suspiciously. In a paroxysm of righteous fury, goaded by the discovery of the baby that Agnes has 'found', Harriet locks Dr. Anders in and announces that she will be spending the holidays with them.

The three proceed to 'treat' Dr. Anders — giving her a test on her knowledge of proverbs, drilling her about her childhood, testing her perceptions of 'what is and what isn't'. Dr. Anders' psychiatrist-speak is turned on her as Harriet, backed by the easily-manipulated Agnes and Betty, lecture her on the importance of cooperating "for her own good". The daily medication ritual in which she is forced to join the others is also for her own benefit, despite the alarming symptoms she displays.

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