

# Entertainment

Expression of women's idealism as the mud of Europe embraced their sons' bodies

## Tale of McClung's fighting days

**The Fighting Days**  
Workshop West Theatre  
til April 20

review by Mac Hislop

Friday Evening, Kaasa Theatre. The Event: a play — *The Fighting Days*. The Troupe: Edmonton's Workshop West Theatre. The play was, as the CBC-type noted in introducing the play, a prairie drama grounded in the Canadian experience.

This play is set against the backdrop of a newly-settled Canadian prairie with all its vastness and the experience of loneliness and alienation peculiar to women.

This is not a play about the "heartrending country lane of broken dreams" experience of Prairie women. From an urban perspective (inasmuch as Winnipeg may be considered urban), the play concerns itself with the transformation of women from their traditional lot of "chasing cows" and making babies to their emergence as full citizens of their emerging country. The characters are women with their own profound strengths and human failings.

A moderate and very involved audience was on hand for this, the play's premiere performance. Sensitive eighties men with beards talked knowingly about their own feminist experience while meshing with mascaraless women proudly sporting their credentials as women. Grey leisure suits unaccompanied by ties rubbed embarrassingly against polyester florals. The crowd was adequately, although involvally, cool. The performance certainly engrossed all — many smiles were seen creeping across faces in the theatre and in the concourse.

Written by Wendy Lill, *The Fighting Days* is a poignant expression of women's suffragist

aspirations and their rampant idealism as the mud of Europe slowly embraced the inert bodies of Canada's dead, their sons. Lill effectively projects her profound understanding of the lot of Prairie women, the dynamics of the suffragist movement and the forces against which the movement had to struggle in the context of the larger Canadian political reality of the period 1912-1918. This play is both humourously charming and starkly analytical; like a dust cover flipped off a turgid chair. A whole new perspective of Canada comes to light through Lill's pen.

The play does not suffer from a heavy-handed polemical assault on men, but rather concentrates its energies on expressing in as compelling a fashion as possible, the aspirations and trials of women in this period. The play's central conflict focuses on the omnipresent political and moral problem — how does one deal with the compromise demanded when lofty ideals encounter the nasty reality of wartime Canada? In this light, this is not just a play about suffrage in Canada, but it is a play about the unavoidable conflicts and contradictions of modern political society. Furthermore, and more importantly, it is a play about Canadian people.

An objective view of the acting would describe the actress/actor's efforts as 'solid'. Hardly adequate. A purely subjective account would state that the actor-persons (?) were marked joy to watch.

Through Fanny (Jan Wood), the audience is introduced to and discovers the play's other characters: Lilly (Jude Bene), a reporter and Fanny's sister, Nellie (Edith Marshall), a committed suffragist, and McNair (Earl Klein), a newspaper editor in Canada's most miserable provincial capital. A neophyte farm girl, Fanny is taken to the city by her sister



Above: Scene from *The Fighting Days*

Inset: Edith Mitchell who plays Nellie McClung

where she embarks on an unwitting journey of self-discovery and increasing political involvement through her dual involvement as a newspaper columnist and as a suffragist. Wood does make a good go of her character and is generally convincing. At times she seemed to lose touch with her character. Long intervals of enjoyable performance are broken by moments of hesitation. The transformation of Fanny is well appreciated by Wood and she does a grand job of projecting the changes her character undergoes, although at times her discoveries seem too easy.

Lilly was a true joy to watch and very well done by Bene. She brought to her character a great deal of verve and energy which was effectively used to enhance her character and performance. While Bene was very much in touch with Lilly, she moved easily from Lilly's politeness into her other characters endowed with a plethora of Dear Abby names.

Nellie, while an admirable if not embracing character, was played in a necessarily restrained manner by Mitchell. Mitchell handled her role as it must be played, with a great deal of conviction and idealism tinged liberally with Nellie's acknowledgement of her own limitations, in the context of the war and her Imperial snobbery. Mitchell effectively conveyed the moral discomfiture of her character — a character pushed to choose between her ideals and reality by circumstance and personal interest.

McNair was brilliantly portrayed by Klein. Being both extremely witty and provocatively loquacious, McNair carries the masculine burden while being, in turn, a moderate and a fount of reason and security. Klein did a tremendous job of playing McNair — a most demanding part to play (and even harder to write) as at no point does McNair condescend to facilitate the emergence of women. Rather, women come into their own in the play on the strength of their own efforts — not by the "withering away of the man", but by the strengthening of women's identification with themselves. Klein was most enjoyable in his role.

Of particular interest is the production as a whole. The cast worked well together. At no time were their characters unbelievable nor left to drift. The play was well-written and very well-produced. Moreover, *The Fighting Days* accepted the challenge of coming to grips with extremely complex and emotional questions, and judiciously reflected a profound understanding and a delicate handling of those questions. Unquestionably this play is a must for anyone with an interest in Canada and Canadian theatre.



interview by Suzanne Lundrigan

Edith Mitchell plays Nellie McClung in Workshop West's production of *The Fighting Days*. Perhaps it's part of the transformation which an actor undergoes when preparing for a part, but she rather resembles McClung. Something about her eyes and gestures call to mind that fiery suffragist.

"Nellie McClung was a terribly committed woman. She believed in the power of women, their power to influence what was going on. She was not at all hard-edged, rather she was very gracious and very funny. She was an incredibly generous woman," explains Mitchell.

Though McClung did win the battle for the vote, she was not unfamiliar with defeat. "For example, she was very committed to the battle for prohibition... that's one battle she didn't win and yet she was never bitter."

Mitchell, who had done her homework on McClung — "I read lots of books, saw the NFB films made about her, and saw the production of *What Glorious Times We Had* based on McClung" — explains the relationship between actor and character. "As the actor you say the character's lines and words... somewhere along the line these words and lines become absorbed."

And what effect has this "absorption" had on Mitchell? "I have real admiration for her commitment. I don't feel that committed to the world, but I've become more aware of a desire to become active."

Mitchell has worked with Catalyst Theatre which is very issue-oriented. "At the Catalyst we dealt with everything from wife beating to child abuse."

Mitchell came into theatre through the back door. "I worked in administration. That required a lot of organization... I'm organized in some things. Administration is tough. People are always yelling at you."

She moved into acting and has been there for three years now. "This last year has been pretty lean. I hope to be in one of the Fringe Productions this year."

### IMPORTANT

Absence and deferral of Final Examinations  
(Hopefully this won't apply to you, but if it does...)

- Any student who is ill or suffering from severe domestic affliction is advised not to sit for a final exam, as these excuses can not cancel an exam already written.
- A Student who misses a final exam for these or some other reason may apply for a deferred exam.
- Documentation pertaining to such an absence must be submitted within 48 hours of the affected exam period(s) to the Registrar.
- Please contact your faculty for particular regulations.

If you have problems with these or any other concerns please consult your ombudsmen.

PAUL ALPERN

J. SHAH PEMBERTON

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