

More on Canada's Great Preoccupation:

Bordertown Cafe Reviewed



Bordertown Cafe

Written by *Kelley Rebar*

Director: *Terry Tweed*

Designer: *Shawn Kerwin*

Lighting: *Ian Pygott*

With: *Michael Ball, Michael Mahonen,
Jennifer Overton and Wendy Tatcher*

*The Playhouse, Theater New Brunswick
29.1.91*

Canadian stability, quirkiness and consistency is celebrated against the foil of American flamboyance, recklessness and unreliability in Kelly Rebar's highly entertaining play, *Bordertown Cafe*. The play opened last week Friday at the Playhouse in Fredericton. This is a play that examines with wit and impressive control the peculiarly Canadian preoccupation with being a close neighbour of the United States. However, while this theme is crucial to the play, it serves primarily as a metaphor for the more engaging study of family life in North American society.

Marlene (Jennifer Overton), a nervous child of a mixed marriage (Canadian and American) and participant in a mixed marriage (Canadian and American) lives with her son Jimmy (Michael Mahonen) in a small humble cafe located on the Canadian side of the Alberta/Montana border. Jimmy is seventeen and torn between his growing affection for an absentee American father and the monotonous stability of his "plain" Canadian mother. Faced with the choice of joining his father who has just gotten married to an American woman called Linda or staying on with his mother and working for his grandfather on a farm, Jimmy encounters a dilemma that soon involves his grandmother Maxine (Wendy Tatcher) and his grandfather, Jim (Michael Ball) in a moving unravelling of emotion and psychological histories that have shaped the lives of all the characters.

Kelley Rebar's script is compact and carefully trimmed

to ensure an unwavering pace throughout. It is the characters that make the play, for, it becomes clear that the humour is located in the details of their personalities and not in the occasional one-liners that do appear. Rebar succeeds in establishing character similarities between Marlene and her father Jim, both of whom are reserved and have a hard time expressing their affections, while the noisy and talkative Jimmy is patterned off his grandmother Maxine. The effect is a strong sense of family which makes what is essentially a simple kitchen sink drama a true study of human experience.

The struggle of the teenaged child who is the victim of divorce is not a particularly original theme; but then, nor are any of the themes we see on stage year after year. Refreshingly, Rebar's play imbues this eighties stock tale with a poetic humour that rests on the playfully exploitation of stereotypes that can be found in the relationship between America and Canada. The American Dream, complete with the myths of suburbia (where Jimmy's father promises to take him), adventure and pioneering, is treated as a type of psychological nemesis that haunts the Canadian psyche with a sense of inferiority. Ultimately, this Dream is shown to be largely inadequate and synonymous with unreliability and instability.

However, America is not seen as entirely diabolic by playwright. The frankness of Maxine and her inability to conceal her emotions serve as

important catalysts for change in the story. When, in the end of the piece, she declares that Jimmy's ultimate assertiveness is evidence of the American coming out in him, there is an element of truth intended. The curious interplay of strongly felt emotions and stoic restraint become physical symbols in the play and they lend the drama a realism that enhances the believability of the relationships. Ultimately, the disparate patterns of behavior that are associated with Canada and America are shown to be best expressed when they merge with one another. However, taken literally, Rebar's metaphor clearly asserts that the Canadian's sense of worth will only come when s/he begins to turn away from looking to the border for salvation, as Jimmy does by looking to his father for freedom from the humdrum existence on the Canadian landscape, and starts to look into him/herself for a sense of identity.

Despite these apparent symbolic levels, Rebar's play is a naturalist piece and Terry Tweed does not compromise that feature at all. Symbolic messages are allowed to emerge only as a series of ironies caught in the accidents of the plot and dialogue. The set, designed by Shawn Kerwin is realistic in its plainness and pragmatism. The kitchen of the cafe is typical of any truck stop in small town North America. When the second act opens we are treated to the interior of the restaurant area of the cafe. Again, simplicity abounds complete with the realistic touches of pepsi signs,

coca cola and hostess cake ads and an ancient juke box tucked away in the corner. Such realism demands dialogue that reflects this semblance of everyday life. The characters eat, drink, and cook while playing on stage. Time is real time and the actors have to effectively pace themselves through what is essentially two very long scenes. On the most part, Rebar's script adheres to the strictures of this form. She energizes the piece with the occasional variations as, for instance, when she allows Jimmy a number of asides and internal monologues which draw us further into his character.

The cast manages this with great skill. Wendy Tatcher who plays Maxine does not allow her portrayal of this saucy American woman to fall into caricature for cheap laughs. Her timing is impressive and she manages to exploit all the laughs that are inherent in her character. When playing beside Michael Mahonen, she is able to match his nervous energy effectively. Mahonen's performance is a studied one which sometimes looks like that of an actor trying too hard to restrain a tendency to overact. Whenever this self-consciousness is overwhelmed by the momentum of the drama and the performances of the other characters, Mahonen's Jimmy is powerful. The two less elaborate but equally challenging roles of grandfather Jim and Marlene are played with appropriate intelligence and restraint by Michael Ball and Jennifer Overton. It is clear that these are all

consummate actors who have been lucky to have been casted in the right roles in the same play. Terry Tweed's concern for detail and her careful eye for the articulation of emotional and psychological statement through the manipulation of special dynamics on the stage only serve to enhance the work. The result is good theatre.

Bordertown Cafe is TNB's third offering this season and it is the best yet. It surpasses Norm Foster's *The Affections of May* largely because the script is far superior. But there is more: while Foster appears to be laughing at his small town people in *Affections*, Rebar is enjoying her characters and lending them a dignity that cannot be denied. Shamata has given New Brunswick three very light theatre pieces. One looks forward to the production of *Ghosts* which will represent the only instance of non-comic theatre. One hopes that the lightfare, as professionally handled as it is by the company, will not dominate TNB's seasons for the next few years. That aside, TNB must be commended for looking to Maritime talent for its productions. Three Maritime residents were members of this ten person company. That is commendable.

Kwame Dawes