

Entertainment

"The reader must be willing to risk as much as I risk"

Lola Tostevin breaks poetic bonds

by L.A. Trofymow

A poet should be aware of the primacy of language and how it affects the body and the mind. It's very important that the body and the mind be counterbalanced.

To Lola Tostevin, it is important that she is defined as a feminist poet. She defines herself thus in a very wide context, going back to women's foremothers, who first were aware of living under "masculine ideology". What is important to Tostevin is that awareness, or consciousness.

"I am not a radical feminist," says Tostevin. "I am married; I have a son. I am very interested in trying to work things out between men and women. I don't believe in a separatist kind of 'female utopia'. I also do not take a political stand... To take such a stand means living in opposition..." To Tostevin, ethics come before politics.

She is aware of an existing "feminine economy" of language and "I don't pretend to speak for men" she says. "So much of the male economy of language is based on a language of opposition: the theory of structuralism, for example. To me, that is a constraint."

Tostevin is more interested in the regeneration of language: the more that the self and language changes, the more one explores the self. But the feminine economy is a language of literature, and must not be confused with speaking within the social constraints of the everyday world. In poetry, one attempts to break down these constraints.

Double Standards, Tostevin's latest book, ironically began with her desire to write a novel, not poetry. However, she found that the awareness of language kept interfering. "Perhaps I was self-effacing. The primacy of



Photo Bruce Gardner

Lola Tostevin is not a radical feminist.

language kept coming to the fore... Instead of the story, or the biography, language itself became the subject. What started out as a childhood narrative merges into abstract poetry and a 'warmer climate' of language".

The "warm water" of language is very rhythmic; it is closer to the body; it is tactile and textured. But "the reader must be willing to risk as much as I risk," continues Tos-

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tevin. "She must not close herself off, afraid of the intellectual or the abstract. I try to keep a balance between the emotion and intellect in my work.

"I was asked earlier, 'What is this neurotic obsession with language?' But every culture has had poetry, and poetry has focused on language. Language develops through the culture, and it's an ongoing process."

Our culture's obsession is with description, offers Tostevin. "I don't understand why people are so afraid of intellectual theory. It's only there to *flesh out thought*, as Smaro (Kamboureli) says." Tostevin notes a suspicion of the feminine economy of language. "They see it as an intellectual exercise, as pretentious."

She continues: "I don't want to change the culture, I want to change myself (through the feminine economy of language). But if enough people want to change themselves, then that will change the culture. Language is not the same as it was 300 years ago."

Tostevin's writing explores her daily life, her dream life, her intellect, her emotions, and her narrative life. Thus her writing is necessarily complex, but also rich. What is more important than description however, is the "underlying narrative". Yet Tostevin does have a need to describe, and so she has begun another novel. So far, she says, she's

followed "a pretty straight narrative line" without putting away the sound of language.

"Modern women have a particular need to verbalize... it's almost become an empirical social science, because it's the telling of past experiences." But Tostevin is more interested in *literature* than with verbalizing these experiences. "Language is an experience too. I want to move to that space beyond (women's) victimization, the stereotypes... to that space of *imagination*."

The most obvious victimization of women in literature is pornography, says Tostevin. But some male writers can write within the feminine economy: "James Joyce (can) — in his own sexist way" she notes. She also cites several French writers, and Kleist, an 18th century German author, as users of the feminine economy which, after all, does not belong to any particular group of people.

Tostevin finally notes that Descartes wrote in French rather than Latin so that more women could read his writing. "But he so simplified the language — perhaps because he thought women were stupid. His language became so *constrained* that he ironically developed a male economy of language in order to introduce philosophy to women.

"It's very nice, now, to be able to break those restraints."

An evening of dining and decadence

The Dining Room
Walterdale Theatre
til March 22

review by Gary Dhillon

Welcome to the insular world of A.R. Gurney's *Youth*. A world of decaying WASP values, a world which is illustrated in its many forms in the Walterdale Theatre's production of *The Dining Room*.

The play is a series of vignettes where six actors play the 57 different roles, varying from exuberant children to senile old men and women. In this apparent randomness there is one cohesive prop and symbol: the dining room. Each vignette makes some allusion to the dining room, whether straightforwardly or symbolically, but beyond this the similarities end. The variety is not unintentional though, for the playwright is presenting a complete vista of his world; and this includes as many dramatic situations as possible.

The success of this production depends on the skill of the actors. These actors do a creditable job, but at the same time reveal their strengths and weaknesses. Most of them exaggerate and thus overdo their roles as children at a birthday party. The exception is

Claire Mullen who gives a very funny and believable performance as a smug, little birthday girl. Mullen shows the most range with an equally good job as an old woman who no longer recognizes her family and wishes to go back to a house which has long been demolished — a disturbing, but nevertheless good, performance.

The other actors show their talents in specific roles. Brenda Brown is good as the bitchy teenager illicitly sharing drinks with an awestruck friend. Eva Nolan is innocently flirtatious as the housewife who helps a stockbroker turned carpenter with his work. Wayne Carpenter is excellent as the pioneer grandfather interrogating his money-seeking grandson. Gerald Osborne has a flair for the comedy of moral outrage and Ron Pearson presents a believable picture of a broken man confronting his daughter's more broken marriage and confused life. In all these roles the actors are believable, but in their other roles they seem too much like they are acting, which is not what they were striving for.

Despite its flaws, which included the occasional lighting difficulty, *The Dining Room* is worthy of attention for the complexity of its subject: a whole fading culture.



The Dining Room is a series of vignettes, all set in the dining room, in which only six actors portray fifty-seven characters.

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