

The Arts:

Factory Theatre Lab pushes Canadian plays

by Jenny Pearson

The idea of making plays in a factory would have sounded pretty surrealistic a few years back. Today, in terms of the basic "no nonsense" that characterizes progressive theatre, it figures. The image takes you right down to the bare boards of life, in the tradition which Theatre Workshop pioneered in the east end of London.

It is a world into which you go prepared for hard seats, audience participation, simplified scenery, low prices, politics left of centre and new plays which will knock you off your prejudices and make you think. The confrontation of actors and audience is close and informal and it is tacitly recognized that they are sharing the one scene — quite a different feeling from the traditional theatre, where they face one another like opposing armies across the proscenium.

So it is at the Factory Theatre which opened three years ago in an old candle factory over the top of a petrol station in Toronto. But there is a difference here from the workshop theatres of Britain. The Factory, with its commitment to presenting only Canadian plays, has coincided with a larger wave of Canadian nationalism which is at this time sweeping the country and finding expression in every aspect of life.

Talking to young Canadians, one meets this enthusiasm, this sense of newly discovered identity, surging up in great bursts of impatience with the colonial cloak which has for so long hidden Canada from herself.

Ken Gasse, the founder and artistic director of the Factory Theatre, is well aware that its present success in terms of recognition and support has a lot to do with having appeared at the moment it was needed. He told me in an interview in London: 'It was an accident of history: like they say about a great man, he is the one who just happens to be in the right place at the right time. This new nationalism probably dates back to 1967 (the year of Expo), but it has really come to flower in the seventies. There is a social and political climate in Canada now that is separating itself from the powerful American mythology and media, separating itself from its colonial history and orienting itself towards something that is more indigenous.'

The first 'indigenous' plays to appear at the factory were, not surprisingly, political in content. There was one called *Branch Plant* about a British company closing down a plant in Toronto and putting a whole lot of people out of work. Another attacked the American influence under the title *Two Countries*. The theatre's slogan

Canadian tenor blasts arts nationalism

Jon Vickers, Canadian-Born Operatic Tenor, attacked Nationalism and Commercialism as enemies of truth in art.

He said at the Annual Luncheon of the Canadian Opera Women's Committee in Toronto recently that every major opera house is afflicted by Nationalism.

"La Scala years ago fell from the pinnacle of the operatic world because of it... Paris completely collapsed because of Nationalism and is now struggling to regain its feet under a new International regime. London is in deep trouble, even the mighty Met has very severe rumblings."

He attributed the trouble to the fact that people are afraid.

"Are we going to allow our arts to be suffocated in a deluge of Nationalism as well as the materialistic commercialism which has been brought about by an Artificially-created public demand for the sensational?" he asked.

Listing famous artists such as Picasso and Maria Callas, he said: "they belong to the world."

"How can we hope to appreciate them or emulate or indeed have any basis upon which to adopt policy if we seek to view them from the cramped confines of self-seeking chauvinistic minds? "The arts must know no national, linguistic or color boundaries."

At a news conference, he objected to questions about when he will sing in Toronto.

"Whenever I set foot in this city I hear nothing else," he said. "It's always, 'when are you coming back?'"

"People go out into the world and they throw their talents into the marketplace of the world. If this country continues to think the only important thing is for Jon Vickers, a Canadian tenor, to come and sing with the Canadian Opera Company, they're nuts."

"I think it's incestuous and dangerous only to bring back Canadian people... the only way we are going to establish a higher standard in this country is for the people to observe and be exposed to the great."

in those early days was 'Discover Canada before the Yankees do'. But Ken Gasse insists that this concentration on political plays was not policy on his part: it just happened that these were the plays which came his way. The second year, 1971, produced a spate of comedies.

When he first declared that he would put on Canadian plays exclusively he attracted like-minded people by the very extremity of the stand he took. Within a year an audience was established. Some of the best actors and directors in Canada came to work there. And there was no shortage of writers turning their talents to the making of new plays, some of which have subsequently been performed in London and New York. There was and still is an exciting sense of corporate energy at work: writers, actors and directors all switched on to the task of "churning out plays".

Talented young people have flocked to be part of the venture, whether working on stage, behind the scenes, or on menial jobs like painting the theatre. Among those who painted the walls in 1970 was Rosemary Donnelly, a young English actress who is now Mrs. Ken Gasse.

We Three, You and I is one of the Factory's successful products, a short play by a young west coast Canadian, Bill Greenland, which produced shock reactions of violent enthusiasm and equally violent disapproval when it was performed in London last autumn as part of a "Festival of Canadian Theatre" brought over by a group from the Factory.

It is an example of the kind of effect you can get with an unstructured audience arrangement, because it is thrust like an unplanned intrusion into a situation where everyone is expecting a more light-hearted entertainment. A lady suddenly announces that she wants to make a two-minute appeal because it is "disseminated sclerosis week" (by an extraordinary coincidence, it was disseminated sclerosis week when the play came to London) and a girl who apparently has disseminated sclerosis gets up on her crutches, talking about her disability and exclaiming in anguish "I want to get married and dance with my husband!" Because its emotional power lies in being utterly believable, Gasse produced it for London with an English cast.

This play is obviously a long way from the overtly nationalistic themes the Factory opened with. Today they are not so interested in being anti-American or anti-British as in trying to discover what is

Continued on page 14