

The world according to Robertson Davies

interview by Laurie Greenwood

The *New York Review of Books* likened him to Thomas Mann. In the *London Observer*, Anthony Burgess wrote, "With Robertson Davies the Canadian novel may at last claim to be taken very seriously indeed." As Davies crossed the lobby of a downtown hotel in Edmonton last week, I worried about making an idiot of myself in front of one of my literary heroes. As if sensing this Mr. Davies immediately asked me about bookselling (something I am comfortable discussing), and from there our conversation turned to his new book *The Lyre of Orpheus*, his personal interests and some advice for aspiring novelists.

Davies' Cornish trilogy began with *Rebel Angels* and was followed by the novel shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Award, *What's Bred in the Bone*. A]-

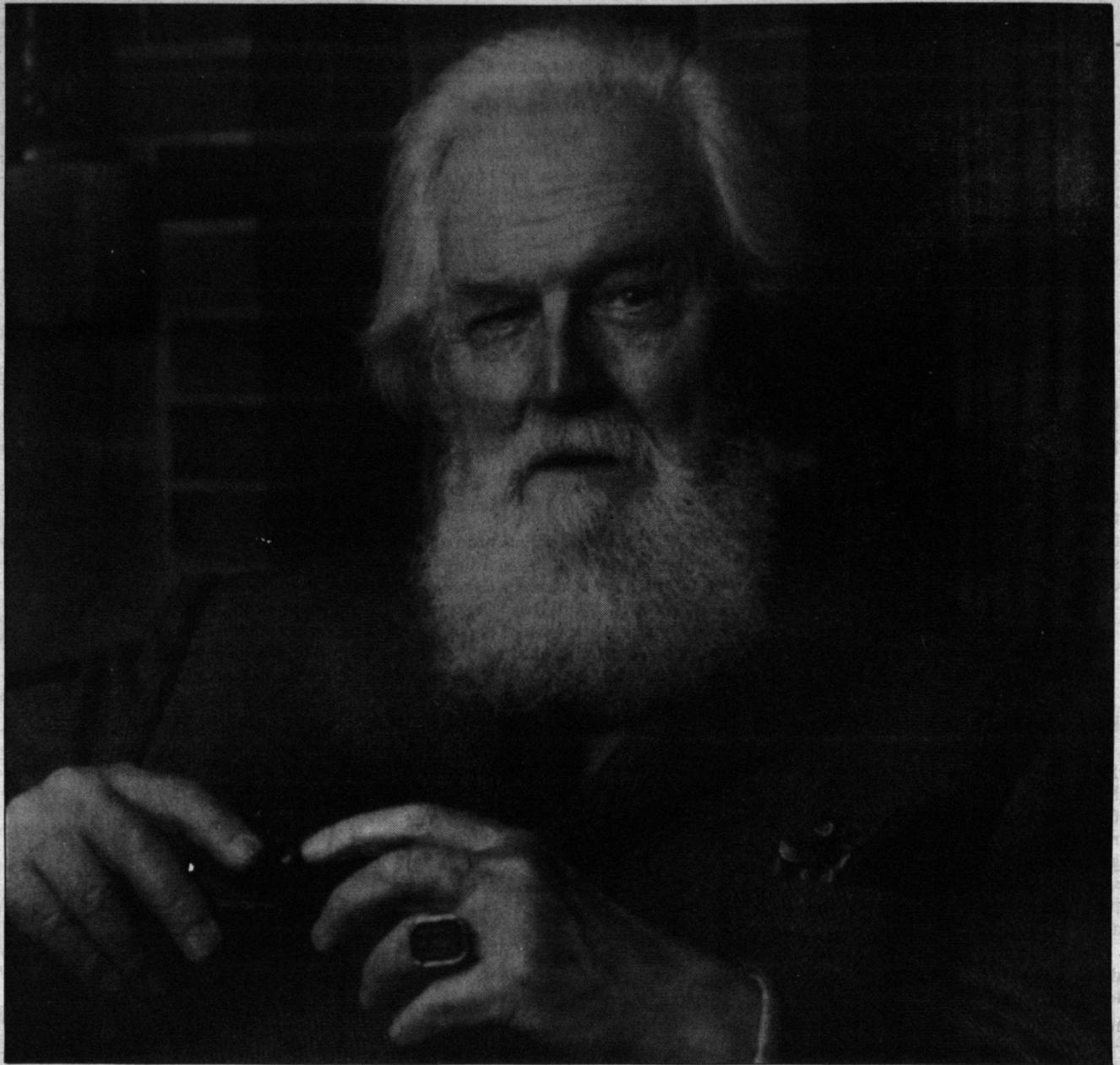
"Creativity is not something you do. If you're lucky creativity does you."

though Kingsley Amis won the Booker, Davies was thrilled to have been nominated. *The Lyre of Orpheus* is the last book in the series and centers around the Cornish Foundation and its attempt to resurrect an opera written by E.T.A. Hoffman in the early 1800's called *King Arthur, or the Magnanimous Cuckold*. A thoroughly unpleasant doctoral student named Hulda Schnakenburg is to complete the musical score while the Reverend Simon Darcourt undertakes the libretto. Overlooking everything is Hoffman himself (or "ETAH IN LIMBO," as Davies calls him) commenting on the characters and twists of plot. It is vintage Davies with wonderfully intelligent dialogues, eccentric characters and a good dose of humor. He manages to meld Jungian psychology, opera and Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* in a way few authors would ever attempt.

Recent criticism of Davies' work in *Macdeans* and *Books in Canada* accused him of pretentious characterizations and aiming at an older, academically inclined audience. Janice Kulyk Keefer went so far as to question whether Davies' witty narratives should be considered as "art." As much as I hated to do it, I ventured for his opinion on these comments.

"I love praise and I loathe criticism," he said with a twinkle in his eye. Concentrating on a schedule of readings and autograph sessions that already included 27 appearances in two weeks, he hasn't had time to follow the reviews. He said he writes for himself and he's his own best critic. Over 400 people enjoyed Mr. Davies readings from his new book at the University and at the Princess Theater last Thursday. A former actor and playwright, his stage presence was a real treat for his fans.

It disturbs Mr. Davies that his books are more widely read and respected outside of his native Canada, but he puts it down to a particular Canadian characteristic; being defensive and a bit shy about our attributes. In his travels he found that Euro-



Robertson Davies at 75: The author of *The Lyre of Orpheus* and 29 other books was in town last week for a reading on campus.

peans think of Canada as a very literary country, and laments the fact that he cannot find Canadian authors in the many airport bookstores he's frequented lately. Does he have a favorite Canadian author? Again there is a twinkle in his eye: "If I had one I wouldn't tell you who it was."

Davies offers three points of advice for would be authors. First, "get a job that puts bread in your mouth." He stresses that critical acclaim can take a long time and financial rewards are few. Second, he feels the experience of being a newspaper

journalist is excellent for someone who wants to write novels and suggested *Robinson Crusoe* and *Journal of the Plague Year* as required reading. Lastly, know why you are writing because as a career, it is very lonely. Writers should persevere no matter what the response to their work may be.

Creativity is a word Davies is uncomfortable with. He doesn't believe that a certain time of day or a particular location is conducive to writing. He has a workroom in his home and stresses the word

work. "Creativity is not something you do. If you're lucky creativity does you."

Davies recently celebrated his 75th birthday and with 30 books to his credit, it was difficult not to be in awe of this stately yet quietly funny gentleman. Our conversation was over all too soon for me, and when I got back to the bookstore I picked up a copy of *Fifth Business* and decided to treat myself to his books all over again.

Laurie Greenwood is a co-owner of Greenwood's Bookshoppe on Whyte Avenue.

High Class Brass has brass, class

High Class Brass with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra Jubilee Auditorium September 16

review by Pat Hughes

The trumpet duo of Jeff Tyzik and Allen Vizzutti took the stage at the Jubilee on Friday as the High Class Brass, dazzling the audience with their skill and style, living up to all expectations and putting on a great performance.

The way in which the program began was indicative of the performance which was to follow: the silent, expectant audience heard a tentative theme played by a lone trumpet, offstage to one side. That theme was answered by a similar, modified one, and the two combined to form a trumpet dialogue in full swing as the soloists entered from the wings, still playing. This was, in fact, the beginning to Vizzutti's Overture, thus opening the evening in distinctive fashion.

Tyzik and Vizzutti moved through the performance with singular ease and style, playing a fairly wide range of their own music, as well as their arrangements of

some borrowed themes. In particular, the High Class Brass Suite, composed by Vizzutti, was an effective showcase for the skill of the duo. Vizzutti called the Suite a "Mozart meets Bill Evans" piece, and this proved to be an apt characterization of several of their works, especially the Suite. Beginning on a light, brisk, "classical" theme, the piece quickly moved to a hip samba, Vizzutti and Tyzik alternately conducting the orchestra and playing their solos. The Brass Suite was brought off extremely well, as were all of the evening's selections.

Tyzik and Vizzutti were not the only stars of the evening, however. The Edmonton Symphony Orchestra, although relegated to a more minor position than usual, played the different arrangements extremely well. Backed by a small rhythm section, including Edmonton pianist George Blondheim among others, the ESO displayed a real feel for the music they played. The easy, swinging rhythms held none of the stiffness some might expect of a symphony orchestra playing jazz, and Tyzik and Vizzutti wasted no opportunity to sing the ESO's praises in this regard. Tyzik claimed that when most orchestras

play jazz or swing, they play around with it, not really treating it as music. Not so with the ESO, the Brass stressed; the orchestra adapted well to the change, playing fully on a level with the two soloists.

All in all it was an evening of unusual but pleasing contrasts. The reserved atmosphere of the orchestra and the hall combined with the street-performer style and friendliness of Tyzik and Vizzutti. The cavernous, cool feel of the Jubilee Auditorium took on that of an intimate ballroom during Tyzik's arrangement of Duke Ellington's "Sophisticated Lady" and, above all, the mixture of the more "classical" sound meshed with the dance-hall swing and rhythmic jazz. All of these contrasts together made for a very different, very enjoyable evening. Jeff Tyzik and Allen Vizzutti proved to be an excellent duo of performers, and a great pair of entertainers as well.

P.S. CTV was also in attendance on Friday, and it is rumoured that the broadcast will occur in early January. For more reliable information, however, it would be wise to contact the station and to keep an eye on your TV Guide.