

books: sheila walton

Well, Mary McCarthy's *The Group*, has finally appeared in paperback and those of us who didn't want to gamble on the hard-cover edition have finally found out what all the fuss was about. Despite the rave notices the book gives itself, I do not think that this is "clearly one of the best novels of the decade."

Of course it is always difficult to have a sense of perspective about a novel that is so close to us in time; but I suspect that although the book is an intensely interesting social document, it fails as fiction. It may be that my definition of the novel is old-fashioned; nevertheless, the book depends for its momentum, less on plot than on what can best be described as its element of gossip.

FOR WOMEN ONLY

Lionel Trilling says somewhere or other that art satisfies by doing what we dare not, and at a certain crude and obvious level, this statement describes what Mary McCarthy is doing in *The Group*. Because it is a book primarily about women, and about a certain class of woman, *The Group* tends to appeal to a limited audience. As far as I can tell, Miss McCarthy finds her most vocal admirers among that same group of young college-educated women about whom she writes, and perhaps their admiration stems from the fact that her characters do what the average Dalhousie female undergraduate does not dare to do (see recent sex poll). *The Group* satisfies her curiosity about a variety of interesting subjects, from losing one's virginity (Chapter 2) to the merits of breast-feeding versus bottle-feeding one's baby (Chapter 10). These "topics" are discussed in such a clinical manner, that at times it is more like reading a manual for brides-to-be than a novel, particularly in the episode in which Dottie goes to a birth-control clinic. It all sounds

the diagrams. Yet as social criticism, this coldly pragmatic section is brilliantly clever, since it documents a certain point of view in American society.

POINT OF VIEW

The mention of point of view suggests one of the more intriguing aspects of technique in this novel. Very often the narrative is in the third person, but from the point of view of a particular character. This technique eliminates the personality of the narrator but permits unlimited opportunity for irony, since the reader's impression is of eavesdropping on the stream of consciousness of someone other than Mary McCarthy. At its best, this is highly effective:

But if she could not match dear Gus, like a paint sample or snippet of material, with any of the charted neuroses the opposite, she found to her dismay, was true of herself. She seemed to be suffering from all of them. She was compulsive, obsessional, oral, anal, hysterical, and anxious . . . A sense of guilt transpired from her Sunday-night washing ritual, and she allayed her anxiety by the propitiatory magic of ironing and darning. The plants on her window sills were the children she could not have..

This character is Polly Andrews, the member of the group who comes closest to being a heroine, in the sense that she is the only one who might be termed a successful human being.

Unfortunately, Polly becomes less and less believable as the novel progresses. Polly has something for which one suspects the novelist has a sneaking admiration; Polly has class. She manages to live genteelly without the curse of materialism, but when she is described as making pomander balls and home-made jellies for Christmas presents,



the wryly ironic portrayal in the paragraph quoted above becomes disappointingly saccharine.

BEHAVIORISM

It is perhaps the loss of her characteristic irony which makes Miss McCarthy's presentation of Polly fall short. This irony provides the prevailing tone in the novel and is one of the strongest elements of unity in the work. This is in keeping with the fact that *The Group* is a social novel. It might even be termed a novel of manners, since the behaviour

of the characters is so important to themselves and, presumably, to the author. The women in the novel commit errors in taste, not sins: Norine and Kay are cases in point. It is ironical that Kay is given a tasteful funeral, in contrast with her own tasteless wedding. It is ironical, too, that Lakey, the pivotal figure in the group turns out to be a Lesbian, but apparently makes no breach of etiquette thereby.

The Group presents a rather despairing picture of life among

the upper middle classes. These supposedly well-educated females are adrift in a world controlled by men, but the men except for Harold, are powers, not distinct personalities. It is in its exposure of the reality behind the illusion of the Vassar '33 Class Notes that the strength of this novel lies, and it is Mary McCarthy's acuteness in recording social situations rather than her ability to conceive and execute a plot which makes the book worth reading.

theater mike walton

Leon Major

After a conversation which took up most of his valuable afternoon, the thing that impressed me most about Leon Major, besides his patience with bumbling student reporters, was the complete absence of pretentious clap-trap in anything he said. This is surprising in view of his position as Artistic Director - in itself a pretentious title - in a repertory theatre unique in English Canada, which has actually, miraculously, made box-office headway in this wretched city, of all places.

Yet the pretentiousness of his title is not at all reflected in the man. Major has no delusions about being a cultural messiah to the Maritimes. He seems too busy getting things done to spend much time pondering abstractions. He has ideals, but they must answer to such practical criteria as 'is it good theatre?' and 'is it good box-office?'

Major's practical nature and infectious energy combined with Shakespeare, himself a thoroughly practical dramatist, to produce this season what must be one of the definitive versions of *Twelfth Night*. We would certainly endorse the project of 'raising the cultural level of Halifax'. Major who would scoff at such a phrase, is also showing that such a project is not beyond the scope of concrete action. He and the Neptune Theatre deserve the full support of the city and the university.

POST MORTEM

Major described himself as

'happy, but not satisfied' with the past season. As far as the company is concerned, 'on the whole, each actor has improved, and therefore adds a greater contribution to the ensemble.' He was optimistic about public response to the Neptune citing an increase in attendance of about 3,000 for this year's summer season, over the corresponding July to October period last year. He pointed out that the gain is especially significant since although there were the same number of performances this summer, there were actually fewer plays. He felt, then, that there was evidence that 'the theatre is establishing itself as an institution in the community.'

He was emphatic in asserting that the Neptune is working towards its own policy, and not modelling itself on the Stratford or any other theatre, 'Our initial policy', he said, 'was to produce primarily new plays and those classics which have some contribution to make to our society. But we are limited by the amount of money we have to spend' unfortunately there is no guarantee that six new plays will take in money.'

WANTED - NEW PLAYS

New plays are apparently something of a problem. Major indicated a sheaf of manuscripts in his bookcase. 'We have a whole pile of new plays, but we don't have time to work with the playwright; it takes months to work with an author to get a script



ready for production, so that it's impossible at present to produce a play by an inexperienced playwright.' We hinted that on the other hand, there was no excuse for producing a Broadway play like *Come Blow Your Horn*. Major retorted that 'the Broadway type of play can't be ignored. . . . a theatre can't do King Lear every night.'

THE FUNCTION OF THEATRE

Though, not a visionary, Major does have a firm idea of where the theatre belongs in its society, and what it should be doing there. 'Its first function is to entertain, which can mean many things . . .

the second involves fulfilling a responsibility to its public. Seminars and workshops will be continued for those who want them. These projects involve a two-way contribution between the public and the theatre. The third function involves a responsibility to education.' Here Major produced a brief which he had been preparing for the Halifax Board of Education, stressing the need for students of English to enjoy the dramas of Shakespeare as well as learn about them in class. He suggests closer cooperation between the schools and the Neptune in order to develop discrimination and taste for drama amongst high school students.

Major also believes in close cooperation between his theatre and this university. He expressed a hope that there would be another joint seminar next summer, but 'probably not on Shakespeare'. He noted that attendance at last summer's Shakespeare seminar, held jointly by the Neptune and the University, was disappointing. Leitch is a fine scholar', he said, 'and should have been heard'.

CROSS - FERTILIZATION

He expressed enthusiasm over the Dalhousie Drama Workshop 'Any university has a responsibility to make its students aware of the arts one way or another, to help the student discover, investigate and wonder at great works. Dalhousie is fortunate in having a professional theatre here, and we are fortunate in having the university, as a possible source of talent and a source of informed, constructive criticism. University people have a passionate belief in argument which is good for theatre'. Major said he looks forward 'to a point where the Neptune can engage in a practical exchange with the university'. Walk-on parts, for instance, could be played by

student actors.

We asked Major if he intended to continue with the Neptune. He replied, 'Any person who works in a creative medium depending so much on contact with the outside world can contribute more by going out into it occasionally and coming back with fresh ideas . . . so it depends on whether the Board will ask me back, and on whether I'm feeling 'dry'. But in any case I don't wish to break my connection with this theatre'.

I was impressed, in the conversation, with the fact that Major does a fair amount of scholarly work in preparing his plays. For *Twelfth Night*, for instance, he consulted both Folio and Quarto versions and investigated the original staging of the play. His illuminating comments on this play showed that he could make a valuable contribution to a university Shakespeare seminar.

HARD WORK

Another impressive fact that emerged from the interview is that theatre is damned hard work. Although *Come Blow Your Horn*, with an already established script and style, only required three weeks of preparation and four weeks of rehearsal, the other plays this season presented more of a problem. 'I spent two and a half months in the preparation of *Twelfth Night* alone,' Major told us. Hard labour and long hours are also part of theatre work. 'Anybody who calls theatre 'sissy' should work here a week,' Major suggested, 'if they could last that long. When we are building sets, for instance we have to get up at eight and put in as many as eighteen hours a day'.

There's a challenge, philistines.