

Entertainment

No hotbed of new ideas

Davies' new Question blows mostly cool

By AGNES KRUCHIO

It sounded like a reasonable, even interesting proposition.

Robertson Davies' new play, *Question Time*, commissioned by the St. Lawrence Centre, was to have been an enquiry into the nature of the relationship of the private individual and the public personality — how do they co-exist within a politician?

"A play about power," Davies states in the programme notes, "and what power may do to a man, and what that man in turn does to the people around him, and to the country he leads."

The question could be dealt with in an interesting manner. What we are dealt out in this play, however, is a hash of burned-out pomposities, a clutter of obscure references that only historical scholars would know, let alone appreciate, and stuffy dialogue, overdrawn, flogged analogies and methodical, heavy-handed symbolism.

SHORTCOMINGS

The result is a play with all the shortcomings that Canadians are accused of having by Robertson Davies himself, curiously enough, in the programme notes of this very play — that is, being saturnine, humourless and stodgy. Interspersed with this are glimmerings of wit (usually squelched by being self-consciously

deliberate and overextended) and the odd hint at originality.

The dramatic technique used by Davies is a plane crash, with its victim, Prime Minister Macadam, hanging between life and death. Landing in a never-never arctic land by the romantic name of Les Montagnes des Glaces, he wanders in shock through his *Terra Incognita* — himself.

Subsequently, we are treated to scenes in Ottawa, where the P.M.'s friends and allies decide that the show must go on regardless, and that someone will have to take over his role as head of the country.

A film clip of a newscast of The National with the real Lloyd Robertson lends credence to the story. This technique, however, is eventually used so much that the value is worn thin by the time curtain calls roll around.

In the second act, we observe a session of the Parliament of the Self of Prime Minister Macadam. The question pursued through the meandering series of debates is: who is the Prime Minister? Should he live or should he die? Through maladroit tangents, we are given to understand that the characters are really about Canada.

History makes an appearance, an overdecorated rococo fop, as does

the National Animal — a blue-suited beaver who extols the virtues of his kind and its suitability to symbolize the land. An interesting idea, but by the time he leaves, we are glad to see the verbose beaver go.

The tedium of the second act is especially enhanced by a weak Prime Minister. The role demands someone with presence and Kenneth Pogue as Macadam is unfortunately nowhere near the regal personality he is supposed to portray.

The rest of the cast do their best with what is a most unrewarding script for any actor, and add some spark through sheer force of personality to make even some of the long-winded speeches listenable.

Jennifer Phipps presents a strong and dignified Prime Minister's wife, trying to maintain her integrity and that of her husband amid rumours of his imminent death. Some of her lines ("I did not marry a Prime Minister") bear strong resemblance to Margaret Trudeau's.

Robert Benson makes an entertaining beaver, although he cannot sustain what should have been only a cameo appearance but became instead an overelaborate exercise. Stephen Markle as the Shaman — the Eskimo witch doctor who guides Macadam on this trip into himself — offers a measure of vitality that his



Arnak (Diana Barrington) comforts the right honourable Peter Macadam (Kenneth Pogue) in Robertson Davies' *Question Time*.

lines lack. Diana Barrington offers another spot of warmth for the refrigerated viewer.

The technical aspects of the play are excellently handled and some novel and imaginative techniques are used. Murray Laufer's elaborate sets are quite attractive, although they do clutter up the stage at times — a projection of icebergs amid

styrofoam snow and cellophane ice is not really necessary.

The electronic score by Ann Southam is quite appropriate in conveying the mystery of *Terra Incognita*.

The play runs at the St. Lawrence Centre until March 22, nightly at 8:30 p.m.; student rush tickets are \$2.

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