

# of Exposures's Emma Orr

interview by Gilbert Bouchard

It had been a long day for Canadian actor Gale Garnett. Rehearsals for Citadel's current production of *Exposures* were winding down as opening night approached.

Over beer at The Intermission, the Citadel's posh watering hole, Garnett eased back into one of the soft leather couches and granted Gateway reporter Gilbert Bouchard this interview.

**Gateway:** Could you tell us a little bit about your professional background?

**Garnett:** Yes, I've been an actor — I say actor because I think actress sounds like a miniature actor — since I've been 13. I've worked and enjoyed all media although theatre is what I've done the most of and it is what I know best. Theatre is my home but I also like doing film, television, and radio. I've worked all over Canada; I'm from Toronto. I was born in New Zealand but I've lived in Toronto since age 11. I also have a place in New York since I work a lot in the States. If you work in the U.S. you need a place in either New York or Los Angeles and I hate L.A. I've worked in films and T.V. in California and Europe.

**Gateway:** Could you describe your role in *Exposures*.

**Garnett:** Well, the lady I'm playing is called Emma Orr, who was a real character. The play is based on a true story although it's been somewhat fictionalized by the playwright. The play takes place just at the turn of the century in 1898. Emma is a woman like myself or friends of mine. She's interested in art, travel, learning things, having adventures, and making love. But the difference between Emma and I is that in 1985 you're allowed to be interested in these things and you can be a single woman and pursue them, but in 1898 women were expected to be married and to stay married and live wherever their husbands lived. Emma has a bad marriage and she's living in the middle of nowhere (as she calls it) on a farm outside of Galt, Ontario. A very poor farm, with a man she's not in love with. She wants to travel and have all these adventures, but Victorian society being what it was, she's trapped — she's trapped by the social codes of that time for women. That's what the play is about — her ability and inability to deal with that.

**Gateway:** Was the role difficult to do?

**Garnett:** Yes, but in a good way. It takes quite a bit of caring and concentration. I'm off stage very little. Emma goes through a lot of emotional changes. There's also a scene in the play that has some nudity in it, but it's not some cheap porno nudity. In Victorian times they had these racy postcards that were very popular. In the play Emma poses for some of these cards as a way to get off the farm, to make money. She and a man she loves decide to make these post cards and there's a scene where that had to be done. One has to get used to taking one's clothes off on stage. I felt very shy about it at first, but my director Tom Beniely-Fisher, was wonderfully supportive and non-chauvinist and good about making this comfortable, making it true rather than cheap. My co-star who was in



Photo Bill St. John

that scene with me, Geoffrey Saville-Read, was also terrific. If he had made me self-conscious I don't think I could have done it. But yes, it was hard work doing the show.

**Gateway:** You did a one woman show last year at the Rice. Are you planning to revive that show, and are you doing any other writing?

**Garnett:** That show was *Gale Garnett and Company* and it went wonderfully well here at the Rice and the audiences were very warm to it. I do that show a couple or three times per year, or at least I try to. But the show changes every time. The show is semi-improvised half the time anyway. I add new characters and if the characters feel like they're getting tired I take them out and put other ones in. It's all a collection of characters, just like Lily Tomlin has a collection of characters or Gilda Radner. This is my collection of characters. So I'll always do that play. I am working on two other plays; one's called *The Mythellany*, based on mythology and the other is *Women's Rites*. *Women's Rites* is based on some of the rituals involved with being a member of my gender group. Just things that happen to women from the time they're little girls to the time they're very old women.

**Gateway:** You mentioned that you're writing a script for the CBC?

**Garnett:** Yes, my very first radio script. I've never written a radio script before. I've written the first draft and I've received my "carping" notes from my producer. Now I've got to do the final draft based on some of his notes and some of the things that I want to improve. The script is for *Vanishing Point* the surrealistic show on CBC-FM at 10:30 Saturday nights. We haven't taped it yet so I don't know when it's going to be on.

**Gateway:** Was it difficult doing your one woman show?

**Garnett:** Well, I love working with other people if they're good. But it's also wonderful to have a show that belongs to you, lives in a duffel bag, that you travel around from theatre to theatre with. Actors don't get to own anything. We have to leave the costume in the dressing room and go on after each show, but if it is your show you get to keep it. I like having something belong to me that I am the producer, director, and actor of. It may sound egotistical but people don't really know how much at the mercy of other people actors are. Other people hire us. Other people in a sense design our work for us to a great degree. To have something that is entirely your own creation is very rewarding. I find the rewards of a show like *Gale Garnett and Company* outweighs any of the dangers or hassles.

**Gateway:** You also mentioned dividing your time between Canada and the United States. Is this difficult?

**Garnett:** I divide my time among the whole world. It's not just Canada and U.S. I have bases in three places. In Toronto I live in a collective house with other actors and writers. In New York I have a place of my own and just recently got a small studio in Athens, Greece. Greece is my spiritual home, I think I must have lived there in another life, because I love it so much. There's something

special between Canada and Greece. For some reason it shouldn't work because we are a cold weather climate and they're a warm weather climate, but there is a very happy exchange between the two countries. I don't know why, but I know it's true.

**Gateway:** Seeing that you do both film and theatre work, from an actor's point of view do you think there is any difference between the two?

**Garnett:** They are different, but they're the same as well. You must be prepared when you're acting. You must know who your character is, you must know what she wants, what causes her pain, what gives her pleasure — all of that. All that preparation work is the same. What is different is the actual work process. In the theatre, you've got the audience out there, and you're doing it every night you have to re-create it every night; the audience becomes another actor. When you're doing a film, the audience isn't there so if you say something funny you have to assume it's funny because you won't hear anybody laugh, but by the same token you have this incredible stillness in which to work and if you get it right you've got it right forever and you never have to do it again because it's on film. You get to play beach scenes on real beaches and horseback riding scenes on real horses. That's all real fun. I enjoy both. I think for me theatre is a major craft, and film is great big toy, but I love both.

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