

When is a smile not a smile? When it is absolute

THE ABSOLUTE SMILE, by George Jonas; **KINGDOM OF ABSENCE**, by Denis Lee, House of Anansi, \$1.95 each.

Since George Jonas came to Canada in 1957 from Hungary, having been born in 1935, a certain pessimism about human affairs wouldn't seem a surprising mood to find in his poems.

In fact, pessimism is more than a mood here; it's what the poems are made of. It hangs over everything Mr. Jonas deals with like smoke—admittedly aromatic smoke, quite beautiful to breathe.

The cover of *The Absolute Smile* has a photograph of absolutely smiling people at a cock-tail party. Mr. Jonas is worried about them, and his own place in their world:

*They talk about the business,
the weather,
there is a faint click as they
lock the door.
only a few of them would hurt
a fly
and all of them support a
family.*

Immediately he asks, "Will they be caught? Is theirs the perfect crime?" And ultimately the answers are yes and no respectively:

*I think one sees any city in a
different light
After discovering that the
bottoms of overturned street-
cars
Are reasonably bullet-proof,
though one should never
Be more than fifteen feet from
the nearest doorway.*

So watch it, you smiling people. But Mr. Jonas is about to man no barricades; his mood is not "I accuse", but "I worry". Or perhaps "I'm too numb to worry":

*I have little to say about the
structure of society,
There may be certain letters
to write occasionally,
Certain amounts to pay when
they become due,
But it is against the law for
some people to hurt me.*

The tone is unmistakably fixed in the next two lines: "In view of this I continue to lead/What I am told is an existence . . ."

All this could become a bit tedious if Mr. Jonas were less sure of the nuances he can get his grey quatrains to express.

As it is, he contrives to ring changes on his despair with some gusto.

Perhaps it is from his having "slowly come to the conclusion/that I am not a very personal thing" that the real toughness of these poems derives.

And every so often Mr. Jonas forgets his role as nervous guest at what Pauline Kael has called the "Come-dressed-as-the-sick-soul-of-Europe party" and is betrayed into a more passionate indignation, as in these lines concluding a poem

about the cannons fired at President Kennedy's funeral:

*We who are temporarily left
behind
Should be more compassionate
We should not torture without
a good reason
The frightened and lonely dead
A time will come when we
ourselves
May wish to rest and forget
And we should not discharge a
gun
To honour a man who was shot
in the head.*

All in all, *The Absolute Smile* is a distinguished collection of poems. Mr. Jonas' range is narrow, but he cuts deep.

I've not left enough space to do

DANSE MACABRE

*The dead travel too fast for me
I don't see how I can escape them.
They catch up with me, even pass me by,
And I stand alone in the circle of their dance.*

*The moon is made of rocks, they leave no trace in the
sky,
The earth digests them, who knows their address?
Even their fingerprints are obliterated.
Even the FBI could not find them.*

*The dead travel too fast. One day
They sit grinning on my shoulder
Then with a groan of pain, a shriek of warning,
They disappear into my future . . .*

from "The Absolute Smile"

Mr. Lee's book justice, but I don't think the book itself quite does justice to Mr. Lee's obvious talent.

There are a few poems here that are pretty successful in a blustery way, dense and choppy like Hopkins or Berryman but without quite enough substance to justify the shouting.

The less successful poems fall on both sides of this punchy style: some of them are stiff and pre-

tentious ("My subject is the absence of the real/in time; the deprivations of the tongue . . ."), others are shrilly chatty ("Mind you we mean it passionately, the two of us,/Blake and me; it's the courage bit.")

Nevertheless, there are splendid passages that leap out of the poems they're trapped in. Mr. Lee's next collection may be superb.

—John Thompson

Arts Calendar

Music: Handel's Messiah (again)

The big thing this week is the most enterprising new theatrical venture for a long time: the Newman Club's full-scale production of John Osborne's *Luther*.

This searing, scatological tribute to the Christmas season will happen next Wednesday through Saturday in the new SUB theatre at 8:30 p.m.

If ever a promising production deserved your support, this one does. So help the Newman Club celebrate the Luther anniversary: turn out for *Luther* in droves.

Tonight Hugh Bancroft will be playing the organ with the Centennial Singers singing along at St. Joseph's Cathedral at 8:30 p.m., courtesy the Women's Musical Club.

Tomorrow evening and Sunday afternoon (8:30 p.m. and 3 p.m. respectively) the gala Edmonton Symphony production of Handel's *Messiah*, with Joan Maxwell, Victor Braun, Charles Bressler and Bethany Beardslee as soloists, will be presented at the Jubilee.

If you attend the Sunday afternoon *Messiah*, you can leave your Saturday and Sunday evenings free for two Department of Music programs.

Saturday the Department will present the University of Western

Ontario String Quartet; Sunday, another in its own series of Bach programs. Both concerts are at 8:30 p.m. in Con Hall, for free.

And next Wednesday at 8:30 p.m. in the Jubilee, Celebrity Series presents violinist Tossy Spivakovsky.

Bear in mind that on December 17 Le Theatre Francais d'Edmonton will present two performances in the new SUB theatre of *Le Journal d'Anne Frank*, at 3 and 8:30 p.m.

And the Citadel's holiday offering is *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, which some of you may like to compare with Richard Lester's campy film version.

Speaking of film, the Alberta Geographical Society is showing the NFB's flashy *Helicopter Canada* at 8:30 p.m. in TL-12 next Wednesday.

And may I trespass on Gordon Auck's territory enough to urge you all to see *The Shameless Old Lady* at the Roxy before *The Sound of Music* rears its ugly head there? It's a superb little film which says about ten times more about human freedom than *Blow-up* even begins to.

—John Thompson

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