

Writers bomb on nuke panel

By CHRIS WARREN

"I don't think in a sense that I have anything worth saying," says Nobel literary laureate William Golding. "Perhaps in this situation there isn't anything worth saying." Tuesday's Authors' Festival panel, *Writers in the Nuclear Age I*, posed the question, "Do writers have special responsibilities over and above what their predecessors had, now that our planet can be totally destroyed by the push of a button?" The timid and ambiguous responses to the question left this reviewer disappointed and dissatisfied.

Members of the panel, moderated by Toronto columnist June Caldwell, were seemingly afraid to take an overtly apolitical stance as artists, even though the drive of their comments was that writers were best simply to "celebrate," as Mr. Golding has it, "the extraordinary value, the ecstasy as well as the brutality—the infinite possibility both ways—of the human creature." British poet Michael Hulse's notion that "whatever we say is said against death" reflected a tenuous unanimity that the act of writing in itself was some-

how political, or at least optimistic.

But Mr. Golding's brief and rather despairing presentation was perhaps the closest to an unequivocal stance that writers do *not* bear these "special responsibilities." In fact, his was an admission, again the most badly stated, that writers feel helpless in the face of a possible nuclear holocaust. When an esteemed writer says "the only thing one can do is be frivolous," it's hard to tell whether this is an observation or a prescription.

Judith Merrill, Toronto-based science-fiction writer and anthologist, stood as the sole pro-"propagandist" (as she called it). Noting the two events of this century which in her opinion first gave the common citizen a feeling of complete political powerlessness—i.e. the world's discovery of the death camps and the destruction of Hiroshima. Merrill asserts that it is the duty of writers to be courageous enough to combat that feeling.

Merrill was the last of six panelists to speak. The first, US short story writer Alice Adams, merely read a few pages from a recent story. The following question period also revealed the curious strain of irreso-

luteness surrounding the problem of a writer's obligation—if there is one—to take a stand on the arm's race.

Though Sheila Fugard (S. Africa) and Julia O'Faolain (N. Ireland) both deal in their fiction with overtly political topics, they define their tasks as writers *vis-a-vis* the "nuclear age" in largely vague terms. "In looking at nuclear catastrophe," Fugard says, "I feel that one has to be aware of the immediacy of life now." O'Faolain, citing the symbolic actions of the Greenham Common women, maintains that "literature should be an attempt to make the world more ambiguous"—an idea in itself which could hardly be more ambiguous. She adds, "If

you preach anything at all only the converted listen."

The panel was noticeably lacking in Third World writers, and there is a temptation to think that had one or two been present, they would certainly have seen it as their task to be politically engaged, but perhaps not with a question so seemingly nebulous and intangible in their experience as nuclear war. The nature of the kind of human inclination nuclear and all war represents was glossed over, even in the writers' earnest pronouncements on the terrible prospects of nuclear devastation.

One thinks of Milan Kundera's desperate "laughter and forgetting" or the Polish writer Tadeusz Borowski who, after surviving Auschwitz, stuck his head in a gas oven five years later in complete despair. One thinks of Par Lagerkvist's



Dwarf and Elie Wiesel's mediocre dissident poet in *The Testament*, and the feeling of frustration with the panel's wavering is heightened.

If, as Buber thought, indecision is the essence of evil, the indecisiveness of these noted and deeply serious writers *should* be a source of worry and dissatisfaction. Let's hope the panelists in the second installment of the seminar, this afternoon, including Margaret Atwood, Kenzaburo Oe and Ursula K. Le Guin, will create more debate and examine the problem more closely than those of the first.

Abstract language given context

By CHRIS WARREN

Over beer, wine and mussels at Harbourfront's Spinnaker restaurant, some professional and aspiring translators got together last Saturday to discuss the tribulations of the translating business. The lunch followed the first "Translators' Seminar," one of several special panel discussions at this year's International Festival of Authors, in the Premiere Dance Theatre.

One of the five highly esteemed translators, Alberto Manguel, editor of the *Black Water* anthology of fantastic literature, is a part-time professor at Vanier College. He is presently publishing a second volume of *Black Water*. A translator of both French and Spanish, Mr. Manguel, born in Argentina, says he translates a story "because I want other people to read it—I want to give the reader some impression of the way it impressed me."

Literary translators—not usually a very visible element in the writing trade—often grapple with time-consuming and frustrating obstacles. Paul Wilson, translator of the first foreign-language novel to win a Governor General's award (Josef Skvorecky's *The Engineer of Human Souls*) is presently working on letters from prison of the Czech novelist and playwright Vaclav Havel. In this author's case, the language is deliberately convoluted and abstract, in order to baffle state censors. The problem then is "how to translate a contrived language and to understand the underpinning thought, which is also abstract."

The panel, which included Leila Vennewitz, translator of Heinrich Boll, and Sheila Fischman, who recently won a Canada Council award for her translations of Michel Tremblay's work, looked at more mundane obstacles. Obstinate editors, densely-written originals, archaic prose styles, and untranslatable phrases all stand as the kind of problems to expect, if you are cherishing the secret desire to translate a great but sadly neglected novelist.

How exactly to get into this business, however, remains a mystery.

The participants in the seminar are native, school-taught, and self-taught speakers of languages. But their reasons for taking on the often thankless task of translating are similar. Mr. Wilson, for instance, learned Czech by living in Czechos-

lovakia for 10 years, learning the language "like a child." He translates only Czechoslovakia's 400 or so banned writers, since "when these authors dig down and try to discover what has happened to them, we find that some of the same tendencies are happening in our own society." International writing "expands one's understanding of the world," says Wilson. For Sheila Vennewitz, it's necessary "to dispel myths and draw the human race closer together."

But the attempt, no matter how diligent, is always limited. "We never," says Mr. Manguel, "get across as much as we would like to."

"Issues of literary translation" appeals to a particularly specific interest. The audience was such that an invitation to join the panel for lunch was not completely spurious. But, hopefully, the informal yet serious approach to audience interaction with professional writers will apply for other events in Harbourfront's rich line-up this year.



York professor Alberto Manguel (yup, with the beard), chats with fellow translators at Harbourfront.

Tomorrow look for a panel on "the alleged imperialism of the English language," while on Saturday the second installment of the translators' seminar will take place. Readings include Mordecai Richler, Margaret Atwood, and Frederick Pohl (tonight), and E.L. Doctorow, William Golding, Brian Aldiss, Judith Merrill, Samuel Delaney, and Ursula K. Le Guin Friday and Saturday nights.

Keep your eye peeled for continued coverage of the Author's Festival in next week's *Excalibur*.

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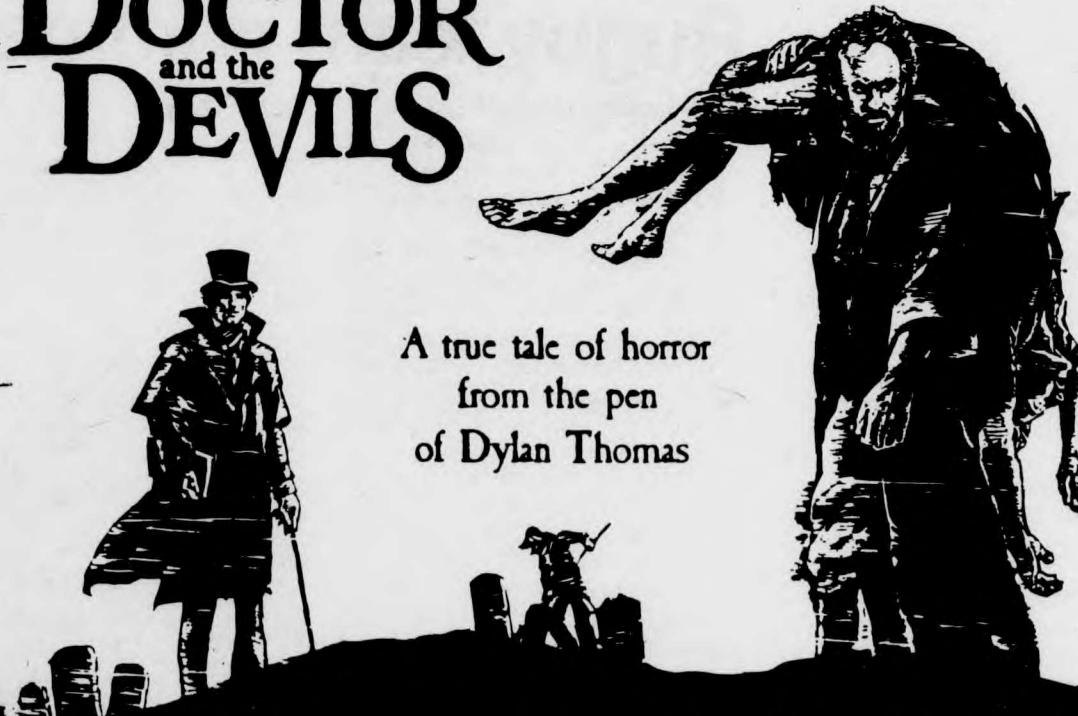
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