

# entertainment

## Berton's latest - a 30's soap-opera

By Eric Walberg

Pierre Berton - playwright, author of documentaries and filmscripts (even a musical comedy!), newspaper reporter, TV celebrity, winner of 3 Governor General awards, the Stephen Leacock Medal, the ACTRA Award, Officer of the Order of Canada, recipient of 2 honorary degrees and the City of Toronto's Civic Award of Merit, etc., etc. . . .

Dr. Berton must be a truly Canadian writer if anyone is. Surely. Probably every home in Canada is graced by at least one of his 2 dozen books, the most recent being *The Dionne Years - A Thirties Melodrama*.

Certainly he writes about things Canadian - his repertoire almost suggests a paranoia which apparently can only be quelled by continually churning out Canadiana

and memorabilia, as if, by convincing us, he hopes to convince himself that Canada really is the True North Strong and Free.

However, a mastery of trivia and sensation, though it may titillate, is not in the last analysis convincing.

The subject matter of *The Dionne Years* is fascinating. The book will undoubtedly bring in a bundle as well. The Dionne quintuplets were truly a miracle of nature - the only time in the history of mankind that quintuplets (and, even rarer, identical quintuplets) have survived into adulthood. And it happened at the height of the Depression in a tiny Franco-Ontario community near North Bay, to a 26-year-old mother of five.

In a backwoods farmhouse, without electricity or running water, their delivery began with only a midwife. They were forced into life in front of an open wood stove by a country GP, and fed warm water with an eye-dropper until their story made them celebrities on an international scale.

Meaty stuff this - yet it is pointless to rehash this material merely to produce a sensationalist bit of fluff, what Berton refers to as "hawking" and "recycling" in reference to earlier versions of the "Quints"



story. It is never made clear what exactly differentiates this magnum opus from these previous money-makers.

Dr. Berton is certainly an undisputed master of trivia. Did you know, for instance, that Fox-Movietown actually filmed the assassination of King Alexander I of Yugoslavia?

He is always the quintessential liberal, reassuring the reader several

times that those involved really "were sincerely convinced that what they were doing was in the best interests of everyone." Did I hear someone say Pangloss?

Unfortunately, these less endearing traits are not relieved by a coherent analysis of the Dionne phenomenon and its relation to the so-called "Dionne years".

Rather, we are treated to sensationalistic scraps which are never

mediated by analysis. Take, for instance, such words of wisdom as those of our great Lord Thomson of Fleet (formerly Roy Thomson of North Bay): "it's probably better to try like hell to get a job and fail than just to walk in and take a handout; I did it, you know."

Or Berton's only overt reference to anything political, when he related that North Bay was so badly hit economically "that a communist candidate would have little difficulty in carrying sections of the riding outside the urban centres." Such fleeting references do not count as analysis in my book.

It appears in retrospect that the "Quints" were a God-send to North Bay, bringing in American and Canadian tourists and their \$s (and in so doing, presumably, keeping out the Communist Hoards). They were also a God-send to Beehive Syrup, Carnation Milk, and thousands of other bits of our commercial madness. A drop of Beehive syrup *chanced* to be fed to the Quints along with their warm water just after their births. Beehive has inhabited fields of clover ever since!

The commercialism which fed on the Quints was truly incredible. Berton blandly relates fantastic battles between money-mad advertisers, seemingly without succumbing to nausea. However the commoditization of the Quints, their parents, and their doctor eventually ruined their lives. This is only hinted at here, and none of the surviving Dionnes is even interviewed to confirm this.

Presumably, a history which revealed the period and the phenomenon of the Dionnes as a tragedy would not make a good Xmas present (this commodity's obvious goal) and especially considering the uncomfortable economic parallel with today which it would entail. Hence we are fed the trivia and told the story just as if it actually were a 1930's "melodrama".

We certainly get no understanding of the forces which shaped the insanity of the Dionne cult (and the "Dionne years"). Nor is Mitch Hepburn's invidious role and his motives in taking the children away from their parents clearly analyzed.

The Dionne phenomenon was a classic case of Shirley "Dimple" à la canadienne. The masses might not have their bread, but make sure they have their circuses!

Their story is a tragedy. This book is a tragedy, or better, a travesty. They were a source for "filthy lucre" (almost all American), just as this book will be.

Perhaps one of Berton's next dozen books will be more worthy of your coffee-table! Until then, if you want to try to understand the "Dionne years", read Dorothy Livesay's memoirs of the 30s. If you want to know the Dionnes' story, read their own version - *We Were Five*, a bitter revelation of their personal tragedy.

## Cabaret's "Sin-strip" confusing

By Cynthia Rantoul

Last week's York Cabaret production of *Sin Strip* left the audience confused.

It was difficult to determine whether the object of the play was to entertain or present a social statement on prostitution, and it never became clear.

Having a marvelous array of witty songs, *Sin Strip* had the means to produce a highly entertaining play. But apparently the authors did not believe humour was sufficient. They had to try drama.

Picture the dilemma of the writer(s), who had such a vast array of material concerning prostitutes, had the opportunity of a lifetime to have fun with it, but for some reason were induced to add some drama.

Drama for its own sake has a place that no one should question. If the slant could have stayed on one side of the fence, be it drama or humour, the play would have been effective. But the attempt to offer the best of both worlds did not work. Even David Crombie might have had a hard time wondering if it was a play about the strip or not, and he should know!

The role of Madame (played by Faye Frith) was a frightening one. Her lewd jokes were probably justifiable, but her sad and serious overtones killed levity even when it had a chance to blossom. Whether this was due to overacting or taking her part too seriously is unclear.

The role of Velvet (played by Cheryl Cecchetto) was more than once supported by the highlight of the show "Titania" (Jayne Ransberry).

Ransberry's absorption in her role and lack of inhibition in making the part realistic should have been studied by Cecchetto. It was not to director Kate Lushington's credit that Cecchetto carried a lead song when it was so obvious to all that her voice had neither the strength nor the training to handle it.

Monologues suffered from a disease called disinterest. It was evident that the actors were not too keen on this section of the play, and the punch so necessary to that type of presentation was definitely lacking.

If the calibre of the writing could have kept up to the staging and lighting direction, the play could have been an unquestionable success.

## History relived

# An 1895 political power-play

By Colin Smith

James Reaney's *The Dismissal*, as staged by the NDWT Company, is a lengthy (two hours and 50 minutes including two intermissions), active and penetrating political satire laced with numerous dramatic interludes.

Based on a true incident, the play recalls a chunk of repressed Canadian history, namely the 1895 strike conducted by the students of U. of T.'s University College.

The story, long and convoluted, is a partial reason for *The Dismissal*'s length. Basically it revolves around the dismissal of one Professor William Dale and the expulsion of the Varsity editor, James Tucker, over their airing of the nepotism present in hiring a history professor at a salary twice that of the usual staff (he was the Chancellor's son-in-law!).

This affair, which implicated people as high as the Minister of Education of Ontario, resulted in student boycotting of classes and demands of Dale's reinstatement and a Royal Commission investigation. The effort was scuttled largely thanks to the political malingering of one William Lyon Mackenzie King (at that time a fourth-year student at U. of T.) and the withdrawal of evidence by the student's key witness. Dale was not reinstated and the Commission, of course, found no improprieties.

Able directed by Keith Turnbull, *The Dismissal* adopts a free-form flow of music, vignettes and dadaist satire, along with a tremendous economy of sets, some fanciful back projections and a keen feeling for space, time and period detail.

Adding to the dramatic-satirical end of things are such devices as the employment of nearly every member of the cast in multiple roles, leading to some hilarious incongruities as women wander around onstage wearing men's beards; the fracturing of time-space flow; symbols that parody themselves; and good use is put to the overlapping, repetition, and group utterances of lines.

The sturdy cast is effective throughout, with standout performances being delivered by Nancy Beatty, Jay Bowen, Peter Elliott, Jerry Franken, Rick Gorrie, Ken

Parnell, Allan Stratton and Sandy Webster.

In closing, *The Dismissal* is a valuable play for anyone interested

in knowing about the political machinations that once occurred in Canada that, apparently, have been continuing into the present.



Freshmen initiation in the coal cellar of U of T's University College.