

Ontario playwright is a staunch regionalist

James Reaney could well be considered the most important playwright writing about the Ontario experience — and one of the finest playwrights in Canada. His Donnelly's Trilogy which was first presented at The Tarragon, later toured across Canada and was given a tremendous reception. He also co-wrote Baldoon, recently presented by the NDWT.

Excalibur asked him about his regional sensibility and touched on upon his views regarding Quebec, Canadian Theatre and the Canadian experience as a whole.

By BOB POMERANTZ

Excalibur: Why are your works primarily Ontario-based, rather than "Canadian"?

Reaney: I was born on a farm

near Stratford and I possess a rural sensibility. I used to hear dozens of stories about our own locality in southern Ontario. I'm a regionalist. I figure that we might as well start with local things. If you scratch deep enough locally you'll eventually get "Canada".

Excalibur: On the subject of regions, what is your view on the current situation in Quebec?

Reaney: Well, they voted in an honest government for a change. If Ontario had been as interested in itself as Quebec is — viewed herself as 'region' instead of the dominators of Canada, we'd be much more sympathetic. We can't get used to the Quebec nationalism, simply because there's been so little "Ontario" nationalism. The Davis government doesn't care about counties — or old traditions. This government is very ('get-rich quick') — and her aims have been all gummed up. Counties need a local base — we need local

bases to give back the feeling that people belong to a unique locality.

Excalibur: What do you think of the current theatre scene in Canada — the quality of writers and their writing?

Reaney: It's certainly an exciting time. There's a lot of original writing — a lot of people are writing. The unknown actors and actresses of a number of years ago are finally gaining some much deserve recognition — Patricia Ludwig for example. Paul Thompson is doing some fine directing. I like the work of David French, Geoge Ryga and Michelle Trembley. What I don't like is when the theatres cash in on the media — if a particular event makes the headlines 10 or 12 groups will do a play on it. One or two will certainly suffice.

Excalibur: It seems to me that three or four years ago, Canadian theatre was at a pinnacle. Why does there seem to be a slight slipping off in interest?



Ontario playwright James Reaney

Reaney: A few years ago, the Canadian government was very hot on new Canadian writing — they're not willing to follow through. As a result, our grants are staying the same at best. A new group like NDWT just starting out must solicit most of their funds from corporations, foundations and individuals, because the government is really tightening up on grants. We just don't have the money for sufficient publicity.

Excalibur: Is there a unique style of Canadian writing? That is how do Canadian works differ from American?

Reaney: It's difficult to talk about "Canadian" writing, much of the material is of a regional sensibility. A play like "Leave it to Beaver is Dead" by Des Macanuff lies on a megopolis — big city plane. But then, many people in Canada experience megopolis life, so it's thus relative to Canada. "Beaver" deals with the heavy drug scene — as does the American play "Connection". The difference lies in the fact that "Beaver" is more subtle while "Connection" strikes at the juggler vein right off. I'd have to say then, that Canadian writing is more naive than American.

Excalibur: I notice that you employ a chorus, as well as many unusual special effects in your plays.

Reaney: Yes; the unusual effects. I was inspired by the Peking Opera Company, they create some very interesting effects. The key to

creating such effects is to make them primitive. This will destroy realism and get underneath things. People are forced to take a closer look at what's going on — and think. I call this technique spiritual stratization. As for my using a chorus, this convention stems from the classics. I learned a lot from ancient Greek theatre. Also, I have been influenced somewhat by Brecht's techniques.

Excalibur: It is interesting that in many of your plays, the actors sing songs and play games either on stage or among the audience before the actual performance beings.

Reaney: This idea came out of our workshop training and our working with children's theatre. We found with children that to get them in the mood, it helps to sing to them and play games. It builds up the atmosphere and brings the audience into the mood of the play. It seems to work very well with all types of audiences.

Excalibur: What is the purpose behind your touring Southern Ontario with Baldoon and later with Wacousta?

Reaney: Southern Ontario is extremely vulnerable to an influx of American culture. By presenting material on Canadian experiences like the Baldoon mystery and the Pontiac Conspiracy, we are beating the border — we must combat the strong influences coming across the border. It is essential to retaining a separate identity.



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