

News of the arts

Play salutes wheat co-ops

A play about the co-operative movement by the wheat farmers of Saskatchewan has been a runaway hit for a theatre company in Saskatoon. *Paper Wheat*, which was written by the actors of the Twenty-Fifth Street House Theatre, is drawn from interviews conducted with over 100 prairie farmers.

The play is a documentary drama about the settling of the West by immigrants from various parts of the world – the hardships they encountered: the weather, the insects and the loneliness, and how they worked together to set up grain co-operatives.

Andy Tahn, director of *Paper Wheat*, describes the play as “personalized Saskatchewan history.” It is full of anecdotes and songs and snippets of conversation about wheat pools and credit unions. The title refers to the futures market which existed before the wheat board became the marketing authority. This practice of buying contracts for the grain before it was harvested would force prices down until farmers were paid rock-bottom prices.

The story of how farmers formed co-operatives as a defence against exploitation is told by six actors playing various roles. In one scene, the struggle is telescoped by a wrestling



Sharon Hughes and Michael Fahey in a scene from *Paper Wheat*, written and

produced by the Twenty-Fifth House Theatre company of Saskatoon.

match between Grain Growers Gertie and Big Business Bertha, who is encouraged by Government Gail, and in another scene by a song-and-dance routine, “The Grain Exchange Rag” (“Let’s all bump the bumpkin”).

Twenty-Fifth Street House Theatre opened *Paper Wheat* in Sinaluta, a small town in rural Saskatchewan in early April. The play then toured Moose Jaw, Regina and Eston, ending

with a two-week run at their home theatre in Saskatoon. Audience reaction has been excellent. In a letter of thanks to the company, one woman reminisced: “I saw and heard my parents and grandparents and relived some of my own experiences...our family came to Canada in 1906...my daughter and I talked for hours after the performance about the heritage which you are keeping alive in this ‘epic’ production.”

Literary prizes

Winners of the 1976 Governor General’s Literary Awards are (fiction): *Bear* by Marian Engel (McClelland and Stewart) and *Les rescapés* by André Major (Editions Quinze); (poetry): *Top Soil* by Joe Rosenblatt (Press Porcupic) and *Poèmes 1946-1968* by Alphonse Piché (Editions de l’Hexagone); (non-fiction): *The Writing of Canadian History* by Carl Berger (Oxford University Press) and *Le Bas Canada 1791-1840, changements structureaux et crise* by Fernand Ouellet (Editions de l’Université d’Ottawa).

The prizes, \$5,000 each, from the Canada Council, were presented to the authors by Governor-General Jules Léger on May 17.

Prize-winners were chosen by an 18-member selection committee which examined over 400 works written by Canadians in 1976. Mordecai Richler,

novelist, and Jean Basile, editor and critic, co-chaired the committee.

Bear

Critics have described Marian Engel’s novel *Bear* as “one of the most extraordinary and artistically successful novels ever written in Canada.” *Bear* is a story of a woman who, on an island retreat in northern Ontario, discovers the existence of god-like forces in nature, and emerges from her experience with hitherto unknown self-knowledge and self-possession.

Marian Passmore Engel was born in Toronto and spent her childhood in Port Arthur, Brantford, Galt, Hamilton and Sarnia, Ontario. She studied at McMaster University and McGill, and has taught in Canada, the United States and Cyprus.

Her earlier publications include *No Clouds of Glory (Sarah Bastard’s Notebook)*, 1968; *The Honeyman Festival*,

1970; *Monodromos (One Way Street)*, 1973; *Joanne*, 1975; and *Inside the Easter Egg*, 1975.

Les rescapés

André Major’s *Les rescapés (The Survivors)* is the third part of a trilogy of “stories about deserters.” It concerns 14 people in a small Quebec village, their struggle against the violent forces of nature which surround them and of their own human nature within. They are deserters, each in his own way, from society, with which they are unable to cope. The first parts of the trilogy are *L’épouvantail (Scarecrow)* (1974) and *L’épidémie (The Epidemic)* (1975).

André Major, born in Montreal in 1942, published his first work, a collection of poems entitled *Le froid se meurt*, in 1961. Since then he has written two other books of poems, several novels and short stories.