

A play about fathers and sons and war

By SINE MacKINNON

In My Father's Footsteps is a play about fathers and sons and wars. The play penetrates the psychology of father-son relationships and lances the silence surrounding the experience of a special paratroop unit trained in the intimidating Italian mountains during World War II. Although this is clearly material made for theatre, the drama could go far astray without a gifted hand to guide it.

But this story has one—that of actor and playwright Robbie O'Neill, co-founder of the nationally known Mulgrave Road Co-Op Theatre Company. When *In My Father's Footsteps* plays to its first Halifax audience tomorrow evening at the Sir James Dunn Theatre, O'Neill will not only be its author but also one of its principal actors. That's appropriate. The play comes directly out of O'Neill's own experience.

The play had been brewing in O'Neill's mind for some time. Ten years ago, O'Neill picked up an old book about the First Special Service Force (also called the Devil's Brigade).

The special service unit was made up of Canadians—including O'Neill's father—and Americans, and had originated for the specific purpose of recruiting and training men to eventually act as guerrilla or commando force in the mountains of Italy. While that never happened, the Special Service Force was instrumental in liberating Rome in 1943.

"My father didn't talk about it. None of those people did," O'Neill says. "I was intrigued by the silen-

ces. I was drawn towards the subject because of what wasn't known rather than by what was known."

O'Neill wanted to fill in the silences, so he went to Italy last June with his father to attend a reunion for veterans of the Special Service Force.

The play should speak, O'Neill discovered, to both the generation touched by war and the generation unscathed by its experience as well as to "the subject of being male and all that entails." His challenge is to relate the confusion and dislocation suffered by the soldiers, and to reveal the abyss which exists between fathers who have fought wars and sons who feel alienated from them.

"I'm attracted by the psychology of the situation . . . I'm interested in trying to bridge a gap in communication between two generations," he said.

In My Father's Footsteps, directed by Kent Stetson and performed by O'Neill and John Dartt, follows O'Neill's critically acclaimed first play, *Tighten the Traces, Haul In the Reins*, a one-man show about the courage and good-humoured tenacity of the late Leo Kennedy, a polio-afflicted character from Guysborough County. O'Neill performed it across Canada and in Europe, and the play aired on CBC television last fall.

O'Neill's reputation as an actor precedes his playwriting career, and promotes it.

"Playwriting is still a new dimension for men. I'm still exploring. My acting ability has helped me a great deal. I have a sense of what can be theatrical. I'm not afraid of words." □

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He [Chuchu] told me a bizarre story of one of his last visits to David. The Dean of Guatemala University, an honoured guest of Panama, was with him—also a bottle of whiskey which the Dean had emptied while Chuchu drove. The Dean was quite drunk by the time they arrived and for some reason all the hotels were full, so they went to the police station to beg a cell for the night, but the cells were full too. There remained the little square with its stone benches, but the benches were all occupied by fourteen homosexuals. Luckily Chuchu was in uniform. He ordered a guardia to summon the homosexuals before him and after

giving them a long reproving address he dismissed them to their homes. Then he and the Dean were able to sleep on the benches in the empty square.

The Panama Canal treaty is eventually concluded in 1977, although not to the General's satisfaction and heightened tensions in Latin America serve to increase rather than decrease his political problems. In 1981, as Greene prepares for his fifth visit to Panama, he receives the news that the General has been killed in an airplane crash under mysterious circumstances.

Despite the sense of impending tragedy that hangs over the book, the dominant tone is light-hearted and humorous. The reader is completely drawn into the story through Greene's highly effective personal approach. □

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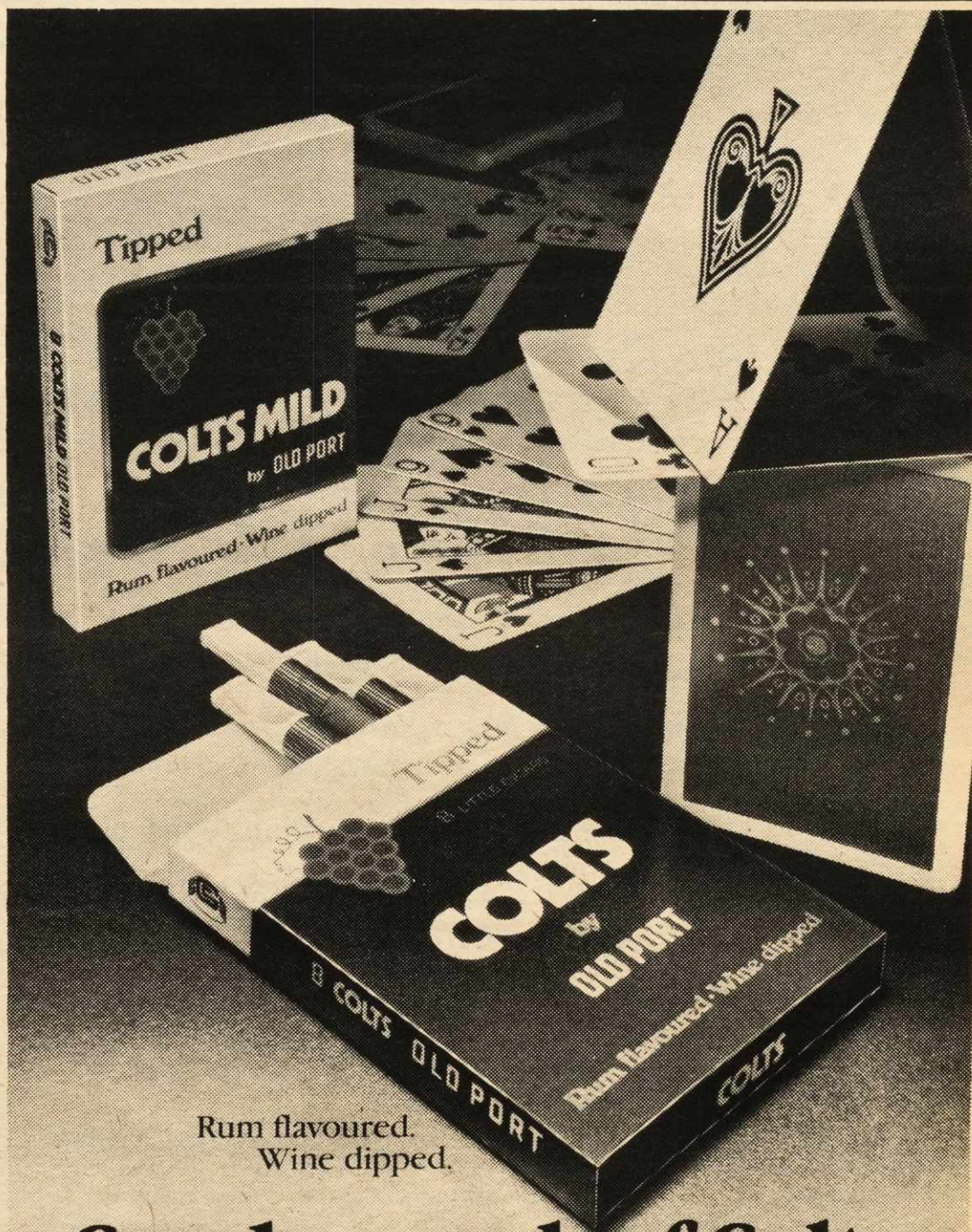
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