

Arts & Entertainment

Moher pushes political play at Workshop

interview by Elaine Ostry

Richie Rich once served as inspiration for Frank Moher, Edmonton-born playwright. "I loved comic books as a kid," he says. "They show action and words simultaneously, they have a straightforward, linear narrative, colour, action, spectacle.... Theatre is a lot like this."

Two of Moher's plays, *The Third Ascent* and *Sliding for Home*, were hits last year. Both productions received Stirling Awards, *The Third Ascent* winning the award for Best New Play. Moher's latest play, *Prairie Report*, premieres with Workshop West on Friday.

"*Prairie Report* is more explicitly political than the other plays," Moher says. It is about a conservative Western Canadian magazine threatened by a takeover which "throws the lives of young journalists into crisis." It deals with how these writers try "to reconcile their own personal politics with those of the owners."

"This problem is familiar to Moher, who once worked as a book reviewer/editor for the *Alberta Report*. Although it was an inspiration, "*Prairie Report* is not a literal representation of that magazine."

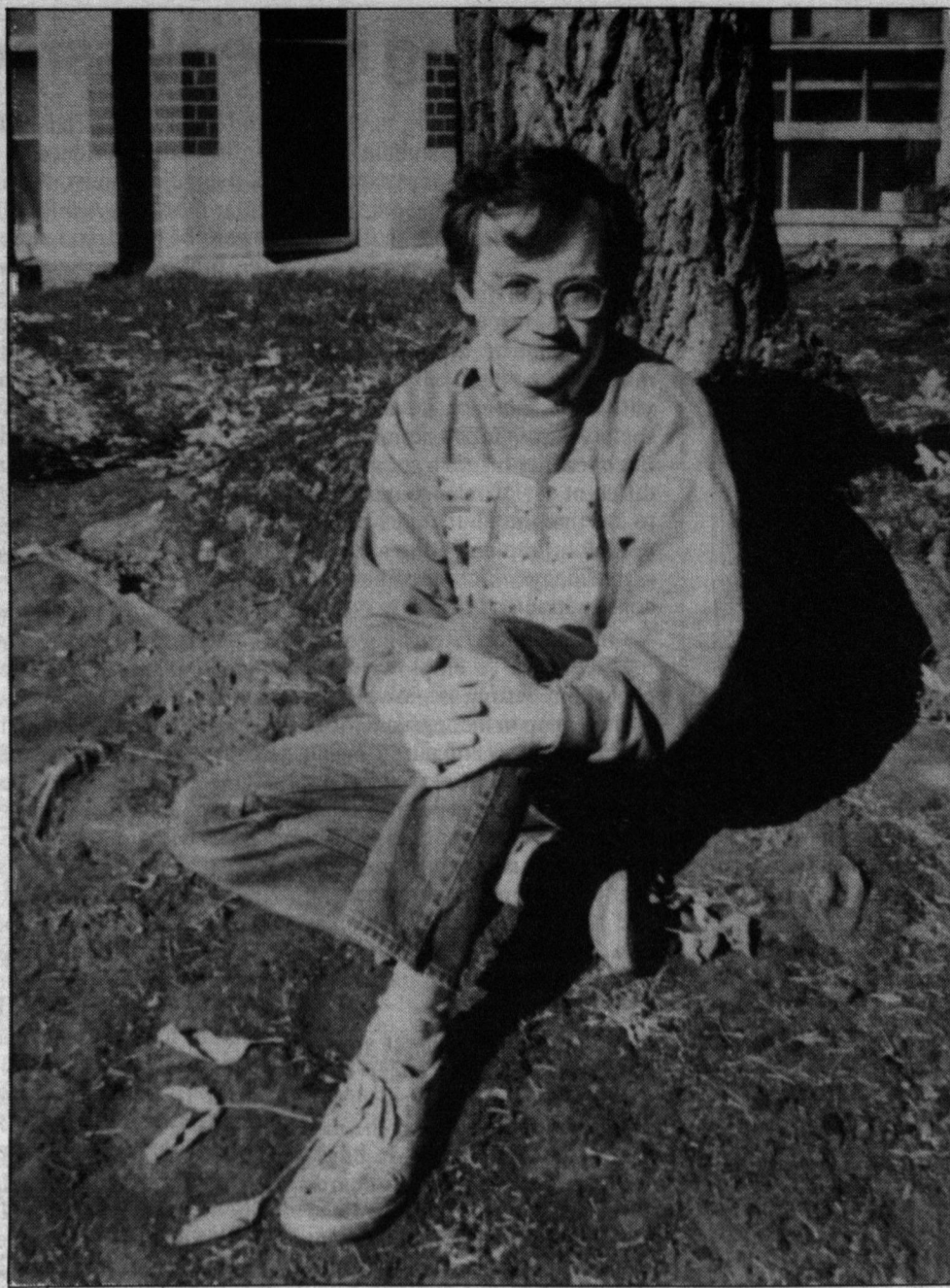
"*Prairie Report* tries to explore the range of conservatism" in a comic way. Moher sees the conservatism of Western Canada becoming "extreme, fanatical and hurtful... the balance seems to have been lost." Extreme conservatives, he says, have "discredited" regionalism.

Moher wants a variety of political views, rather than trying to push any particular political bias. "I think western Canadians should be a hell of a lot more interested in their destinies."

What is western Canadian culture? Is there one? Moher certainly thinks so. In the west, he says, there is a "spirit of collectivism, of needing to rely on each other."

Western Canadians should be proud of this heritage. "Edmonton, is an important place to live," he states. "It's a bloody sophisticated city and it always has been." A flourishing artistic community is "not really a new phenomenon — it goes back to the '20s. That's one of the reasons we're so vital now."

"We're getting now, for the first time, theatre artists born and shaped in this place, and they're naturally creating theatre that's an expression of this place." In the '50s, Edmontonians produced British hits, in the sixties, American hits and during the



Frank Moher, former *Alberta Report* writer, has already made his mark as a playwright. His current production at Workshop West is called *Prairie Report*.

seventies, Edmonton stages paraded the plays of Toronto: "We did it so slavishly it was embarrassing."

Moher is living in B.C. now, but considers Edmonton his home. "I've spent 28 of my 33 years here." He first became involved in the theatre at a young age, becoming a member of the chorus in *Jackpot* at the Walterdale in 1967. "I hadn't been good at anything up to that point." He attended the playwriting program for two years at U of A, later returning to teach.

The chief mistake made by beginners, Moher says, is "forgetting that you're not writing real life, you're writing theatre. It's a distilled version of real life." Familiarity with the theatre is important to the budding playwright. Exploit everything you can do in a theatre.... You can't afford theatre that isn't theatrical; you have to offer (the

audience) something they couldn't get sitting at home watching the VCR."

Moher is now working on a play about the collapse of Principal Trust. Can this event be the focus of a comedy? "I write about people who are at odds with their environment — fish out of water — and that tends to be funny as well." But it is important to "gauge" the issues of the play, and "if comedy gets in the way, it has to go."

The future of theatre in Canada is obviously important to Moher. "What we need more of in the cultures and races of this country — Native, Asian — to accurately reflect its society." People involved in theatre should take a look at projections for Canada's demography. "If they're not putting on plays that matter to people other than those of Anglo-Saxon culture, nobody's going to come to their theatres."

A shameless plug for Midnight Oil

by Alexandra Parr

"**P**ower and the Passion". It may be the title of their song but it's probably also the best way to describe the stage performance of the Australian band Midnight Oil, who will be hitting the stage at the Convention Centre on Tuesday night. Previous concerts have proven that when you go to see Midnight Oil, you don't just get entertainment, you get an experience. The five-man group is touring Canada on the success of their sixth album *Diesel and Dust*, by far their most successful album to date. Many people had never even heard of them before and were surprised to hear that Midnight Oil has been around since 1978. They're in for a treat.

The band is without a doubt represented at all times by lead singer Peter Garrett. He's pretty hard to forget; you won't have to ask which one he is on stage. Bald, 6'5" tall and possessing a stage presence that can only be described as overwhelming, Garrett accepts the leadership role in the band naturally and leaves the other four to perform a solid backup function. He's not your average rock musician though, even without his decidedly different appearance.

Garrett is politically active and the music of Midnight Oil reflects it. The first single from *Diesel and Dust*, "Beds are Burning", is concerned with Aboriginal land rights in the Australian outback: "The time has come/a fact's a fact/It belongs to them/Let's give it back." Garrett has a law degree from the University of Sydney and once ran for the Australian Senate as a candidate for the Nuclear Disarmament Party. He narrowly lost that seat in 1984, but certainly hasn't turned his back on political activity since then; in between songs at Midnight Oil's concerts, he speaks at length about the plight of the Aborigines, the environment, apartheid and nuclear proliferation. Sure, maybe some people don't go to a concert to hear that sort of rhetoric; and maybe (dare I say it?) some fans don't really even care. But I don't think that's characteristic of Midnight Oil's predominantly youthful fans, and I think that Peter Garrett's views are probably very interesting; if it's part of the show, then like the music, it will be mesmerizing.

That's not to say that a loud and energetic time isn't to be had. Peter Garrett has fun with the crowd — one can anticipate the first few bars of "The Dead Heart" already — and the band enjoys touring Canada. As the introduction to another of the band's hits, "U.S. Forces", Garrett commented to a Vancouver audience, "I think Australians and Canadians both have a little trouble with U.S. forces..." Although they are occasionally compared to U2 in terms of political involvement, Garrett disagrees that there's much of a similarity; while U2 is more concerned with humanistic issues, he says, Midnight Oil is more about politics.



Grapes of Wrath glad to be home

interview by Tracy Rowan

"Touring, touring, touring." This was the response to the most obvious question recently posed to drummer Chris Hooper of the Grapes of Wrath. Having heard very little about the Vancouver-based band since their appearance here last November, the first question inevitably had to be where have the Grapes been this past year?

1988 started off with the Kelowna natives playing a sort of 'homecoming' gig since moving to the big city and signing with Capitol Records, on which the 1987 *Treehouse* LP was released. "Our single, 'Peace of Mind', was in the top five there finally" offered Hooper who expressed a sense of pleasure in the "revenge" factor of playing to a previously reluctant hometown audience. "MuchMusic flew out to do a story on our return to Kelowna — they filmed us at the club and we took them sightseeing around town to our old school and stuff. One of Tom's (the bass player and Chris' brother) old teachers even

walked by while we were filming."

Next on the agenda was a three month tour that took the band, now a solid quartet with the addition of keyboardist Vince Jones, all across the U.S. on what was their most gruelling stint on the road. "We played 80 shows in three months and travelled on a 1958 diesel touring bus that Fats Domino used once. It was a classic, really crowded with fold-out 'prison' bunks and a loud, grinding engine."

The tour did have its merits though, including choice opening slots for *Guadalcanal Diary* in California (and the famous *Roxy* in L.A.) and *Robyn Hitchcock* and the *Egyptians*. "A lot of people down there knew who we were — you sort of realize you'd infiltrated areas that were unexpected. We worked hard and learned a lot on that tour... as a band you've gotta be special, fighting to win fans because there's just so many other bands there."

The Grapes return to Vancouver's 86 St. Club was a welcome one come May 1st

after winding up their string of U.S. shows. "It was a blast, just an out-of-control show" notes Hooper of playing to a packed crowd of real Canadian fans.

After a much needed summer break, the band was back together in August, resulting in a quick succession of 12 new songs written over the course of just one month. A self-produced demo tape followed which is currently being used to shop for a producer for the next album slated to start pre-production late this year, with a late spring release date. Saturday's *Dinwoodie* show will give Grapes of Wrath fans a chance to hear lots of the new material.

"Some of the new songs sound really different, with a definite piano and organ sound," says Hooper referring to the 'guitar band' label commonly associated with the Grapes. "This trip is to try the new songs live and so far the fans have been civil enough to accept the new stuff without demanding to hear all their favorite songs from the first two albums."