

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

EARLY WINNIPEG PLAYWRIGHTS

by

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ABSTRACT

Winnipeg in the Twenties and Thirties had an active theatre community in which thrived several known playwrights. The plays of two in particular, Harry A. Vaughan Green and Maurice Shannon Corbett, were published, as well as produced both in Canadian and American cities. The purpose of this thesis is to define the thematic and dramatic character of these two playwrights, and compare their work to other more widely recognized Canadian plays. The introductory chapter defines the theatrical climate in Canada, and attitudes toward early Canadian theatre in context of the times. Chapters II and III contain an analytical study of the plays of Green and Corbett, while in Chapter IV there is a brief summation of the study with some conclusions on the merit of the Winnipeg plays.

The theatrical climate in Canada during the Twenties and Thirties is discussed through the published remarks of certain critics of the times including Fred Jacob, Merrill Denison, Robert Ayre and Herman Voaden. Canadian reticence to their indigenous drama is compared to American indulgence toward their own playwrights and productions. The reinforcement of Canadian colonialism is shown by the way the British were able to exert their influences on Canadian culture and values. The trend to such dependency was detrimental to the establishment of a Canadian theatre. This thesis also traces the influence of the Canadian Authors' Association and their approach to promoting the

writing of Canadian plays.

Within the context of the Canadian theatrical scene, in which certain playwrights functioned, it became apparent that playwrights whose plays became widely recognized were from Toronto, the centre of the theatrical activity in Canada. Some of these plays, Brothers in Arms by Merrill Denison, Low Life by Mazo de la Roche, Man's World by Fred Jacob and Three Weddings of a Hunchback by H. Borsook are analyzed and discussed in terms of providing a basis for comparison of the plays by Winnipeggers, Green and Corbett, my contention being that their plays deserve wider recognition.

The representative Winnipeg plays, Green's Death of Pierrot, Forerunners, Good Times Are Coming and Corbett's The Rolling Stone, Lucky Dollars and Broken English are shown, in analysis, to have a richness and depth of meaning, as well as a relevance to society in context of the times. The Death of Pierrot is a fantasy which combines realism and surrealism with characters out of the Commedia del Arte scenarios. Society is condemned for its adherence to convention. A lonely and deprived farm couple are the characters in Forerunners, while Good Times Are Coming shows how the depression affects certain kinds of people, the wealthy, and the impoverished.

Corbett uses characters who represent the working classes. In The Rolling Stone Jimmy is a wanderer unsure of his goals. When he returns home he attempts against great odds to establish himself with a steady job. In Lucky Dollars, the protagonist is a young man who learns

a lesson about himself and the use of money. Tony, a central character in Broken English, is easily identified as a North End Winnipeg immigrant attempting to integrate in the new land. His daughter is in love with a man from the upper class, one who does not have the courage to go beyond his social limits. This conflict is resolved with humor and pathos as Corbett satirizes the class structure in Winnipeg during the Thirties.

The thesis questions the lack of recognition given the Winnipeg playwrights, since the study reveals that the plays of Green, and Corbett, compare favorably with the frequently anthologized eastern Canadian plays.

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PREFACE

Before resurrecting the Winnipeg plays which I propose to analyze, I would justify to some degree my motivation for research into their obscure creators. With my involvement with theatre in Winnipeg, in a modest way as director of "Plays for Living Actors Company", I have always been on the lookout for plays which would represent our local environment, and wondered if anything was ever written before Ann Henry's Lulu Street. A province which could produce writers like Ostenso, Grove and Laurence, whose fiction has given us some of the most revealing of human passions of the frontier civilization, should also have produced playwrights. I looked to the urban setting for these people in order to discern a different perspective of Manitoba society. Would there be paradigms similar to the prairie novels? The artistic thrust of the Manitoba novelists introduced certain patterns which have become associated with the prairies, such as isolation, the hostile land, the power in possession of the land, and of women and children as chattels. What would writers of urban themes focus on?

In my research into the history of theatre I learned that the Winnipeg Community Players, in the Twenties and Thirties, produced new Canadian plays on their Members' nights, and that Harry A.V. Green and Lillian Beynon Thomas were two Winnipeg playwrights whose works were used. In an index I found titles by Ida M. Davidson and quite by chance

I discovered that Maurice Shannon Corbett was a Winnipegger. It was fascinating to see in the Brock Bibliography of Plays, that Sister Mary Agnes of Saint Mary's Academy in Winnipeg had published forty-four plays.

If indeed there were legitimate plays which had been produced and published, why then were they almost completely ignored in any reviews or anthologies of historical Canadian literature? I decided to search for the Winnipeg plays, analyze their thematic and dramatic characteristics and attempt to determine what merit they had as drama. Were they as good as Denison's Brothers in Arms, or La Roche's Low Life, two plays which are periodically mentioned by the literati, or are they deservedly best forgotten? One of the difficulties, of course, in analyzing a play is that one cannot truly determine all its qualities from the printed page. As well as thematic and dramatic appeal, a play should have the practical effects for mounting. Apparently the Winnipeg plays, in context of the times were regarded as having these qualities. Green, Corbett and Thomas each had their plays produced professionally in Manitoba and other centres with good results, using mainly single sets for easy and inexpensive design.

My research of Winnipeg theatre helped a great deal in finding the Winnipeg plays. The old programs of the Community Players, some of which are in the Manitoba archives, have interesting and relevant information about Canadian drama which had been produced by the Players. Libraries were not particularly useful, but scanning the newspapers of the Twenties and Thirties turned up many reviews of Canadian plays,

including those written by Winnipeggers. At one time, then, Winnipeg plays were alive and their writers known. Sometimes I was introduced to people who knew of these writers or knew someone who did. A request in the local papers September 1977 brought me in touch with former theatre people who gave me useful leads. Harry Green's daughter, Dr. Nancy Sirett, phoned to tell me that her father, almost ninety years of age and living in Vancouver, was very active in the Winnipeg Community Players from its inception in 1921; he was one of the writers I was looking for. A student of mine mentioned that when she worked on the bookmobile in Victoria, an old gentleman who used to come in for books would chat with her about his theatre days in Winnipeg. That gentleman was Maurice Corbett, whom I had no way of knowing was a Winnipegger; the two plays of his mentioned in the Brock Bibliography listed only his American publisher. I corresponded with these two playwrights by letter and tape, and in November, 1977, I interviewed them in their homes. Fortunately they were in possession of most of their plays and were kind enough to lend them to me.

The Sisters of St. Mary's Academy were very gracious in allowing me to borrow the plays of Sister Mary Agnes. I interviewed a former student of hers, Sister Eileen of the Academy, and she reminisced about the personality of this prolific writer and her devotion to writing and directing plays.

The library at Red River Community College was most helpful in obtaining through inter-library loans the plays of Thomas and Davidson, as well as other materials from the rare book sections of other

Canadian libraries. The University of Manitoba's collection of the Canadian Forum was a good source of articles on theatre by Fred Jacob, Robert Ayre, and other critics of the times.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Winnipeg playwrights, two in particular, Harry A.V. Green and Maurice Shannon Corbett, whose works comprise the main discussion of this paper, were writing plays at a time when the cultural context in Canada was undergoing change, change manifested in the establishment of the Little Theatre movement across Canada. Along with writers like Merrill Denison, Mazo de la Roche and Fred Jacob, the Winnipeggers responded to this pervasive rumbling of cultural nationalism. Canada's participation in the First World War had brought a new feeling of self-recognition to Canadians, the creation of an indigenous theatre being a sign of that self-recognition.

Before World War One, Canadians welcomed the travelling American and British road shows, playing to both the smaller towns and large cities. The populace, willing enough to be entertained by outsiders, built accommodations; theatre houses mushroomed across the country, some financed by the American Road companies for their own benefit. Winnipeg, which was on the eastern circuit, had four main theatres at the turn of the century: the Winnipeg Theatre, the Winnipeg Opera House, the Dominion Theatre, and the Walker. After 1914, the frequent visits of the touring companies came to a halt, particularly in the smaller centres. The strong nationalism which marked this period influenced Canadian writers. Novelists and poets were encouraged, and

the Little Theatres promised to produce Canadian plays. Within this milieu, local playwrights responded with plays which reflected the new cultural climate of the country. Replacing the long poetic dramas of the nineteenth century, the postwar dramas brought a sense of a new beginning. Prominent among the new breed of playwrights were two Winnipeggers whose contribution to Canadian drama deserves recognition, Harry A.V. Green and Maurice Shannon Corbett.

Even with the new feeling of nationalism, the playwright of the Twenties and Thirties was still a timid expositor of his country's social ills. Such poets as Klein, Smith, Kennedy, and Scott chastised the country for its poverty and injustices. Prairie novelists, Grove, Stead, Salverson and Ostenso, wrote of the hardy stoical stock of prairie farmers, their courage and constant battle with the hostile land. These writers were well received; the reader could both enjoy the private experience he shared with the work or could react to it negatively, once again in private. A playwright's views and perceptions are reenacted before a large group, an audience who may or may not agree with the interpretation presented. Therefore, for the playwright, it is always more difficult to get acceptance. The new Canadian playwright usually stayed on safe ground knowing that his plays would face an audience still imbued with Victorian theatrical expectations and Edwardian values. Audience prudishness may have been a barrier to the fledgling writers, who, unlike American playwrights, hesitated to write about the more brazen and sordid aspects of life. Plays such as What Price Glory, Rain and Ladies of the Evening, are examples of popular American Drama which deal with violence, gore and immoral behavior.

American producers, according to a columnist of the time, Fred Jacob, seemed easily to overcome any audience resistance to such plays. But in Canada the most daring of Canadian playwrights would merely jostle and jibe with lighthearted drama, poke a stuffed shirt, or point an admonishing finger at outmoded puritanical behavior. Few went further. Perhaps it was this light touch, this delicate approach to preserve decorum, which made Canadian drama seem to lack substance.

Canadian thinkers of the times were aware that Canadian drama was too often nebulous, indefinite and ineffective. While not advocating the violence or sex which popularized the American drama, they nevertheless criticized the lack of vitality in their native drama. Some denounced the absence of a distinctly Canadian art of theatre or decried the deficiency in productions. Others suggested that Canadians should produce only the great classics. Few defended Canadian plays; some offered hope. Many of these opinions came from Eastern Canada, since Toronto, then as now, in comparison to other Canadian centres, was the hub of dramatic activity. One critic deeply interested in indigenous Canadian drama was Herman Voaden. He had been educated in drama and theatre at Yale, and had studied playwrighting under George P. Baker. On his return to Toronto, Voaden instituted the "Play Workshop", whose objective was to "develop a distinctly Canadian art of the theatre and to encourage the writing of Canadian drama".¹ Voaden taught a Modern Drama course at the Central High School of Commerce where he was an English instructor. Himself a playwright, he encouraged playwrighting, and set up a competition, publishing a volume of the winning plays in 1930, Six Canadian Plays. In his introduction, Voaden makes an

urgent plea for a nationalist drama:

There must be dedication, a faith and idealism to give unity and purpose to creation....These two things, dedication and absorption in a soil and people distinguished the Irish Literary Renaissance, a movement which holds great interest and promise to us as we look forward toward our own future as a creative nation.²

Voaden's active participation in theatre, and his encouragement to playwrights, had a positive influence on Canadian drama. His letter to Vincent Massey in February, 1929, drafting a national drama festival modelled on the British Drama League, was instrumental in organizing the Dominion Drama Festival.

Merrill Denison had more pessimistic views on Canadian drama. His 1929 essay, "Nationalism and Drama" compares the practice of Canadian Theatre and drama to the "art of dinghy sailing among the bedouins. There are no dinghys because there is no water."³ He suggests that there is no Canadian dramatic writing because there is no Canadian Theatre, and "it is impossible to believe that there ever will be one."⁴

True, there are exceptions. Just as there must be the occasional pond or river on which some bedouin has launched a raft and hoisted a sail,⁵ so there have been good Canadian plays. But the generality holds good.

Continuing in a negative vein, the essay holds that whatever interest in drama did exist could be attributed to the "intellectuals" of the country:

It is not at all surprising that there should be no Canadian drama. One's surprise comes from learning that anyone could have seriously believed there ever could be a Canadian drama. Let it be noted to the credit of the mass of Canadian citizenry that but a small fraction of its number has ever concerned itself about the matter. It has been a fancy of a very special and narrow group which, for want of a better name, may be called intellectuals.⁶

Although there is a tinge of sarcasm in Denison's remarks, his point is

well taken if one considers the founding members of the Winnipeg Community Players as an example. Lawyers Harry Green and C.A. Crawley, Dr. F.A. Young, and Professor J.H. Heinzelman, as 'intellectuals', fit Denison's narrow definition. Denison's point about the lack of a Canadian theatre could also be attributed to some general conditions which fostered dependency on British productions. According to this excerpt from the Bill of a British troupe of touring actors, theatre from abroad was much encouraged. Sir Barry Jackson, a British theatrical impresario, wrote in the preface of a souvenir program in 1931, with the title "Why We Come to Canada":

In the course of the past twenty years few incidents have given me more pleasure, or seemed a finer tribute to my work than the invitation extended by the National Council of Education to bring one of my Companies to Canada....Rather, my purpose -- as I understand it, the purpose also of Major Ney and the National Council of Education -- is to afford the people of Canada who are not able to visit the Mother Country an opportunity to enjoy theatrical fare equally with other subjects of His Majesty living within easy access to the West End of London. Just as we share our ancestry in common, the one with the other do we enjoy a similar culture, and as we have done this in the past surely shall we do so in the future. Nowhere in the Empire is this spirit of loyalty and co-operation more alive than in the Dominion.

British drama therefore, is our joint heritage and the six plays which comprise my programme from coast to coast of Canada are truly representative of British stage. Acted by British Players according to our own tradition, they are faithful examples -- in presentation and in rendering -- of what is to be seen in the West End of London....⁷

These ideas of a shared ancestry, heritage, and culture prevailed among many Canadians quite willing to consider British drama as their own, thus propagating a certain apathy about indigenous theatre and drama.

Even in an essay written as late as 1962, with references to early drama, William Solly expresses similar views to those of Denison, commenting further on why Canadian drama has continued to be in a state

of apathy:

Plays do not exist without productions and audiences to watch them, and though it is by now a well-worn excuse for the anaemic state of our theatre to say that our audiences have been lured elsewhere, it is nevertheless quite true that prolonged exposure to the skills of Broadway and American films has given rise to a widespread conviction on the part of Canadians that their drama will not only be inferior, but worse, amateur....Can we not with justification blame the very temper of the country, -- is there not a certain national lack of self-confidence, pride and romance which has refused to allow our drama to develop?...One comes with surprise upon something like Merrill Denison's Marsh Hay, which is quite a reputable play admirably sustaining tense drama for four acts -- but one is not too surprised never to have heard of its being produced.⁸

It is true that while many Canadian plays got published, few were produced. Fred Jacob, in 1925, criticized the well-meaning Canadian Author's Association for giving only a monetary reward to the winners of their playwrighting contests. The establishment of the C.A.A. and the Association's subsequent competitions for playwrights did provide an incentive to writers. But, Jacob said,

These contests are too much like the lotteries. They appear to have served their purpose when somebody gets the cash...The competition will do more to foster the writing of one-act plays than the lecturer, but it must go a step farther than in the past. The interest ought to focus on the stage where the successful play is given its opportunity to come to life, and not upon the winner of the cash reward.⁹

Jacob mentioned that the writers of the approximately twelve contests held after World War One simply disappeared into limbo and that with one or two exceptions, their plays were stillborn. The writers learned nothing because they did not see their plays produced. Mr. Jacob's suggestion that staging the plays should become part of the prize was later instituted.

Some critics were simply patronizing. Their suggestions as to what should or should not be produced could only have fostered inferior

feelings among new playwrights. In 1923, Mr. E. Dale wrote in the Canadian Forum:

There should always be presented on any bill of short plays...some work of more serious calibre and of wider import. Better far to make a glorious hash of Julius Caesar, or of A Doll's House than to make an unending line of successful Charlie's Aunts.¹⁰

Mr. Dale's remarks are similar to those of Jean Burton, who suggested in 1922:

ten of Wilde, of Barrie, of Pirandello to one of Beyond the Horizon, as well as experimentation with Russian, Scandinavian plays and the social problem plays of the French...the moving plays of the Irish school...¹¹

Both writers ended their articles with a hope for local playwrights, but it was a patronizing gesture. Writers like Dale and Burton are no better than the nineteenth-century writers and critics who believed that the only worthy plays were English or European and that writers should use them as models. Dale and Burton implied strongly that Canadian writers could not measure up to the standard of the dramatists of other countries. Conversely, Americans seemed to nurture indigenous plays and to accept their content even if laced with violence or sex. Jacob, in 1925, wrote of the way American critics defended their writers from foreign criticism:

More and more in recent years, the American drama has been running to violence in both speech and action. They smash and blaspheme and throttle and curse and roar murder, and word goes backstage from the box office, "Keep up the good work." -- following which new profanities go screaming out over the footlights.¹²

Jacob mentioned as examples What Price Glory, Rain and for a blatantly sexual show, Ladies of the Evening. He criticized Tarnish, by Gilbert Emery, for a scene in which the hero chokes, almost to death, a young woman who has annoyed him; the American critics praised the play. While

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remarking that The Show Off failed in London, Jacob noted that this failure did not deter the American defences, and quoted one of the producers, Miss Rosalie Stewart, on her return to New York after the collapse of the play. Her remarks were to the effect that "American drama is so far ahead of that of London and Paris that it is futile to attempt to compare them. They haven't our tempo; their detail is not half vivid enough."¹³

Jacob did not condone Miss Stewart's remarks. The incident recounted simply indicates that unlike Canadian critics of the times, Americans offered their playwrights self-assurance. Canadian critics all too often fostered a lack of selfhood in their culture by failing to support or adequately to encourage the presentation of indigenous drama. It seems that these feelings influenced Canadian producers, who continued to rely on foreign plays. In contrast, the Americans preferred to produce their own, an attitude at least partially responsible for the development of a strong American drama history. As Jacob aptly phrased it, their motto was "See America First". Nevertheless, in spite of all the criticism, some fine Canadian plays were written and produced. Many of the plays were not only staged in local theatres, but in different Canadian and American cities. Winnipeg stages hosted the plays of Mazo de la Roche, Fred Jacob, and Merrill Denison, while the plays of Winnipeggers Harry A.V. Green and Maurice Corbett played in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Evanston, Illinois.

Green, a sensitive and poetic writer, brought a variegated background to his plays. He was a lawyer, an alpinist, metaphysicist and theatre enthusiast. Corbett, singularly in tune with his urban

environment, integrated his plays with the tempo of the times as he felt it. The two writers, living in Winnipeg during the Twenties and Thirties, were neither acquainted with each other nor aware of their common interest in theatre. Their economic and social backgrounds were vastly different. Green's interests were many. As a young man in Edinburgh he developed a keen sense of art and literature, an interest sharpened by artists and men of letters who came to visit his father. Green also tells how his legal practice in Winnipeg brought him into contact with the people of the prairies, from whom he learned of rural isolation. Green's plays were first staged by the Winnipeg Community Players at their Saturday night productions, a time set aside for experimental theatre. As the writer gained a reputation, his plays were produced in other Canadian and American cities.

Green's plays are as varied in subject and theme as they are in style. He writes of fantasy and dreams in his Death of Pierrot and Angela, and of the stark and harsh prairie life in The Forerunners. He draws on superstitious ritual of an elderly Ukrainian farm woman in A Miracle Play of Manitoba. In contrast, he sets the scene of another play, A Game at Mr. Wemyss, in the urban home of an upper-class gentleman. Good Times Are Coming, called a farce by the author, concerns two young medical students who decide to earn more and easier money by housebreaking than by pursuing their intended profession. Green also claims to have written the first ballets to be produced in Winnipeg. Au Salon de Coiffure (or Permanent Waves) was based on a story by Count Fouette de Bourre*, and L'Après Midi d'un Boulevard was based on an

*Count Fouette de Bourre was the founder of the Ballet Russe.

incident recounted in de Bourre's autobiography. Green's play for children, The Land of Far Away, was produced many times.

Green received his law degree from the University of Edinburgh, and came to Canada in 1912 when he was twenty-four. He joined the legal department of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company and worked there until his retirement at the age of seventy. He was one of the founding members of the Winnipeg Community Players, supporting them from the time of their inception in 1921 to the time of his retirement in 1958. Green was personally involved in every theatre activity other than acting and directing and moved in a social milieu of artists, writers and the affluent upper-class. Among his associates were artists whose names are well known, all of whom designed for the Winnipeg Community Players' theatre, L. Lemoine Fitzgerald, A.J. Musgrove and W.J. Phillips. In 1933 Green received a high honor from the British Columbia Drama Association Incorporated for his outstanding efforts on behalf of the Canadian drama*, a citation entitling him to the suffix C.D.A. (Canadian Drama Association).

By contrast, Maurice Shannon Corbett, born and educated in East Kildonan, Winnipeg, the son of a registrar at the Court of King's Bench, completed his formal education at high school. From the time he wrote his first play, before he was eighteen, and savored the success of its first production in the John Black Church in 1919, he was determined to pursue a theatrical career. The play had some touring

*Among the other recipients of this award were the Earl of Bessborough, Lady Tupper and Mrs. C.P. Walker.