

partial detachment from the general currents of progressive opinion provides the basis for both the strengths and weaknesses of his analysis but any thoughtful reader will profit immensely. For my part I'd now agree that *Dawn of the Dead* is an important work, but he'll never convince me about *Last House on the Left* and *The Deer Hunter*.

Peter Steven works in film and video distribution at DEC in Toronto. He is the editor of *Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics and Counter-Cinema*, *Between the Lines Press*, and is currently producing a video on new refugees to Canada.



NeWest Plays by Women

Eds. Diane Bessai and Don Kerr

Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1987, 272 pp.

The events which structure women's lives do not justify optimism. Women are still atoning for their guilt, still making compromises and rationalizations. This is the unintentional message of four plays by women from Western Canada published recently as a collection—the first of its kind—by NeWest Press. In her introduction Diane Bessai notes that all the plays are “in some manner regional,” although only one of the playwrights still lives in the West, and only two of the plays were originally produced in Western theatres. Their regionalism, rather than a sense of place, is a common mind set: unfortunately, what these plays share is their translation of the experience of marginalization, most acutely the manifold marginalization of women, into helplessness, hopelessness, and acceptance. Classism, ethnocentrism, and sexism, which on some level inform all of these sometimes funny (although never comic), sometimes tragic plays by women, are made to seem inevitable and even excusable patriarchal ideologies which women cannot step outside of or get past, even in their fictions, and hence imaginations.

Joanna M. Glass' *Play Memory* is a historical play set in Saskatoon nearly 40 years ago. As the title suggests, the events are narrated retrospectively by Jean, the daughter of a prairie salesman who, after being fired from his job, becomes an alcoholic and destroys both his own life and the life of his family. Jean's tale is a coming to terms with the physically and emotionally damaging behaviour of the father and an attempt to recuperate and justify her tragic past in a way that makes it understandable and palatable to herself, if not to the audience. “You're an illiterate, peasant, German-descended country bumpkin!” Cam bellows at his wife in a drunken passion. She replies, “And you're a wordy, Scots-descended, whiskey-sodden son-of-a-bitch!” The father's ethnocratic expression of his wife is just one expression of his belief in the cultural superiority of a white male anglo heritage. The play, of course, critiques this attitude, as in the wife's bitter retort, and yet its vision of the world remains predominantly that of the father. This is not a play about the marginal peasant woman immigrant but a romanticization of the fallen “Canadian aristocrat.”

Cam too is a pawn and a victim. He begins as a good capitalist, successful, motivated and convinced of the worth of his profession, but ends a sacrificial lamb. His job is with the regional office of a centrally controlled Canadian firm which ousts him from his position and leaves him an unemployed alcoholic. His hard drinking, which gives him the bravado and arrogance necessary to do the job, when he is out of work is an addiction which disarms him: rather than fighting the arbitrariness of company politics he retreats and disposes of himself.

The “benign” sexism that dominates Cam's relationship to his wife and daughter in success, turns to verbal and physical abuse in failure. His wife and daughter, although agents of his self-destruction and the treatment he affords them, are unable to escape. The liberation which finally comes to them is attributed, in Jean's memory, to the nobility of the father: in allowing them to leave, he has given them their freedom. In this way the last act of patriarchal destructiveness is rewritten as “the most admirable thing he'd done in his life.” There is an oppressive fatalism in all this: not only in the depiction of women as unable to take action and the power of the past to contain our lives, but especially in the romanticization of the father as an agent of that oppression, a romanticization perpetuated and perpetrated by his victim.

Fatalism is also a key note in Wendy Lill's *The Occupation of Heather Rose*. This comes as quite a surprise in view of her previous political works on Winnipeg garment workers and women's suffrage. Unlike Joanna Glass, who sentimentalizes oppression, Lill's black humour is instrumental in making the audience aware of the suffering and oppression that white incompetence and naivety cause Native society.

The Occupation of Heather Rose is a solo piece: rather than the depiction of women in the shadows of dominating men, there is a woman alone on the stage. However, Heather Rose, a young nurse, is weak and dependent upon the patriarchal order. She comes from Ontario to Northern Canada as an agent of the central state with virtually no understanding of the Native society in which she suddenly finds herself. Her social work approach to the problems she encounters (she tries to set up fitness and nutrition classes) makes an absurdity of any form of effective action and the ineffectual translation of the female role as mother/nurse/caretaker into the professional sphere makes a mockery of women's traditional work.

Heather's helplessness and horror reach a climax as she watches Naomi, a young Native woman, die from sniffing gasoline. Heather survives this experience by running away, an option which we assume was never available to Naomi. And although the pain of the experience has undoubtedly taken its toll upon her, Heather's summer camp attitude to her placement in the North, in a luxuriously furnished pink townhouse, her evenings spent in a bubble bath, abandoned gossip or *Chatelaine* magazine, her dreams of a future trip to Europe—all make it impossible to read her confession, “It's inside me now,” as more than another sentimentalization, this time of liberal guilt.

Pamela Boyd's *Inside Out* is also a solo piece but this time focuses upon the mother in the domestic sphere. This play is paradigmatic of women's continuing oppression and exploitation in the home for the sake of a husband who enjoys the excitement and diversity of a public life. It traces the tensions and problems in the choice between a woman's role as mother and her desire to realize herself in a profession outside of the home. Unlike the other plays in the collection this one takes place in Toronto. However, the domestic is to the public as the prairies are to central Canada, an isolated and marginalized space.

The humour in the depiction of a day when everything goes wrong, which is unquestionably



the charm of this play... dramatic level the pain... And yet her domestic prison is... her domestic prison is... that she fantasizes... subsequent guilt over... sity for self sacrifice... with a sentimentaliza... restrictions which her... her—to her son she... God”—and in this way... itulates to the very id... insidiously oppressed.

Like *Play Memory*... *Six Cadenza* is dom... conception of the wor... under which men liv... They labour long hou... die from a sudden... deterioration. For mos... options. Johnny, the o... who refuses his fate... East, takes up with M... lives of the women ar... more subservient. Lea... who is murdered bec... father/lover; Dolly is... and with his death... happily-ever-after ro... Farley, the only wom... opinion of her own, co... the men and has no... advocate of the temp... “thin old mangy cat... farical, nagging, dis... tent.

In the face of the... fabricate multiple ev... the miners are alcoh...

Despite their 130-year history in Canada, the Chinese have not assimilated because of Canadian policies which have prohibited them from participating in mainstream social life.



The Chinese in Canada

by Peter S. Li

Oxford University Press, Toronto, 1988,
164 pp.

Although Peter Li wants to write about Chinese-Canadians, he finds that their historical experience only permits him to write about them (as the title of his book indicates) as the Chinese in Canada. His book is the study of the marginality of one group of Canadians, which shatters the myth that Canada has been relatively free of institutionalized racism. With the aid of historical materials and an immense number of statistics, Li illustrates the social condition of Chinese-Canadians, from their arrival in 1858 to the present, the racism against them, the structure of their community and their recent occupational mobility in Canadian society. His work provides two main emphases: the study of Chinese-Canadians through a focus on the larger Canadian society, and an analysis of racism from the perspective of class.

The novelty of Li's book seems to stem from his first emphasis that one cannot understand a minority group in the absence of a majority. Unlike sociologists who examine the condition of Chinese in Canada through their cultural background, Li begins his study by focusing on the structure and policies of Canadian society. He claims that the experience of Chinese-Canadians and the characteristic of their community are more the result of interaction with the larger society than the influence of traditional Chinese values or in-group activities. The Chinese have not assimilated despite their 130-year history in Canada, not because of adherence to traditional values, as commonly believed by sociologists and the general public, but because of policies passed in Canada which prohibited them from participating in mainstream social life. In the history of Canada, Li tells us, no other immigrant group was subjected to as many discriminatory laws as the Chinese. They were the only ethnic group which was required to pay a head tax to enter this country. They were never regarded as permanent residents of Canada, and were often considered as a menace to racial and moral purity. They were prohibited by law from acquiring Crown lands (Statutes of B.C. 1884, c. 2), from working in mines (Coal Mines Regulation Amendment Act, 1890), from admission to provincially established homes for the aged

the charm of this play, partly defuses on the dramatic level the painfulness of Ellen's entrapment. And yet her desire to escape the bonds of her domestic prison is worked up to such a pitch that she fantasizes murdering her child. Her subsequent guilt over doing so drives the necessity for self sacrifice even deeper. The play ends with a sentimentalization and fatalization of the restrictions which her role as mother places upon her—to her son she says, "You are a child of God"—and in this way she rationalizes and capitulates to the very ideology which keeps her so insidiously oppressed.

Like *Play Memory*, Sharon Pollock's *Whiskey Six Cadenza* is dominated by men and their conception of the world. The material conditions under which men live are extremely difficult. They labour long hours in mines, drink hard, and die from a sudden accident or slow physical deterioration. For most of them there are no other options. Johnny, the only son of the Farley family who refuses his fate, failing to find a job in the East, takes up with Mr. Big, the rumrunner. The lives of the women are equally as bleak, and even more subservient. Leah is a victim of child abuse who is murdered because of her infidelity to the father/lover; Dolly is bereft of her young suitor and with his death the dream of a woman's happily-ever-after romance is shattered. Mrs. Farley, the only woman in the play with a will and opinion of her own, commands little respect from the men and has no influence upon them. An advocate of the temperance movement, with her "thin old mangy cat" manner, she is drawn as farcical, nagging, dissatisfied and utterly impotent.

In the face of their hardships, the characters fabricate multiple evasions of material reality: the miners are alcoholics; the lovers are starry-

eyed; Mr. Big rants of the cosmic significance of the universe. The final, senseless tragedy would seem to undercut these intoxications, yet Johnny's last words are, "It may have been all lies, but that still doesn't mean it weren't true." Ultimately, with its dissolving images, its gossamer and gauze, the play and its romanticizations are complicitous with these romanticizations, a complicity which in the end romanticizes fatalism and hopelessness just as much as it does dreams of escape. One is left with an ambivalent yet oppressive vision of the miners and the bootleggers and the women they abuse: in this romanticization of the brutality of the patriarchal order, life is colonial yet cosmic, fated yet full of promise, coal and gossamer.

Each of these plays depicts aspects of women's oppression with some degree of insight. However, when read together, they seem to suffer from a number of disturbing tendencies. If women have in the past been victims and continue to be so in the present, is it necessary to confine our representations to such women? If in the past women have contributed to the ideologies which oppress them and continue to do so in the present, is it necessary for our representations to acquiesce to and continue this act of complicity, even if with ambivalence? While these plays expose the oppressive destructiveness of patriarchal dominance, their almost total lack of utopian vision—and, even more, their sad ability to make excuses for the patriarchal order—set definite limits on their potential to help women reinscribe themselves otherwise, and rewrite their worlds. We await the voices of other Western women, voices less trapped in despair and self deception.

Kym Bird and Mark Fortier are doing PhDs in English at York University.