

CULTURE ACROSS THE LAKES

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(Resumen)

La dependencia en todos los órdenes de las actividades humanas que Canadá siente ante los Estados Unidos, si bien se ha ido suavizando con los años, sigue presente en el mundo de la cultura. No se trata tan solo de la copiosa venta de libros norteamericanos, ni de la popularidad en la TV canadiense de programas realizados en Buffalo, o tan lejos como Los Angeles, los propios escritores acuden en numerosos casos para su inspiración a temas o enfoques peculiares de los Estados Unidos. En este artículo nos referimos a un autor teatral canadiense que ha tomado como modelo de sus personajes de una gran parte de sus obras las películas de gangsters de Hollywood. También comentamos la referencia a los Estados Unidos en las novelas de Margaret Atwood, ocupándonos en especial de la denuncia, irónica y divertidamente exagerada en algunos casos, que hace en Survival de la "Invasión" de turistas que sufren los bosques al norte de Quebec. Los distintos aspectos de la supuesta "invasión", vistos a través de los ojos de distintos personajes, con la voz de la autora-protagonista como fondo, son objeto de un detenido análisis crítico.

Nobody denies that Canada looks across the boundary to the United States often with apprehension, tinted with mistrust, but secretly with admiration, while it increases its efforts to create a national culture in the world of the ideas and the Arts. Not only are books and movies from the U.S. widely distributed in Canada, but, furthermore, Canadian TV networks badly depend on popular series and quizz-shows from across the border for their best programs. As a famous Canadian critic pointed out in the sixties: "many Canadian cultural phenomena are not peculiarly Canadian at all, but are typical of the wider North American and Western contexts".⁴⁰

In the Canadian show business world the tradition of the American touring companies has been maintained to the present day. Quite understandably, because it is easier for local drama groups in the extreme north to make tours into Canada than to reach, for instance, New York or Boston. For many years Canadian theatregoers preferred to watch foreign plays and were attracted the dazzling names of British and American actors and actresses. This was particularly so when it came to the staging of the famous Broadway musicals, such as Sweet Charity, Oklahoma and A Chorus Line. However, little by little Canadian drama has managed to make itself a name and to win the attention of national audiences. It is interesting to point out that among the many types of contemporary Canadian drama not a small number follow a mimetic tendency towards using materials and techniques of Hollywood

action films.

If we were only to take into account the "foreignness" of his settings, we could pronounce George Walker as Canada's most versatile writer. Although born in East End Toronto and a former taxi driver, this resolute dramatist has traveled from local color into the myths of the world of pop culture, in order to recast them in a humoristic light. His line is certainly not the well-made play, but rather a Grand-Guignolesque approach to cartoon and "film noir" subjects. This procedure has the danger of self-mockery, but Walker does not seem worried about it. The "scenario" of his plays are usually exotic and the creatures that populate them caricaturesque.

His first successful play, Beyond Mozambique, is set in the jungle, as the title suggests, and accommodates weirdies such as a lustful priest - drugs, young boys, etc. - a Nazi criminal, a shameful mountie and a porn-film actress, among other bizarre characters. In the line of the clumsy private-eye, modelled on Peter Seller's screen inspector, but with agit-prop overtones in a series of plays published together as The Power Plays. Following the technique of parody imposed by Walker on his plays, Tyrone Power, the leading character is a plump, short and bald trouble-maker, not a bit like the good-looking, romantic movie star of the forties and fifties.

Walker acknowledges openly his indebtedness to the gangster B movies. One of his plays is called Theatre of the Film Noir. The Dramatist discussed the nature of these plays in an interview with Robert Wallace:

WALKER: I'll take the opportunity to say right now that I don't write parody. I don't think I've ever written a parody. I saw in "B" movies a horror and an ugliness that was only hinted at. I don't know why but in Hollywood or wherever these movies were made, perhaps because they were low budget, people felt the freedom to suggest the horror but they never went all the way. Beyond Mozambique expresses what I think those jungle movies were really all about - the ugliness, the imperialistic quality, the desperation of the characters, placed in a theatrical setting. I tend to like to frame the world and to use various genres to do that. "B" movies are a generic frame that gives me freedom to jump off in any direction that I want to or that the characters will take me. Mozambique is a jungle movie and Filthy Rich is a detective story, but they are both about other things, about other characters.

WALLACE: And Theatre of the Film Noir?

WALKER: Theatre of the Film Noir is a murder mystery set in Paris just after the war about sexual and political intrigue. It is like a Film Noir. I wasn't aware that it actually had a plot and that it was a murder mystery until after I finished working on it. Then I realized that that's what it was. In many ways it's like Ramona: it has rhythms of a dream but it deals mostly with character, specific characters in a specific situation in a specific world, which is basically what I write, I think.⁴¹

Ramona and the White slaves (1978) is his most experimental play so far and its episodic structure has set the pattern for the rest of his production. Ramona has a dream within a dream technique, which is stressed by the main character's ambivalence between suffocating motherhood and perverted prostitution; in this leading character, whose name is used for the title of the play

- we encounter the personification of evil that is recurrent in his work.

Other plays by George Walker also reflect aspects of violence we often see

in movies. The punk-rock musical in Rumours of Our Death (1975) depicts the underworld of pool hustlers, who also manage other "productive" activities, such as drugs and prostitution. The main character, Charlie, is temporarily out of balance in his own world - he owes a lot of money to his pool challenger - besides undergoing a difficult situation with his "molly", due to misunderstanding and temporary impotence. Quite logically, as befits kinetic inspiration, the play is divided in short episodes and uses several locations.

David French has a gift for the suitable slang and the right speech rhythm, in spite of moving outside his most frequented domain, within the blending of domestic drama and comedy. Furthermore, One Crack Out is a byproduct in French's initial intention of staging the phenomenon of artistic impotence. He admitted in an interview that he could not finish the original play, about a writer's difficulties in getting on with his work, and instead transferred the subject to the melodramatic world of crooks and gangsters.⁴²

There are other plays by David French, apart from this excursion to the Hollywood B movie atmosphere, that lie within the scope of this article. I am referring to the Mercer family saga, which placed David French as one of the leading Canadian dramatists of the seventies.

Evolving from an early acting vocation and his experience as a TV script writer - like quite a number of other contemporary playwrights -, French had the advantage of working closely with Bill Glasco, who shaped an acting company, which, in time, has entered the legend of the Canadian stage, the Toronto Tarragon Theatre. David French, after writing short stories and one act plays, attempted recollections of life in Newfoundland - the French family had moved to Toronto when David was six years old -, filtered to him by his father.

Leaving Home (1972), which is what Keepers of the House eventually became with Glasco's help, has a strong autobiographical foundation. However, although the play is located in Newfoundland, Ben, the son, who makes the decision to break away, is much older than the author at the time.

The tension between Jacob Mercer and his eldest son, growing out of personal ties, is an universal theme, yet French has managed to create an excellent play out of all the creative materials by achieving the right atmosphere and moving his solid characters through carefully handled situations.

The plight of Jacob, the father, whose local speech is beautifully rendered, struggling desperately to maintain his grip on his family, is very moving and dramatically effective, because even his wife, who stays behind with him when the children go away, has more or less consciously sided with their two sons in their efforts to start a new life.

Apart from the obvious connections with some instances of contemporary European literature, we cannot avoid thinking of a very famous American source, Arthur Miller's family plays of the forties.

This thematic loan is stressed by the technique used in his next drama, Of the Fields, Lately, also dealing with the Mercer family. It is a memory play, strongly

reminiscent of Death of a Salesman in some important aspects. In both plays, Canadian and American, father and eldest son, though really loving each other, argue bitterly now and again. The father in both plays has lost his moral strength and is physically ill. Neither Jacob Mercer nor Billy Loman understand that Ben and Biff want to find their own way in life, without being directed by their parents. Some critics have pointed out this parallelism; among them Edward Mullaly in "Canadian Drama, David French and the Great Awakening".⁴³

Jitters (1979), regarded by many as the best comedy written by French and, furthermore, perhaps the most successful on the contemporary Canadian stage, seems very illustrative of the cultural dependency that we mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The idea of unveiling the personal problems of a whole theatrical company while they are struggling with the rehearsals of a play is not new by all means. There have been very recent attempts at this kind of situation in several countries, but David French excels in handling the plot with masterful skill, and, what is more important, also manages a penetrating insight into Canadian idiosyncrasy.

One of the most recent plays of this sort is Michel Frayn's Noises Off. From a technical point of view this British play is much more complex than its Canadian equivalent. Both open up with "the play within the play" at the rise of the curtain, baffling the audience, who later on learns that the "meaty stuff" is yet to come. In Noises Off this playlet is called Nothing On, in Jitters it turns out to be a domestic drama, The Care and Treatment Of Roses. In fact, the very titles of these playlets mark the first differences: The Care and Treatment of Roses is a case of self satire, mocking the type of theatre that had made French famous through the Mercer saga: Nothing On is a slapstick sexual farce, which combines a fast acting pace with careful timing, so that the whole development should not end in total chaos.

However, French does not hide his cards for a long time. The rehearsal of the playlet is interrupted by the director and soon the relationship between the comedians in "real life" takes over, with their typical worries, rivalries and petty arguments.

On the other hand, Frayn attempts a spectacular "tour-de-force" in the second act, by showing us the comings and goings of the comedians from inside, so the audience witnesses what happens among them while they wait for their cues to step on stage. As Pilar Zozaya says in a very appreciative commentary on Noises Off:

After the interval, the audience is immediately taken in by Frayn's audacity: The whole set has been turned through 180 degrees and now, one month later, we are back stage while the actors and actresses are getting ready for an afternoon performance. Affairs have been developing between members of the company, and one of the sources of great comedy is to witness how the most innocent deed glimpsed by somebody who suddenly pops in has a totally different meaning and is the cause of endless rows and misunderstandings. Frayn is still alluding to all possible levels of fiction and reality, truth and deceit.⁴⁴

We find both plays, the British and the Canadian one, very rewarding as theatrical experiences, quite often for different reasons, but let us just add that Jitters had its first performance at the Tarragon theatre on February, 16th, 1979, while Noises Off was premiered at the Liryc Theatre in London almost three years later.

Nevertheless, the idea was not new in either case. From Shakespeare to Sheridan there have been abundant examples of "the play within the play" especially in the XVIIIth century. More recently we can recall as many as six or seven similar attempts, in the last quarter of this century, to mention only those in the English speaking theatre, from Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead up to Ayckbourn's A Chorus of Disappointment.⁴⁵

Jitters is not so daring from the technical point of view as Noises Off. The first act is given to a stage rehearsal of the playlet and later on to the confrontation between the comedians while they are having a rest. The second act takes place a short time before the opening night in the dressing-room and the Green Room. The tension increases when the director realizes that everything is out of place and most of the comedians are dominated by an acute feeling of jitters; the situation, as the big moment approaches, becomes frantic - an actor gets locked inside the loo and another one lies unconscious on the floor -. The third act takes place the following afternoon, when the company gathers to work out changes in the text and discuss the reaction of the critics and audience the night before.

Pertinent to this article is the value of Jitters as a kind of document that reveals the ties that still bind Canadian drama to American show business.

In the first act, just as the rehearsal is interrupted, the two leading comedians cannot refrain from exposing their jealousy in front of their fellow-actors. Patrick Flanagan has these nasty words to say about his counterpart, Jessica Logan:

PATRICK: We are talking about that prima donna. Canada's own Jessica Logan. God, that kills me. She's been in the States half her life, she comes home to do one play for six weeks, and suddenly she is a national resource.

GEORGE: Blame the press, not her. You know what they're like.

PATRICK: I've been a name here for twenty years, I can't even get a bank loan.

GEORGE: You want a sandwich ?

PATRICK: Even in that Albee piece she played herself. That's all she can do, bitches.⁴⁶

Later on we learn, by mouth of Susi, one of the director's assistants, that the ticket sales have been a complete success and that a famous drama critic from New York is going to attend the opening night. In fact, Jessica Logan believes in The Care and Treatment of Roses, and, in spite of being a play by a new Canadian dramatist, she has high expectations of taking the show to Broadway. Not only George, the director, feels excited with the idea of Bernie Feldman coming all the way from New York to see the play; other members of the company seem enthralled too when they get wind of this presence.

As for Patrick and Jessica, every time they exchange words the fact of having a chance of acting or not in the United States comes up in the conversation. The

longest chat about this subject is at the beginning of the second act when the two leading performers are alone in the dressing room. It turns out that Patrick is against venturing outside Canada, because he secretly fears he might fail abroad. Quite logically being addicted to alcohol undermines his self-confidence. On the other hand, Jessica has now reverted to saying that the great Bernie might not turn up in the last minute after all, so Patrick thinks that she is showing her own anxiety in having to face a New York critic.

In the second act, when there is little time left before the play starts and one of the actors, Tom, has not turned up yet in the theatre, the name Feldman sounds again as George tries to convince Robert, the new dramatist, to save the show by stepping into Tom's part.

In fact, there is no ending of Bernie Feldman all along Jitters. He seems to be a kind of a ghost haunting the actors before and after the performance. In the third act George tells Robert and Tom that he has had a telephone call informing him that Bernie has gone back to New York without attending the opening of The Care and Treatment of Roses, because one of his own shows there is in trouble. Furthermore there is a turmoil in the dressing room when Jessica walks in complaining about everything. The reason for her bad temper lies in what the critic of The Toronto Star has written about her acting the previous night: "Perhaps Miss Logan has been absent from the theatre too long. Perhaps she misjudged the intimacy of the small theatre. The fact remains that her performance is by far too large for such an intimate space, almost wildly extravagant, reducing the characters at times to caricatures. She starts off at such high emotional pitch she has nowhere to go except into the upper ranges of hysteria".⁴⁷

The worst part of it is that these words stand out as the only negative criticism in the whole article. If Jessica was already in low spirits, you can imagine how she feels when she is told that Feldman has gone back to New York. She is convinced that when he gets to know about her bad performance, he will make sure that the part of Elizabeth is given to another actress. Fortunately, at that critical moment Susi comes in to tell George that Feldman is on the phone and that he wants to invite him and Jessica for dinner. As it turns out, the previous call was a false one, apparently made by Patrick due to his mixed feelings about touring abroad. And so the play ends happily with the comedians celebrating their big chance of proving their talents in front of a sophisticated audience across the border.

Margaret Atwood, the leading woman writer in Canada at present, published a book at the beginning of her literary career about, among other things, what means to be a Canadian. In this book she equates her country to a victim, and goes on to speak of the Basic Victim positions. If we are to judge the attitudes of the comedians in Jitters in regard to their homeland, we could say that they fall, more or less, into Position Two, which, according to Atwood, reads as follows:

To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea.⁴⁸

There is no doubt that in Jitters the character that more openly embodies this attitude is Patrick Flanagan. He complains that being a leading Canadian actor for many years has not brought him any financial security ("I can't even get a bank loan"), but he has accepted more or less grudgingly the fact of being a victim since he is afraid of proving his mettle on unfavourable ground.

Jessica is a victim too. She has had the courage of acting abroad, and she has returned home pretending she is doing the other comedians a great favour by taking part in the show. However, all this amounts to nothing less than self-deceit. She did not manage to make a name for herself in the American circuits and, what is worse, she is now trying to attract attention in Canada. Unfortunately she is incapable of fitting into the requirements of a domestic comedy on a small stage.

The whole cast of actors are somehow victims too. They need the sanction of a foreign critic in order to gain prestige at home. They acknowledge the fact that they are victims of History, of growing up in a country where the individual has to look across the border in search of the standards that will establish the difference between failure and success.

Northrop Frye offered a suitable historical explanation for such a handicap:

Cultural history, we said, has its own rhythms. It is possible that one of these rhythms is very like an organic rhythm: that there must be a period, of a certain magnitude, as Aristotle would say, in which a social imagination can take root and establish a tradition. American literature had this period, in the north-eastern part of the country, between the Revolution and the Civil War. Canada has never had it. English Canada was first a part of the wilderness, then a part of North America and the British Empire, then a part of the world. But it has gone through these revolutions too quickly for a tradition of writing to be founded on any of them.⁴⁰

Canadians often resent the disadvantages of the historical immaturity of their country. Such a resentment is bound to appear in literature when the neighbors across the lakes constitute the ideal scapegoat for a neurosis.

The negative results of the intrusion of technology in the wilderness appear at the very beginning of Surfacing, one of M. Atwood's early novels:

I can't believe I'm on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south, and I notice they now have seaplanes for hire. But this is still near the city limits, we didn't go through, it's swelled enough to have a bypass, that's success.

The narrator, a young woman distressed by an unhappy marriage and an abortion, travels to northern Quebec in search of her childhood roots in the presumably unspoiled area where her father has disappeared. She is accompanied by Joe, a new companion, and another couple. David, the owner of the car in which they are traveling, is a radical Anglo-Canadian who hates the guts of the Americans. On passing signs of a U.S.A. military rocket site, he starts swearing ("bloody fascist pig yanks"), and so he does every time the two couples come close to any kind of installation that smells of U.S. presence.

One day, while the four of them are fishing by the shore of a lake, a motor boat turns up, skidding by their canoe. It is a fishing party of two American businessmen, complete with guide and American flag. The narrator makes the Americans sound dangerous and nasty to the point of having to move away from them as quick as possible; things seem to have gone from bad to worse in the way Americans behave in the Canadian wilderness:

If they catch one they'll be here all night.

If they don't get anything in fifteen minutes they'll blast off and scream around the lake in their souped-up boat, deafening the fish. They are the kind who catch more than they can eat and they'd do it with dynamite if they could get away with it.

We used to think they were harmless and funny and inept and faintly lovable, like president Eisenhower..⁵⁰

The description of another pair they had met years before, equipped with all the suitable gear for fishing and camping, gives Atwood a good chance for a long paragraph of comedy and satire when describing their clumsy antics.

Later on they have an encounter with a less conspicuous specimen of the neighbor country ("his clothes were woodsy, semi-worn, verging on the authentic"). Bill Malstrom ("please call me Bill") introduces himself as a member of the Detroit branch of the Wildlife Protection Association of America. He wants to buy the young lady's land by trying to win her confidence. He assures her that the cabin would only be used as "a retreat lodge, where members could meditate and observe". Nevertheless, the feeling that he is a phony Nature lover permeates the conversation.

When David inquires about his identity, the wild supposition crops up that, instead of a wildlife watching place, what Malstrom and his cronies are after is a military strategic base, because, as David puts it, in the States they are running out of clean water and therefore the American government has its eye on the Canadian inland lakes. David's fantasy goes wild to the point of forecasting internal rebellion. According to him the Canadian top officials would eventually give in, confronted by an American invasion and it would be left to the good patriots to take up the fighting against the U.S. marines, reverting to guerrilla warfare.

Furthermore, all these gloomy suppositions find an echo in the narrator's mind. Her train of thoughts shows a shared distrust in the strength of Canada as a nation:

He seemed very positive about it, as if it had happened already. I thought about the survival manuals: if the movement guerrillas were anything like David and Joe they would never make it through the winters. They couldn't get help from the cities, they would be too far, and the people there would be apathetic, they wouldn't mind another change of flag. If they tried at outlying farms, the farmers would take after them with shotguns. The Americans wouldn't even have to defoliate the trees, the guerrillas would die of starvation and exposure anyway.⁵¹

So where is the rub ? Perhaps in the moral feebleness of the Canadian male ? The fact is that along the pages of the novel neither Joe, her demanding boy-friend,

nor David, the boasting philanderer, inspire much confidence as mature human beings.

Ironically enough, the first Americans they had met, the ones that looked like irritating businessmen, the very ones that aroused the narrator's biting comments, eventually turn out to be nothing else but Canadian citizens. It happened that the two fishing parties mistook each other for Americans. What baffled the narrator was the flag on the prow of the motor boat; however, it is just another example of prejudiced vision. One of the phony Americans explains he is a Mets fan and after a closer look the narrator discovers how easily we jump into false conclusions ("it wasn't a flag at all, it was blue and white oblong with red printing, GO METS.")

After this we are bound to think that Margaret Atwood is aiming at the confusion in Canada's national sense of identity, the subject of another book of hers, and indeed of many essays written in her country. The danger lies in the fact that the total cultural assimilation by the U.S.A. seems unavoidable; at least this is what the narrator of Surfacing thinks and many Canadians fear:

But they'd killed the heron anyway. It does not matter what country they're from, my head said, they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into. They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can't tell the difference. Like the late show sci-fi movies, creatures from outer space, body snatchers injecting themselves into you (sic) disposing your brain, their eyes blank eggshells behind the dark glasses. If you look like them and talk like them then you are them, I was saying, you speak their language, a language is everything you do.⁵²

Carried away by her despondency, the narrator goes as far as comparing the Americans with Hitler; a gross exaggeration by all means, that her creator, Margaret Atwood, slips into the novel, but does not condone in real life. Canada is not an isolated case among the so called free countries. After all, gangster, horror and sci-fi movies, flashy cars, fast food and rock and roll music are household icons everywhere. The consumer phenomenon does not affect the northern neighbour only; it has become the Western hemisphere's glossy way of life, that has almost spread to the rest of the entire world. As a kind of consolation, however small, Canadians know how to take it easy, because, as the saying goes, we are all in the same boat.

NOTES

40. " Conclusion to A Literary History of Canada ", reproduced in The Bush Garden (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 214.

41. R. Walker and C. Zimmerman, The Work (Conversations with English-Canadian Playwrights), (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1982), p.218.

42. Gina Mallet, "David French's long journey comes full circle" Toronto Star, November 14, 1981, p. 43.

43. The Fiddlehead, n.100 (winter, 1974), pp.65-66.
44. Contemporary British Drama (1980-1986), (Barcelona: PPU, 1989), p. 214.
45. Zozaya refers also to an article by Katherine Worth. " Farce and Mr. Frayn ", Modern Drama, vol.xxvi, n. 1.(March, 1983), pp. 49-49. The names of Pirandello and Beckett are mentioned by Worth in connection with Frayn.
46. Modern Canadian Plays, ed. by J Wasserman (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1986),p. 314, 2nd. column.
47. Ibid., p. 343, 1st. column.
48. Survival (A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature), (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 37.
49. " Conclusion to A Literary History of Canada ", p. 219.
50. Surfacing (Toronto: General Publishing Cop. Ltd., 1972), p. 71.
51. Ibid., p. 104.
52. Ibid., p. 139.