

Book review

The well-tempered critic

BY ALLAN M. GOULD
It is not often that we think of a fine novelist as a major critic as well. Usually he or she is known primarily as one or the other.

With the publication of Robertson Davies' *The Well-Tempered Critic: One Man's View of Theatre and Letters in Canada* (McClelland and Stewart; 285 pages; \$18.95, we are forced to add another name to that brief list.

Davies began as a journalist and critic on *The Peterborough Examiner*, wrote a number of flawed but occasionally interesting plays, and then went on to gain some fame for *Leaves of Malice*, *A Mixture of Frailties* and other novels.

As the Master of Massey College at the University of Toronto, he is known and admired in academic circles across Canada, but it has only

been during the last few years, with the publication of his *Depford* trilogy — *Fifth Business*, *The Manticore*, and *World of Wonders* — that he has reached the peak of his craft as a writer of fiction, and gained international recognition.

Yet all this time, he has been steadily, continually, consistently turning out essays on theatre, literature, the arts. These essays have appeared in

a number of places.

Is there a value in anthologizing often-ephemeral reviews and writings of a man like Robertson Davies?

In a sense, his articles, spanning four decades in a wildly expanding Canadian theatre and literary scene, are of automatic historical interest: Who else, except perhaps the late Nathan Cohen, wrote over such a long period — and

wrote so cogently and well?

Davies was certainly in there, fighting the good fight for a Canadian theatre and Canadian culture, earlier than anyone else.

As early as 1944, in *The Peterborough Examiner*, he was prodding CBC radio to "establish in Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver four companies of radio-actors, each with a good director and a good technician." We cannot help but be charmed at his optimism and false hope.

When we note how Davies applauded Ireland's Tyrone Guthrie, and recommends him as a director for Canadian theatre two years before he came to our country in 1953 to help launch the Stratford Festival, we can admire his prescience.

PRaising STRATFORD
But there are just as many disappointments in judgement and insight.

Was the Stratford Festival "an artistic bombshell, exploded just at the time when Canadian theatre was most ready for a break with the dead past and a leap into the future" as Davies wrote in *Saturday Night* in 1953, along with ecstatic reviews of early productions there?

I would agree more with Cohen, who felt that Stratford devoured what was a rather promising theatrical scene in the late 1940s and early 1950s, in and about Toronto.

Like a black hole of culture, it sucked in every performer and designer within hundreds of miles, who could not resist the excitement of a big theatre with international pretensions.

Indeed, almost all of Davies' reviews of Stratford productions are limited by the writer's unbridled affection for Tyrone Guthrie, with whom he wrote a number of books on the Festival.

OUR CULTURE

In the longer, second section of this anthology of articles, Davies writes on Canadian poetry, novels and our culture in general.

Here he is often more on target, and more valuable today: it is good to read literate, intelligent reviews of such major works of fiction as *Barometer Rising*, *The Tin Flute*, *The Sacrifice*, *The Stone Angel*, and the early poetry of Irving Layton, which he justifiably admires.

For some reason, Canada has never been strong in the world of criticism. The United States could be proud of George Jean Nathan, Stark Young, Eric Bentley and Robert Brustein (to name just a few) in reviewing theatre, but we have only Nathan Cohen.

And in the realm of belles lettres, where is the Canadian Edmund Wilson? Leslie Fiedler? Alfred Kazin?

And so we have the criticism of Robertson Davies, so lovingly edited and gathered by Judith Skelton Grant, who put out a companion volume two years ago, *The Enthusiasms of Robertson Davies*.

Rarely passionate but often witty, pleasantly thoughtful but infrequently challenging, these reviews and essays are handy to have about, for students of Canadian literature and theatre, but hardly "must" reading for anyone else.

Allan Gould teaches at the University of Toronto, and writes and performs on CTV and CBC-TV and radio.

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SPINNING A YARN

Bonnie Smith (seated by the tree) conducted a number of Acton and Georgetown children toward becoming skilled craftsmen of "God's eyes", an ancient North American Indian art-form related to hand-weaving. The 13 youngsters were

participating in a session of the Kids' Craft Club on the lawns of the Acton branch of the Halton Hills public library Saturday. (Herald photo)

Keeping operating costs low down on the old farmstead

Talk to most farmers these days and you'll find one problem uppermost in their minds — rising interest rates. Some fortunate individuals have debts that amount to no

DOLLAR SENSE
more than 5 per cent or so of assets but they are worried too. Interest payments on that level of debt can still eat up 5 to 10 per

cent of cash income.

For farmers with heavier debt loads, today's interest rates can spell real trouble. The danger point is reached about the 20 per cent mark — that is, when debt charges consume 20 per cent of revenue. The individual who reaches that point may not be able to service his debt for very long.

menting dairy earnings by raising steers in hopes that beef prices will improve. It's always better to lose a little than lose a lot.

4. Keep careful tabs on your operations with a month-by-month cash flow budget. If trouble arises, you can spot it quickly and head it off at the pass.

5. Don't make any decision that anticipates lower interest rates in the next 12 months. A downturn just doesn't seem to be in the cards.

6. Consider incorporating. That way you can take advantage of a once-in-a-lifetime Small Business Development Loan. Because lenders don't have to pay tax on these loans they are attractively cheap. Right now the going rate is 11 1/2 to 12 per cent — and banks just love this kind of business.

7. Finally, speaking of banks, it's a good idea to keep in close touch with all your creditors, especially if you anticipate problems of any kind. Farmers generally see their bankers once a year, but every 90 days is a better bet in these difficult times. More than anything else, lenders dislike uncertainty.

Health survey's findings are released

A report on the findings of a special federal government survey concerning the health of Canadians indicates that lower-income groups have a significantly higher proportion of health problems.

income groups.

People with higher incomes are more likely to consult a health professional on a routine basis.

Donald Shaughnessy is with Ward Mallette, Chartered Accountants in Cobourg.

The report, called *Canada Health Survey*, has been released by Health and Welfare Minister Monique Bégin and Jean-Jacques Blais, Minister responsible for Statistics Canada.

Twelve per cent of Canadians suffer from long term disability.

Sixty per cent of automobile drivers and passengers wear seatbelts all or most of the time in provinces with seatbelt legislation — only 16 per cent wear seatbelts where there is no legislation.

1. Undertake no capital spending unless the savings or extra earnings are going to be more than enough in the first year to pay the finance costs.

2. Get rid of any assets you don't need in your current operations. Do you have 40 acres sitting idle a couple of miles up the road? Two tractors when one would do? Dump them fast. If you have a larger herd than you need, sell off the surplus and lighten your debt load.

3. Don't operate a sideline business that depends for success on upward trends in the market just because you have surplus capacity. You'd be wrong, for instance, to try aug-

Some of the highlights of the report show that:

Canadians are sick an average of 15.7 days per year; females and the elderly contribute disproportionately to this average.

Heart disease, mental disorders, bronchitis and emphysema are more common among lower

Three-quarters of the population consult a doctor at least once a year; half visit a dentist.

Half the population uses some medication (medicine, pills or ointments including birth control pills and vitamins) in any given two-day period.

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