

A bold attempt, with more to come

Canada House, a two-act play, by J. Karol Korczyński

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Canada House, a two-act play, by J. Karol Korczyński, at the Theatre Passe Muraille Backspace, Toronto, through November 28

Canada House, the play by J. Karol Korczyński, is a generally endearing, wildly uneven, often amusing, sometimes maddening, socially critical piece. Currently running at the Theatre Passe Muraille Backspace in Toronto, the play modestly takes on, as its subject matter, the worship of the free market, corporate domination of modern life, the decline and betrayal of the trade unions, social polarization, socialism, war, human nature, the drug trade, telemarketing and telephone sex, the police, father fixations, bar-room mores, stand-up comedy, karaoke and probably a dozen other topics that do not immediately come to mind.

The presumptuousness of *Canada House* (which more or less borrows its name from the Toronto tavern in which the playwright composed the piece over the winter of 2001-02) is one of its strong suits. Whether or not the playwright treats all these subjects adequately or convincingly—whether or not, given their quantity, he *could*—is perhaps another matter. Here the primary importance probably lies in the boldness of the attempt. We trust that more polished efforts will follow.

For all its ambition, there are only three characters in the piece: Sally (Wendy Thatcher), a former factory worker, former stripper, now a barfly and telephone sex worker; Louis (Daniel Kash), also a former factory worker, also a barfly and jack of all dishonorable trades; Ray (Brian Marler), a monstrous “boiler room” telemarketer and budding entrepreneur.

Canada House manages to combine (although not always successfully) lumpen social realism and absurdist black comedy.

The Social Market Foundation (represented by Ray)—which seeks “To wipe out any and all barriers to the free accumulation of personal wealth”—is conducting

experiments to find the worker suitable for the new global economic conditions. Ray turns to the denizens of Toronto’s Skid Row and selects Sally as his “backup” in the “Wash Tub Methamphetamine” business, in case his present employee, a “broad in Pango Pango,” should falter. Sally, in fact, ends up chained to the wash tub in question, and only escapes by maiming herself.

Having received his trophy from the Social Market Foundation as “this year’s Winner of the Time and Motion Man of the Year Award” for his methamphetamine ingenuity, Ray turns his attention to “Social Robotics,” a process that provides (in his words) “a hand-picked supply of specialized labour power...for the...ah...more sensitive jobs. Now, I’m talking a pool of workers devoid of anything but the most basic of desires...Workers who’ll do what ya tell ‘em...without question, without reflection...without...(searching)...compunction.”

Ray plans to present Louis, his protégé and dirty errand boy, as the prototype of the New Working Man. To help along the process and prove his point that “Any job’s a good job” in the new economy, Ray instructs Louis to murder Sally, now handless and living on the streets. “You’re whatever I damn well want. Yeah. That’s right. A pair of arms. A nail. A piece of fucking tubing.”

In fact, Louis has a crisis of conscience and Ray’s plan unravels, as “work riots ... [f]ood riots, war riots, whatever,” erupt. Louis and Sally reconcile; she has hopes for mankind, after all, “‘Cause I know what folks can be, Louis. I know what folks can be.”

The lives of the three protagonists are tied together in other ways. Sally, as telephone sex worker “Brandy,” has a special relationship with Ray, who uses his own assumed name to make calls to his favorite sex operator. He can only find sexual satisfaction, with a plastic bag over his head, through listening to tragic stories (although they have to be “quick and clean. Like a smart bomb on a Cairo hospital.”).

Further complicating matters, Sally and Louis used to work in the same factory, owned by Ray's father, until Louis ran off with the strike fund in the midst of a bitter dispute. Ray complains that the strike ruined his father's company and drove the older man to suicide. "The way he just sat at home afterwards. A failure....Another family chewed up by the likes of you...(mimicking workers)...We want more. We want more...(then)...Ta hell with initiative. Ta hell with private property...(again as a worker)...Give us more."

As this brief summary might indicate, a great deal is going on...all at once. The play is messy, both intentionally and, less happily, unintentionally. Korczynski wants to come at modern society, as he sees it, from all sides, as provocatively and imaginatively as possible. He only succeeds, however, a portion of the time.

In his determination to get to everything that troubles him, the playwright strikes out somewhat wildly. The first act in particular suffers from a scattershot approach. Too many themes, treated too cursorily. More than that, Korczynski makes the mistake of too many other contemporary playwrights and filmmakers, identifying harshness and coldness with a radical and 'hard-hitting' approach. Sally's 'death by striptease' speech is no more appealing (actually less, because less humorous) than Ray's "Hell, we even got guys workin' on turnin' the law of the jungle into nothin' but a fuckin' guideline." Making everything and everyone dislikable and cynical is a little too easy.

The longer scenes of dialogue in the second act are more affecting. Arguments, relationships and social attitudes are given more of a chance to unfold. We see some reasons to care about these people, even, in a peculiar fashion, the dreadful Ray. (After all, the purely evil or entirely destroyed personality is not particularly fruitful material for drama. Ray's domestic problems and sexual fetish make him into something of human being, albeit a deeply defective one.)

In his choice of milieu too Korczynski seems to have taken the least line of resistance. According to the press notes, the author's "unique 'life on the skids' perspective comes from an unhappy stint in Vancouver's notorious Hastings and Main 'rooming house row.'" That's fine, but what does Toronto's Skid Row tell us about modern life? Such a locale is probably one of the least affected by the upheavals of the past two decades. Is the author looking to these layers as the final barrier against unadulterated free market capitalism? One hopes and

strongly suspects not. Or is he saying that even such damaged human specimens will ultimately revolt against the depredations of the globalized economy? Or...? We don't really know.

Moreover, it isn't often that one gets to make this criticism these days, but the play does in fact suffer from an *overabundance* of political points, even though generally astute. Too often one feels a given scene or stretch of dialogue veering inevitably, as though pulled by some ideological force of gravity, toward verifying a sociological argument. The pull feels unnatural. It is also unnecessary. To paraphrase Danton, 'spontaneity, more spontaneity, always spontaneity' ought to be the watchword of the highly politically-conscious writer. The worldview will emerge of its own accord, given half a chance.

In any event, one could make a number of such points about the dramatic and social choices made by the playwright, and a variety of unresolved ideological issues, but they almost seem beside the point. This is a first effort, and many things remain to be worked out.

Korczynski has plunged into the theatre feet-first, and the entry is entirely to be welcomed. What one carries away principally from *Canada House* is the author's deep concern for humanity, mordant wit, flair for the theatrical and general enthusiasm for the enterprise. The latter has communicated itself to the actors, who carry on with great exuberance, especially Thatcher. They seem to care a great deal about what they are doing. And that is rare.

If I had the playwright's ear for five minutes, this is what I might say: 'Next time out, cut down on the four-letter words, they get tedious; write in plain English, without dropping the Gs ("workin', turnin', nothin'," etc.)—this supposedly proletarian lingo also gets tiresome; go beyond a certain nostalgia for a working class existence (national-based trade unionism, etc.) that is long gone; look around at the present world, including its economic life—it's not simply nightmarish; try less politics as such; above all, calmly describe life as you see it. Simply write about life, with your genuine gifts, and you will make a lasting contribution.'



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