NOTES

[1]James Reaney has written two articles about ways in which workshops with children influence his writing: "Kids and Crossovers" (*Canadian Theatre Review*, No. 10, Spring 1975) and "Ten Years at Play" (1969) reprinted in *Dramatists in Canada – Selected Essays* (University of British Columbia Press, 1972).

Joyce Doolittle teaches Canadian Studies and Theatre for the Young at The University of Calgary. She co-authored, with Zina Barnieh, A Mirror of Our Dreams – Children and the Theatre in Canada *(Talonbooks 1979).*

Plays for Canadian Children

MALCOLM PAGE

Cyclone Jack, Carol Bolt; *Billy Bishop & the Red Baron*, Leonard Peterson. Simon & Pierre, 1974. 63 pp. illus. $4.95 paper. ISBN 0-88924-011-6.

The Devil's Instrument, W.O. Mitchell. Simon & Pierre, 1974. 31 pp., illus. $4.95 paper. ISBN 0-9690455-6-5.

These three plays, written in the early seventies, have in common only the fact that Simon & Pierre have chosen to publish them. They are good-looking, large-format texts; however, they lack such basic information as the date and cast of first production. Further, while *Cyclone Jack* and *The Devil's Instrument* have several photographs of the play in performance, *Billy Bishop* is illustrated instead with vaguely relevant old pictures.

These plays show great variety: two are written for large casts but one,

Billy Bishop, has only four performers; two are historical but one (Mitchell's) is apparently set in the present. *CCL* readers will also note that the pieces by Bolt and Peterson were written for the Young People's Theatre, Toronto, for performance to young audiences, while Mitchell wrote for adult television but later had the work staged by Ontario Youtheatre.

Carol Bolt is prolific and versatile, her work ranging from the portrait of the young Emma Goldman, *Red Emma*, to the thriller, *One Night Stand*. In the past, I have had two problems with Bolt's plays. Such pieces as *Tangleflags,* for young children, and *Maurice*, a light-hearted history of Duplessis, have seemed to me somewhat sketchy, even unfinished, as though an active mind had raced on too soon to the next project. *Cyclone Jack* seems more deeply felt; Bolt appears more completely committed to her subject here. The other problem was the question of how seriously to take Bolt. Is she a historian who now and then makes fun of her subject, or is she more the popular entertainer who happens to use people like Emma and Duplessis as characters? In *Cyclone Jack* she has found the right mixture: amateurs and professionals, the naive and the exploited, lots of surface hoopla, and a hint of a moral under the sugar.

Cyclone Jack is a lively and exuberant one-acter, often bursting into song. We see Jack (real name Tom Longboat), a young Indian from Brantford who simply enjoys running: he wins the 1907 Boston Marathon, is speechless when welcomed at Toronto City Hall, drops out of the 1908 Olympic Games, beats the Italian Dorando at Madison Square Gardens soon after, and turns his wedding into a publicity stunt. Beneath the success story – the *Canadian* success story – poor simple Jack, the reservation boy bewildered in the city, is being exploited by his manager. Further, we learn that sporting success doesn't last. Early in the play and again at the end Bolt tells us:

> No one wanted a loser
> Tom was down on his luck
> When he was thirty-five
> We let him drive
> A big Toronto garbage truck
> Just one place for a loser
> Working on a garbage truck.

I am sure that I would enjoy seeing *Cyclone Jack*, and so would the children I know.

Leonard Peterson, a playwright for nearly forty years, is rarely remembered in discussions of Canadian drama because so little of his work has been published.[1] His play about Billy Bishop, commissioned in 1974,

precedes John Gray's triumphant view of the same man.[2] Peterson's four actors play children in hospital, who take on another thirteen parts between them. The audience is invited to participate as pilots, too: a danger here, I think, of everyone rushing round, arms outstretched, shouting and shooting!

The one girl-patient encourages the others to play games about Bishop and the Red Baron, and to find out more about the two pioneer fliers. The highlights of Bishop's story are here – early failures, shooting up an aerodrome, rivalry with the Englishman Albert Ball, withdrawal from France against his wishes, receiving medals from King George V (who says to him, not "You've been a busy bugger," but "Zowie!"). Then the Kaiser decorates the Red Baron, telling him, "Ja, take the whole caboodle, all the decorations we got."

Peterson faces two problems. First, the question of tone. How should the killing of people be presented, especially to a young audience? (*Billy Bishop Goes to War* has ambiguities in seeing Bishop simultaneously as killer and hero.) Peterson presents Bishop and the Red Baron as examples of bravery, able to inspire the children to overcome their illnesses and depressions. Second, when creating battling airplanes in flight, Peterson calls for the use of pogo sticks, wheelchairs, stretchers and model planes (and, if we choose, tricycles, unicycles or propellers on sticks). I believe, however, exceedingly inventive actors and director would be needed to sustain the many flying scenes.

Not all of W.O. Mitchell's vast output has been published either, but he has at least been adequately recognised for *Jake and the Kid* and *Who Has Seen the Wind?* The "devil's instrument" proves to be the mouth-organ, played by Jacob, a 16-year-old Hutterite boy. On a rare trip to town, he meets his older brother Darius, who left the farming community some years before after objections to his putting up pictures in the schoolroom. At first Jacob does not recognise Darius, but he accepts the gift of the mouth-organ. He practises secretly, and has a secret night-time meeting in the straw-stacks with Marta, the girl he is to marry. Found out, he is punished not only by the ruling that no one is to speak to him for three months, but also by a decision that Marta will be married off to another. Jacob fails to persuade Marta to run away with him, and is last seen hitch-hiking to the city to join his brother.

The glimpses of Hutterite life are intriguing – praying, hymn-singing, water-divining – and so are such recurrent phrases as "the devil's music," "the Bone-setter" and "Peter the Goose Boss." Some of the prose, however, is stilted, and so are Jacob's speeches when he reaches for poetry, e.g. "It leaves me like . . . Like I am the only one left in the whole world. It

is like I am left hanging. And it hurts . . . in your throat. I want to . . . to cry, for something is lifting up in me, and I want to cry." More seriously, most of the characters are thin and the older ones hard to distinguish.

The Devil's Instrument is disturbing because of its simplistic and negative view of the Hutterites. Mitchell seems to agree with Darius, who says: "Outside the city – just outside – where I live – there is a colony . . . It is called a jail, Jacob. When I have passed the camp, I have thought of you, Jacob. Each time. There are guards there with guns instead of bearded bosses. The fence is higher. But those are slight differences. They – are – so – slight." In Mitchell's picture, one cannot understand why all the young people have not fled from the restrictions and joylessness. I would like to see on stage more of the strengths which must exist in this community life. This matters in two ways: not only is the conflict one-sided dramatically (Jacob and Darius are right, and everyone else wrong, and we do not see the conflict presumably existing within Marta), but Mitchell is encouraging redneck prejudices against Hutterites, who are after all more sinned against than sinning, disliked as too successful and prosperous by neighbouring farmers, and persecuted by disputed tax demands.

Mitchell appears to be passionately involved. He hates the stultifying effects of the Hutterite way on its young people, and, if there are values in such a life, he cannot see them. He challenges, in fact, the mainstream liberal view that the more or less extreme religious sects should be left alone. His play points to compulsory secular education for Hutterites. Mitchell, by writing of the present, faces us with real issues outside the theatre more directly than do the other two authors.

Plays on all these subjects are, however, important. The three authors, with very varying earnestness, are helping to assert a distinct Canadian identity, separate not only from Britain but also from the United States. Irish dramatists responded to a similar need eighty years ago. Canada needs to re-discover the Donnellys, *Walsh, 1837,* and now Billy Bishop and Cyclone Jack.

NOTES

[1]An interview with Leonard Peterson appeared in issue #14 of *CCL*.

[2]An account of John Gray's *Billy Bishop Goes to War* can be found in the March 16, 1981, issue of *Maclean's*.

Malcolm Page teaches English at Simon Fraser and has published widely on Canadian and British theatre.