The Plays of Gwen Pharis Ringwood:

Very little has been written about regionalism in playwriting. A brief glance at books dealing with the development, history and criticism of drama will reveal how rarely the word appears in the Table of Contents or Index. In fact, it seems to be, in the minds of some drama critics, a pejorative term. For them it seems to denote narrowness, a failure to deal with the larger world around us, an inability to reach the universal experience in drama. Yet regionalism is a very important term in dealing with theatre. Perhaps our forebears took it for granted as part and parcel of theatre. Today's Canadian critics seem to separate plays into two categories--major drama and regional drama.

Let me quote from a Canadian critic who reviewed my book, Stage Voices, in which twelve Canadian dramatists analyse their own work. The critic, Bruce Bailey, comments in Quill and Quire on my choice of dramatists for Stage Voices. He says:

> Certainly there is artistic justification for including essays by such writers as Michel Tremblay and James Reaney in this book, but less for people like Herman Voaden, Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Tom Grainger, and Michael Cook who are of interest primarily as representatives of regionalism in the threatre.(1)

The critic has separated what he considers the major dramatists from the regional playwrights. Yet Tremblay

An Appraisal

by Geraldine Anthony

and Reaney's plays are explorations into the regionalism of Quebec and of southwestern Ontario. How then do they differ in the mind of this critic? Were not the major plays of the Irish Literary Revival regional drama? And what about the plays of Tennessee Williams which reveal the regional decadent south, and contemporary New York and London comedies which project a picture of big city dwellers. Is this not also regionalism in drama?

Is it possible that regional playwrights who achieve success in the professional theatre are no longer assessed by the pejorative term "representative of regionalism?" That, in fact, what the critics are really separating are major and minor categories of playwrights? I suggest that regionalism in theatre must be given the dignity it deserves as a major, viable re-presentation of life on the stage.

Gwen Pharis Ringwood is a regional dramatist peopling her plays with Canadian prairie farmers; Ukrainian, Italian and Greek immigrants in Alberta; and native Canadian Indians in Alberta and British Columbia. She is a regional dramatist but not, by that fact, a lesser playwright. As a regional dramatist she can be major, minor or simply mediocre. But that assessment is dependent on her characterization, dialogue, plot, theme and general appeal to her audiences. My assessment of her plays in this

paper must necessarily be brief. In the final analysis it will be the reader and theatregoer who will judge the quality of Gwen Pharis Ringwood's work.

Gwen Pharis was born in Washington State in 1910 but moved with her family to Magrath, southern Alberta, when she was three years old. Her father was a farmer so she grew up on a farm in the prairies of Alberta with brief periods spent at the University of Montana and at work on the Blackfoot Indian Reservation. After receiving a B.A. from the University of Alberta, a Master's degree in Drama from the University of North Carolina, she married Dr. John Brian Ringwood. They lived for a few years in Goldfields, northern Saskatchewan, a frontier mining town; in the Ukrainian district of Lamont, Alberta; in Edmonton and Williams Lake in northern British Columbia where she worked with the Chilcotin Indians in the Cariboo.

Before her marriage she had written radio and stage plays for which in 1937 she was awarded a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship to study for two years at the famous Fred Koch's regional Carolina Playmakers School at the University of North Carolina. During those years Gwen Pharis was taught by great regional dramatists, among whom was Paul Green, Pulitzer prize-winning playwright of In Abraham's Bosom. Thus she learned how to write a regional play. She was urged to write about the Canadian prairie, the Indian, the immigrants, the ranching country of Alberta. Felix Sper tells us about regional drama in his book, From Native Roots, which embodies much of the philosophy Fred Koch passed on to his drama classes. Felix Sper says:

> The seeds of a native or regional drama have been dormant in the American soil for more than a century, . . . By slow degrees the specific American locale began to breed native character types . . . . As the sciences of psychology, folklore and anthropology contributed their findings . . . the playwright began to perceive . . . how the human species on his own ground reacts naturally, humanly, rhythmically. And he became aware of a truth as he examined local variations. From common physiographic features and common ways of living and thinking is derived the pattern of culture peculiar to a region.(2)

He then describes three types of regional characters developing from this context:

> The region as such has erupted an odd assortment of characters as heroes. (1) With each region some folk figure has become identified (e.g., Paul Bunyan, the mighty logger from the North woods). He or she incarnates the dreams and wishes of the common man and transcends the human by performing feats of the impossible. . . .

(2) Easier to envisage have been those lesser personalities who magnified by time and events . . . earned widespread fame in the growing years of the republic e.g., Abraham Lincoln, John Brown Daniel Boon, Davy Crockett, Johnny Appleseed . . . and a score of others . . . .) (3) Finally the common folk came into literature by way of fiction assisted by anthropology (e.g., Uncle Remus, an aged Negro slave who told . . . fables of his race in lively, authentic dialect. His creator, Joel Chandler Harris, inspired other writers from other regions to draw similar characters of the planter, the cavalier, the mountaineer, backwoodsman and villager . . . .) The discovery of the folk, their bitter experiences on the farm and prairie resulted in the creation of more natural human types. . . . Then came the discovery that the local oddities of the Kentucky mountaineer or the Oklahoma bandit or the Vermont farm hand were but the outer dressing of the common man, the universal man. And regionalism began to burst boundaries.(3)

What these American regional writers did for their native land, Gwen Pharis Ringwood is doing for western Canada. She responded to her training in North Carolina with a series of Canadian regional plays featuring those three types of characters: first, the larger-than-life folk heroes; second, the famous real personalities magnified by time; and third, the fictional common folk of farm and prairie.

She describes her own comedies as: "trembling on the edge of farce."(4) She prefers comedy because she feels more remote and removed from her material. She can then disguise an attitude and express it in comic terms. In Widger's Way she parodies and makes use of melodramatic techniques masterfully to create her best comedy in the tradition of such plays as Plautus' Pot of Gold and Molière's Miser. Widger, the miserly Albertan farmer, is a true native folk type conditioned by his environment--a product of Alberta, that province rich in farmland, oil and geological discoveries of fossils on the Pre-Cambrian Shield. His fellow characters reflect the people of that era from Planter, the gold-miner, and his murderous partner, Jake; to Sokolander, the cheap politician; Anastasia the curious widow; Professor Bond, the geologist and his farmhand student, Peter; Garrow, the young American oil technician; Dowser Ringgo, the peddler of strange potions; and Docket the Constable. Together their personalities reflect the land and their conversation is expressive of the folk imagination and folk idiom. Widger's mirror reveals his and their greed, cruelty, fears and ambitions. Rich in humorous dialogue, it expresses a way of life which Widger ex-

pounds in these words: "I've lived to myself, don't lend things, discourage children tramping down pastures, don't borrow anything or bother anybody." (5) This small lean man is representative of some native character types bred by the Alberta soil. A conversation between Planter and Widger reveals the conditions of their lives at that period in Alberta:

Planter: I think I'll stay here and be your hired man, Widger. I'll slop the hogs, make hay, fish, shoot partridge up and down the river and get drunk on Saturday on Widger's wages. A tidy life and restful.

Widger: Hired man to Widger? But of course you're joking. I'm not rich, you know. A poor farmer wrestling with poor land to get the meanest living! Cutworms and taxes, drought and early frost, potato blight. . . . Why Sir, you've no idea how nature contrives to keep a man's nose hugged to the grindstone. I work from dawn to dusk and at night I dream of dying in the poor house. And when I get up what do I find? A hawk has killed my chickens, the old sow's devoured all her litter, bugs ravished the potatoes and the bull's been struck by lightning. That's how it goes with Widger. I couldn't afford you, Sir.(6)

But Planter leaves Widger his sack of gold for safekeeping against the murderous intents of his partner and there ensues a folk comedy full of misadventures, a maddening mixture of coincidence and fast-paced action resulting in a farcical array of characters. Regional drama it is and strongly Albertan in flavor. Widger, giving with one hand, pulling back with the other, has a Canadian flavor that does not date. Widger is rich in dinosaurs, triceratops bones, the exploitation of the land and trial by fire in melodramatic terms--a play people will always understand.

A second type of folk character in the Ringwood plays is the real people whose lives have been magnified by time in western Canadian history: Hatfield, the famous rainmaker of Medicine Hat who brought rain to the farmlands during the depression years of the drought; Billy Barker, the discoverer of gold in northern British Columbia at the turn of the century; Nigger John, the revered Albertan cowboy in the last years of the great ranching era; and Bob Edwards, that indomitable Editor of the weekly newspaper, The Sheep Creek Eye Opener.

In Hatfield, The Rainmaker, Gwen Ringwood immortalized the character of the con man, Hatfield, before the creation of the American play, The Rainmaker. Hatfield, hired by the town of Medicine Hat, Alberta, in 1921, promises to work miracles to bring rain to the drought-

ridden Canadian farmland. Rain does come and desperate Canadian couples decide to remain on the land they were about to forsake. Ringwood's impressionistic play deals with the hope, cynicism and despair of the farmers of Medicine Hat.

Stampede evokes the beloved character of John Ware, a great Albertan and a real person, called "Nigger John" by his fellow Albertans. Stampede recalls the last years of that great ranching era in a play based on some of Alberta's cowboy legends. Integral to the play is the rich regional background of the Calgary stampedes. Act I takes place at a camp site on a cattle trail leading north to Calgary in midsummer, 1912. Act II occurs a week later at Ma Raybourne's Boarding House in Calgary, and Act III in the enclosure behind the Chutes on the last day of the first Calgary Stampede. The plot involves Shorthorn, the Foreman of Bar XY, wanted for murder, who drives cattle to the Calgary Stampede. Shark, a cowboy, jealous of Shorthorn's abilities, threatens to report him to the authorities. Shorthorn's partner is Nigger John. Together they plan to buy a ranch but Shorthorn is forced to escape the law after saving young Bud's life in the Saddle Broncs Riding Contest. Nigger John is no stereotype black man but a ranch hand no different from the white cowboys. His character is drawn with sensitivity and he appears as an intelligent, kind, experienced westerner whose nickname is a sign of dignity, not opprobrium, in the Alberta of 1912. Regional drama proved him to be a product of the land. The same local idiom used by the white man and the black forces us to see him simply as a man. Nigger John's influence over the other characters is quiet but strong. Such dialogue as the following shows his leadership qualities:

About Stampedes:

> I don't like stampedes. I hate them. I just can't see it, that's all, raking a horse from head to flank, making an outlaw out of him, wasting him, so's people can yell.(7)

About his horse Midnight:

> He's been hurt bad, Jim. Deeper than his skin, deeper than any spur can rake him. Midnight knows now, what he always feared. He knows that man's got a mean streak in him, a queer twisted mean streak that likes to hurt and hurt deep. And most of us don't do much about crushing it down. We ought to, you know--if we don't blot it out, it'll finish us, sometime.(8)

On breaking horses:

> Sit deep in the saddle, take a far distant look and hope to God you land soft.(9)

Stampede is a romantic evocation of ranching days in Calgary and Ringwood has managed to re-create vividly that era in our imaginations.

Another of her plays dealing with a real person as folk hero is the musical, The Road Runs North. Here the legendary Billy Barker becomes her best developed historical character, an archetypal figure of the whole era of exploration and settlement of the Canadian North-west. The Gold Rush in the Cariboo is depicted between the years 1861 and 1864. The musical is peopled with stock regional figures--the daring gold miners, the heathen Chinese, the faithful Indians, the French settlers, the men from Upper Canada, the Hurdy Gurdy Girls of Barkerville, the tavern-keeper, the Judge, the women camp-followers and finally there is the romantic figure of Billy Barker himself, the British merchant sailor, who gave up the sea to prospect for gold. His successes and failures in this gold rush setting, full of prospectors and desperadoes, is regionalism at its most romantic. Yet the background of fact and character is true to history and once again we see cause and effect in the land and its characters.

Another real person magnified by time was Bob Edwards, the Editor of the Sheep Creek Eye Opener (Calgary Eye Opener) in Alberta. Ringwood's play The Jack and the Joker, set in 1904, is a farce that revolves around the character of the Editor who is honest, pulls no punches but prints the truth in his muckraking Eye Opener. He opposes Dudley Carp's dishonest political manoeuvres for a political office. Mrs. Carp forces the owner of the printing press to sell out to her but in the nick of time Bob Edwards obtains evidence that Carp has sold useless land to the owner. Both money and printing press are returned. A slight play, it is nevertheless a tribute to the sense of honesty and justice inherent in the character of Bob Edwards and it was the first work of literature based on this famous Editor.

Gwen Ringwood has also immortalized a town in her regional drama. The people of Edson, Alberta, celebrating its fiftieth Anniversary, commissioned her to write an historical musical. She wrote Look Behind You, Neighbor in which the character of Edson with its ordinary people, its births, love affairs, marriages and deaths sets in relief the region and its people. Obviously influenced by Thornton Wilder's Our Town, it nonetheless accentuates the Edson people, their coal mining activities, their gardens, railroads, lumbering industry, farmland, streams and rainbow trout, the moose and deer, their oil and other resources, their consciousness of Edson as centre and gateway to the West. The early settlers who came to the locale when it was nothing but forest and wild animals, timber and snow, who had the courage to stay, are celebrated in this musical. The building of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway from Edmonton to Edson, the opening of the first school, newspaper and jail, Edson's contribution of servicemen to two World Wars makes Edson proud of

its status as a town of Alberta.

Gwen Pharis Ringwood has also immortalized fictional characters of the prairies in her regional drama. Hester, the prairie woman obsessed with love of house and land in Ringwood's finest play, Still Stands the House; and Garth, the prairie farmer whose angry need to dominate his prairie farmland in the two plays, Pasque Flower and Dark Harvest, give us a deeper sense of the influence of the Canadian prairies on its people. How simple and how stark life is on the prairies which in turn breed such stoic people! The bitter years of drought are painted vividly in the tragedy, Still Stands the House. The play revolves around the struggle to cope with unpredictable weather conditions which has broken the spirit of many farmers and their wives on the prairies. The waving wheat fields of spring contrasted with the terrible blizzards of winter, test the spirit of men and women in the relentless year-by-year struggle with the land. Remote and cheerless is the house for which Hester sacrifices the lives of her brother and sister-in-law. The proud austerity of the house is reflected in the lives of its inhabitants. Bruce says:

> It's strange that in a soil that won't grow trees a man can put roots down, but he can. . . . When I saw the wind last spring blowing the dirt away, the dirt I'd ploughed and harrowed and sowed to grain, I felt as though a part of myself was blowing away in the dust.(10)

And Hester says:

> The snow lies deep on the summer fallow--the snow is a moving shroud--a winding sheet that the wind lifts and raises and lets fall again. 'And the winds blew and beat upon the house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.'(11)

In Dark Harvest Gwen Ringwood again succeeds in melding the prairies and its people. In the same simple, poetic style, she highlights the barrenness and imprisoning quality of the lives of its characters. Although this play does not rise to the dramatic heights of Still Stands the House, it does, nevertheless, explore the evil consequences of fanatical devotion to the land. Her one heroic and tragic male figure is Garth, who tries to dominate nature and a hostile God. He says:

> That's what I'm fighting. Lise . . . the thing that kills . . . the thing that lies out there in the earth and lets things die . . . and I'll win, Lise . . . you'll see . . . I'll choke him down and down and I'll win in the end.(12)

Garth's passion for the land is not one of love but of anger and a need to conquer. There is something dark and unnatural in his fight against nature. The land which nurtured him has become

his opponent and one knows instinctively that he cannot win.

Gwen Ringwood's regional plays also embrace the Indian and his closeness to the land. She attempts to probe his myths and culture. Two young Indian women are symbols of the Canadian Indian tribes. Jana in the play, The Stranger, and Maya in Lament for Harmonica. In The Stranger Ringwood has created a Greek tragedy similar to the Jason-Medea story. Jana, the Indian girl, has a baby by Jason, a white man, who rejects her for a white woman. In her grief Jana poisons the woman, kills her baby and commits suicide. The epic quality of the land and its first settlers transcends the plot. The orchestration of Ringwood's poetic language lends depth and richness; her use of classical form provides grace and purity. This is no pale emanation of the stereotyped Indian maiden but an attempt to penetrate to the heart of the Indian and her despair, the Indian's true feelings about the invasion of the homeland by the white man. She uses the traditional Greek chorus to echo her emotional responses to the Indians' plight and, through Alphonse, she says:

> I drum for each man who is wrenched from the warm dark of nothing,
> Cries out, grows tall and walks upright.
> I drum for every man who walks from dark to dark,
> And knows not what lies at the next turn of his journey,
> I drum for every man who knows not where to put down his foot
> To escape the thing in the shadow.
> I am old, half blind, and like every man
> I drum myself to my own death.(13)

These choruses not only express forebodings but also have a healing quality about them.

In Lament for Harmonica, Maya, the Shushwap Indian girl,has a child by the white man, Allan, who is unaware of the event. The baby dies and Maya becomes addicted to alcohol and prostitution. Gilbert, an Indian, loves her and attempts to murder Allan whereupon Maya stabs and kills Gilbert. Again Ringwood attempts to probe the inner depths of the Indian's conscience in a play that lacks the power of The Stranger but is nevertheless an honest effort to view the Indian in her native ground and folkways and to articulate her puzzlement and confusion in a white man's world.

The last category of regional plays in Ringwood's work concerns the immigrant to western Canada. She explores the love of Canadian girl and Greek boy in her play, The Deep Has Many Voices; the Ukrainian's response to life in Canada in The Drowning of Wasyl Nemitchuk; the Scandinavian's life in the new land in Chris Axelson, Blacksmith; and the Italian's happy abandonment to

life in her children's play, The Magic Carpets of Antonio Angelini. These four plays are sensitive illuminations of the fears and confusions experienced by immigrants in their efforts to blend with a new land. They are, in fact, the expression of the melding of two cultures, or the inevitable forcing of one culture upon another.

In an overall assessment of Ringwood's regional drama--its creation of folk heroes, its enlargement of historical characters, its development of common prairie people, its Indians and immigrants, one finds running through all the plays a preoccupation with the earth and its manifestations of life. She has tried to penetrate to the very heartbeat of the earth itself in order to find out how people feel about their home which is the earth. She took specifically the western mystique and explored it in its people. Ringwood has a kind of distilling talent for describing the quality and the feel of the land itself. Deep-rooted in man is his adjustment to his own land. He first tries to control it and then to cherish it. It would seem that in her early plays her characters seek to control the land whereas in her later plays they cherish it. There is an epic quality about the open country and the effect of this bigness upon the human being.

Folklore arises out of the common consciousness of the people. It is a feeling for the land and its common people. Ringwood's heritage is definitely that of the land and her language stems from it. Her body of regional drama has a unity in its preoccupation with the land and its people. It is the depiction of western Canada, its history and struggles, triumphs and defeats. The rural crucible of her birth marks all her writing and gives it its larger-than-life quality and its instinctual union with the earth. What Felix Sper says of regional dramatists in general can very aptly be applied to Gwen Pharis Ringwood's characters:

> Caught up and placed in his limited natural setting by the practised hand of the playmaker, the earthbound native with his kin, has lived for a moment in a crop of plays whose validity as art and whose value as living documentation must no longer be ignored.(14)

NOTES

1. Bruce Bailey, "Review of Stage Voices," Quill and Quire (March, 1978), p. 8.
2. Felix Sper, From Native Roots (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers Ltd., 1948) pp. 15-17.
3. Ibid., pp. 17-19.
4. Gwen Pharis Ringwood, personal interview with the present writer, May 25, 1977.
5. Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Widger's Way (Toronto: Playwrights Co-op, 1976).
6. Loc. cit.
7. Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Stampede (Edmonton: Alberta Folklore and Local History Project, 1945).
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Still Stands the House (New York: Samuel French Inc. 1939).
11. Ibid.
12. Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Dark Harvest, Canadian Theatre Review, No. 5 (Winter 1975), p. 94.
13. Gwen Pharis Ringwood, The Stranger (MS. Williams Lake, 1971), p. 24.
14. Felix Sper, op. cit., p. 22.