

# Theatre society shines

by Sean McQuaid

The U.P.E.I. Theatre Society performed the play *Quiet in the Land* at Carrefour de l'Isle-Saint-Jean in three shows over the March 19-21 week-end. It was the Society's second production this year, and by far the most ambitious and successful of the two.

The play, written by Anne Chislett, is set in a farming area near Kitchener, Ontario, in the latter years of World War I. The main characters are members of an Amish farming community, separated from the rest of Canada by their German ancestry (understandably a source of much tension during World War I) and their strict, isolationist religious beliefs, beliefs that forbid them from participating in war as their goal is to live apart from the evils of the world, be they war or such sinful luxuries as pianos and telephones.

The play's conflict develops on three interlocking levels. On one level there is the struggle of the community and their newly-elected bishop, Christy Bauman (played by Craig Blair) to avoid being involved in the war or otherwise exposed to the evils of society. On another level there is a movement within the community, led by young Menno Miller (played by Tim Wartman) and the community's other young men and women, to be more open and integrated with the modern world. The third conflict, which crystallizes the other conflicts on a smaller scale and exacerbates them, involves Christy's son Yock (played by Sean Clements). A questioning young man who rebels against

the authority of his father and the church, Yock refuses to join the Amish religion, unable to accept the strict disciplines of the church on the basis of blind faith and unwilling to submit to the stern, unwavering and often unreasonable demands of his father. Yock's flight from the community pushes Christy to the breaking point as he becomes an obsessively strict bishop trying to compensate for his self-admitted failure with his son by forcing his religious flock to walk the Amish straight-and-narrow. Led by Menno and the church's Deacon (Zepp Brubacher, played by Mark Miller), the community begins to tear apart as it considers abandoning the church rather than tolerate the obsessive, demanding, and self-righteous Christy, who drove away his own son.

There is no black-and-white morality in the play, only ambiguous gray areas. Christy's spartan, demanding discipline is obviously in need of moderation, and Christy himself could stand a much-needed dose of humility. Still, it is clear from the start that he only wants what is best for his church and his son, trying to protect them from the evils of the world though he may smother them in doing so. The trauma Yock experiences in the "real world" as a soldier seems to prove Christy's fears correct, and Christy is left humbled by his awareness of his pride and overzealousness yet reassured of the justness of his cause and the need to continue. Like almost all the characters in this play Christy acts from the best of motives, but as the saying goes the road to Hell is paved with good inten-

tions. Even in the end the play leaves one wondering if a balance can be struck between religious disciplines and the needs and practicalities of human existence, and no one path is clearly the right one.

The performance itself was excellent overall, generally exceeding the quality of the Society's earlier production this year. Perhaps it is the presence of a good director (Laurel Smyth) that makes the difference, but regardless of where the credit lies the acting is much better, even in the case of performers who took part in the previous one-act productions. Craig Blair, whose performance in *The Dumbwaiter* was a rather one-dimensional show of anger, displays much more versatility here. Christy is a character dominated by righteous anger, but Blair also brings across the sensitivity and vulnerability of the man as he struggles to come to grips with the loss of his son, his failures as bishop, and the long-ago death of his wife whom he never forgot. Sean Clements is convincing and riveting as the tortured Yock Bauman, and Lesley Shaw (atoning for a less than stellar performance in the *Bedtime Story*) is equally engaging as Kate Brubacher, Yock's true love, who finds herself torn between Yock and the ideals and community she holds dear. When Yock returns to find Katie married to his friend Menno, Clements and Shaw produce some truly gut-wrenching, tear-jerking moments in their torment over their star-crossed love. Tim Wartman (also a veteran of the ill-fated *Bedtime Story*) is very well cast as the earnest, noble, and quietly stoic Menno, whether as a spokesman for religious reform or as the wounded but forgiving husband. The play also benefits from a strong supporting cast: Sara Livingston is amusing as a chattering housewife, and Steve Hunter turns in a flat but perhaps deliberately flat performance as a rather rigid, militaristic automaton in his role as a Canadian recruiting officer. Heather Doiron stands out too as Christy's meddling, moralistic mother, almost a maternal version of Lady MacBeth as she pushes Christy into taking charge of the church, with disastrous results.

*Quiet in the Land* was a generally impressive production. The actors and all associated with the project are to be congratulated for their fine work in putting together a moving and thought-provoking piece of theatre. ●

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