# REVIEWS

*Consecrated Ground*. By George Boyd. Directed by Richard Donat. Eastern Front Theatre, Halifax, NS. 14–24 Jan.1999.

Halifax-born playwright George Boyd's *Consecrated Ground* pays tribute to the people who once lived in the black community that the city of Halifax razed to the ground in 1965, in the interest of urban and commercial development. Africville now occupies an almost mythic place in the Nova Scotian subconscious: a source of pride, but also a symbol of historical oppression, for many blacks; a symbol of culpability for the city's administrations, past, present, and future. With such controversy as its background, *Consecrated Ground* could very easily, some might say, justifiably, have adopted a purely polemical stance. Boyd, though, uses this historic injustice as a point of departure in order to create a subtle and educational play that shows the various costs that accompanied the implementation of this government policy. These costs wear many faces. Tully, the three-month-old son of Clarice and Willem Lyle—played by Jackie Richardson and Jeremiah Sparks—is killed by the rats that live in the dump and the abattoir that frame Africville. Clarice's response to her son's ghastly death is to insist that Tully be buried in Africville, even though it is being destroyed. Director Richard Donat uses sound especially well in creating the oppressive spectre of the bulldozers that menace the community from just beyond the periphery of the stage.

Tully's death ends Act I, the longer of the play's two acts, which builds up slowly to this crucial event. The fact that an infant could die under such horrible circumstances in a major Canadian city in 1965 emphasizes the abject state imposed upon the residents by the city's government. As Reverend Miner observes to Tom Clancy, the 24-year-old white official who is put in charge of administering the city's purchase of the land upon which Africville rests, "You can bet that if there were a park or a shipping terminal here, they'd have electricity and running water." Moments like this are some of the most powerful in the play. Boyd's text skilfully reminds us of a crucial aspect of the Africville saga: the scandalous living conditions persisted because of government decisions.

The loss of Tully's life crystallizes other costs for the residents. The threat of the church's demolition evokes from Reverend Miner prose that, in rhythm and tone, is reminiscent of Martin Luther King, on whose birthday I saw the Eastern Front Theatre's production. Reverend Miner tells Clancy of the church's importance to the community: "It's our sustenance when we are weak, our warmth when we are cold," with a balanced rhetoric that characterizes Boyd's balanced approach to the subject matter he dramatizes.

This commitment to balance is registered significantly in Clancy, the play's only white character. A young idealist who feels he has overcome his combined moral onus of skin colour, wealth, and privilege, Clancy first believes that he is actually contributing to a better life for the residents by facilitating their relocation. He is a very human character who must encounter for the first time the realities of political life when he tells Reverend Miner that the church is scheduled for demolition. Naïvely, he had thought that he and the reverend had accomplished a minor victory by saving the church from the bulldozers. Also, in a moment of macabre irony, he must explain to the Lyles that they are no longer eligible to be relocated to Uniacke Square, the housing project where their friends are being moved, because it is a family complex, and they are now childless. Since the city is directly responsible for the deplorable living conditions that cause Tully's death, to have a city official make such a statement is reminiscent of the old joke in which a man murders his parents and then throws himself on the court's mercy because he's an orphan. Clancy's growing realization that he, too, is being exploited by the city adds further texture to the play's central conflict.

The church is the venue for the play's climactic scenes in Act II. In addition to serving as the site of Clancy's awakening, this is the place where Willem finally agrees to sell his land to the government. Willem's decision is also revealed to Clarice in the church, rendering more bitter her realization that the land she had entrusted to her husband—it had been her family's land for generations and she signs it over to him legally at the beginning of the play—has been sold out from beneath her feet. The cost to their marriage of Tully's death and Willem's decision seems beyond recuperation until the final scene, in which the Lyles bury their son in the soil of Africville, in ground consecrated by Reverend Miner.

The final scene brings two individual performances to centre stage. Jeremiah Sparks sings a hymn to Tully. A voice so beautiful emanating from a scene so tragic captures the layered conflicts the play presents. Second, and most noteworthy, is Jackie Richardson's poignant and moving performance as the grief- stricken mother. As she bends over the baby's open casket near the play's end, she embodies the anguish the residents endured and the history of a people. Clarice's pride in her heritage and her determination to have her son buried in the ground that she insists was consecrated by her ancestors are the play's motivating force, and Richardson brings strength and nobility to the role.

Boyd's play is educational about the history of Africville, but it also leaves the audience with the question: what would have been the cost of staying in Africville, considering the government's desire to exploit the land upon which it sat? When Willem yells at Clarice, after he has sold the land, that the place killed their son, he implies some of the ambivalence bound up in the play's resolution, the burial of a dead child in land that will one day serve as a bridge approach. One cannot help reflect upon who wins this fight in the end. Such moral complexity is another strength of Boyd's play.

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*'Race,' Rights and the Law in the Supreme Court of Canada: Historical Case Studies.* By James W. St.G. Walker. Toronto and Waterloo: Osgoode Society and Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1997. xiii, 448 pages. $29.95.

James W. St.G. Walker's book examines how racially-biased laws or practices were dealt with by Canadian courts in four cases which reached the Supreme Court of Canada between 1914 and 1955.

The book's title is narrower than its scope, for it is a social and cultural history as much as a legal history, and one which doesn't over-emphasize the significance of the judgements of the country's highest court. In none of these cases did the Supreme Court of Canada set clear or progressive precedents for the guidance of lower courts. The courts themselves are shown as one aspect of Canadian public life where social attitudes and minority aspirations have struggled for affirmation despite setbacks. Walker discovers racism in setting out detailed and wide-ranging historical case studies. The social myths of Canadian race history emerge in the 'common sense' expressions of innate white superiority that repeatedly occur in the cases under examination.

In the first example, Quong Wing, a Chinese-born naturalized British subject living in Moose Jaw, challenged the constitutionality of a Saskatchewan law which barred "Chinamen" from employing or managing white females. Walker begins by showing how an anti-Chinese animus had rooted in British Columbia following the importation of thousands of Chinese labourers to help build the Canadian Pacific Railway, many of whom remained in Canada as a potent source of cheap labour. They were mythologized as dirty opium smokers who would prey upon white women, and generally regarded as non-assimilable into Canada's white society.

Quong Wing employed two white females in his restaurant, neither of whom felt herself in any need of protection from him. He was fined $5.00 in magistrate's court for violating Saskatchewan's *Female Labour Act* by being ethnically Chinese, although a naturalized British subject.

Interestingly, the appeals of this decision taken before the provincial Supreme Court and Supreme Court of Canada were not argued on the basis of Quong Wing's rights as a British subject, but on whether the provincial legislature had the power to make the law in question. These arguments did not confront the law's implicit racist assumption that persons of Chinese ancestry were of lesser moral character than other Canadians.

Other studies include the case of Fred Christie, a black Montreal hockey fan who was refused service at a tavern within the Montreal Forum before a hockey game. While sometimes known as 'public houses,' taverns were not in law obligated to serve the public, and the Supreme Court of Canada upheld their denial of service to Christie on the basis of "freedom of commerce."

The meanings of these cases unfold as a crystallization of social myths and attitudes rather than as legal benchmarks. One reason for this seems to be the tendency of judges to reflect the establishment views of their time, and to find narrow technical reasons for their decisions rather than upholding

basic human rights. In light of contemporary standards, some of this country's most eminent jurists—including chief justices Sir Lyman Duff and Bora Laskin—seem staid, even repressive in judgement by present standards. Walker fairly acknowledges that our contemporary realities may be no less subject to judicial and social errors.

Perhaps the most impressive feat of scholarship in the book is the preliminary "Orientation" chapter. In fewer than 40 pages Walker provides an intellectual history of his working concepts of race, law, and history itself. It can be usefully re-read at the end of this stimulating study.

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*The Story of the Jamaican People.* By Philip Sherlock and Hazel Bennett. Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1998. xii, 434 pages. $23.95.

> For history to be grasped conceptually as a rational coherent process, antagonism must be reduced to a contradiction.
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> –Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Times* (1990)

This is a history of the Jamaican people. That is to say, it is a history of those peoples who have come to be called Jamaican. But who is a Jamaican? Is a Jamaican simply someone who is a Jamaican citizen, or holds a Jamaican passport, or happens to self-identify as Jamaican (whether in Kingston Jamaica, London England, Toronto Canada, or elsewhere)? Or, is a Jamaican anyone who can trace their purported heritage to the land called Jamaica?

According to Sherlock and Bennett, this is a history of the Jamaican people which "begins in West Africa, with many different African people" (xi) and culminates in the building of the vibrant multicultural and multi-ethnic nation-state of Jamaica. This is the first authoritative history of Jamaica written from the "African-Jamaican, not the European point of view" (xi). This is the History of the African People of Jamaica: the authoritative story of the historical movement of African Jamaicans from West Africa with the Akan, Ashanti, Yorubas, and Ibibios, to European slavery and rebellion with Cudjoe and Nanny, to colonialism and the anticolonialism of Sam Sharpe, Paul Bogle and Marcus Garvey, to nationhood with Alexander Bustamante and Michael Manley. This is then the history of the struggles of African-Jamaican people to become a fully self-determined people and nation. Or to put it differently, this is the story of the revelation of the Spirit of the African-Jamaican people: the story of the revelation of the Spirit of Jamaica, through time.

This is not to say that the African-Jamaican people were alone in forging the nation-state of Jamaica. According to Sherlock and Bennett, African Jamaicans were joined in the nineteenth century by peoples "from India,

China, Lebanon, and Syria" (xi) in addition to the Europeans who chose to make Jamaica their home. But Jamaica is primarily made up of the African-Jamaican people whose labour power and life force, literally, went into the creation of this nation, and whose creative energy continues to manifest itself in the outstanding cultural production which comes from Jamaica.

According to the authors, the first three hundred years of Jamaican life were constituted by division and separation. "There were two groupings of people in Jamaica, 'two Jamaicas' separated by race colour and political power" (389). One African and one European.

However, in the period from 1938 to 1962, "Jamaica moved from colonial condition to full and sovereign nationhood ... [and] political power [was] transferred from a predominantly white-brown minority to a predominantly black majority" (372) as the political system moved from a colonial gubernatorial system, to a parliamentary democracy with a two-party system based on universal suffrage for all citizens. What emerges is an independent and self-determining Jamaica, with a sense of itself, and of its own African-Jamaican identity. As the authors state:

> The change came as silently, and magically as spring comes in uplands Jamaica, with its delicate greens and glowing purple of new leaves on the pimento trees .... The impulse came from the people's discovery of their own identity and this was accompanied by a surge of creative energy unparalleled in their history. (391)

Today, despite the persistence of racist, social cleavage brought on by the remnants of a Eurocentric education system, African Jamaicans must continue to look to their African heritage as a source of strength and wisdom, and continue the process of transforming two Jamaicas into one. Whether appeals to the so-called spirit of Africa (which supposedly undergirds contemporary Jamaican life) will be enough to accomplish this goal remains to be seen. Or, is it that the mythos of a whole Jamaican nation, like the myth of (the) whole nation, must forever remain within the sphere of the imaginary?

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