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FREDERIC WOOD THEATRE

Zastrozzi



Julia

*Costume Design Sketch
by Catherine King*

University of British Columbia

Frederic Wood Theatre
presents

Zastrozzi

by
George F. Walker

Directed by
Robin Nichol

February 7-11
1989

For information and reservations
phone 228-2678

The Co(s)mic-Exotic Theatre of George F. Walker

It's 1970 and a 23-year-old, self-educated, working class kid is driving cab in Toronto. He sees a flyer on a lamppost soliciting scripts for a new theatre and decides to give it a try. A year later he attends the opening of his play *Prince of Naples* at the Factory Theatre Lab - only the second play he's ever *seen*. For the next six years he's the Factory Lab's playwright in residence and soon the most distinctive voice in the burgeoning Canadian theatre. While all around him dramatists wrestle solemnly with questions of National Identity and Authentic Canadian Experience, George F. Walker transcribes the increasingly exotic experiences banging around inside his head.

His earliest plays are absurdist exercises in the manner of Ionesco and Beckett, but his own bizarre imagination doesn't take long to emerge. In *Bagdad Saloon* (1973) an Arab peasant kidnaps Henry Miller, Gertude Stein and Doc Halliday to try to learn the secret of mythic immortality. An ex-Nazi doctor performs diabolical experiments in the African jungle in *Beyond Mozambique* (1974), assisted by his wife who thinks she's Olga in Chekov's *Three Sisters*, a pederastic priest and a mountie disgraced for massacring a herd of cattle. *Ramona and the White Slaves* (1976) opens with the opium-besotted madam of a Hong Kong brothel hallucinating being raped by a poisonous lizard. In *Zastrozzi* (1977) the master criminal of all Europe ("the clear sane voice of negative spirituality") hunts down an artist who claims to be the messiah. As Factory Lab artistic director Ken Gass understates in his introduction to Walker's first published collection, "Not many prairie landscapes in George Walker's plays."

Throughout this period Walker's style is largely comic book gothic with generous dollops of B-movie cliché. "My mind is a media garbage bag," he admitted without apology. But with *Zastrozzi* he showed that he could synthesize a wide variety of sophisticated source materials along with the pop-cultural stuff. Nietzsche and Artaud, Jacobean revenge tragedy and romantic melodrama all dwell together in the play on "that fine line between the serious and the comic" where Walker says most of his dramatic work lives. (The original source was Percy Bysshe Shelley's baroque prose fantasy

of the same title which Walker claims he never actually read.) *Zastrozzi* also epitomizes Walker's fundamentally philosophical mindset. The Walkeresque hero (or anti-hero), engaging a world characterized by chaos in every form, is obsessed with restoring order, imposing justice or rediscovering meaning, even if he has to invent it. "Life is a series of totally arbitrary and often meaningless events," *Zastrozzi* deadpans to his confederates, "and the only way to make sense of life is to forget that you know that."

Since *Zastrozzi*, Walker has continued exploring this thematic terrain but in less exotic settings and with characters only slightly larger than life. *Gossip*, *Filthy Rich*, *The Art of War* and *Theatre of the Film Noir* (1977-82) comprise a *film noir* series featuring shabby private eye/investigative reporter Tyrone M. Power trying to make some sense of the chaotic murk that is life in the modern city. Moving even further from the stylization of Walker's earlier work are the three "East End Plays," *Criminals in Love*, *Better Living* and *Beautiful City* (1984-87), which are nominally set in the east end of Toronto. The underside of real urban life is brought into marginal focus in these plays - poverty, rampant development, homelessness - but their central concern is Walker's same old co(s)mic-apocalyptic vision. As one character says, "I use words like destiny and fate and despair. I talk of the great abyss which beckons us all...I describe the human condition."

Though Walker has won every theatre award in Toronto and achieved some broad popular success with *Gossip*, *Filthy Rich* and *Zastrozzi*, his breakthrough into the mainstream of Big Time theatre has only come with his most recent play, *Nothing Sacred* (1988). This quirky adaptation of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* is the surprise hit of the season on the North American regional circuit from Los Angeles, San Francisco and Vancouver to Chicago, Hartford and Washington. Not that Walker is doing anything he hasn't done before in this darkly comic examination of nihilism and the 19th century Russian aristocracy. Maybe, as *Globe and Mail* critic Ray Conlogue recently suggested, "Public taste has finally caught up with George F. Walker, hippie surrealist."

Jerry Wasserman teaches English and Theatre at U.B.C. and will soon be seen trying to save the infamous Robin Givens in *The Penthouse*, an ABC Movie-of-the-Week.

Zastrozzi

by George F. Walker

Directed by
Robin Nichol

Set Design by
Ross Nichol*

Lighting Design by
Alan Brodie

Costume Design by
Catherine King

Sound Design by
Darryll Patterson

CAST

Zastrozzi James Binkley
Bernardo. Peter Wilds
Verezzi. David Mackay
Victor. Timothy Hyland
Matilda. Lois Anderson
Julia. Tracy Holmes

Europe. Probably Italy. The 1890s.

There will be one fifteen minute intermission.

*Ross Nichol is a freelance designer and a member of
the Associated Designers of Canada.

Zastrozzi

is produced by special arrangement with
Great North Artists Management Inc.
Toronto

PRODUCTION

Technical Director. Randall Plitt
Stage Manager. Darryll Patterson
Properties Supervisor. Heather Kent
Head Scenic Artist. Kairiin Bright
Lighting Assistant. Jill Buckham
Costume Assistant. Carol Evans
Assistant Scenic Artist. Paula Pryce
Properties Assistant. Nik von Schulmann
Electrics Crew. Heather Kent, Glen Winter
Lighting Operator. Nancy Lyons
Sound Operator. Randall Plitt
Wardrobe Mistress. Jill Buckham
Make-up. Nick Davis

Costume Supervisor. Chelsea Moore
Set Construction. Don Griffiths, John Henrickson, Robert Moser
Costume Cutter. Jean Driscoll-Bell

Fight/Stunt Coordinator. Charles André
Wig and Hair Stylist. Elizabeth Nichol

Box Office. Carol Fisher, Jason Smith
House Manager. Sara Levine
Business Manager. Marjorie Fordham
Programme Editor. Tracy Holmes
Production. Robert Eberle

Acknowledgments

George Haide
Maria Hutzinger
J.Cricket Price

"The Home of the Canadian Playwright"

George Walker was no overnight success. But while his early plays earned little acclaim, Walker slowly developed into one of Canada's foremost playwrights. The conditions which enabled this development were unique in the history of Canadian theatre. In the first half of the 1970s, new playwrights such as Walker were routinely given the freedom to fail and to learn from that failure. The subsequent success of many Canadian playwrights - Walker, Carol Bolt, David French and others - was due in part to the exceptional opportunities available in Toronto at that time.

In 1970, theatre in Toronto was dominated by American models. *Hair* ran all year at the opulent Royal Alexandra Theatre, providing the Rosedale set with a dose of counter-culture in a hygienic and palatable form. At the other end of the audience spectrum, *Chicago 70* ran for three months at Toronto Workshop Productions, that cell of old socialist ideology. Although collectively created by Canadian actors, *Chicago 70* too paid homage to the American counter-culture: the "Chicago 7" and those rabble-rousers who nominated a pig for President.

At the same time, a spate of new theatres were founded in Toronto on American models. The first of these was Theatre Passe Muraille, inspired by off-off-Broadway's famous Café La Mama. Another was the Global Village, an artists' colony à la Greenwich Village, with a warehouse performing space modelled on Richard Schechner's Performance Garage. The Studio Lab, another of Toronto's "off-Yonge-Street" theatres, ran Schechner's *Dionysus in 69* for more than eight months, with (as in New York) curious college students making up the largest part of the audience. In Toronto, however, cast and audience generally kept their bacchic frenzies under control, and their clothes on. This was Canada, after all.

And among all these stars and stripes, where was the Canadian theatre? Well, this *was* Canadian theatre as we understood the term, since the plays were produced and performed by Canadians. In 1970 the Canadian playwright was incidental to Canadian theatre: the only one with an international reputation, John Herbert of

Fortune and Men's Eyes fame, could not even fill his 35-seat Garret Theatre. Toronto's mainstream St. Lawrence Centre bravely tried an all-Canadian première season in 1970, but soon retreated to *Mary Mary* under the pressures of bad reviews and poor box office. In 1970 the Canadian playwright was ignored even by Toronto's alternative theatres, later so celebrated for their nationalism, who pursued foreign alternative models rather than foreign mainstream ones.

In the ensuing two years, new alternative companies focused the attention of Canadian theatre on the Canadian playwright. The most prominent of them was Tarragon Theatre, led by Bill Glassco, which first produced the plays of David Freeman, David French, and Michel Tremblay (in English). To a great extent, however, the new nationalistic approach to dramaturgy was triggered by the Factory Theatre Lab and its young artistic director Ken Gass.

Gass (b. 1945) was raised in Abbotsford, studied theatre and creative writing at U.B.C., and went to Toronto in 1968 to look for a job teaching high school. Writing an article on one of John Herbert's thinly-attended plays led Gass to teach some workshops and direct some small productions at the Garret and at Theatre Passe Muraille. More importantly, it led to Gass' awareness of how neglected the Canadian playwright was in Canadian theatre, even a playwright as highly regarded as Herbert.

In May 1970 Gass started his own company, the Factory Theatre Lab, in a former candle factory above an auto-body shop. At the outset, he announced that the Factory would produce only Canadian plays. (A huge sign in the stairwell read "Discover Canada before the Yanks do".) Gass called his company "the home of the Canadian playwright" - even though there were so few scripts available that he put leaflets around town to solicit new plays. That's how he met George Walker. In this programming policy, as we have seen, Gass was definitely swimming against the current. But fashions change in the theatre, as they do anywhere; soon he found himself the leader of a "Canada First" movement in Canadian dramaturgy.

Talk to anyone about the early years of the Factory, and the word you will keep hearing is "chaos". While partly due to poor organization, the chaos at the Factory stemmed mainly from the high

sense of purpose which Gass brought to it. Typically, he would propose a policy or a project simply because it was a good, or a noble, or an important idea. Then all the resources of the Factory would be plunged into a terrible struggle to make it happen. The amazing thing is that the process worked. Into vacuums created in this way would rush the talent and energy needed to accomplish Gass' goals, however absurdly idealistic they seemed. The Factory was fuelled by the purity of his causes. Perhaps the world then was more hospitable to idealists than it is today.

Cooler heads left. Bill Glassco, for instance, the Factory's first dramaturge, couldn't stand its haphazard production methods and self-destructive scheduling; but he found in Gass' devotion to the Canadian playwright a vision and a purpose which his own work had been lacking, and he adopted the Factory's nationalistic programming policy when he founded Tarragon Theatre. To most young artists, however, the Factory was irresistible. No more knocking on doors begging for a chance to prove yourself. No more polite refusals. As long as you didn't expect much sleep or much money, all you had to do was to show up. Soon you'd be fundraising, vetting scripts, giving workshops, even directing new plays.

The Factory stumbled from crisis to crisis, gaining critical stature and a reliable audience along the way. When LIP grants dumped large sums of money into alternative theatres in 1972, the Factory responded with a remarkable string of successes, by such writers as Larry Fineberg, Michael Hollingsworth, Louis Del Grande (later of TV's *Seeing Things*), George Walker, and Gass himself. It even started paying its employees regularly. But to anyone from the Factory (Walker included), success was never without irony. The company nearly collapsed in 1973, in 1977, and several times since. Just two months ago, new rumours of the Factory's death appeared in the Toronto press. We can only hope that they are greatly exaggerated. Otherwise, where will the next George Walker come from?

Denis Johnston teaches Canadian theatre history at U.B.C. His book on Toronto's alternative theatres, *Swimming Up the Mainstream*, is due to be published this fall.

First Productions of Walker's Plays

Year	Title	Company	Director
1971	<i>The Prince of Naples</i>	Factory Lab	Paul Bettis
1971	<i>Ambush at Tether's End</i>	Factory Lab	Ken Gass
1972	<i>Sacktown Rag</i>	Factory Lab	Ken Gass
1973	<i>Bagdad Saloon</i>	Factory Lab	Eric Steiner
1974	<i>Demerit</i> (unpublished)	Factory Lab	Ken Gass
1974	<i>Beyond Mozambique</i>	Factory Lab	Eric Steiner
	(Revived 1978)	Factory Lab	George F. Walker
1976	<i>Ramona and the White Slaves</i>	Factory Lab	George F. Walker
1977	<i>Gossip</i>	Toronto Free	John Palmer
1977	ZASTROZZI	Toronto Free	William Lane
1979	<i>Filthy Rich</i>	Toronto Free	William Lane
1980	<i>Rumours of Our Death</i>	Factory Lab	George F. Walker
1981	<i>Theatre of the Film Noir</i>	Factory Lab	George F. Walker
1982	<i>Science and Madness</i>	Tarragon	William Lane
1983	<i>The Art of War</i>	Factory Lab	George F. Walker
1984	<i>Criminals in Love</i>	Factory Lab	George F. Walker
1986	<i>Better Living</i>	Centre Stage	Bill Glassco
1987	<i>Beautiful City</i>	Factory Lab	George F. Walker
1988	<i>Nothing Sacred</i>	Centre Stage	Bill Glassco