Special Collections

George Ryga

Biocritical Essay

by

James Hoffman

Of what consequence my pen,
Should it not shred
The wind-torn sky,
When the demon of war shrieks out,
"You are born to die!"

These lines, taken from one of George Ryga's early poems, "Of What Consequence My Life", were written in the early 1950s and printed in his first publication, a little red book of poems, *Song of my hands*, published in 1956.[1] Much of Ryga's subsequent accomplishment as a writer, as well as many of his problems, are indicated in these brief lines, for he made considerable effort, before his sudden death at age 55, to "shred the wind-torn sky". The result was a great variety of projects - novels, short stories, poems, radio and television plays, and the stage plays for which he is most noted - most of which display an impressive magnitude since for him the task of a writer was an enormous one, full of import and moral responsibility, an opportunity to dispute life's greatest issues, to confront the gods themselves. Thus he charged his heroes, small and large, from Rita Joe to Prometheus, to war with all sorts of demons; to speak grandly of the triumph of the human spirit and progress; and to passionately declare their belief in the ineffable brotherhood of ordinary people. He seemed, given the breadth of his subject matter and fluidity of his writing style, to be contesting the very limitations of time and place, as well as the idea that man is unchangeable or incapable of, as he expressed it, "grandeur... nobility of the human will".[2] He spoke of the need for "revelation"[3] in art and of himself as "the trumpet of the night".[4] It is this singular quality, this extraordinary sense of mission, like that of an Old Testament prophet, that drove Ryga and his work, that provided that powerful *voice*, unforgettably present in a work such as *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. By the early seventies he was being described as "the most successful

theatre dramatist in English Canada".[5] But it also made him the uneven author he is, the man who could create the trivial *Seven Hours to Sundown* or the extravagant, unwieldy *Paracelsus*. Largely it was because he experienced life in harsh contrasts - thus his tendency to render life in uncompromising, black and white terms. Life's gross contradictions were impressed upon him from an early age, and, believing he possessed a peculiar sensibility to apprehend them, he began to write.

The contradictions began early, with what he would have called "the heroics of survival".[6] He was born in 1932 into a Ukrainian immigrant family in northern Alberta, on a homestead in a tiny settlement virtually without a name - sometimes called Deep Creek, mostly Richmond Park. His home was located north of the Athabasca River, on a heavy, clayey soil, with a mix of dense stands of poplar, patches of scrubwood, open areas strewn with hefty boulders and, beyond, the forbidding muskeg; overall, an inhospitable place to farm. His parents had arrived in Canada only in the late 1920s as part of a recent wave of Ukrainian immigration (most came between 1890 and 1910) and therefore got the less desirable, marginal land - at a time of deepening world depression, enormous famine in their homeland, and the growing threat of world war. His earliest memories were of gathering with family and neighbors around a large map the Rygas kept pinned to the wall, on which the home battle fronts were marked with pins and strings, then of walking to school with his mother, listening as she wept of war and the fear of loss: "We are going to be destroyed, they'll come and take your father away, we'll be forced to walk...".[7] His father, not yet a naturalized citizen, was active in left-wing, progressive causes and was somewhat feared for his beliefs - he was also a professed atheist - and might still be deported, for the Ukrainians were looked upon with suspicion by the *Angliki* who dominated cultural and civic life. In the family, there were only two children. He was close to his younger sister, Anne, to whom he taught English, was doted upon by his illiterate mother, a former milkmaid in Ukraine, and was respectful towards his hard working, authoritarian father - who had some education and read to him excerpts from Ukrainian writers: Shevchenko, Franko, Ukrayinka and Stefanyk. His sister summed him up as "a gentle, obliging boy, short for his age...the bright lad of a feared father".[8] When he first wrote, it was as a faithful son of the soil, treasuring the one hope of the farmer, the fecundity of the land:

> Not much I ask, I only wish,
> To show my worth before man and God,
> To answer the urge that stirs in me --
> Which has always been and shall always be;
> At the scent of the turf, and the feel of the sod.[9]

The Richmond Park community provided fertile material for the imagination. With a mixture of Ukrainian, Polish and Icelandic peoples, loric images abounded, as Ryga remembered: "things like scaring the hell out of each other with dark groves of trees...the forests were the homes of threatening things - like Boars. The Icelanders had black bulls with dripping intestines raging through the forest". In language: "there were no soft comments...everything was slightly exaggerated so that a man didn't shout, he thundered; the child didn't whimper, he screamed".[10] This inclination to shock, with startling, elemental images in hyperbolic language was an integral part of Ryga's early language experience; only when he first went to school did he encounter English, which seemed tame by comparison, "a bookkeeper's language".[11] Then, besides working on the farm, he dug graves for spending money, an experience which provided him with a vivid "library" of the dead:

> ...the field of graves became a library for me, to which I still return when I visit there. For in reading the Cyrrhic headstones, I read into darkening corners of my own memory. That man died of toil and malnutrition. That woman of sadness....[12]

This tendency to dwell on suffering and death and to use what seem to the English-born sensibility as overblown language have been sticking points with critics of Ryga.

An emerging sense of a special calling, felt when he was very young, was partly religious and visionary, and partly a desire to escape a life he was beginning to realize was a "killer for the soul", especially as his father, becoming increasingly ill, fell into a "black despair".[13] Despite his father's atheism, Ryga for a while was attracted to the Catholic church: he was baptized and even entertained the possibility of the priesthood when, with a dozen other boys, he attended a retreat house in Athabasca. He embraced a greater visionary life, however, in his own unfettered imagination: perceived by his parents to have special writing ability, he was allowed to work quietly at his assignments. Passing school quickly, he borrowed books from the University of Alberta extension library, becoming especially fond of the romantic poets Byron, Shelley, and his great favorite, Burns. Working to complete high school, he took courses with the Department of Education's Correspondence School Branch where, by his good fortune, he was to find the first of his many great teachers, Nancy Thompson. She encouraged him to submit his writing to a scholarship contest to attend the Banff School of Fine Arts - and he won in 1949 and again in 1950.

At Banff he was a nervous country boy, feeling out of place with the other students, but he set to work with peasant determination and was soon attracting the attention of his instructors. The School of Fine Arts in the late forties had a number of faculty who were outstanding in their field, as well as being good teachers. One of them, E.P. Conkle, had been a member of the Yale 47 Workshop under George Pierce Baker and had, at the University of Iowa, taught Tennessee Williams. He remembered Ryga as "the best student I had at Banff - as Tom Williams (Tennessee) was my best student at Iowa University".[14] Another instructor was Burton James, director, theorist, and builder who had founded the Seattle Repertory Playhouse; he was also a Marxist who had worked in Russia at the Moscow Art Theatre and later was to run into trouble in the U.S. during the McCarthy era. He insisted his students develop an historical, political context to their work, believing that theatrical activity is meaningless without it. James had a passion that attracted many followers and Ryga found himself attending whatever sessions he could, even becoming close to the man and his wife, Florence: "Whenever I was hungry at mealtime, I'd go over to the James. There was always an extra plate for me".[15] That first summer at Banff, Ryga saw his first play: the School's production of *Oedipus Rex*, which impressed him greatly.

His most important breakthrough as a writer came the following summer, when he worked with Jerome Lawrence, a man with impressive credentials in American radio and stage - *Look Ma, I'm Dancin*' (1948), then later, *Inherit the Wind* (1955). Lawrence, a warm, robust man, and a fanatic for work, was the catalyst who really forced Ryga's creativity, as the two spent many a late evening completing their respective assignments. They formed a close friendship - Lawrence calling it a "literary father-son relationship". Part of his task was to pull Ryga out of his habit of despair:

> He was an absolute original: a gold-mine of stories and legends not only of the rugged Northern Alberta farm-country, but of the Indians, and his own rich Ukrainian

> heritage. He tended at first to be heavy, despairing, pessimistic, and I urged him to find the hope, the nobility, which classically, in drama and literature, has been distilled from sorrow and hardship.[16]

That summer, too, Ryga experienced the first potent result of his writing. Reading of the Korean War, and under the influence of Burton James, whose sessions he continued to attend, he wrote a poem critical of the war. He showed it to other students who were impressed and had it published; soon it was around the school and the town of Banff. When representatives of the IODE scholarship committee visited him to announce that as a consequence of the poem he would henceforth be ineligible to receive any further assistance from them, he realized how important a part of his writing his political beliefs were - "I remember feeling very, very good that day". [17]

The next few years were some of Ryga's happiest, although they began with a personal tragedy. He was working on a job that was amazingly symbolic, ending forever the isolation of Richmond Park and opening the way for his permanent departure. He was on a construction gang pouring concrete footings for a bridge over the Athabasca River when there was an accident and he lost the three middle fingers of his right hand. It was a hard blow, but one that had a place in the scheme of things, in a boyhood he once characterized as one of "silent despair".[18] Now, less suited to manual work and his worth on the farm decreased, he began to seriously consider a writing career. Soon the despairing universe yielded up some fruit: there was a positive response to his application for work at an Edmonton radio station.

He worked as a copywriter at radio station CRFN in Edmonton for several years, living in an apartment with friends, in what he called "a little Montmartre".[19] The home was a centre for a group of artists, writers, musicians, construction workers, young CCFers and students - Ryga was also taking evening courses at the University - all of whom gathered for long, late night sessions of readings, music and, especially, debate. Ryga enjoyed these, especially the debates and reading aloud his poems. He was beginning to heed other voices too, those of left wing causes, not surprising for someone from an ethnic, minority background. He read Marxist materials such as the journal *New Frontiers*, published by Margaret Fairley - educator, scholar, community worker, fierce defender of the underprivileged and of communism. Ryga submitted poems and two were published in her journal. One of them, "They Who Suffer", ends with Ryga's own blend of leftist sympathy and his sensual love of the earth:

> But mark my words, John;
> A people bled white
> By those who own all, John,
> May awake overnight!
>
> Then remember the breath, John,
> Of a morning in May;
> More sweet is the air, man,
> Of the worker's great day![20]

In Alberta politics he was a follower of William Irvine, one of the province's important figures of reform, an activist and visionary who also wrote plays and published important books such as *The Farmers in Politics*.[21]

At this time Ryga was making his own political statements - and again, as at Banff, there was personal cost. On the radio, for the "Reverie" show for armistice day he juxtaposted pacifist, anti-war poems with increasingly strident military music which, when broadcast, provoked a number of phone calls and letters, half in favor and half opposed, which led to a warning by the station manager. But it was a speech he gave at a left-wing rally in support of the accused atomic spies, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, that finally lead to his dismissal. When he worked at another station, CFCW, in Camrose, he was again suddenly dismissed after only several months simply because of his communist affiliation.

In the spring of 1955, with money saved, he went to Europe for a political reason and a literary one - and stayed a year. Journeying with an Edmonton friend, Mike Omelchuk, he planned to attend a world youth festival in Warsaw sponsored by the World Federation of Democratic Youth. On his way he toured Britain, bicycling north to Scotland to explore the country of Robert Burns. He traveled through Dumfries and Ayr counties, conversed with Burns's biographer James Barke, sat on Burns's own chair preserved at the Globe Inn in Dumfries and visited the Burns's mausoleum in St. Michael's churchyard. The latter must have been a kind of epiphany, for the Scottish Bard, in eternal effigy leaning on his plow, doubtless thinking of the strife between the Auld Licths and the New Lichts, faced many of the same cultural and political disruptions so familiar to Ryga. There were likely silent assurances exchanged in the Dumfries churchyard that morning in May, as prairie farmboy from Athabasca gazed at the lowlands plough-boy from Alloway. Some of his early poems imitate Burns's ballad rhythms as well as his themes celebrating simple rural life - as in "Bonnie Annie":

> So when my cattle and my sheep
> Are sheltered for the darkening e'en,
> I'll pen a tender, ploughman's song
> And send it to my Annie Green![22]

He met living poets, too, as he traveled to several major conferences for, while in London, he received a request from the Canadian Peace Congress to attend the World Assembly for Peace in Helsinki, where he met and worked with several notable writers. He became acquainted with Martha Millet, the American poet, author of the verse play *Dangerous Jack* [23], who taught him the importance of political commitment in writing. He characterized their relationship as "very intense, beautiful"; then, traveling to a youth festival in Bulgaria, he met and became intimate ("We were lovers")[24] with Lobat Vala, an exiled Persian poet, who had been imprisoned and tortured by the repressive Shah's regime. An attractive, volatile person, she taught Ryga about "fire...passion"[25] in poetry. He dedicated a poem, "My Song Is Still", to her in *Song of my hands*:

> Take from my burning kiss
> The timeless flames of youth
> To fire your prison-weakened heart
> To resistance and to life!

A third key figure at this time was Rewi Alley, the great builder of modern China, who set up plans for the reconstruction of China after its wartime devastation by the Japanese. Besides doing important health, education and relief work, he had developed a plan to reorganize the country's industry, along a co-operative

system, emphasizing smaller, less vulnerable units of production scattered across the country. At Helsinki he and Ryga worked together on a cultural commission to make recommendations to the United Nations, also becoming friends and remaining in contact for years afterwards. Ryga wrote about him upon returning to Canada, in *The Athabasca Echo*: "Many and wonderful were the stories he told me...."[26]

Back in London, Ryga worked for the BBC, writing in-house reviews and press releases for television programs. He gravitated to the folksinging clubs, especially the *Ballads and Blues* in Soho. There his closest acquaintances were those deeply involved in folk music: Alan Lomax, the American music specialist and collector of folk songs; Ewan McColl, folksinger and husband of Joan Littlewood, the founder of the Theatre Workshop (he would later come to Edmonton to visit Ryga), and Dominic Behan, brother of Brendan. Ryga as yet had little to do with the theatre, although he did see one Theatre Workshop production - possibly McColl's adaptation of Hasek's novel *The Good Soldier Schweik*.

When Ryga returned to Canada he lived again in Edmonton, in an apartment with his sister and others, including Vernon Ray, a left-wing friend who worked at a bookstore operated by the Labour Progressive party. But, after the inspiration and promise of Europe, this was a depressing period; working as a copywriter for an advertising agency, he produced little of his own work and what was written was highly derivative. He did publish his first book, however, the collection of poems in *Song of my hands*. Two themes that emerge, no doubt due to the world perspectives he'd gained in Europe, are his wish to speak for the people and his enthusiastic interest in the future of his country:

> Traveller, when you see my country
> Where prairie wind and sun range free;
> Remember those who found and built her -
> Think of what she yet will be![27]

But he wrote little else - despite the fact that he had a sheaf of notes from Europe and a thorough account of his affairs in the regular letters he had sent to his sister Anne, asking her to save them for him as a form of diary. He wrote several short stories, publishing one, under the title "A Canadian Short Story".[28] He did not begin to write seriously, as a full-time activity, until 1959, when, after a second, brief trip to Britain, again including Burns's country in Scotland, he returned to Edmonton, and married Norma Campbell, whom he had met earlier in London.

This really was the beginning of Ryga's career as a writer; now with the regularity of family life, he was able to plunge into his central project: writing novels. And, given his tumultuous year in Europe, it is not surprising that his first effort was intensely autobiographical and wildly plotted. *The Bridge*, [29] named after the edifice he helped construct across the Athabasca River which was such a turning point for him, outlines many events of his life in Richmond Park and in Europe, passionately expressing the will to live life to the fullest, even though the protagonist, a young writer, is in fact dying because of an accident. Two opposing tendencies are already present in this early work: the desire, as a young Marxist, to participate in the struggle of the people in their aspirations to internationalist, progressive principles; and a personal inclination towards a rugged individualism, where men are gloriously outside any social or political agenda - like the legendary Cossacks and Tartars that meant so much to him.[30] The latter predominated as he wrote his subsequent few novels; not until his play, *Indian*, really, did he find a successful mix of individualism and politics.

In another early unpublished novel, *Heritage*, he began a direction that was to preoccupy him for many years, eventually appearing in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, the story of the aging patriarch agonizing over the loss of his land and especially the absence of a suitable inheritor - possibly a deep reference to Ryga's own abandonment of his father's homestead. The theme is repeated in the extant novel fragments *Men of the Mountains* and *Profiles in Dust*, as well as in the completed novel *Man Alive*.

In *Night Desk*, written while Ryga was a desk clerk at the seedy Selkirk Hotel in downtown Edmonton, a colorful fight promoter spins tales of his life and beliefs which are notably individual and eccentric, "A man's got to crow. That's what bein's a man is all about"[31], rather than progressive or political. The man, Romeo Kuchmir, based on a real-life figure, takes a fatherly position towards the young clerk, an image of Ryga himself, freely dispensing earthy advice, while the clerk, for his part, says nothing, his silence a nagging question mark to the other's exuberance, thus bringing a hesitation of purpose to the work.

In *Hungry Hills*, his first published novel[32], Ryga, in the figure of Snit Mandolin, returns to the homestead - only to find the "harsh cruelty"[33] of the land has defeated everyone. Here, the politics are submerged, mainly because the narrator, a young man dispossessed by his own community, has limited knowledge of the world. The novel is weakened by an ambiguous ending - whether it is Snit's tragedy or not is questioned by his complicity in the crimes of Johnny Swift, a dark, evil figure and a kind of symbol for the very hills themselves.

Ryga wrote about a half dozen novels at this time, in Edmonton and during the first few years in Summerland, British Columbia, where he and his growing family moved in March 1963, partly to reduce expenses since as a full-time writer he was living in straitened circumstances. There were many rejections and a number of manuscripts were lost in the move, but he assembled a collection of short farm stories and anecdotes that would finally appear under the title *Ballad of a Stonepicker*. He also wrote short stories, compiling them into an anthology under the title *Poor People*, perhaps because at the time he'd been reading Gorky and Dostoevsky - whose early work was *Poor Folk* (1845). Although he had little luck gaining publication, he was now sending the stories to CBC radio where they were read on such programs as *Anthology* and *Stories Read by John Drainie*. In these stories, many of which were used over and over again in various genres, Ryga was mining the rich lore of the Richmond Park area - not using the social realism expected of a Marxist, but rather the older form of the folk tale in imitation of Gorky, with a strong moral underpining. There is some stylistic experiment in his use of symbolism, naturalism, regional coloration and a varying point of view of the narrator. One of the stories in the collection was "Pinetree Ghetto", later to be dramatized and renamed *Indian*.

His big break came in 1962 when he watched Edward Albee's short play, *The Zoo Story*, on the innovative CBC television anthology series *Quest*. Impressed with the play's presentation of stark character contrasts and simple, potent outdoor setting, and believing he could write a play as good, he set to work dramatizing *Pinetree Ghetto*, then sent it to producer Daryl Duke, who instantly decided to stage it, believing the work could "break through the cheap euphoria that most television "drama" is aimed at".[34] This was Ryga's first work in the medium, and it became an event, as his best work tended to do, with the entire teleplay being published in *Maclean's Magazine*, a week before the broadcast date of November 25, 1962.

The play, since anthologized in a dozen or so books, is a Canadian classic now, most important perhaps for its hard-nosed image of a Canadian Indian, cleansed of any romantic or passive qualities, a man who literally, powerfully rises from the earth to speak those large, final WHYS: "One brother kill another brother - Why? Why? Why?".[35] In this play Ryga found what his earlier works lacked: a strong political context. Until *Indian*, his works, although they displayed his signature passion and moral underpinnings, were without a sure political setting. His characters, as troubled as they were, existed in a kind of generalized folk vacuum, with no clear cause for their misfortune, except perhaps that of fate. The following year there was a request from a Finnish organization in Toronto for a stage version, so Ryga adapted the teleplay and the first performance, and therefore Ryga's first staged play, took place in Toronto in March 1963.

There were other television and radio successes in this period, up to Canada's centennial year, 1967, the year when he enjoyed five teleplays broadcast, one play triumphantly produced on stage, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, and a second, *Just an Ordinary Person*, scheduled for the new year. Besides *Indian*, he also had *Two Soldiers* (1963) and *For Want of Something Better To Do* (1964), his adaptation of the Gorky story, broadcast on *Quest*; both works, with their harsh questioning of Canadian values, caused some controversy. Then, on the equally issue-oriented *Shoestring Theatre* series, he had three important teleplays broadcast: *Storm* (1963), *Bitter Grass* (1963) and *The Pear Tree* (1964), all of which concerned a male roaming outcast.

On radio he had nine plays broadcast up to 1967, but only two were not originally teleplays or adaptations of other works. His first, *Masks and Shadows*, broadcast in 1963 on CBC's *Late Night Theatre*, contains the familiar patriarch-son antagonism but with an unusual twist: the son, driving along a highway in the Okanagan area of British Columbia, picks up a hitch-hiker, an old man, who dispenses wisdom and, surprisingly, has intimate knowledge of the man and his wife. The old man turns out to be a fantasy figure and is noteworthy as indicating Ryga's search for a patriarch capable of acting as father, reconciler, visionary - all pointing to Duke Radomsky in *Man Alive* (1966). In *Departures*, the father-figure is no longer a phantom but a feisty old man who now plays the central role. The man, although near death, achieves some reconciliation with his son. This work was produced by Rupert Caplan and broadcast on CBC's *Action Theatre* in 1963.

Of special note was *Man Alive*, a high point of the patriarch narrative that in some form or other haunted Ryga for so long. In this teleplay, produced on the *Festival* antholgy series in 1966, Ryga reached a breakthrough as the patriarch is given mythic proportions: the larger-than-life protagonist, Duke Radomsky, a kind of Canadian Peer Gynt, wanders across Canada in search of his son, the inheritor of the land. He is a symbol of all the men who worked the land, built the railways, raised families. In addition, Ryga accomplished his goal of utilizing an extremely foreshortened, suggestive kind of writing, writing that is briefly stated but extremely potent in stirring powerful memories. This he called "telepathic drama".[36] Finally, Ryga was fortunate to work with director George Bloomfield - the two were in close sympathy, the latter as politically aware as the playwright and as passionate in developing potent drama. When, the following year, Ryga was asked to select a director for *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, he chose Bloomfield.

The idea for *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* really began when Ryga, enjoying some success with the CBC in the mid-sixties, was put on a retainer for two years, to produce material for the Corporation. Much of what he wrote was rejected, or merely remained on the shelf as first drafts or outlines. One of these was the kernel for the story of an Indian girl who, facing a vanishing life on her reserve, travels to the big city only to be

consumed by it - the story, again, of the outcast son, now a daughter, and the patriarch in search of her. Ryga had developed this specific story in several unpublished novels, *The Third Day of Summer* and *A Feast of Thunder*, then in an unproduced screenplay, *Child Under a Leaf*. All anticipate *Rita Joe*.

When Malcolm Black, artistic director of the Vancouver Playhouse theatre, saw a newspaper article about yet another Indian woman found dead in the skidrow section of the city, he wondered if there was an idea for a play. He first asked Beverley Simons who, unavailable for the project, referred him to Ryga who accepted and immediately penned the essential elements of the play - the evocative, poetic story of Big Sandy, the white geese and dragonfly speeches, and the magistrate's half-remembered lyric tale of the young native girl on the Cariboo highway.

At the same time, another key player in the play's development, George Bloomfield, also read about the death of an Indian youth. In Ontario, child welfare authorities, using helicopters to fly across the northern stretches of the province to spot Indian children truant from school, had snatched a boy and taken him to the city of Kenora. As he was being flown away the frightened child memorized the configuration of the railway tracks; these would be his guide when he could escape and walk home. His frozen body was eventually found beside the tracks. Bloomfield read of this and became interested in researching the Indians' situation in order to write a piece for the CBC - although the Corporation found the situation "too hot to handle politically".[37] It was extraordinary that when Bloomfield arrived home he found a package from Ryga: it was an early draft of *Rita Joe*. Ryga asked Bloomfield to read it over and consider directing it for the Playhouse that fall.

When Ryga began writing *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* he was really writing his first stage play. With little experience of the stage, he was approaching the form as an outsider and tended to rely on broadcasting techniques: the rapid jumping from scene to scene, the close focus on one person's point of view, the use of flashbacks, as well as music and song. Such dramaturgical freedom allowed him to remain true to the play's essential impetus, that of a dispossessed woman struggling against the system - although the script did take many directions in its development.

When Ryga first wrote his two-page outline it began: "The play is an odyssey through hell of an Indian woman". His choice of words indicate Ryga's inclination to dramatize - as opposed to Bloomfield, who was trained in documentary techniques of the National Film Board. Even as he wrote what appears in many ways to be a documentary, of a woman's trial and execution, Ryga was in fact struggling to find the dramatic form to mold the documentary material, both his and Bloomfield's, into powerful drama. The play, according to early drafts, was to have a "dream-nightmare type of movement and mood", and was intended to leave the audience "haunted by certain highlights out of which they may later unravel a conclusion". From the beginning there is a very open dramaturgy, reminiscent of the expressionistic plays of the early 1920s, which instead of depicting the externals of action and reality, focused on the inner life of man, the mind of the protagonist, whose spiritual, emotional efflux served as a transforming device. The progress of the work in its final form to the Playhouse stage shows Ryga developing a more liquid dramaturgy, even more so than he had done in *Man Alive*, with shorter scenes flowing through each other, imitative of the freely associating mind of Rita Joe - in whom all of Ryga's most effective elements, the poetry, passion and politics, came together perfectly.

These elements were assisted by the strong first production, with Chief Dan George as the father, David Joe,

and Frances Hyland as his daughter, Rita. The cast, working under Bloomfield, was especially committed to the project: an exhausting, emotional experience for all, it became for Vancouver, not just another big opening but an event, with the reviewers generally thrilled - even at a loss for words. Only Nathan Cohen, of the *Toronto Star* demurred.[38]

But when *Just An Ordinary Person* premiered just two months later in Vancouver, the excitement did not recur, despite good notices. In fact, with Bloomfield departed to work in New York immediately after *Rita Joe*, Ryga had lost his most effective stage director. Deeply reliant on a strong director for effective *mise-en-scène*, especially with his fluid dramaturgy, Ryga now worked with a succession of directors, many of whom were not in strong sympathy with him. This was partly Ryga's fault, as he was essentially outside the practical theatre, and always approached working with actors and directors with considerable trepidation.

When he wrote his next major play, *Grass and Wild Strawberries*, there were problems of misinterpretation - the first of many. The director, Don Eccleston, with whom Ryga had worked successfully on television, preferred to highlight the more sensational aspects of the work - an examination of youth in the contemporary hippie culture, while Ryga wanted a strong critique of what he saw as the protagonists' misguided search for values. Thus the play, again produced by the Playhouse Theatre, was staged as a multi-media rock music extravaganza, and audiences flocked to the theatre - while many older patrons left early and complained to the management. Although containing some interesting song lyrics, it is one of Ryga's least successful scripts, dramatically weak, too readily didactic, with unmemorable characters. Shortly afterwards, the artistic director, Joy Coghill was fired, partly because of *Grass and Wild Strawberries*; when David Gardner took over, he was surprised to find such division in the company. Nevertheless he successfully remounted *Rita Joe*, chosen to be staged at the opening of the new National Arts Centre in Ottawa in 1969.

One area in which Ryga never achieved success, although not for lack of trying, was in film. Altogether he wrote fourteen screenplays, none of which was finally made into a film. Many were written in the late sixties and early seventies - when the Canadian Film Development Corporation was making funds available. Notable are his adaptation of Shizuye Takashima's autobiographical story *A Child in a Prison Camp*[39], completed in 1975, and *A Storm in Yalta*, a poignant evocation of Chekhov's friendships and debilitating illness, completed the year of Ryga's own failing health and death, in 1987.

His reputation as a difficult, controversial playwright came with his next play, *Captives of the Faceless Drummer*, another commission from the Playhouse Theatre. The play, scheduled in the Company's season, was suddenly "deferred" by the Playhouse Board since it was seen as being unready, even though a reading committee had examined merely a first draft. Much publicity ensued as the cancellation became a *cause célèbre* and the reputations of both Ryga and the Playhouse were damaged. Supporters finally staged the work in a low budget production at the Vancouver Art Gallery, in April 1971.

The play is uneven, containing strong Ryga passion but some question of direction. First titled *The Lovers*, it was intended to be a drama exploring the "changing morality"[40] of a wife and her happily married husband who falls in love with a girl half his age. But when the FLQ crisis occurred in October 1970, with the resulting declaration of the War Measures Act, Ryga suddenly set the play in an urban garret, with terrorists holding a diplomat captive. The play became a dialectic of the class war between the urbane diplomat, Harry, and the rough guerilla commander; but, with elements of the *ménage à trois* remaining, there is stasis in both

stories, despite some interesting debate and the creative use of a chorus. The play as a whole is unredeemed by Ryga's characteristic poetics. It was published in Vancouver by Talonbooks in 1971.

Now began his self-declared period of "artist-in-resistance", when, both by choice and by outright exclusion, he was absent from the mainstages of Canada, many of his plays of the next two decades suffering second-rate productions. He was now also a *provocateur*, a commentator on Canadian cultural affairs, writing for example in the first number of the *Canadian Theatre Review*, of the the "cultural subservience"[41] of much of Canadian theatre, as for example at Stratford, which he maintained is funded and operated under corporate boards not representative of the people. It was a period when he wrote some of his grandest, most challenging plays - one of which, *Paracelsus*, was announced as "a gauntlet, a challenge, an outright provocation"[42] to the theatre establishment.

There were still commissions: two from the Banff School of Fine arts, which resulted in *Sunrise on Sarah* in 1972 and *Portrait of Angelica* the following year; both were directed by Tom Peacocke. The first was a continuation of *The Lovers*, in a decidely non-political setting, the protagonist a professional middle-class woman going through a mental crisis. Her various relationships are explored in a more satisfactory manner than in *Captives*, since the whole play, including the setting, enacts the processes of her mind, while her various friends exist on the edges of her consciousness. The play was well received and played at the Festival Lennoxville the following year; it was published at the same time by Talonbooks. *Portrait of Angelica*, however, fared less well. Based on his experience of living in Mexico in the winter of 1972/73, Ryga wrote a series of vignettes - the play was subtitled at Banff, "Sketches of a Sunshine Town in Mexico, 1973". It represents Ryga's first attempt to stage folkloric motifs. Until now, his "folk" characters such as the Indian or Rita Joe existed in a hostile environment, that of an indifferent western society. Therefore their folk values existed largely as fragments of memory or desire and their capacity for action was severely limited. The play suffers because of its central character, a Canadian tourist, Danny Baker, a lonely, frustrated writer, admittedly a man without strong convictions, whose monologue is colorless and whose inaction stifles the play. *Portrait* was published by Turnstone Press in 1984.

Paracelsus is Ryga's major play: it is epic in conception, the language is in verse, and at the centre stands a historical figure of monumental brilliance - and considerable bombast. Researched on a trip to Switzerland, before he went to Mexico where he wrote it, the play is Ryga's unwieldiest stage work. It is long, the plotting is complex, jumping from place to place, and from time to time; always it is strident, Faustian:

> I
> Entertain the devil for one purpose -
> I must *know*!
> God - please help and guide me!
> For I do not understand your ways
> With man![43]

It remained a crucial work in the Ryga canon, a play he could never let go of, the kind that emerges from the playwright's fiercest, most uncompromising beliefs, where all his politics and passions have their full vent - his own *Brand* or *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Paracelsus is the first of several major heroic figures Ryga tackled, the next being Prometheus; in each case, he was using a touchstone figure to pose a large humanist

question: how much real progress has man made through time?

But *Paracelsus'* dramaturgical extravagances, not to mention its staging difficulties, left the play unproduced for fourteen years until, in 1986, Playhouse Theatre of Vancouver, with a generous grant from the Federal Department of Communications - to stage a major work for the Expo '86 fair - decided to do it. The production, however, directed by John Juliani, was universally condemned.

Of great personal satisfaction to Ryga was the musical *A Feast of Thunder*, for which he provided the libretto while composer Morris Surdin created the music. Played in June 1973, at Massey Hall, this was a major work for the National Shevchenko Musical Ensemble in Toronto. The theme, another grand one, is suggested by the four movements, Birth, Youth, Manhood and Death, and the production was an impressive one, with large, swirling orchestrations, jazz and rock rhythms, and dynamic sung sections. Although the production was designed to appeal to an audience wider than the Ukrainian community, it attracted only one reviewer from the three Toronto dailies, and despite general approval, there was concern about the work's lack of structure.

By the mid-seventies, as his dramatic writing was in decline, Ryga was recognized as one of Canada's major playwrights - as well as a "gladiator", a "maverick".[44] Returning to his favorite form, he revised several novels he had written earlier, for publication by Talonbooks: *Hungry Hills* and *Ballad of a Stonepicker* and a third, published for the first time, *Night Desk*. As a result of several trips to China, which gave him much to reflect upon, he wrote *Beyond the Crimson Morning*, a travelogue/meditation about China and - seen in perspective - Canada. Then, beginning in 1980, when he was writer-in-residence at the University of Ottawa, he had plans for several more novels but only one was written, *In the Shadow of the Vulture*, published by Talonbooks in 1985. It was, he felt, one of his most satisfying novels[45] It is a long, expansive work that afforded him the opportunity to explore a number of themes and motifs that had long attracted him - the resilient humanity of ordinary working people and the terrifying yet fecund aspects of the land. It details the odyssey of a ragtag group of illegal aliens as they huddle in the back of a truck taking them through Mexico into the U.S. to work as virtual slaves on a chicken farm. The story was sparked by what he had witnessed while living in Mexico, as well as by a similar situation with East Indians in the Fraser Valley area of British Columbia.

Ryga still wrote for the media, with seven television and about two dozen radio plays broadcast after 1967. Most noteworthy on television was *The Rocky Mountains* for a CTV series, *Canada: Five Portraits*, completed in 1973, and *The Ballad of John Lepa*, also for CTV, for the *Newcomer* series, which resulted in the stage work, *A Letter to my Son*. For radio there was the CBC's *Bush and Salon* series, in which he and researcher/lorist Bill Barlee traveled to historical locations around B.C. to find material, resulting in a series of radio plays, one of which, *Dreams are made of Gold Dust*, was the basis for the stage work, *Ploughmen of the Glacier*. Throughout the decade, increasingly, his protagonists live as aliens in foreign communities, their isolation from the people a serious handicap, as in the radio plays: *One Sad Song for Henry*, *The Bells of Grenada* and *Brandon Willie and the Great Event*.

Two other stage plays, written in the mid-seventies, demonstrate both an occasional lapse of writing and the precarious nature of the productions Ryga's plays were receiving. *Seven Hours to Sundown* is a thinly disguised representation of real events that occurred in his home town of Summerland, where Ryga had

become a major player in a campaign to save a former hospital building for an arts centre.[46] But when he attempted to extend the small-town politics into a near Greek tragedy, with the mayor's father, a stern, uncompromising prophet of doom, suddenly impaled on a tree as a crucified martyr, he had taken the play into forced realms. He admitted that it was too much a documentary, that he "was too close" to events; not surprisingly, he believed *Seven Hours* was "not really understood"[47] in its premiere production in Edmonton by Theatre Network in 1976.

Ploughmen of the Glacier is one of the most successful and frequently produced of Ryga's plays. Originally titled *Two Men of the Mountain*, it was commissioned by the Okanagan Mainline Regional Arts Council to play in the "Okanagan Images" festival. An Adaptation of *Dreams are made of gold dust*, it is the tale of two historical figures, "Volcanic" Brown, a rugged prospector and Robert Thornton Lowery, a refined journalist. The play is structured as a series of meetings over the years as the men, opposites in their approach to life, debate and attempt to understand each other, finally realizing their similar humanity, symbolized in the end by the two cougars that devour the prospector. Ryga was more successful in this play with inserting his "mythological touchstones"[48], which meant the attempt to capture the special flavor of the lives of the protagonists, as well as the smells, sights and sounds of their environment, another use of his "telepathic drama" he'd developed for *Man Alive* ten years earlier. The play, directed by Tom Kerr, drew good audiences in a tour of the Okanagan, but did poorly when it played in Vancouver, despite good notices, leaving the producer, Chris Starkey, to wonder why it failed [49].

Jeremiah's Place is a reworking of his familiar patriarch story from the early 1960s, about the loss of a homestead, but both Ryga and Victoria's Kaleidoscope Theatre, who'd commissioned the play for a school tour, agreed it was a mistake. The play is too talky and static and the production was halted early in the run. Nor was there better luck with *Prometheus Bound*, his adaptation of the play by Aeschylus. This was commissioned by Brian Richmond, who'd been asked to direct for Toronto's Open Circle Theatre, a company known for its commitment to social and political works. Somewhat like Paracelsus, the great figure of legend is represented, now in a modern setting, as a man of the people questioning those who have betrayed the modern socialist revolution. As such it is Ryga's special address to the socialist bloc, a statement of generalized Marxist belief. The Open Circle however, having financial problems, soon closed down permanently and the play has not been produced to date. So too his work with Mikis Theodorakis, with whom he collaborated on *Twelve Ravens for the Sun*, a musical call to life to the builders of Canada's west coast, has not been produced. This work was completed in 1980.

A singular accomplishment, however, is *A Letter to my Son*, one of Ryga's most deeply personal and and warmest plays. The main character, Old Lepa, is based on his father and that man's experiences of homesteading, marrying and farming, especially detailed in earlier versions of the play. While many events vary from actuality, the central theme of reconciliation between father and son is a heartfelt wish as well as a tribute from Ryga. Part of Lepa's triumph lies in achieving full citizenship in his adopted country, an interesting corollary to acceptance by his son. He does this through overcoming his antagonism towards a government social worker who is attempting to obtain a pension for him, a difficulty since he has been declared officially dead - just as the elder Ryga was a *persona non grata* during the 1930s. The play is unique in the Ryga canon as having a predominantly warm atmosphere and a happy conclusion. It was aired in November 1978, finding a good reception including a nomination for an ACTRA award: "best dramatic writer - television". A short story version, "A Visit from the Pension Lady", was published in McClelland and Stewart's anthology *The Newcomers: Inhabiting a New Land*, in 1979. At the same time Ryga was beginning

a productive association with a fairly new theatre company, the Kam Theatre Lab of Thunder Bay, Ontario, whose aim was to bring "indigenous" theatre to northern Ontario to "people who don't often get a chance to experience it live".[50] The Company had already given eastern Canada the premiere of *Ploughmen of the Glacier* in the late 1970s; now, several members having seen the teleplay, the Company asked Ryga to write a stage adaptation to open the 1981/82 season. The play was warmly received, and there was another production, his final with the Company, the short play *Laddie Boy*.

There was a similarly good, although brief, relationship with a Winnipeg theatre company, The Prairie Theatre Exchange, newly rejuvenated under director Gordon McCall. One of McCall's first projects was directing a production of the *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, with natives playing the native roles - notably Margo Kane in the lead. The production was highly successful, with a well received run in Vancouver as well, but plans for a new play, *Reflections in Paradise*, went awry.

In Ryga's final years there were no further important stage plays written, merely a number of experiments, none of which enjoyed much success but did give personal satisfaction to Ryga as he worked closely in the staging of each - recalling his earlier work with George Bloomfield. *One More For the Road* is a one-person show written for friend and performer, Dick Clements, with the spoken and sung ramblings of Chester C. Sharpe, another Ryga Everyman figure but also a composite of Ryga and Clements. It played at the Firehall theatre in Vancouver in October 1985, to mixed reviews, then, in a later revised version, toured around the province. With the idea of forming a visionary theatre company, The People's Theatre of Canada, based in Summerland, Ryga formed a collaboration with performer Cheryl Cashman. Together they were to stage a new play for the Native Education Centre in Vancouver, with Cashman directing and Ryga writing. *Children of Moses* is a play about two brothers, both failures, who return to the home of their dying father and reflect on their dreams and disappointments. But there was a dispute over alterations to the text and the project was suddenly dropped by the Centre. Then he wrote *Glaciers in the Sun* specifically for Cashman, who would play the leading role, that of a spirited woman recalling the work of her grandfather, active in the trade union movement. Ryga sent the script to Kam Theatre Lab, but there was no production; instead, his plans, including an adaptation of *Lysistrata*, were put on hold as the enormous work of staging *Paracelsus* in Vancouver consumed all.

His final works were mainly prose, as he returned to writing short stories, completing just over a dozen between 1984 and 1987 and hoping to publish them in a single volume. There are no breakthroughs in style although, compared to the stories of *Poor People*, they take place in more modern and often urban settings - the kinds of places where Ryga was rarely comfortable. These works set several specific preoccupations in his final years: a fear of artistic failure, and a questioning of whether family members will be capable of assuming important responsibilities. The first theme is strongly typified in "Angel" in which a young, awkward actress goes to the city only to find miserable jobs; the second in "The Private Obsessions of Andrew, the Waiter", possibly the best work in the collection.

Ryga's final work was the poem, "Resurrection", written for a poetry festival in Baghdad. To the last, he argued with death, that he needed to survive longer in order to supply more anger against the world's injustice, as in the refrain, "I have not done enough!". The final account that remains is that of a spirit, escaped from the confines of flesh, now free to help others - perhaps his ultimate characterization:

> He cried through parched lips - "Yes - I am free,
> Free, free at last! I will go where I am needed.
> Tend the sick and wounded - give courage to the
> fallen...

This is the last image of Ryga - a man transfigured, the soul of the writer and his latest creation one - thus confirming nagging questions about his role as an author too close to his works, too *engagé*. What will his interpreters make of this? A necessary prophet or mere tortured spirit? An important, obsessive monologist or whining, inchoate provocateur? Whichever, he would be listened to and would encourage the debate[51]

NOTES

1. George Ryga, *Song of my hands and other poems* (Edmonton: National Publishing, 1956), n.p.

2. George Ryga, personal interview, March 31, 1984.

3. David Watson, "Political Mythologies. An Interview with George Ryga", *Canadian Drama*, vol 8, no 2, 1982, p. 172.

4. George Ryga, *Night Desk* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1976), p. 16.

5. Robert Weaver and William Toye, eds., *The Oxford Anthology of Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 455.

6. George Ryga, personal interview, March 31, 1984.

7. George Ryga, personal interview, Feb 18, 1984.

8. Anne Chudyk (Ryga), letter to the author, July 21, 1990.

9. *The Athabasca Echo*, March 31, 1950.

10. George Ryga, personal interview, January 22, 1984.

11. George Ryga, personal interview, January 22, 1984.

12. George Ryga, letter to Cheryl Cashman, July 2, 1986.

13. George Ryga, personal interview, January 22, 1984.

14. E.P. Conkle, letter to the author, October 8, 1986.

15. George Ryga, personal interview, December 13, 1986.

16. Jerome Lawrence, letter to the author, December 5, 1986.

17. George Ryga, personal interview, January 22, 1984.

18. George Ryga, "Notes from a Silent Boyhood", *Clover and Wild Strawberries, A History of the Schools of the County of Athabasca*, Athabasca Local, Alberta Teachers Association, George S. Opryshko, ed., 1967, p. 12.

19. George Ryga, personal interview, December 13, 1986.

20. George Ryga, "They Who Suffer", *New Frontiers*, Vol. 4, No.3, Fall 1955, p. 37.

21. William Irvine, *The Farmers in Politics* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1920).

22. *Song of my hands*, n.p. Cf. Robert Burns's poem, "Saw Ye Bonie Lesley".

23. Martha Millet, *Dangerous Jack* (New York: Sierra, 1953).

24. George Ryga, personal interview, February 18, 1984.

25. George Ryga, personal interview, February 18, 1984.

26. George Ryga, "Rewi Alley, As I Knew Him", *The Athabasca Echo*, September 21, 1956.

27. George Ryga, "Prairie Wind", *Song of my hands*, n.p.

28. George Ryga, "A Canadian Short Story", *The Ukrainian Canadian*, February 15, 1957.

29. George Ryga, *The Bridge*, ms., The George Ryga fonds, the University of Calgary Library. Selections appear in *The Athabasca Ryga*, E. David Gregory, ed. (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1990), pp. 89-112.

30. Cf. George Ryga, *Beyond the Crimson Morning* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1979), p. 53-54.

31. George Ryga, *Night Desk* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1976), p. 61.

32. *Hungry Hills* was first published in Toronto by Longmans in 1963; then in Vancouver by Talonbooks in 1974.

33. George Ryga, *Hungry Hills*, Talonbooks, p. 21.

34. "*Indian*, a new TV play to read *and* see", *Maclean's*, December 1, 1962, p. 30.

35. George Ryga, *Indian*, in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe and other Plays* (Don Mills: General Publishing, 1971), p. 32.

36. George Ryga, personal interview, January 22, 1984.

37. George Bloomfield, personal interview, June 12, 1988.

38. Nathan Cohen, "A non-production of a non-play", *Toronto Star*, November 25, 1967, p. 30.

39. Shizuye Takashima, *A Child in a Prison Camp* (Montreal: Tundra, 1971).

40. George Ryga, "The Lovers, Notes on a Stage Play", ts., the George Ryga fonds, the University of Calgary Library.

41. George Ryga, "Theatre in Canada: A Viewpoint on its Development and Future", *Canadian Theatre Review*, No.1, Winter, 1974, p. 28.

42. Peter Hay, "An Introduction" (to *Paracelsus*), *Canadian Theatre Review*, No. 4, Fall 1975, p. 39.

43. George Ryga, *Paracelsus*, in *Two Plays: Paracelsus and Prometheus Bound* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1982), p. 72.

44. Cf. Allen Garr, "Footlights on the Foothills", *Weekend Magazine*, Nov 13, 1976, p. 10-13; Tom Shandel, "Ryga seeks theatre of the road", *Georgia Straight*, May 26-June 2, 1977, p.19.

45. George Ryga, letter to Jovanka Bach, July 23, 1987, the George Ryga fonds, the University of Calgary Library.

46. Cf. *Beyond the Crimson Morning*, p.21-26.

47. George Ryga, personal interview, March 31, 1984.

48. George Ryga, personal interview, March 31, 1984.

49. Cf. Scott McCrae, "Anatomy of a Bomb", *Vancouver Sun*, May 21, 1976, p. 4.

50. Kam Theatre Lab, promotional release, "history and background", n.d.

51. Since Ryga's death, two volumes of his mostly unpublished works have appeared: *The Athabasca Ryga*, E. David Gregory, ed. (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1990), and *Summerland*, Ann Kujundzic, ed. (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992).

For a full biography, see *The Ecstasy of Resistance: a bibliography of George Ryga*, James Hoffman (Toronto: ECW Press, 1995).

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The George Ryga papers: George Ryga fonds, Renée L. Paris fonds, George Ryga & Associates fonds. An inventory of the archive at the University of Calgary Library. Compilers: Juanita Walton and Sandra Mortensen. Editors: Marlys Chevrefils and Apollonia Steele. Biocritical essay: James Hoffman. [Calgary]: University of Calgary Press, [1995].