



Special Collections

Gwen Pharis Ringwood

Biocritical Essay

by

Dr. Geraldine Anthony, S.C.

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The water diviner, Dowser, in Gwen Pharis Ringwood's musical play, *Mirage* (1979), says of the willow stick:

"...when the power's on me, it turns to a wand...See how loosely I hold it in my hands...No pressure. I...wait for the willow to find water...I'm looking to find some pool or running stream not too deep underground." Jeanne, the young homesteader's wife suddenly observes:... "The willow bends...It's trembling in his hands." Dowser had earlier remarked: "I have the gift...."¹

It is the gift for plumbing the earth's secrets, for finding the cool and hidden springs.

Like Dowser, Ringwood had the gift, the talent for probing beneath the surface of things in order to see the miraculous growth of people, of their relationship to one another and to the earth. Ringwood divined the truth of humankind's identification with the earth, not so much as master of it but as integral part of this evolving planet. Her plays, studied from this one aspect alone, reveal the essence of Ringwood's philosophy of life. She sees the earth burgeoning forth plants, animals and human life in its ever-evolving process. She sees the inter-connectedness of all this teeming life with the earth itself. This miracle young Gwen Pharis and her three brothers observed in their early childhood in their father's farm in Barons, fifty miles north of Lethbridge, and later on in Magrath, Alberta. Together they explored the land around the St. Mary's River across from the Blood Indian Reserve. They felt part of the coulee, the prairie, the gulleys, the deep ravines. Here is the mystery of the earth and the mystical union of human spirit with earth of which it is so much a part. If Gwen Pharis, an agnostic, had any religion at all, it was that belief in humankind whose roots were bound inextricably with nature, continually evolving with it - what the paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de

Chardin later referred to as: "the pre-eminent significance of man in nature, and the organic nature of mankind."²

This was Gwen Pharis's earliest experience in southern Alberta, surrounded by the sweep of sky and prairie, impregnated with the land's influence on her young being. The dark abyss of the well, down which she and her brothers would gaze, was to them symbolic of the earth's deep mystery, which Gwen Pharis sought to fathom in her plays and in her novel *Younger Brother*. Here she comes to grips with the land and its hold on their young lives. Again and again she recreates the prairies in her writings, stressing nature's beauty and solitude as well as its violence and terror, particularly its singular hold on the people dwelling there.

Ringwood's divining rod, her muse, her talent for playwriting was used, like Dowser's wand, freely and easily. She did not impose herself upon her work but allowed the play to develop a life of its own, bending and moving in whatever direction, and she simply followed. Because she allowed this willow to bend of itself, her plays seem to be the free gift of nature, unburdening itself in an evolving process that brings characters to an awareness of themselves and their deep relationship to the earth. Ringwood's own life from birth to death was spent first on prairie farms in Alberta and later in the ranch country of central British Columbia.

Gwen Pharis was born in 1910 in Anatone, in the state of Washington, to Leslie Pharis, a farmer/teacher from Missouri of Irish and French Huguenot ancestry, and Mary Bowersock Pharis, of Pennsylvania Dutch and English-Irish extraction. When she was three years old Gwen was taken to Alberta where her parents had purchased a farm near Barons, and later they moved near Magrath. Eventually Leslie Pharis was elected Alberta advisor to the federal government's Agricultural Advisory Committee Program. His wife, Mary Bowersock, was a schoolteacher throughout her life. Gwen's three brothers died tragically - Blaine and George overseas in the Canadian Air Force in World War II, and Robert in a sudden death many years later. The mystery of life and death permeates Ringwood's plays.

Gwen Pharis's future career in theatre was influenced early in life by the annual five-day Chautauqua Festival of the Arts in Magrath. Their presentation of classical dramas enlivened the young child's fertile imagination, as did the British and American travelling theatre companies which occasionally passed through Lethbridge. Both her parents and her teachers were most encouraging, her father with his strong philosophic mind and her teachers with their varied experiences in schools Gwen attended in Calgary, Montana and Edmonton. The first Social Credit Premier in Canada, William Aberhart, was her Math teacher. Gwen Pharis returned to Magrath High School for Grade Ten where her father was teacher and principal. His Math and English lessons expanded her vision and added to her sense of exploration. Her play *The Deep Has Many Voices* (1971) contains her feelings of wonder at the vastness of the universe and the ability of mathematicians to harness some of its powers.

A school friend, Dorothy Thomas, of High River, commissioned Ringwood, many years later, to write the story of Edson, Alberta, in the musical play *Look Behind You, Neighbor*. A regional folk musical recreating the history of Edson, it brought together the entire town in this theatre group project where the local people created dance, costumes, set, and even formed an Edson Band. Ringwood's talent for this kind of community project was later to reach its zenith at Williams Lake, in the central part of British Columbia, where she and her husband lived from 1953 until her death in 1984. There she encouraged the entire town to take part in her

plays and musicals. *The Road Runs North* (1967) was one of her most successful musicals on the theme of Billy Barker and the Gold Rush days of the 1860s. Clive Stangoe, editor of *The Williams Lake Tribune*, said of her: "Her impact on Williams Lake, her expertise and dedication, changed the character of the place."³ In tribute to her dedication, the people of Williams Lake built and named their theatre the Gwen Pharis Ringwood Outdoor Theatre.

An early affinity for Chekhov, developed when she attended the University of Montana, revealed itself many years later in the characters and structure of some of her plays, in particular *The Lodge* (1975) where a family group gather for a birthday celebration. Although nothing of great moment happens through the course of the reunion, by the end of the play the characters have changed radically. Chekhov's detachment from dependency on any one main character can be seen in several Ringwood plays, notably in *The Rainmaker* and her three musicals, *Look Behind you*, *Neighbor*, *The Road Runs North* and *Mirage*.

Forced to leave University in 1928, because of the failure of her father's newly purchased irrigated farm in Valier, Montana, Gwen Pharis worked as a bookkeeper with Browning Mercantile on the Blackfoot Indian Reservation in Montana. Here she made friends with both Indians and Métis, despite the decided aloofness of the neighbouring white community toward the Indians. Characters, setting and plot for her later unpublished novel "Pascal" were taken from her experiences on this reservation. Ten years later she attempted to utilize the myths of the Blackfoot people in a drama of ancient Indian rituals, but she failed to capture their mystique. She succeeded forty years later with her two highly sensitive Indian plays *Lament for Harmonica* and *The Stranger*.

Having sold his Montana farm at an auction, Leslie Pharis brought his impoverished family back to Alberta in 1929. Among their losses was that of an expensive, uninsured bull, struck by lightning. Ringwood depicts this in her wonderful folk comedy *Widger's Way*. During the depression both parents found teaching positions in Spring Coulee near Magrath while Gwen Pharis continued her studies at the University of Alberta. Professors here who influenced her thinking included Dr. W. G. Hardy, novelist, Professor Wm. Hardy Alexander, classicist, and Dr. Broadus of English language text book renown. In 1933 she worked as secretary to Elizabeth Sterling Haynes who was initiating the development of theatre in Alberta. This proved to be the turning point in Gwen Pharis's life as she became totally immersed in drama with her for the next five years. During this time Gwen Pharis wrote her first play, directed and produced by Elizabeth Haynes at the newly opened Banff School of Fine Arts. She also wrote thirteen half-hour radio plays for CKUA program *New Lamps for Old* directed by Sheila Marriot. In the Summer of 1937, Frederick Koch, head of the Playmakers Theatre at the University of North Carolina, taught playwriting at Banff and became aware of Gwen Pharis's talents. He obtained a Rockefeller Foundation grant for her to study toward an M.A. in Drama at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. After two years of prolific work there with the writing of six plays and the production of five of these, as well as the assistant editorship of the quarterly magazine *The Carolina Play-Book* containing some of her articles, poetry and plays, Gwen Pharis graduated in 1939 with an M.A. in English and Drama, and was the winner of awards for her outstanding work. *Still Stands the House* is the best known and finest of her plays written and produced at this time. All her plays of this period revolve around the prairie experience of farmers, and of immigrants in Alberta: *Still Stands the House*, *Dark Harvest*, *Pasque Flower*, *One Man's House* and *Chris Axelson, Blacksmith*.

After graduation and her return to Alberta, Gwen Pharis married Dr. John Brian Ringwood who accepted a post as doctor for the gold mining community at Goldfields, Athabasca, in northern Saskatchewan. These

were also years of personal fulfillment in her marriage and the birth of her children. Her writings henceforth became rich in her recognition of the Canadian spirit, of discovering Canada - its unique terrain and impressive beauty. The two years in Goldfields fired her imagination and inspired some of her later plays. The comedy on French-Canadians in the north *The Courting of Marie Jenvrin* was written in Goldfields. The lonely aspect of the land in northern Canada also becomes evident in later plays. The challenge of the Canadian environment - hard, lonely and cold - is revealed in her prairie plays and is the source of communion with that mysterious force of life in the earth around her. Communion with nature nourished her sensibilities and provided the inspiration for her work. The heroic struggles of farmers with the land in Ringwood's plays end always in reconciliation with the mystery of the universe. The farmer, Garth, in *Dark Harvest* accepts this mystery and surrenders himself to it - the view of the agnostic who yet hopes in the possibility of meaning behind the force of nature.

Having enlisted for medical service in World War II, Dr. Ringwood left his young wife and two children in Edmonton, Alberta. Gwen Pharis was providentially offered a grant at this time to write Albertan folk plays. It provided the initiative to bring her vision of Canada to other Canadians. These were regional plays, no less important for their regional quality. During the year 1944 to 1945 she wrote three plays: *The Jack and the Joker* focussing on Bob Edwards, the editor of the satiric newspaper the *Calgary Eye-Opener*; *The Rainmaker* recalling Charles Hatfield, hired in 1921 to bring rain to Medicine Hat, Alberta; and *Stampede* on the Calgary rodeo, and incidentally John Ware, or "Nigger John" as he was called, the famous Alberta black man - a cowboy and rancher who lived before the first Calgary Stampede. In these plays, especially the last two, Ringwood establishes atmosphere, the spirit of the region, its peculiar mystique and authentic characters.

After the War, Dr. Ringwood returned and the family took up residence in 1946 in the Ukrainian area of Lamont, Alberta. Two more children were born within the next three years. The farce *The Drowning of Wasyl Nemitchuk* or *A Fine Colored Easter Egg*, about the unique qualities of the Ukrainian character, was written in 1946. Influenced by Chekhov's comedies, it developed into an imaginative, lighthearted farce successfully produced the same year at the Banff School of Fine Arts.

In 1953 Dr. Ringwood accepted a position as surgeon in the fast-growing community of Williams Lake in central British Columbia where his surgical skills were sorely needed by ranchers and loggers, both Indians and whites. Here Gwen Ringwood initiated community theatre, and began her famous "coffeehouses" or evenings of dramatic entertainments. A portion of her time was volunteered to teaching Indian children in the Cariboo Indian School located at Saint Joseph's Oblate Mission. She adapted plays for Indian children and helped them compile two books of their stories and legends. During these years she wrote the serious plays *Lament for Harmonica* or *Maya* (1959) and *The Stranger* (1971) showing the tragedy of the Indian as victim. In *The Lodge* (1975) the Indian is the mystical seer. The problems of youth and society in the 1960s are graphically portrayed in *The Deep Has Many Voices* (1968) and *A Remembrance of Miracles* (1975). These were also years of personal involvement in the administration of theatre through workshops in dramatics and adjudication of numerous plays in School Drama Festivals, 1960 to 1970.

In 1968 Dr. Ringwood retired and they moved outside Williams Lake to the ranch country bordering Chimney Lake where they purchased more than one hundred and twenty acres of ranchland. This final communion with the land, with trout fishing and flower planting, gave Gwen Ringwood the solitude she needed to collect her writings of a lifetime, and to add to her canon in the peaceful retreat of a cabin, her writing den. Here she retired for some hours each day, composing short satiric plays titled "Encounters",

children's plays such as *The Magic Carpets of Antonio Angelini*, and the unpublished novel "Pascal". From this solitude she was often interrupted to deliver banquet addresses, to give workshops and judge writing competitions, to be a member of university theatre panels, and to give the occasional university lecture. Five major plays were written at this time: *A Remembrance of Miracles* (1975), *The Lodge* (1975), *Mirage* (1979), *The Furies* (1980) and *The Garage Sale* (1981) which was produced at the du Maurier Festival in Vancouver.

Ringwood's last years, though fraught with the painful knowledge that she had incurable cancer, were spent heroically gathering her life's work together for the University of Calgary, which had purchased the Ringwood Papers, and meeting with professional colleagues and friends. One of her last public appearances was at the Banquet of the Association for Canadian Theatre History at UBC in May 1983, where she was acknowledged for her fine work in Canadian Theatre by an Honorary Membership in the Association. Just one year later, in May 1984, Gwen Pharis Ringwood died. A tribute and toast were offered in her memory at the ACTH/AHTC annual Banquet at the University of Guelph: "Her legacy to us is not just in her accomplishments but in the inspiration of a woman who had become a whole human being" (Toastmaster, ACTH/AHTC Banquet, University of Guelph, May 1984).

Ringwood's plays can be conveniently grouped in three periods: (1) early prairie plays, (2) Alberta folklore, (3) final plays of social protest. This essay deals only with her plays because this genre constitutes her major work. Her musicals and children's plays, her poetry, two novels and short stories, will offer further insight on Ringwood for the researcher interested in delving further into her work.

Her first serious writing was done under the tutelage of Frederick Koch, Playmakers School, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in 1937 to 1939. Here "Proff Koch" trained her in the writing of regional drama. She was encouraged to recreate the Alberta prairies, the farmers, the immigrant people there. Her first attempt was a one-act farcical comedy, *Chris Axelson, Blacksmith* (1938). In this minor work she did incorporate the techniques she was learning from Koch in setting, dialect and dramatic situation. It is merely an average exercise in playwriting, yet it shows her instinct for comedy. Combining comedy and farce she creates folk characters typical of lower-class Swedish immigrants using some mildly humorous dialogue.

One Man's House (1938), her second play, set the tone for her later plays of social protest. Of more substance than *Chris Axelson*, it depicts Polish immigrant reformers endeavouring to achieve better working conditions through labour unions. It is derived from the true story of a Polish reformer in Alberta whom Gwen Pharis knew personally. The play, however, is too short for the reasonable development of the theme. It would require a three-act play to handle the complexities of this drama. Obviously the work of a novice, it still shows improvement over earlier writing. In a tone that is quiet and compassionate, Ringwood creates quite memorable poetic lines, as, for example, the words of Jan Lodeska, the reformer, to his wife:

"The years they crowd us, Martha?

Like sheep at a narrow gate."⁴

Still an exercise in playwriting, it does reveal the skills Ringwood is gradually learning. She is testing her ability here to depict the relationship between simple, warmhearted people. Poetic dialogue, which becomes Ringwood's forte, is also tested in this play.

Her next drama, *Still Stands the House*, was a triumph of form and substance. So successful was this one-act

play that it has been repeatedly performed over the years, particularly on university campuses. Depicting the sufferings of a farmer and his wife on the Alberta prairies, it succeeds in becoming a powerful, artistic metaphor of humankind's relationship to the earth. Set in the depression years of the 1930s, it recreates the bitter drought of summer and the fierce blizzards of winter. The land is the protagonist and the people reflect the prairie spirit. Though part of that very land, Ruth rebels against it, while her sister-in-law is obsessed by it and finally becomes as deranged as the weather itself, succumbing to and becoming part of its violence. Conflict is the central note - conflict with nature and conflict between Ruth and Hester. The land has exerted so strange a power over Hester that she will commit murder to preserve its ownership. Thus when her brother, Bruce, and his pregnant wife, Ruth, decide to sell the land, Hester deliberately fails to fill the lamp that will bring them safely back through the blizzard. The play ends with the grim figure of the spinster, Hester, irrevocably bound to house and land forever.

The dialogue is full of subtle rhythms, imagery and symbols, building emotionally and dramatically to the climax. Hester, in a deranged fury, breaks off a bud from a hyacinth plant which Ruth has so carefully nurtured - a symbol of Ruth's unborn child. This symbol is reinforced by reference to the mare's foal, soon to be born in the blizzard. But all this burgeoning life will never be brought to fruition. Ruth, Bruce, the unborn child and the mare's foal will die - sacrificed by Hester to the land from whence they came. The madness of nature's blizzard is reflected in Hester's derangement. All blend into the land and become one with it. The god is the land; Hester is merely its caretaker. In the end the land reigns supreme. Ringwood suggests that the play, with its austere prairie landscape, be produced in a very austere way, restrained, flattened. Against this austerity the images come alive and the contrast produced is dramatic. *Still Stands the House* is symbolic of the austerity of the Canadian prairies where survival is the key to life. Ringwood's poetic dialogue is enhanced by her stage directions as can be observed in the last scene of the play in Hester's words:

"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."

"They've gone. They won't be back now." (With an intense excitement, Hester blows out the lamp at the window and pulls down the shades. Her eyes fall on the bowl of hyacinths in the corner. Slowly she goes to it, takes it up and, holding it away from her, carries it to the door. Opening the door, she sets the flowers outside).⁵

Hester's last words are taken from the New Testament, Matthew VII:25. "And the winds blew and beat upon the house; and it fell out: for it was founded upon a rock." In this final image, Hester brings together the land, the people and Canada itself in the image of the house.

Pasque Flower (1939) is another one-act play of prairie life written at this time. Recalling the pale blue pasque flower growing throughout the prairies at Easter time, Ringwood sees it as symbolic of spring and therefore of hope in the land. The play involves a marital rift between a wheat farmer, Jake, and his wife, Lisa, and also the dark rivalry between Jake and his brother, David. The unexpected gift of a bouquet of pasque flowers from Jake to Lisa indicates to her that their marriage will, like the land, survive all obstacles. A new spring, a new beginning in their lives, has appeared. The plot is a simple one - a triangle in which David, a medical doctor, appears after years of estrangement and almost succeeds in winning Lisa away from

her husband. Added to this conflict are two emotional situations - the memory of the death of their only child and Jake's relentless appropriation of the land of a neighbour who could not pay his debts. Neither situation is totally resolved at the end. A verse play, it reveals Ringwood's talent for poetic drama. The characterization of Jake and Lisa is well drawn but David's character is two-dimensional. The tone is austere and somber, capturing the loneliness and isolation of the prairies and of the people who dwell there. Ringwood makes extensive use of biblical names and figures in her prairie plays, thus strengthening the mystical relationship between human beings and the land. The dialogue expresses the sterility of the land and of Lisa's life. Clear, simple, almost barren poetry, it creates an image and then personifies it. Lisa refers to her early love for David, before she marries Jake, in these words:

"Sometimes in summer,
When the wind raises the dust like smoke,
I've traced your name there on the ledge.
Tried to hold on to some remembered beauty,
Something you gave me in your voice and smile,
When you were here before.
Then I'd see the dusk blot out the name I'd written.
I took it as a sign it was a dream I'd had,
Having no meaning."⁶

The image of "dust like smoke" changes to dust personified as it deliberately blots out the name of her lover.

Eventually Gwen Pharis lengthened *Pasque Flower* into the three-act play *Dark Harvest*, one of her most successful full-length plays. It won first prize in the Ottawa Little Theatre Playwriting Competition, was produced at the University of Manitoba in 1945, and published by Thomas Nelson in 1945, by the *Canadian Theatre Review* in 1975, and by Enid Delgatty Rutland in *The Collected Plays of Gwen Pharis Ringwood* in 1982. Anton Wagner says of it in his review: "Its protagonist, Garth Hansen, the land-hungry Alberta farmer attempting to dominate nature and a hostile God, is perhaps Ringwood's only heroic and tragic male figure".⁷ Not only did she create this larger-than-life male figure, but more importantly she created the epic character of a wheat field, as symbolically evocative of the earth as Chekhov's cherry orchard. Whereas in the shorter play the emphasis is on a triangular human relationship, in *Dark Harvest* the emphasis is on a triangular spiritual relationship - Garth Hansen versus God and the land.

These prairie plays, written and produced at the University of North Carolina, were her apprenticeship to her later work. Yet so fine were these contributions that two of them, *Still Stands the House* and *Dark Harvest*, continue to be applauded by critics as examples of some of her best work.

Returning to Alberta in 1939, Ringwood spent the next few years using the knowledge and experience acquired in Chapel Hill to recreate Alberta folklore in drama. In *The Courting of Marie Jenvrin*, she produced a slight comedy of a vivacious French-Canadian girl courted by three men: young Louis Hebert, middle-aged Mr. Dinsmore and the witty Irish hard-rock miner, Michael Lorrigan. Tricked into vowing she will marry the man who can give her a Jersey cow, she is unaware that Dinsmore can arrange to have the cow flown in. Michael gets Marie out of a legal predicament and she settles for marriage with Michael. The audience is aware that she, like the protagonist in *The Taming of the Shrew*, will triumph. The dialogue is humorous, the

characters realistic, the romantic touches fun. Never meant to be anything more, it is simply lighthearted entertainment.

In 1945, Ringwood was commissioned to write four one-act plays on Alberta folklore. In *The Jack and the Joker*, Ringwood attempted to bring to life the clever and satiric Bob Edwards who edited, for many years, the famous *Calgary Eye-Opener*. A slight period piece, Ringwood failed to utilize the rich material available in the newspaper's many editorials by the legendary Bob Edwards. The dialogue is trite and full of clichés, the characters merely stock figures. Ringwood remarked that she found it difficult to present this quiet self-effacing man who was also the author of biting, clever, satiric criticism. Nevertheless this farcical comedy is still occasionally presented in Alberta drama festivals.

The Rainmaker is a much richer play - a symphonic play that could be orchestrated. Impressionistic in form, it uses the real character of Charles Hatfield, hired by the town of Medicine Hat in 1921, to bring rain to the drought-ridden land. The play reveals the people's reactions to Hatfield - hope and despair - until the climactic moment when rain finally falls on Medicine Hat. Written ten years before the famous American musical of the same title, the play was praised for its imagery and poetry. Seldom produced because of its large cast (including a band), it is nevertheless an authentic portrayal of that time and place.

Stampede, also a big show on a large canvas with musical background, is an affirmation of community in Calgary - the home of the rodeo. Camaraderie, good will and concern for fellow-riders are all expressed here. The emphasis is on events in 1912 leading up to the Stampede, and on the lives of Canadian ranchers and cowboys. The use of Texan cowboy songs lends romance and authenticity to *Stampede*. Ringwood was one of the first to dignify these old songs as an art form. *Stampede* was therefore innovative, exploring the western mystique. John Ware, or "Nigger John", was a great Albertan cowboy and rancher who lived before the Calgary Stampede. Nevertheless, Ringwood introduces into her play this intelligent, experienced ranch-hand whose good influence over his fellow ranchers had long been acknowledged. Ringwood captures his rich human qualities. However, the play revolves, not around him, but around the region and the character of the Calgary Stampede. In these plays Ringwood succeeds in introducing to the Canadian audiences some of their great folk heroes.

In the play *The Drowning of Wasyl Nemitchuk* or *A Fine Colored Easter Egg* (1948) Ringwood presented her first pure farce. Inspired by the character of the Ukrainian people in Lamont, Alberta, Ringwood instinctively felt that their colourful response to life, mixed with a brooding contemplation of misfortunes, would best be highlighted by farce. The result was a delightful play in the full sense of the word, a play provoking laughter in its comic dialogue and characters, in which only the audience is fully aware of the situations. Ringwood used Chekhov's comedies to enrich her treatment of the Ukrainians. It is a warm farce depicting the Ukrainians' reactions to the land, which could be a source of food, or a quick way to get rich through discovery of oil. Wasyl and his wife are content with their land until Olga is tempted by the lure for riches in the possible discovery of oil. She brings men in to drill while Wasyl escapes, pretending to have drowned. His cousin, George, attempts an affair with Olga which fails, and Wasyl returns to claim his wife and his farm. Ringwood's mature professional skill is in evidence throughout this farce. She comments on life without hurting; she observes the funny side of the human condition; she sees the close connection between comedy and tragedy; she points out that one should never take oneself too seriously. This play has been produced many times on stage and has been adapted for radio.

Widger's Way (1952) was her next Alberta folklore play. Using for inspiration Plautus's *Pot of Gold*, Ringwood creates a wonderful little Albertan farmer who wanted to grow but would give and then hold back - a completely Canadian character in Ringwood's opinion. In *Widger's Way* she uses farce, comedy and pathos, fantasy and reality to produce a hilarious play about a miserly farmer, Widger, and a desperate stranger, Planter, who, with his partner, Jake, had discovered gold. Planter escapes with the gold and the map; Jake is hot on his trail. Planter leaves the gold with Widger who is tempted to keep it. The play continues with the hiding of the gold, fear of discovery and a number of subplots to keep the action going and the comedy at high pitch. Widger deteriorates into a nervous shadow of his former self; Jake murders Planter, and Widger is suspected of the crime. The play concludes with a resolution of all plots and a community celebration of two marriages. Widger endears himself to the audience who understand his comic and human foibles. This cautious, careful Canadian farmer is unwilling to get involved in other people's problems. It is Ringwood's view of the human being - small, comic, inconsistent, grasping, selfish, stubborn, materialistic, full of false hopes and false promises, down today, up tomorrow, but always continuing on his quest despite his failures. Of himself Widger says: "I've lived to myself, don't lend things, discourage children from tramping down pastures; don't borrow anything or bother anybody. They'll all remember that. That's my way. They'll say: That's Widger's Way."⁸ This folk comedy, so full of misadventures and fast-paced action, successfully uses all the devices of farce, comedy, satire and melodrama to produce an entertaining play on Widger who must grow and become a responsible member of the community. This comedy has had many successful productions over the past twenty-five years, touring the province of Alberta in 1952 and 1955, produced in Williams Lake, B.C., in 1959, and revived in 1976 at the Kawartha Summer Theatre Festival in Lindsay, Ontario.

The focus of Ringwood's final work in her most mature period is social protest. Never a feminist or activist, Ringwood had always been content to dramatize the human situation as she saw it in regional plays with emphasis on humankind's relationship to the earth and its evolving character. However, in the last twenty-five years of her life from 1959 to 1984 she became more and more concerned with the ills of human society, and she used her talent, not with the intention of grinding any axes, but rather of censuring a society that fails to alleviate human suffering. Her relationship with the Indians whom she taught in Williams Lake gave her a first-hand awareness of their suffering. The problems of youth's confusions and rootlessness in the 1960s and of the elderly generation's problems in the 1970s drew upon her compassion. Thus she wrote of the Indians as victims in *Lament for Harmonica* (1959), *The Stranger* (1971) and *The Furies* (1980); of youth's problems in *The Deep Has Many Voices* (1968) and *A Remembrance of Miracles* (1975); of old age in *The Lodge* (1975) and *Garage Sale* (1981).

The one-act play *Lament for Harmonica* (1959) portrays the life of Maya, a Shushwap Indian girl. Ringwood attempts to view her on her own ground and to articulate her confusion in a white man's world. She dramatizes the effects of an Indian girl's involvement in a white society, her arraignment of that society and her final tragedy in destroying her Indian lover and her own identity. Many Indian signs of death are incorporated in this play, as well as Indian dances and songs. *Lament for Harmonica* won first prize at the Ottawa Little Theatre Competition.

In *The Stranger* (1971) Ringwood uses the Medea story as background. Jana, a Chilcotin Indian girl, journeys to the strange Shushwap country to join her white lover, Jason, the father of her child, only to find that he is involved with a wealthy white woman. He rejects Jana; she therefore kills both the white woman and her own son. Using the conventions of Greek tragedy and poetic dialogue, Ringwood raises Jana to the regal position

of an Indian princess. Although Ringwood does not sufficiently develop the overpowering conflict between Jana's love and her spirit of revenge, she does develop royalty in this Indian girl, through whom the reader sees the courage, nobility, rituals and customs of the Indian race.

In *The Furies* (1980) Ringwood writes sheer poetry in her tale of five young Indian girls betrayed by a white man. It is the story of their suicidal revenge and of Selena who could not join them in suicide, of Selena who grew old and bitter. Finally, in her eighties, Selena takes her revenge on two white men who raped and killed her grandniece. It is a play of passion similar to Greek tragedy which inspired the writing of this play.

During the late 1960s Ringwood's own four children were growing up and their confusions and that of their friends touched Ringwood deeply. In *The Deep Has Many Voices* (1971), a multimedia poetic drama, using surrealism and expressionism, and a cast of more than twenty characters, Ringwood depicts, through several levels of consciousness, the attempts and the failures of young people to reach others. The focus is on Melissa, in the revolutionary mood of the sixties. She moves in a kind of pilgrimage from village to village, from rock music groups to drug scenes to eastern mysticism; she is utterly confused by the bombardment of differing values. The play ends with Melissa's union with the son of a Greek carpenter and their quest for a better way of life. Written for the opening of the Gwen Pharis Ringwood Outdoor Theatre in Williams Lake, it was theatrically exciting with its slide projections of Greek art and religious paintings, its dynamic beat of rock music, its imagery, poetry, light and sound. Tom Kerr, well-known Canadian director, said of it:

The Deep Has Many Voices is full of beautiful poetry....It reminds me of the work of Dylan Thomas because it has revelations of the town and hints about intriguing things in each character's life....To me Gwen Ringwood is at her strongest when she does plays like *The Deep Has Many Voices*.⁹

In 1975 Ringwood created another play on the problems of young people in *A Remembrance of Miracles*. Conceived as a woman's play for the women's project at Playwrights Co-op in Toronto, it focuses on bigotry in a small community with the ultimate destruction of the main character. Merrill Adams is a young teacher, falsely accused of perverting her high school class by reading poetry with sexual allusions. The accuser is a youngster, secretly raped as a child, who now has problems accepting her own sexuality. Verna Gliddens, a politician, uses the conflict to support her election campaign. The townspeople find a teacher's legitimate use of great classical literature a good excuse to delve into Merrill Adams's private life, her extramarital relationship, her loss of her baby. Although eventually acquitted in court, she is forced to leave the town to avoid further disturbances. Constructed in seventeen short vignettes, *A Remembrance of Miracles* introduces each scene with recitations of appropriate poems to musical accompaniment. These poems, like the Greek chorus, emphasize the theme and comment on the situation. Adapted for radio in 1978, it was very well received.

Ringwood's concern for the elderly is expressed in two of her last plays: *The Lodge* (1975) and *Garage Sale* (1981). In *The Lodge* Ringwood introduces a seventy-year-old artist, Jasmine, who gathers three generations of her family together at her summer home for a reunion, before she leaves for Africa to pursue her career. Unaware of her plans, the family squabble over her property as they seek to gain power of attorney, control of her land and the commitment of Jasmine to a home for the elderly. Discovering their selfish plans, she reveals to them the fact that the estate is non-existent, the family home burnt to the ground, the land sold and the

money already in an endowment fund for a school in East Africa. What she had intended to divide among them - valuable land at Soda Springs - she decides to will to the Indian tribe who inhabit the area. Again Ringwood returns to the land and the mystery of Soda Springs where much soul-searching takes place. One powerful and mystical scene at night finds Jasmine and the Indian Chief there in contemplation before the hot spring where mists arise, swirl and change shape. Jasmine says of it: "It's warm. It's like touching the heart of the earth."¹⁰ The Indian Chief replies that the Indians have their ceremonies there before the fall hunt, that his niece spent two days and nights there on retreat, and that his grandfather came there as a boy. All were changed as a result of this union with the earth. From frivolous, shallow people, they became thoughtful, more meditative and proud of their Indian heritage. Jasmine and the old Indian Chief in this semi-mystical environment blend in with the earth and its evolving nature, drinking a sacred draught of the hot soda water and uttering wishes and prayers to the Deity of the earth. The family join them and the individual family emotions of greed and fear, of lust and love are revealed in each one's wish-making. In this mysterious atmosphere the characters are converted into forces fusing with nature and gaining thereby a human and poetic significance. A tragic sense of life is suggested in the dramatic tensions between characters. In no other play of Ringwood's is her sense of union with the earth so vividly portrayed as in *The Lodge*. Produced by the West Vancouver Little Theatre in 1977, it won second place in the Women's Play Competition at the Vancouver New Play Centre.

Garage Sale (1981) is a gentle, bemusing play of an old couple watching what they perceive to be a garage sale put on by a young couple across the road. The humour comes from the old couple's sensibilities and dialogue, but particularly from their mistaken notion that the young couple seem to be putting up their baby for sale along with the furniture. Immediately they decide to buy the baby and thus save it. Ringwood portrays the relationship between the elderly couple very realistically. The audience is reminded in a way of *The Gin Game* and that couple's idiosyncrasies - the weaknesses and foibles of old age. Ringwood's compassion for her two old characters is very evident. Audience rapport with them is quickly established. One of her last plays, *Garage Sale* is a tender and loving contemplation of the elderly. It was produced at the du Maurier Festival in Vancouver in 1981 and adapted for radio by CBC. It has been successfully produced in university theatres and is a delightful final tribute to Ringwood's understanding of birth, life, old age and death. With *Garage Sale* she has completed the human cycle.

A reading of the Ringwood plays is a very rewarding experience. The poetic rhythms of her dialogue, the richness of her character development, the freshness of her vision, and especially her subtle sense of humour, are refreshing. Over and above the dramatic qualities of her work is that remarkable philosophy of the evolving nature of human beings, closely allied to the earth from which they sprang. As mentioned earlier, this philosophy resembles that of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in its emphasis on the human being's oneness with the universe:

Man is not the centre of the universe as once we thought in our simplicity, but something much more wonderful--the arrow pointing the way to the final unification of the world in terms of life. Man alone constitutes the last-born, the freshest, the most complicated, the most subtle of all the successive layers of life.¹¹

It is this vision of man that Ringwood attempts to elucidate in her twenty-six stage plays, her four musicals, her numerous radio plays, children's drama, short stories and two novels. The epic qualities of Western

Canada appealed to her sense of the vastness of the universe and gave her the setting for "the last-born" of "... all the successive layers of life". The individual characters she created to inhabit the land grappled, each in his own way, to come to terms with the life around him and ultimately with life itself. What remains constant throughout her work is this sense of belonging to the earth, as she herself said so often, "of surrounding things" and "fitting into one's own skin"; in other words - learning not only to be part of the earth but in some way to contribute to its transformation.

NOTES

1. Gwen Pharis Ringwood, *Mirage*, in *The Collected Plays of Gwen Pharis Ringwood*, edited by Enid Delgatty Rutland (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1982), pp. 497-498.
2. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), preface, pp. 32-33.
3. Personal interview with Clive Stangoe, 18 May 1976.
4. Gwen Pharis Ringwood, *One Man's House*, in *The Collected Plays of Gwen Pharis Ringwood*, edited by Enid Delgatty Rutland (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1982), p. 6.
5. Gwen Pharis Ringwood, *Still Stands the House* (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1939), pp. 27-28.
6. Gwen Pharis Ringwood, *Pasque Flower*, in *The Collected Plays of Gwen Pharis Ringwood*, edited by Enid Delgatty Rutland (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1982), p. 55.
7. Anton Wagner, "Gwen Pharis Ringwood Rediscovered", *Canadian Theatre Review*, no. 5 (1975), p. 64.
8. Gwen Pharis Ringwood, *Widger's Way* (Toronto: Playwrights Co-op, 1976), Scene 3, p. 22.
9. Personal interview with Tom Kerr, 16 May 1977.
10. Gwen Pharis Ringwood, *The Lodge*, in *The Collected Plays of Gwen Pharis Ringwood*, edited by Enid Delgatty Rutland (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1982), p. 462.
11. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 247.

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Addendum:

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The Gwen Pharis Ringwood papers: an inventory of the archive at the University of Calgary Libraries.
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