Fops, firebrands and fair ladies

BY MATTHEW FRASER
The Globe and Mail

MONTREAL

Emerging from the Espace Libre theatre after Jean Asselin's epic, eight-hour staging of Shakespeare's great historical cycle — the four plays spanning the reigns of Richard II, Henry IV and Henry V — one could wonder if the director had seized upon those plays to make a statement about Canadian federalism. It wouldn't have been the first such use of Shakespeare: during the Second World War, Laurence Olivier made his patriotic film version of Henry V to lift British spirits.

Shakespeare's chronicle lends itself well to a Canadian historical script whose ideal is bilingual unity: England is in chaos under the ineffectual Richard II; he is overthrown and murdered by the Duke of Hereford, who fails, as Henry IV, to restore civil disorder and resolve an ancient conflict with France; but peace is finally achieved by his son, Henry V, who conquers France at Agincourt and wins the daughter of the French king, Princess Catherine, by courting her in her own language.

If Asselin wanted to draw those parallels, his conclusion is manifestly pro-federalist. (Looking for another option, he might have joined to his ambitious task the sequential, three-part Henry VI: there, the weak English king is driven back by the French.) This production, by Asselin's 14-member Omnibus troupe, ends with comic unity of purpose. A few nights ago, when the victorious Henry V (Julien Poulin, elegantly dressed in a modern tuxedo) was stammering through broken French while wooing the unilingual Catherine de France (Sylvie Moreau), there was no mistaking the amusement in the audience: contemporary Canada was in the air, not Renaissance Europe.

Asselin's program notes cast no light on his interest in Shakespeare's chronicle. He has said in an interview, however, that he had been aware of the similarities between the Battle of Agincourt in Henry V and the French defeat on Quebec's Plains of Abraham. Some Montreal critics have said that the production — as well as a few other Shakespearean plays currently being staged here — is an ironic display of anglophilia when the province is, once again, fraught with linguistic tension.

Asselin's colossal effort (using the translation of François Victor Hugo, son of the French novelist) is a fascinating spectacle that approaches the work not through text or character, but through costume. For this director, costume is character. Jean Bollard as Richard II is an effeminate, self-besotted fop in pink leotards; Robert Gravel's hilarious Falstaff is a mass of pillows bursting through his bodice; Julien Poulin as the heroic Henry V in battle is a Roman warrior, his manly chest encrusted with armor and dripping with heavy chains; and the decadent French court is a homosexual bath house. King Charles VI (Gravel) is a ridiculous figure sporting a bird-cage crown, and the Dauphin (Nathalie Claude) is a mincing sissy with an entourage of naked young men who make puns about "having" the English soldiers.

All this extravagance is done for comic effect, and it works wonderfully. But Asselin has done no more than dress up Shakespeare's own Renaissance prescription: that virtue is manly and rational (King Henry V), and that vice is debauched (Prince Hal and Falstaff), irrational (Hotsur) and effete (the French Dauphin). On this level, historical parallels with contemporary Canada don't work.

Some of the sartorial touches are confusing. Why, for example, is the
Duke of York surrounded by a corps of Nazi stormtroopers when he awkwardly enters to declare his neutrality in the feud over the crown? And why, at the very end, is Henry V wearing that tuxedo, his hair slicked back, his lips drawing on a slender cigarette? Is that the stereotype of an Anglo-Saxon? Also, Richard II had been so ridiculed as an effeminate dandy that, when he emerged pathetically at the end, deposed and physically naked, the audience broke out in laughter. Yet this was the final, wrenching scene of a tragic play.

Asselin shows an impressive grasp of the plays, though it isn’t always certain why some speeches are picked up by portable microphones and made to echo through a sound system. Jean-Pierre Ronfard delivered John of Gaunt’s “sceptred isle” speech with great skill, and Bolland is excellent as Richard II (who, we discover in French, will give his kingdom for a chapelet, or rosary, not a horse). Gravel mumbles through Falstaff’s famous speech about honor. And Nathalie Claude, though she shows great talent as an actor, is miscast as Prince Hal. For one thing, Claude is a young woman; Prince Hal is a young man. And in the role, Claude looks more like a spoiled little boy than a debauched young prince.

Asselin seems to have learned Prince Hal’s lesson of virtue in moderation, for the eight-hour performance of the tetralogy was played for only one night. The three plays (Henry IV, parts I and II, have been abridged and merged) are playing separately, at Espace Libre, until the middle of May.
Bard well served in East End cycle

by Marianne Ackerman

HISTORIANS may make the connection, but it is unlikely opinion shakers of the here and now will take note: While language politics, that ongoing and often tedious local squabble, continued to make headlines this week, one of Montreal's premiere experimental theatre troupes scored a major triumph with the greatest dramatist of the English language.

La compagnie Omnibus has opened a dazzling production of Richard II (in French) at Espace Libre, the first part of a cycle to be followed by Henry IV and Henry V.

The Omnibus Richard II is vivacious and original, full of high spirited comedy which in no way undermines the play's poetry or drama.

With a mere $8000 for more than 100 costume changes in the cycle, designer Sylvie Morissette has achieved a miracle.

Sally-Ann fantasy

Richard II is a Salvation Army fantasy, with draperies, bathrobes, lingerie, macramé and odd bits of upholstery rearranged to echo medieval fashion with a chuckle. Director Jean Asselin has tackled the Bard with immense respect for the play but no tolerance for the stuffy pomp which too often hangs on his work.

From the moment Jean Bolland appears in a maroon body stocking and white shoes, it is clear this foppish young king is neither suited for nor interested in statesmanship.

His mischievous transvestite playmates, Bushy, Bagot and Green, easily triumph over the melancholy queen. Boiled's affections, opening the way for the virtue Bolingbroke's challenge to the throne. But when Richard sets aside his king act to play the deposed poet, Bolland's transition is moving and masterful.

From the echo of voices in Westminster cathedral to the roar of waves near the sea, this madcap drama, set on a bare stage backed by six steep steps, is brimming with invention and pure theatricality.

Ironically, Francois Victor Hugo's highly literary translation, which has proved cumbersome on more traditional stages, seems just right for director Asselin's outrageous style, the wind completely kicked out of its overblown sails by brash humor.

If the brilliance of Richard II is sustained through the other two plays (Henry V opens tonight), Omnibus can boast an achievement that has so far eluded English-Canadian theatre's 35-year struggle at Stratford, Ontario: a distinctive stamp on Shakespeare.

The cycle runs on alternate nights through May 13, with a three-play marathon on Saturday. Given the ticket price (a mere $10 per play) and strength of Richard II, it's safe to predict the 100-seat theatre in the East End will quickly be playing to sold out houses. An event not to be missed.
Continuous
Shakespeare

LE CYCLE DES ROIS

Written in the 16th century, when Elizabeth I is enthroned and England expands, these histories of three successive kings capture the patronage and power, the passion and purulence of an era 200 years before Shakespeare's time. It is a reflection on the past and a perfection of the present, which examines the social responsibilities of the characters in their diverse positions and postures.

Shakespeare wrote interactive theatre, in which humour abounds and digressions delight. Omnibus’ productions of Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V (a fall rerun of last spring’s sensation), overflow in additions and interpretations true to Shakespearian style: analogy, anachronism, adventure, and amusement. Omnibus invention is never-ending. The costumes from second-hand Ontario-Street stores adorn actors who are continually changing characters, while the dynamic interplay of battles, bangles, and bar-rooms excites and entertains.

Time and space at once become forms of distortion and entanglement. A French palace lies only a few strides from the shores of Dover, yet we never miss the distinction. Morning on the battlefield follows night in the palatial bored room.

The many talents on stage assure neither a smileless nor a yawning face among the spectators: Robert Gravel as Falstaff, Francine Alepin as Mistress Quickly, Nathalie Claude, Jean Boillard—the list is too long to do justice. Yvan Gaudin’s costumes and set design stand out in an illustrious tradition for L’Espace Libre.

The cycle—you have the choice of one, two, or all three plays—gives an interconnected context of story, situation, and show. As always with Omnibus, gesture dominates, with bawdy bodies to tell a story, and mime for the moods and the humbles. With a more than decent translation, it is truly a 1988 triumph and worth the venture.

If you’re unsure of your French, read the original before going. This is dynamic Montreal theatre in some of the best moments of "the new old" in theatrical mode. Not to be missed. Shakespeare’s wit and wonderment lives on 400 years later in east Montreal.

KEN MORRISON

Le cycle des rois at Espace libre to Oct 2.
Revivals take centre stage in Montreal theatre season

BY STEPHEN GODFREY
The Globe and Mail

MONTREAL

This new season of theatre in Montreal has started with 10 different productions, and the most remarkable of them may well be the revivals from the past.

The past seven or eight years have seen one of the most vibrant periods for Quebec theatre, and the 1987-88 season was hailed by local critics as among the strongest on record. "Theatre and dance are now appreciated in the way that Quebec songwriters used to be in the seventies," says Robert Lévesque, drama critic for Le Devoir. "But this season is the first time that so many plays have been popular enough that they have returned so soon."

Three major revivals are doing well in their second life and have plans to tour. But one of the three is being presented in a dazzling epic version that only Montrealers get to see.

At Theatre Outremont, Michel Tremblay's Le Vrai Monde? (The Real World?) was scheduled to run for three weeks; it is being held over for another week until Saturday, before embarking on a tour of 40 stages throughout Quebec.

Called by some critics Tremblay's best-ever play, Le Vrai Monde? premiered in March of 1987 at the 360-seat Theatre du Rude Vert and was sold out before it opened. The play's action consists solely of taut verbal confrontations and it has the admirably controlled, hermetic structure of a piece of chamber music. Le Vrai Monde? examines a young playwright who writes about his own family and must question the meaning of literary licence when, in no uncertain terms, they object.

Last month, Tremblay and his longtime collaborator, director André Brassard, celebrated the 20th anniversary of their first success, Les Belles Soeurs, and have been the subject of extensive articles in the local press. The rest of the province will get to see the most recent fruit of that collaboration when Le Vrai Monde? tours.

The other two major revivals are being presented as trilogies. Unlike the Tremblay play, they make their cases as much through action and striking imagery as through text. The first consists of Shakespeare's second historical cycle (Richard II, Henry IV, with Parts I and II merged in one evening, and Henry V). It is dramatically cut and transformed into a hyper-active and imaginatively costumed circus by director Jean Asselin, whose Omnibus company is principally known for its work in mime and physical theatre.

The Asselin cycle, which can be seen one play at a time or all at once in seven hours on weekends, was first presented last spring, when Montreal directors all seemed to be rediscovering Shakespeare; half a dozen productions of the Bard's plays were showing to full houses. The trilogy is the only Shakespeare work to be revived, and it is a strong contender to win the prize for best production of the year when the Quebec Association of Theatre Critics announces its awards in October. A tour is being planned for next year.

But the play that sold out most quickly of the three revivals (with three performances added to accommodate the demand) is The Dragon Trilogy, by Robert Lepage, the most acclaimed young director in Quebec. The Dragon Trilogy has already been seen and highly praised in Toronto, New York, Adelaide, London and other cities. The Times of London called it a masterpiece and compared Lepage to "the mature Peter Brook."

Since it was created in 1985, the Dragon has dramatically grown in size. The first version was 1 1/2 hours long; the second, which was seen in most cities, ran 3 1/4 hours. But the third and complete version, clocking in at six hours, has been performed only in Montreal, with a degree of spectacle and involvement that a touring show cannot offer.

The six-hour Dragon Trilogy is being performed in the space where it was created last year, a long, dilapidated storage hangar stretching out from Montreal's Old Port area. The audience reaches the makeshift theatrical space at the far end — plain benches that hold 320 squashed and uncomfortable spectators — after passing through 250 yards of darkness, illuminated only by a long corridor of blue lights and flute music. It is a hypnotic beginning for a play that demands the spectator suspend the usual concepts of time and space.

The Dragon Trilogy is a vast epic, spanning the lives of two Quebec women in Quebec, Toronto and Vancouver through distinct periods from 1910 to 1983. A simple set — a dirt-covered parking lot containing a small attendant's booth — is transformed by deceptively simple means into a series of magical environments, from a dank cellar to a twinkling landscape as seen from the air.

Lepage's script, created in conjunction with his cast, touches on racism, ignorance, the role of chance and the meaning of friendship, through scenes of earthy humor balanced with moments of magic and visual poetry. The work is shot through with simple props and effects — flames, or shoeboxes, or pieces of rope — whose meanings become more intricate and moving as each character's story comes to an end.

In addition to introducing new and quite wonderful characters, from a chatty Vancouver version of a Valley Girl to an equally loquacious nun, the length and the specific setting of The Dragon Trilogy allows a scope not allowable on tour. A sports car comes screeching back and forth down the corridor; the smokelit stage suddenly is filled with a huge paper dragon. Toward the end, there is an unforgettable image of death, closely wedded to the play's locale; the hangar door opens at the end of the pier, the St. Lawrence River comes into view and two characters glide toward each other through a land of bush and driftwood.

Although there is talk of yet another Montreal run for The Dragon Trilogy next year, the play is first going back to Europe for four months, to London, Paris, Brussels and Hamburg, among other cities. At the very least, that tour should provide curiosity about a group of Quebec writers and directors who are not only achieving success, but learning how to prolong it.

Richard II is part of a circus-like Shakespearean cycle.
A Shakespearean history of the British monarchy unfolds at Espace Libre, 1945 Fullum St., until May 14. The entire Richard II, Henri IV and Henri V cycle has been condensed into three 2½-hour plays. This weekend Richard II reigns alone, but Henri IV takes over next week and Henri V the following week. Stay tuned for all three plays in one day on April 24, 30, May 1, 7 and 14.
THEATRE

Shakespeare cycle rings with irony

By PAT DONELLY
Gazette Theatre Critic

My native English, now I must forget,
What is thy sentence then but speechless death,
Which robs my tongue from breathing native breath?
—William Shakespeare, Richard II, Act I Scene II

Bannished Mowbray’s parting shot to the King in Shakespeare’s Richard II rings with delicious irony to an anglophone attending a French-language production in Quebec.

When one stops to think about it, the entire exercise of presenting Shakespeare’s four-play historical cycle — from Richard II, Henry IV (parts one and two) to Henry V — at an experimental francophone theatre in the heart of “Ne touchez pas à la loi 101” country in Montreal’s East End is rather unusual.

However, with a wildly imaginative feminist interpretation of The Tempest (La Tempête) playing at Espace Go, and a major production of Midsummer Night’s Dream (Songe d’une nuit d’été) due to open April 12 at Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, it begins to look like the Bard has been temporarily expropriated from Stratford, Ont.

REVIEW

The entire 3-play cycle can be seen today beginning with Richard II at 2 p.m., Henry IV at 5 p.m. and Henry V at 8 p.m. on April 24, 30, May 1, 7 and 14.

‘Same battle’

What does the re-enactment of the Battle of Agincourt mean in the land of the Battle of Plains of Abraham?

Nothing more than it should, according to Omnibus artistic director Jean Asselin, the man responsible for the Shakespearean cycle which opened this week at Espace Libre.

“Of course, they were, in a way, the same battle,” he adds, with a distinct twinkle, and in fluent anglais.

“We never even thought about the socio-political aspect of playing Shakespeare here,” he said, while putting together actors’ notes after yesterday afternoon’s Henry IV dress rehearsal.

There were some scenes, he recalls, which needed special attention because of language. Like when the French princess Katherine is trying to learn English to please Henry V.

“We had her speak like bad French dubbing in cinema, instead of English,” he says.

In another scene from Henry V, a captured French soldier pleads his cause, in English, to a French-speaking English soldier. For the purpose of “transposition,” says Asselin.

ROBERT GRAVEL
Delightful bag of wind

For the Omnibus cycle Asselin has used a translation by François-Victor Hugo (son of Victor Hugo) — who dedicated his life to the translation of Shakespeare’s work.

All the plays have been trimmed considerably (about 30 per cent for Richard II and Henry V), but the two Henry IV plays (Parts I and II) have been rolled into one, thus drastically reducing this potential eight-hour saga into the same 2½ hours running time as the other two.

To summarize briefly, Richard II was a weak but poetic king, deposed by his cousin, Bolingbroke (Henry IV), and banished to France. The reign of Henry IV, however, was troubled by rebellion. Henry’s son, Prince Henry, spent much of his time drinking with Falstaff and
friends in the local tavern, until he came of age by doing battle with the traitors. A forthright man of action, Prince Henry (Henry V) proved to be a street-smart monarch. When insulted by the King of France, he made war and won, but ensured peace through marrying the French princess Katherine.

At Espace Libre all three plays share the same set — a tiered cliff of unpainted plywood with handles strategically placed to allow for safe climbing and hanging in mid-air. This somewhat dull backdrop, which Asselin says is supposed to suggest stacked coffins or the Wailing Wall, is flanked on either side by huge mirrors.

Zany costumes

The costumes are zany combinations of odd materials. In Henry V the English soldiers wear hockey pads and carry muffin-tin shields while the French are decked out like drag queens.

Echoing sound effects are used (with mixed results) to distort voices, and a deadpan announcer comes out between scenes to announce the next locale.

At first, Asselin’s choreographic approach to the plays is jarring and unsatisfying. Actors are forever leaping up the wall, stamping their feet like horses, or slapping their chests. Bodily contortions accompany declamatory tragic speeches, and the comedy is slapstick gone absurd.

However, by the second session (this writer saw Henry V, Richard II then Henry IV, on separate days) the cartoonish-Brecht style begins to make sense.

The actors all show remarkable physical stamina and versatility as each one flips in and out of as many as a dozen roles within the three plays. It’s an actor’s K-2 challenge.

A few of them are exceptionally good. Veteran Jean-Pierre Ronfard brings deep emotional resonance to his death scenes as John of Gaunt and Henry IV.

Robert Gravel’s Falstaff is a delightful bag of wind. Julien Poulin fares better as Northumberland (accompanied by a dog that matches his coat) than as Henry V.

Of the younger actors, Daniel Desputeau is strong and credible as young Bolingbroke and Jean Boillard’s Richard II is an interesting cross between Marilyn Monroe and Jesus Christ. Francine Alepin hits just the right tone as the mourning Duchess of Gloucester in Richard II.

For further information call 521-4191 or 843-3009.
The bard has besieged the Montreal stage. Six productions happening virtually simultaneously. No festival, no concerted effort to celebrate quadricentenary, but six separate celebrations of magic and merriment, vehemence and execution—an unparalleled theatrical event in Montreal.

The language of Shakespeare has become Québécois. Some of Montreal’s most innovative and enterprising theatres and thespians have graced us with audacious approaches to Shakespeare. None of them aspire to rewriting his plays; all succeed in touching the essence of Shakespearean play.


“We chose Hugo’s translation because of its clarity,” says Jean Asselin, director of Omnibus’ historical extravaganzas. “And we felt a great liberty to cut and transpose and to explain with geste the attitudes Shakespeare was trying to convey. Anyway, the original texts are full of inaccuracies. We only continue Shakespeare’s sense of theatrical freedom.”

The Omnibus trilogy emphasizes the visual through attitude—mime as the art of manners. Geometric stage, mirrors and a wall of vertical stages embody the rise and fall of kings, kingdoms, and courtesans.

The plays are presented together because, says Asselin, “each explains the other, and the whole epitomizes the anxiety of the Elizabethan era. It depicts the responsibilization of kings and of citizens. The throne passes from god-king Henry IV to the usurping Henry V and finally to Richard II.”

Alpin’s Mistress Quickly and Gravel’s Falstaff add meaningful merriment to the proceedings. The infusion of actors and mimes marries text and movement; this vigorous exchange breathes new life to history.

Alice Ronfard and Ginette Noisette have created a theatrical jewel. Not alone, of course. Theatre is a commune. Françoise Faucher as Prospero substantializes text and reflection. Louise Leprade calabansies compulsion. Louise Saint-Pierre whispers Ariel into action. Their Tempest is temporal transposition, an island of magic, stage of sand and screen. The spirit of Shakespeare survives. The ambiguity of sex, the magic of theatre, the rights and responsibilities of man have passed through the pen, eye, and mind of these adventurous Montreal women and bedazzled us mortals, the spectators.

Video abounds, depicting the storm, the multiplicity of appearances and disappearances, and the interplay between actor and character. Ronfard points out that in theatre “we haven’t used technology with love before. It shouldn’t cover the flaws but reinforce what is already there.” Effective use of video, dance, microphones, screens, excellent acting, and pervasive sensuality as herstory make this a penetrating, imaginative production.

Robert Lepage’s Midsummer Night’s Dream creates not a dream of comic relief but a nightmare of passion and violence. “It’s always been staged in such a romantic fashion,” says Lepage, “when it’s full of brutality, bestiality, vulgarity, and sex. The life of spiritual service is measured with deep-seated, inexorable instincts. Love in all its possible states.” Here too we find an island, a wedding-cake wonderworld of flashing first love and androgynous ambiguity. “This precursor to The Tempest was written very sloppily,” says Lepage, “full of psychoanalytic metaphors, elegance, and grotesqueness. Our production is frank and direct. Michelle Allen’s translation is playable text, in an international French which allows for the hierarchy of language in Shakespeare.”

Shakespearean shock treatment.

Why Shakespeare, in 1988, in Montreal, and in French? “When we’ve exhausted any theatrical trend,” ponders Lepage, “we go back to Shakespeare. The past three or four years have been exciting times for new forms in theatre, but now we need to reconsider ourselves. We need to reconsider approaches to theatre.” In a world of AIDS, political scandal and skepticism, and socio-linguistic rigidity, Shakespeare truly has much to offer: the necessity for a population to know its past, the inventive possibilities of a language and a sense to sensuality. “You always have to come back to the text,” says Asselin, “it’s all there.” Anglos, behold a marvellous opportunity: French lessons from familiar stories. Solid, lively translations and productions from the rising fold of new theatrical voices. Bold, bawdy theatre. Audacity that makes for the mystical magic of Montreal theatre.
Cycle Shakesperien

par Elie Castiel

Le "syndrome Shakespeare" s'est abattu dernièrement sur quelques scènes montréalaises. Outre La Tempête, revue et corrigée (en prolongation à l'Espace GO) et l'intrigant Songe d'une nuit d'été (au TNM), la troupe Omnibus s'est lancée sur un projet de grande envergure: les trois rois d'Angleterre tels que perçus par l'imagination de Shakespeare, traduits dans la langue de Molière par François Victor-Hugo, et remaniés sur scène par l'esprit imaginatif de Jean Asselin.

Le cycle triangulaire Richard II, Henri IV et Henri V, tel que conçu par Omnibus (cette fois-ci sous la vigilance de Jean Asselin), s'inscrit dans la tradition "mimie" de cette troupe, tradition qui, depuis 1970, ne cesse d'intégrer le travail du jeu corporel et de la parole.

Richard II inaugure le cycle de façon éblouissante. Il fallait croire à la magie des mots et à cette saga sur la lutte pour le pouvoir et pour la vie, contre les abus d'autorité et contre la mort. Des thèmes toujours actuels.

Jean Asselin a su transposer quelques siècles passés au temps présent. Les voix d'antan semblent résonner sur la scène d'Espace libre.

Tel que le veut la tradition du théâtre élizabetain, on a fait construire trois sections de rangées et une galerie. Face aux spectateurs, une scène "pyramidale", et de chaque côté, des panneaux vitérs, brillantes métophores de l'histoire et du destin qui transforment les êtres habités par leur passion, les élevant ou les rapetissant selon les circonstances.

Richard II était un homme faible et frêle, manié, romantique peut-être, mais vaniteux et assez superficiel pour ne pas régner sur son royaume. Et Jean Boilard rend le personnage "documentaire", trop vrai parce que tout simplement, il y croit.

La scène d'abdication (Richard II laisse sa couronne au tuteur Henri IV) est d'une portée dramatique insoutenable. C'est Daniel Despauce qui va incarner le prochain monarque. Sur scène, il a les traits d'un chevalier intrépide, viril, sans peur et (semble-t-il) sans reproches. Il est entouré d'une escorte de comédiens totalement intégrés.

Le travail au niveau du son et d'une grande originalité. A noter, par exemple, le port d'un microphone dans les vêtements du roi, et sa voix prend une nouvelle ampleur; être et âme se mêlent en un perpétuel combat entre la vie et la mort.

On soulignera aussi les bruits et les tons aigus, comme des plaintes d'un chœur issu de la tragédie antique. Et les anachronismes inventés dans les accessoires et les costumes alimentent cette production de haute qualité.

Les représentations ont toutes lieu à Espace libre (1945, rue Fullum/Métro Frontenac) à 20h00.


Cycle de trois spectacles en une journée (Richard II/14h00; Henri IV/17h00; Henri V/20h00), les 24 et 30 avril et les 1, 7 et 14 mai.

Réservations: 521-4191.
Shakespeare? Oui!

Quebec’s new stage directors are infatuated with the greatest playwright in English. What’s more surprising is that the Bard is playing to sellout crowds.

Separatism often forced theatres in Quebec to address topical interests. Times have changed. The current vogue in Shakespeare isn’t political.

English king’s shy compliments as if they were champagne, her eagerness rarely restrained by good manners. With more Bogart and Garbo than politics or history, director Jean Asselin’s masterly romp through Richard II, Henry IV (Parts I and II combined), and Henry V ended with a flourish of romance and humour.

Had Omnibus sought to present the same texts even a decade ago, Shakespeare’s epic tale of how a ragtag English army whomped the numerically superior French would surely have irritated local nerves. In the charged atmosphere of 1970s nationalism, the classics were often forced to address topical interests. The poet Michel Garneau’s translation of Macbeth into regional Québécois made it part of the re-examination of language and collective identity; the playwright Robert Guirik’s overtly propagandist adaptation, Hamlet, prince du Québec, recast the Danish court as well-known Canadian politicians, and used the play to talk about the perils of federalism. But times have changed. Quebec theatre’s current interest in Shakespeare isn’t rooted in politics.

Language nowadays is an artistic issue. Both Théâtre du Nouveau Monde and Espace Go commissioned new translations from young writers. Oddly, for a troupe that once specialized in mime, Omnibus elected to use Jean-François-Victor Hugo’s translation of Shakespeare’s history plays, a highly literary rendering of the originals that has long been considered too wordy and arch for the stage. Jean Asselin overcame the potential trap with an eccentric, flamboyant playing style and an eclectic approach to costumes, giving the marathon a wonderful baroque sweep to match the flowery translation.

“The public is looking for events,” says Asselin. A wiry, energetic man with a
Bard's French connection

Asselin now Quebec's top Shakespeare director

By PAT DONNELLY
Gazette Theatre Critic

To Jean Asselin, directing his first Shakespeare play in English wasn't just a learning experience, it was a shock.

"I have discovered the esprit of a language. A language is a spirit, and if you don't master it from childhood, it's not easy," says Asselin, who is now directing the students of the English section of the National Theatre School in Cymbeline.

Asselin says working with the students in the production — which opens tonight at the Monument National on St. Laurent Blvd. — changed his whole approach to his work.

"I discovered in myself a bad habit, which was to play the parts to indicate things to actors. But I couldn't do that here. I didn't know the lines well enough — I didn't assess them enough. So I had to explain what I wanted. As a director, that was a big step. I was lucky to have talented and patient actors."

Asselin chose to use the original (circa 1673) first-edition folio of Cymbeline for the production.

"For people who don't know it, it's not easy to read, but for actors, it helps a lot. He (Shakespeare) uses capital letters at the beginning of important words, he doubles vowels and the punctuation means a lot."
Meanwhile, Asselin says he kept his French translation (by François-Victor Hugo, son of Victor Hugo) close at hand.

**No novice**

Not that Asselin is a novice to Shakespeare. On the contrary, *Cymbeline* is the ninth Shakespeare play he has directed in the past three years. His *Le Cycle des Rois* — consisting of *Henry IV*, *Henry V* and *Richard III* — was the peak of last season's fad for Shakespeare en français. The seven-hour Shakespearean marathon took the Association Québécoise des critiques du théâtre awards for best production and best set design this fall.

Asselin’s fascination with Shakespeare dates back to his CEGEP days, when he voluntarily read his way through most of the complete works. His current binge began with a 7¼-hour production of *Henry VI (Parts I, II and III)* at UQAM in 1986.

Asselin, 40, says his admiration for things English extends beyond the works of the Bard. He has always believed British actors to the best in the world and he wanted to train in England, but he was turned down by several top London theatre schools.

"They didn’t take me, probably because of the accent, but probably also because of my lack of talent — as an actor."

So the self-effacing Asselin trained in Paris instead. And five years under the tutelage of renowned mime Etienne Decroux set him on the path of a theatre with no fear of accents, and little need for words.

When Asselin returned to Canada in 1970 after nine years of living in Europe, he and Denise Boulanger — still his constant companion in work and life — launched a mime company and a school called Mime Omnibus (now simply Omnibus).

Eighteen years down the road, Omnibus — which shares Espace Libre with Le Nouveau Théâtre Expérimental and Carbone 14 — is a prime example of Quebec’s internationalist visual theatre.

Over morning coffee on St. Urbain St., Asselin speaks with finely tuned gestures, a lullaby-soft voice and a St. Francis of Assisi manner.

**Prefers teaching**

It’s easy to believe him when he says he prefers teaching to directing. He says he took up directing because nobody else was doing the kind of work he wanted to do. But to him teaching is something, "more modest, but which takes you further."

Asselin says his approach to theatre is "very hedonist."

"I don’t like realistic theatre. It’s dead before it’s born."

Asselin says the company’s participation in Commerce International des arts de la scène (CINARS) last week — which cost the company some $6,000 in sets, costumes and salaries — was nothing new. Omnibus has showcased frequently at similar exhibitions both in North America and in Europe. The company used to travel almost constantly, and one of the shows in its repertory — *Zizi et la lettre* — has been performed more than 600 times in several countries since it was first premiered in 1977.

However, the last couple of years have been stay-at-home ones for Omnibus. Asselin says it’s now time to head out again.

He also says he’d like to reach the English-speaking theatre market in Montreal. And he finds it surprising that there is comparatively more French theatre in Toronto than there is English theatre in Montreal.

"Most of the NTS students I’m working with say they will leave Montreal. I was sad to hear that. But maybe there’s not enough public here for English theatre," he said.