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## Towards Quebecois - A Study of Michel Tremblay's Plays in Cycle of *Les Belles - Soeurs*

G. Sripriya Ramu, M.A. (English), M.Phil., M.A. (French)

A. K. Mohamed Amin, Ph.D.

S. Gunasekaran, Ph.D.



Courtesy: <http://www.cbc.ca/books/booksandauthors/michel-tremblay.html>

### A New Era in the French Canadian Theatre

The year 1968 is remembered in Quebec for two major events - the Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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founding of Parti Quebecois which radically changed the political atmosphere of Quebec, and the production of Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles-Soeurs*, the play that united the popular and avant-garde theatre and thus created a new era in the history of French Canadian theatre.

The avant-garde theatre in the 1940's and 1950's turned to Europe for its inspiration and it was Emile Legault who brought the European concept of theatre production to Quebec from 1937 to 1952. During this period a number of professional companies were formed whose experimental plays were influenced by surrealism and the French theatre of the absurd. Some of them even attempted Brechtian techniques of alienation and other distancing techniques.

The Popular theatre, on the other hand, put up what is called the sketches or humorous revues which addressed, for the most part, to the common man of the francophone population. According to John Weiss, "... it was a reflection of Popular (as opposed to elite) culture, and in Quebec it meant that its subject matter and language were rooted in French Canadian (as opposed to European) life" (9).

### **A Mixture of Song, Dance and Dialogues**

These sketches and revues were a mixture of song, dance and dialogues and it provided an outlet for criticism of government, church and society. Gratien Gelinas's *Tit-Coq* (1949) and Marcel Dube's *Zone* (1953) are very good examples. The enormous popularity of Gelinas made it very clear that in order to be successful Quebec theatre had to reflect its own context, had to speak to the audience about their shared experience, in their own language, which Michel Tremblay did after twenty years with tremendous success.

Dube and Gelinas, like other Quebecers, turned from questions of social and economic survival to the political questions of separatism. These dramas often take the form of a search for personal identity, freedom and happiness within the family. Jane Moss observes that the political implications of the

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moral vacuum seemed obvious to many Quebecers; personal freedom depended on Quebec's independence (26).

### **Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles - Soeurs***

Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles - Soeurs*, as has already been pointed out, created a new era in the history of Quebec drama. About this play Zelda Heller commented in *The Montreal Star*, 25 May 1971; "A turning point in Quebec theatre, in Quebec literature, even in Quebec thinking" (qtd.in Weiss155). J.M. Weiss observes that the considerable dramatic innovations that appeared in this play and in the eleven others that were to follow would influence a whole generation of young dramatists. But even more important than the theatrical innovations was the way Tremblay saw and depicted Quebec society (29).

### **Mont Royal Setting**

Tremblay's plays are set on the plateau Mont Royal, a working class neighbourhood in Montreal's east end. It was here that Tremblay was born in 1942 and it is from this neighbourhood that he derives the inspiration for his plays. The plays are written in "joual", a French-Canadian slang common to Montreal's east end - a kind of Vulgar and crude language full of curses, harsh to the year. Tremblay believed that "joual" is the only language that can describe the working class Montreal from within.

### **The Story and the Characters**

*Les Belles - Soeurs* is about Germaine Lauzon who has won a million trading stamps and has invited a group of feminine relatives and friends to help her stick them in booklets. In Germaine's kitchen fourteen women gather to help her. Germaine, who has won the stamps in a contest, plans to refurnish her apartment with luxury items mentioned in the premium catalogue. As they paste the stamps and gossip, the women become increasingly jealous of Germaine's good fortune.

In monologues, dialogues and choruses, they complain about the drabness of their household drudgery, the many unwanted pregnancies, coarse and drunken husbands, senile mothers-in-law and restrictive moral codes. They vent

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their frustrations, hates and jealousies by quarrelling and exchanging insults, and in the end they steal most of the stamps. The play ends with a virtual fight between these women over the stolen stamps which rain down over the stage as they go out singing in chorus “O Canada”.

### **Depiction of the Alienation of Average Quebecer**

In spite of the comic and farcical touches, the play depicts the alienation of the average Quebecer. It is particularly the Catholic idea of family that Tremblay attacks in this play and in other plays of the cycle. Here women are condemned to a life of obedience to the sexual will of their husbands on the one hand and to the sexual prescriptions of the church on the other. They detest sex because it is usually a painful experience for them. It is again condemned by the church, except for procreation. Part of their pre-occupation is due to their ignorance.

Men are not helpful in any respect. They are often drunk, cruel and never understanding. They are physically absent in the play because they have no part in the emotional lives of their wives. Frustrated with their marital and sexual lives, different kinds of contests that appear in the papers and magazines, become the only pleasure they have in their lives. They abhor the very idea of a night club. They do not like Angeline Suave, an unmarried woman in her fifties, who goes to the club to get rid of her loneliness with a few drinks and a few laughs.

### **The Night Clubs**

The night clubs of Boulevard Saint - Laurent (the Main) represent another way of life - the life of cheap shows, country singers, prostitutes, transvestites and petty thieves. Pierrette, another club goer, has learnt that life on the Main has its own frustrations and the only way she can exist after the loss of her man is to get drunk. But she is not willing to re-enter the family as Angeline did.

### **Two Opposite Worlds**

As the play ends, two opposite worlds are presented: The world of the

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family (Rue Fabre) and the world outside (the Main). This is the dramatic structure that Tremblay establishes for the rest of the plays in the cycle of *Les Belles - Soeurs*.

While some of the plays like *Forever Yours, Marie - Lou* and *Bonjour, la, Bonjour* are set in rue Fabre, another group of plays like *Trois Petits tours* and *Hosanna* depict life on the Main. In the last two plays of the cycle, *Sainte Carmen of the Main* and *Damnee Manon, Sacree Sandra* both the worlds are brought together and thus the cycle forms an integral dramatic world which unmistakably shows Tremblay's contribution to Quebec theatre.

#### ***Forever Yours, Marie - Lou***

*Forever Yours, Marie-Lou* consists of two scenes presented concurrently. On one side of the stage sits Marie-Louise (the mother), alone in front of the television, and Leopold (the father) alone in his tavern. On the other side, ten years later, sit the two daughters Carmen and Manon. Carmen has left the home and is now a "western" singer in a night club on the Main, and Manon is a religious fanatic who sits alone day after day in the kitchen. As the play unfolds it becomes clear that the marriage between Leopold and Marie-Louise is sheer hell. Marie-Louise has let Leopold make love to her four times in more than ten years of marriage, each time he was drunk and virtually raped her, and each time Marie-Louise found herself pregnant. This family is characterized by resentment and loneliness. Children are caught in the web of their parents' relationship. Manon who physically resembles her father, strives to emulate her mother, a saintly figure. Carmen, on the other hand, resembles her mother physically but attempts to break out of the family circle as did her father, but more effectively.

Leopold, whose father and grandfather were insane tries to find some sort of sanity in drink, but fails since he very clearly sees the impossibility of his own situation as an individual and as a Quebecois; "we are just small cogs in a big wheel ... and were afraid of revolting because we think we're too small ...." (91). He decides to put his wife and their young son in the car and drive them all

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to their death. Marie – Lou’s solution is self-inflicted martyrdom. She yearns for the day when her husband will be in an asylum so that she would be able to keep on knitting in peace. In the meantime she is seen sadly reciting her rosary which she feels is the only solution for her. Manon develops her mother's religiosity to the extreme and forces herself to pray for hours on end until she enters into a mystical trance. Carmen, on the other hand, is not prepared to run away from reality. She leaves the house for the Main where she is free.

### ***Bonjour, la, Bonjour***

*Bonjour, la, Bonjour*, also set in rue Fabre, tries to accommodate the individual to some sort of family structure. It is the story of a young man named Serge who has returned from a three - month trip to Europe which he took in order to sort out the conflicting emotions of love he feels for his younger sister Nicole. His entire family - including his deaf father, four sisters, and two aunts - depends on him for support. In the play, which is structured as a series of solos - duets or trios, Serge struggles to free himself from the possessive and aggressive love of his three oldest sisters. Rejecting his aunts and three of his sisters, Serge goes to live with his fourth and youngest sister. J.M. Weiss comments.

Serge’s action is a double challenge: On the one hand he must fight society’s condemnation of incest, and on the other he must combat the tendency for all love to degenerate and be replaced by selfishness and hate. It would appear that the only love possible in Tremblay’s dramatic world is one that contravenes the structure upon which the family exists; only incestuous or homosexual love seems to endure. The intimacy that Serge and his sister shared in child-hood finds its natural expression in physical love ... (37).

### **Plays on the Main**

The plays that deal with life on the Main show the replacement of the family by relationships that have been traditionally condemned by society. At the Main what the society condemns is glorified and evil becomes good. Those

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who want to escape the family at all costs would like to breathe this poisoned air. The only way to exist in the Main is to wear a mask or a false identity which looks more impressive and subsequently becomes the real identity. The transvestites have a special significance in the context of the failure of men in Tremblay's theatre. The oppressed condition of women forces the author to create an individual having the characteristics of both male and female. Tremblay himself explains:

Since there are no men in Quebec, I wanted to make the prototype of the man - woman, that is, a homosexual who represents man and woman ... So I managed to make a kind of man - woman who, through his very nature, is frighteningly human (Weiss 38).

### ***Hosanna***

*Hosanna* is a typical play in the Main cycle in which Claude slowly recounts the betrayal and humiliation to which he had been subjected earlier the same evening. For many years Claude the hair dresser (*Hosanna* the transvestite) dreamed of assuming the role of Elizabeth Taylor playing Cleopatra. *Hosanna* spends endless efforts to dress up as Elizabeth Taylor playing Cleopatra for the annual Halloween party. But as she ascends the stairs of the night club, she is puzzled by the surrounding darkness until the spotlight suddenly comes on and reveals a host of other drag-queens dressed as Elizabeth Taylor in "Cleopatra". When she learns that even her lover *Cuirette* joins in the ridicule, she is deeply hurt and humiliated.

The play is set in the hours following this humiliation and in a long and painful monologue that comprises much of the second act of the play, *Hosanna* recounts her bitter and painful experience. As she comes to the end of her monologue, *Cuirette* rejoins in the apartment. Slowly *Hosanna* discards the elements of her Cleopatra drag one by one and she takes the final step of removing her briefs and confronting her lover in the nude and proclaims, "Look Raymond, I'm a man ..." (75).

*Hosanna* and her lover share real moments of tenderness when *Hosanna*'s

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disguise fails and the sordidness of hetero sexual relationships are completely absent from the homosexual love experienced by Hosanna. “The transvestite symbolizes the possibility (or even the necessity) of a definition of love that is not only outside the traditional family but also outside the accepted heterosexual context” (Weiss 39). It appears as though the only characters who, through their assumed identity on the Main, have moments of happiness are the transvestites.

In his original programme note Tremblay wrote: “I began to think of the crisis of identity that was wracking Quebec, and to search for a character through whom I could speak about it and what it was like not to know who you are, or to try and resemble someone else because you didn't have your own identity” (qtd. Schwartz Wald, *American Review* 502).

Apart from these questions of identity and national oppression, Tremblay is also preoccupied with the problems of gender roles and gender performances, and the impossibilities of the heterosexual coherence.

### **The Last Two Plays of the Cycle**

The last two plays in the cycle, *Sainte Carmen of the Main* and *Damnee Manon, Sacree Sandra* relate the two worlds.

#### ***Sainte Carmen***

In *Sainte Carmen* Tremblay explores Carmen's revolt further. The play is constructed along the lines of Greek tragedy with the chorus composed in the form of music scores. Carmen has just returned to Montreal from a voyage (almost an odyssey) to the United States where, under the influence of country and western music, she begins to write her own songs and lyrics. She is welcomed back to the Main by a chorus of prostitutes and transvestites. She has become a saint and prophet in that she alone has been able to put in to words and music the sufferings and joys of her people. She has got the necessary strength and will and does not need disguises, like Hosanna and others, to reveal her true self. She could use her own words and music and her solution to the problems of the Main is not to hide them under an illusion, but rather to face them and

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ultimately to surpass them. But her message of love and hope, her attempts to legitimize the characters of the Main meets with resistance from the night club owner Maurice who profits from the Main. He warns her to stop singing her own songs and go back to her “Western” costumes with as much bare legs as possible. But she refuses and that seals her fate. She is murdered by Maurice’s bodyguard. True to the tragic style, Carmen’s death occurs off the stage. She is immediately replaced by Gloria Star who, with her Latin - American costumes and music, puts the Main back in order.

There are obviously many levels on which the play can be interpreted:

“a call for more authentic culture rather than cheap imitations of foreign models, a criticism of the defeatist element in Quebec society, even a call for political self-determination. The play also destroys the myth of the Main as a place of hope. Some critics see a kind of catharsis in the outcome of the tragedy - Carmen may be dead, but her message and songs will remain after her - art will indeed triumph over death. Carmen’s death is also interpreted as the final revenge of the Main and its people who refuse to listen to her message of hope.” (Weiss 44)

The play confirms the supremacy of the authority and its ability to crush any form of individuality. As Renate Usmiani observes: “Carmen becomes a victim of her ‘boss’, who is intolerant of change. Her death serves as a parable of the artist's freedom and mission, and of the archetypal Saviour figure’s inevitable destruction at the hands of an uncomprehending, society” (Oxford Companion 570).

### ***Damned Manon, Holy Sandra***

In *Damned Manon, Holy Sandra*, Tremblay turns his attention to Carmen's fanatical sister Manon who shares the stage with Sandra, a transvestite who had minor roles in other plays. The play has no plot and is essentially Beckettian in structure. Manon sits alone in her white kitchen dressed in black, white Sandra dressed in white sits in a black room.

Manon’s world of spiritualism is beginning to dissatisfy her and she feels

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the need for contact with physical objects. While she fingers her enormous rosary beads, she feels as if they were sexual organs of a live body. Her prayers, instead of freeing her from her senses increase her desire for a physical communion with the object of her devotion. The crucifix thus becomes a living body. "I passed my hands over the body of Our Saviour ... and all of a sudden ... I felt an awful need to kiss him" (43). Sandra, on the other hand, finds her life of sensuality increasingly unsatisfying and likes to get rid of her body and become a free spirit.

### **Sexuality**

Manon and Sandra compete each other - the exaggerated sexuality of Sandra may be taken as an answer to Manon's prayers, just as Manon's spiritualism offers an escape to Sandra. Here we have the answer to the dialectic structure that began to take form in *Les Belles-Soeurs*; the conflict between masculine and feminine, between religion and sex, are summed up in the existence of Manon and Sandra. In the end we find Tremblay striking reconciliation between the poles of attraction represented by Manon and Sandra.

The two sexual poles merge into one in the end, and then absorb the religion/sex conflict creating one primary force. Here the problem and the solution are both metaphysical the problem of the conflict between the physical and the spiritual. Tremblay's resolution of the conflict is both artificial and unconvincing. Through an authorial voice he tries to absorb the contradictions of his characters into his own ambiguous personality.

Towards the end as Manon goes deeper and deeper into a trance, as she becomes lighter and leaves her body behind, she is drawn towards an enormously bright light with Sandra crying out to Manon to take her along on the voyage. They realize that they are invented characters that they no longer exist. But then characters have their own independent existence as Pirandello proves in his *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, in spite of the author's desire to put them to death and to take them back.

### **Tremblay's Contribution to Quebec Theatre**

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As one looks back on the entire cycle of *Les Belles Soeurs*, Tremblay's contribution to Quebec theatre comes clearly into focus. Even though there are no political overtones in his plays, his cries for the political independence of Quebec are very much there in the contrast between Carmen and Manon, for example and especially in his depiction of the transvestite: "We are a people who disguised itself for years in order to look like another people", he asserts, "We have been transvestites for three-hundred years" (qtd. in Cloutier 64).

For Tremblay, a nation, which, without knowing its own identity, creates a false image of itself, is doomed to suffer the same contradictions as Hosanna and others. Tremblay's depiction of the breakup of the Catholic French Canadian family is also very significant. Just as "joual" symbolizes the breakdown of language and communication, so also the paucity of strong male characters and the lack of normal sexual behaviour symbolize the breakdown of social institutions in an emasculated society.

Tremblay's use of the stage is innovative and it reinforces the sense of loneliness and isolation his characters feel, and transforms the family or the Main into theatrical spaces that have meanings that go beyond the specific worlds they depict. His dramatic technique combines elements of classical tragedy, musical composition, Brechtian techniques of distancing and alienation, burlesque and avant-garde dramaturgy. In *Les Belles-Soeurs*, for example, normal conversation is interrupted frequently by monologues highlighted by spotlights and by choral recitations composed like musical comedy numbers. In *Forever Yours, Marie - Lou* the conversations, which run against one another, span a period of ten years. Similarly space and time are transcended by the solos, duets and trios that make up the operatic structure of *Bonjour, la, Bonjour*.

Tremblay does not make use of conventional plot structures or realistic techniques. Thus we see that Tremblay very successfully combines avant-grade dramaturgy and Quebecois subject matter which is the distinctive feature of the nationalistic theatre of the 1970's.

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G. Sripriya Ramu, M.A. (English), M.Phil., M.A. (French), RBT (Hindi)  
Ph.D. Research Scholar in English  
Jamal Mohamed College  
Thiruchirapalli - 620 020  
Tamil Nadu  
India  
[sripriyaramu@yahoo.com](mailto:sripriyaramu@yahoo.com)

A. K. Mohamed Amin, Ph.D.  
Head of Department of English  
Jamal Mohamed College  
Thiruchirapalli - 620 020  
Tamil Nadu  
India  
[aminkhattu59@rediffmail.com](mailto:aminkhattu59@rediffmail.com)

S. Gunasekaran, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor in English  
Anna University  
Dindigul Campus  
Dindigul - 624 622  
Tamil Nadu  
India  
[gunakundhavai@yahoo.com](mailto:gunakundhavai@yahoo.com)

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