

GEORGE RYGA AND ENGLISH-CANADIAN THEATRE*

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Abstract

The article considers the contribution of the famous Canadian playwright of Ukrainian descent George Ryga into English-Canadian theatre. The most important feature of Ryga's style is a special attention to the life, feelings, struggles of downtrodden (marginalized, oppressed, neglected, abused) people in a Canadian society (whether they are Indians, Ukrainians, Italians, or other nation or nationality) with a humane and dignified face under unbearable conditions of physical, moral, existential survival. Psychological nuances are presented by George Ryga vividly, persuasively and convincingly. George Ryga is one of the pillars of building a strong and nationally-oriented English-Canadian theatre and drama. Ryga Studies have to pick up their tempo here in Canada (where exists substantial literature on his creative heritage and its peculiarities), and especially in Ukraine (where Ryga, unfortunately and undeservedly, remains basically unknown and unresearched, in spite of some positive steps towards appreciation and recognition of its diverse literary heritage for Ukraine).

Key words: George Ryga, English-Canadian theatre, marginalized, oppression, Indian, Ukrainian.

Introduction (Ryga Studies in Ukraine)

Kyle Wyatt (2019: 3) states: "We like to think that American-style divisiveness and xenophobia can't happen here. We're too welcoming".

With Covid -19 pandemic, massive movement "Black Lives Matter", rapid and unpredictable reevaluation of some core values and principles of human existence, the Humanities will undergo transformations as well. Some of the authors (with high-standard moral values and dignity) will re-emerge and will interest bigger audiences. One of these authors, undoubtedly, is George Ryga.

We would like to provide a brief review of Ryga Studies in Ukraine. Ryga Studies in Ukraine have been in initial stages of its spread and development. Due to the tremendous efforts of several individuals in Canada, Ukraine got Ryga's publications in University, college and school libraries, Canadian Studies centres and other institutions and organizations. And obviously lack of printed works of

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George Ryga here in Ukraine prevents deep and serious research. Much more has to be done regarding acquisition and spread of research literature on George Ryga's diverse heritage, organization of festivals, seminars, conferences, symposia (where again Canadian Studies centres could play a leading role of initiators and creators).

We can notice that unfortunately Canadian Studies in general have not been a priority direction of research in literary studies, linguistics, cultural studies in Ukraine. And it could and should be totally opposite. Suffice it to mention here literature written in English in Canada devoted to the issues of Ukrainian identity, its change and transformation in recent years (the works by Myrna Kostash, Victor Malarek, Janice Kulyk Keefer, Marusya Bociurkiw and many others). This literature has to be analyzed and researched in Ukraine.

Translation of two of his novels ("Голодні гори/Hungry Hills" та "Балада про збирача каміння/ Balad of a Stonepicker") in the 70-ies in Ukraine did not become a resonant event due to the stagnant atmosphere of the 70-ies. The communist party of Ukraine (and in general the Communist Party of the USSR) did not encourage or want any closer contacts of Canadian and Ukrainian communities/societies. These translations could be reprinted and spread all over Ukraine because it is practically impossible to find those copies from the 70-ies neither in the public libraries nor in private collections.

Only in the beginning of the 21-st century we could notice certain rebirth/interest in the creative heritage of George Ryga here in Ukraine. We would like to mention a couple of articles written by Kremenets researcher Illia Kominiarskyi (Комінярський 2011 and Комінярський 2014), who has been residing in Spain since the year 2014. Illia translated from English into Ukrainian several plays written by George Ryga (and used them in his courses and research work). After creation of the Canadian Studies Centre at Ostroh Academy National University (April 2010) George Ryga's works were sent from Edmonton to Ostroh. Later in Ostroh, Lutsk, Chernivtsi (where Canadian Studies centres operate) a number of symposia, seminars, conferences have been organized where works of George Ryga as well as his life and public stance were duly evaluated, analyzed and highlighted. Among the recent events we could mention "Ryga-Tour Ukraine- 2019" (the author of this article and producer of the documentary "Just a Ploughboy" on Ryga's creative heritage Gina Payzant, the cities Chernivtsi, Kitsman, Ternopil, Zbarazh, Ostroh, Hoshcha, Rivne, Lutsk, Kovel) with movie demonstration and reflection of those events in mass media.*

In February 2020 the Canadian Studies Centre of Lesya Ukrainka Eastern European National University organized the round table "George Ryga and Contemporary Canadian Studies" within the faculty's week. We also hope that new research will appear in this direction.

Ukrainian students, researchers and instructors like the plays of George Ryga. I conducted a couple of microsurveys at the Universities in Western Ukraine and also witnessed this love and reverence firsthand during the film "Just a Ploughboy" demonstration.

It is also pleasant that George Ryga's plays have become the subject of Bachelor's and Master's research papers (using this opportunity we would like to

* presentations and seminars during our trip in Ukraine (together with Gina Payzant) Ryga Tour – Ukraine 2019 (September 13-21, 2019, Chernivtsi National University named after Iurii Fedkovych, Kitsman Palace of Culture, Ternopil National Pedagogical University named after Volodymyr Hnatiuk, Zbarazh Secondary School No.1, Kremenets Humanitarian-Pedagogical Academy, Ostroh Academy National University, Hoshcha School-Gymnazium, Rivne State University of Humanities, Lesia Ukrainka Eastern European University, Kovel Lycee).

mention here fruitful and productive work of researchers of Eastern European University, in particular their Canadian Studies Centre, regarding popularization of the heritage of the famous Canadian playwright).

Many works in the West have been devoted to the analysis of George Ryga's creative heritage, in particular, the following ones (Balan 1982, Day 2017, Hoffman 1995, Hoffman 2004a, Hoffman 2004b, Innes 1985, Parker 1971, Nothof 2017, Suchacka 2019). This heritage requires a new perception and re-evaluation.

A couple of publications appeared abroad recently, devoted to the detailed analysis of Ukrainian Canadian literature/themes. Among them are the following ones (Unbound 2016, Grekul 2005, Mycak 2001). And before that was a legendary Yarmarok 1987 (first anthology of works of Canadian authors, mostly immigrants from Ukraine who were writing in Ukrainian, translated into English and also Canadian authors of Ukrainian descent who were writing in English). It would be good if these publications were accessible to the scientists of Ukraine, teachers, graduate students. Some of them obviously deserve reprinting in Ukraine (and possibly translation as well).

Ryga and English-Canadian Theatre

“He is still internationally the best-known English-speaking Canadian playwright, and his prolific multi-faceted writing – over 90 scripts for radio, television and film, as well as two albums of folk-songs, three novels and 16 short stories or novellas, a volume of poetry, two oratorios, a documentary travelogue and fifteen stage plays, one of which was adapted for ballet – have brought him substantial influence in a wide variety of media” – states Christopher Innes (Innes 1985: 13).

Christopher Innes clearly defines the major topics in the creative work of George Ryga (and we totally agree with it): “... major themes: the positive values of manual work and the individual who defies himself in opposition to an alien and alienating social structure, which imposes an inner exile on its citizens and turns all into displaced persons; the distorting emptiness of official history that presents the achievements of the governed masses as the acts of governing few; the need for a unifying cultural myth drawn from the unarticulated experience of the immigrants and outcasts, the subculture of the working classes who built the country” (Innes 1985: 14).

Our objective is to show the pivotal role of George Ryga in establishing truly Canadian theatre, especially English-Canadian theatre. The following methods of research have been used – descriptive, comparative and semantic oppositions. George Ryga's thoughts expressed by him at the conference “Identifications: Ethnicity and the Writer in Canada” as well as a brief analysis of his main plays “The Indian”, “The Ecstasy of Rita Joe”, and “Grass and Wild Strawberries” would be presented. The conference was conducted by the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies and the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta (the fall of 1979). The topic of George Ryga's contribution into establishing a contemporary English-Canadian theatre has not been researched thoroughly and properly which constitutes a novelty of this article.

Our task is not to present here a development or stages of development of English-Canadian theatre. For this purpose the interested reader/researcher could

familiarize himself/herself with two excellent publications [Benson and Conolly 1987; Kroller 2004, especially the section “Drama” by Ric Knowles, pp. 115–134)].

Benson and Conolly (1987: vii) talk about “the rich anglophone theatrical history of Canada”. According to them: “Before the discovery and colonization of North America by Europeans, an indigenous drama of great richness and complexity flourished among the continent’s native peoples” (Benson and Conolly, 1987: 1). The same authors note: “... the country had lost a century and a half of opportunity to forge its own professional theatre identity” (Benson and Conolly, 1987: 32). “Theatrically speaking, Canada was an occupied country for most of the nineteenth century and nearly half of the twentieth” (Benson and Conolly, 1987: 32). Ann Nothof underlines the motif of the class struggle in his work: “His plays consistently present, in uncompromising terms, a class struggle – the underprivileged versus the privileged, the workers versus the management, the people versus the government” (Nothof, 2017: 1). The image of marginalized minorities (indigenous population of Canada, Ukrainians, Italians etc.) constantly is present in the creative works of the famous Canadian playwright. We should show here the strive of George Ryga towards social justice (and presentation by him of the social injustice), his fight against racial prejudice. Don Rubin, professor at the York University in Toronto, editor of “Canadian Theatre Review” and publisher of many plays and essays of George Ryga points to the particular value of his play “The Ecstasy of Rita Joe”: “It was the first play to suggest that racism was part of Canada. The federal government was intensely not amused” (McIver, 2017: 1).

The civic position of George Ryga is clearly defined by Gina Payzant: “One thing George Ryga taught me was that you can look back, but you can never look away” (McIver, 2017: 2). Composer and conductor Victor Davis points at the diversity of topics in the play “The Ecstasy of Rita Joe”: “The themes of colonization, assimilation, infantilization and dehumanization run through the play” (McIver, 2017: 2). Ann Nothof notes: “In most of his plays, Ryga provides explicit social commentary, combined with vivid and thrilling theatricality” (Nothof, 2017: 1).

George Ryga got this feeling of fight for justice in his early years while residing in the Ukrainian farming community in the northern Alberta close to the Indian reservation. Here his origins of rioting were born as well as formation of the acute feeling of social and racial injustice, humane perception by him of the marginalized, neglected, rejected and abused people. Marginality as the notion, to live on the margins – these are very important notions in his creativity and important for perception of it by all of us. Discrimination by the society/governmental institutions/bureaucracy of these people was often total, ruining, leaving for them nothing, even the right for their own language.

Jars Balan and Ann Nothof point at these phenomena in their research. In particular, Jars Balan notes: “... Ryga bears some of the scars that many of his generation acquired in the process of growing up as ‘bohunks’ in an Anglo world” (Balan, 1982: 49). Extremely important are the views of George Ryga himself, expressed by him directly: “As a youngster, I heard words like kraut, bohunk, wop; they were not pleasant. They were equivalent to son-of-a-bitch, that is, the most extreme labels that could be thrown in your direction. You had to live with them because you were conscious of being a member of a minority; a member of a peasant class which had no access to information, no sense of the country’s judicial

values, subjected to some of the crudest punishments that a colonial system could impose upon its smaller minorities” (panelist George Ryga at the round table “Hyphenated Canadians: The Question of Consciousness”, Balan, 1982: 141).

George Ryga deeply analyzed political situation, his views on important and urgent issues of the time, such as, for example, multiculturalism and wars are extremely important and essential today. George Ryga was the son of his time, talent, that managed to grasp and apprehend problems of Canada of the XX century, he was a patriot of Canada and also a nationalist (and western Canada plays a special place in his creative work). He also managed to draw guidelines for peaceful coexistence of various nations and nationalities inhabiting Canada today. George Ryga also was an extremely gifted visionary, envisaging tendencies of today and tomorrow. For us important are ethical issues raised by him.

He also pointed at the regional character of the Canadian literature: “To be a writer in Canada, from whatever background, is to be regionalized” (Balan, 1982: 152).

In his notes to the play “Indian” (Notes in Retrospect, written in May 1970) George Ryga recalls: “It was my first play, and within it I won a freedom in form and content which I felt at the time to be unique in Canadian theatrical and television literature” (Ryga, 1971: 3). This freedom in form and content charms and attracts contemporary viewer and reader of George Ryga’s plays. “INDIAN emerged out of the soil and wind of situation in which I was painfully involved” – states George Ryga (Ryga, 1971: 3).

His ethnic origin gave him also a possibility of critical view at Anglo-Saxon society that held the leading place in Canadian society. We would cite Myrna Kostash in this regard: “You wrote: “Lord Strathcona drove one spike, all the rest was done by Mike’... And of all my education, these twelve words have been the most unforgettable” (Kostash, 7). Being the voice of voiceless (according to the words of Gina Payzant), George Ryga combined his radical political position with personal morality. We would rely here on the idea of Christopher Innes, a wonderful researcher of George Ryga’s heritage (unfortunately, underappreciated by his colleagues in Canada): “His political stance, and the strong moral commitment that has given his works much of its force has proved consistently uncomfortable for the establishment...” (Innes, 1985: 13). From 1969 till 1973 George Ryga himself claimed his independence from the system (see Innes, 1985: 15).

Initial years of his creative activity (including poetic one) are marked by unacceptance of the contemporary society, its conditions, norms and taboo quite often combined by unconvincing arguments of its alternative development. Being in a rush to show amorality, injustice and degradation of the contemporary society (and its ruling “elite”), George Ryga does not manage always to find way out of this gloomy and nasty atmosphere. His intention is that people have to be stunned, it cannot continue this way. Ryga politicizes its poetry, prose, drama to convey to the humankind his concern, unacceptance and even rage.

Unstable and quite often unformed canons of the new Canadian literature were not always ready to such storm and pressure. The new Canadian drama began quite often based on ethnic and class aspect. In many aspects George Ryga was a pioneer, as were his parents who arrived in the year 1928 from Ukraine. George Ryga accepts this mission with excitement and challenge. The theatre for him cannot be artificial, it has to deal with life issues, to delve into the depth of all conflicts,

opposition, moral and physical fall. His artistic world is based on real events and childhood memories. Memory which is analytical and just. A person who is at the bottom, according to George Ryga, has his/her own integrity, completeness and importance. This person by her/his own hard work and perseverance earns at least this miserable survival and deserves some respect and understanding.

It is good that in this approach George Ryga did not go to “socialist realism” (which was the leading research method in the Soviet Ukraine and whole Soviet Union). Maybe his talent, analytical ability, deep and multifaceted knowledge of the world cultural heritage did not allow it. The Soviet Union would eagerly accept such revealer and critic of “capitalist way of life”.

By his creative work Ryga shows that at the bottom of the society there are not only Indians (indigenous population of Canada), Anglo-Saxon establishment pushed there also representatives of other ethnic groups – dear to his heart Ukrainians, Italians and other minorities. “The figure of the Indian can therefore represent all the oppressed because the audience – almost by definition bourgeois, like any conventional theatre’s public – are incapable of seeing any distinction” – states Christopher Innes (Innes, 1985: 26). It was also dilemma of George Ryga’s creative work (especially his dramaturgy) – he showed to his spectator (who was mainly white, rich and held a high position in a society) his/her unpleasant/ugly face, without polished angles. Quite often it cost George his personal financial success, financial stability, not received and canceled contracts, sometimes lack of broader recognition and appreciation among aforementioned establishment. But Ryga was always uncompromising and consistent in his standing for the rights of minorities for dignified life, their own traditions, language and culture.

His uncompromissability and passionality, probably, worked out for the further perspective when the works of George Ryga (in spite of certain resistance from the aforementioned establishment) preserved their own actuality, integrity and survivability in the stormy and inconsistent 21-st century. New generations find in them answers to the questions and demands of current time, fight of good against evil continues, the marginalized need support, acceptance and understanding. “... the principles we hold should lead us to condemn our habitual practices” – thinks Christopher Innes regarding the principles of George Ryga himself (Innes, 1985: 32).

It goes to the point that the court itself, judicial process (as it is vividly shown in “The Ecstasy of Rita Joe” and other Ryga’s works) demonstrates the system’s injustice. The judging society should go through the just legal process itself. In his dramaturgy Geoge Ryga clearly knew beforehand what the next scene or episode should be. He was painstakingly demanding in his strive towards creative skilfulness, perfection and self-expression. That is why he was finding unbelievable response, perception and empathy in his compatriots and the world spectator/reader who had the chance to watch his plays (in Europe, China, Japan, and obviously North American continent). We hope that his leading plays will finally be staged in his beloved Ukraine. Ryga’s Ukrainian Canadian identity, his understanding of the life of an ordinary Ukrainian, we hope, will help it.

George Ryga had an active civic position all his life. His main protagonists/heroes also had an active civic position. Quite often they rise from the bottom to defend their freedom and dignity (2014 Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine was some kind of continuation of this eternal desire). Quite often they are radical activists.

“So the kind of lines I give to Rita Joe would not be different from the kind of lines I would give a Polish or Finnish immigrant who is caught in the same conditions” – stated George Ryga in his interview (Ryga, 1982: 164).

Ryga’s politicality was situational/selective. He never was blindly politicized. We could rely here on his own thoughts: “I am political, but I’m not associated with any political movement, because I distrust them all. My politics are the politics of constant change” (Innes, 1985: 71). By his creative activity George Ryga contributed to the formation and spread of the Canadian literary identity, which has been shining in the 21-st century. He was some kind of predecessor of the contemporary literary giants of Canada such as Elice Munro, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje and others. Issues of justice, fight for this justice, social rights and freedoms will never lose its novelty and actuality.

George Ryga on his own views

George Ryga took an active part in the panel discussion “Hyphenated Canadians: The Question of Consciousness” (at the aforementioned University conference), along with Myrna Kostash, Yar Slavutych and Maara Haas. His thoughts/expressions give us the wonderful opportunity to better know his position regarding those or other issues. George Ryga feels a special responsibility before his predecessors, people who arrived from various corners of the world to build Canada: “... we cannot disconnect ourselves from the reality of who we are or how we came to hold conferences in these kinds of buildings. All this was built on social values. People actually bled and died for it, and my writing is committed to their memory” (Balan, 1982: 141–142).

He does not accept words and position taken by Yar Slavutych. When Slavutych defends very direct (and rather simple) concept of Ukrainian in Canada (providing his own example), George Ryga defends more complicated and less direct model (Canadian who bears Ukrainian gene, because he himself was born in Canada). Telling the story about his stay in Mexico and learning Spanish, George Ryga does not lead down everything to ethnic problems/issues. For him overall humanitarian context is much more important: “While living in Mexico, I had to learn Spanish in order to examine and write on themes which affected me as a humanist. I did not do this with a conscious ethnic purpose. I was concerned with the broader issue of human suffering, which was created and maintained through motives of profit” (Balan, 1982: 142). George Ryga does not lock himself in Ukrainian ghetto, he is interested in broader horizons: “I choose to learn the languages which I need in order to function as a writer. That does not mean that I would tear off my roots and denounce my native language and my heritage; that is the foundation stone on which everything else is built. But it only represents three or four or five per cent of my existence” (Balan, 1982: 142).

George’s thoughts about past and future are interesting: “I do not live in the past. I do not live in my father’s frame of reference, in terms of why he came to Canada. He came and he lived and I’m concerned with what happened to him when he arrived” (Balan, 1982: 142). Further he claims: “The British are a minority in English Canada” (Balan, 1982: 142).

George Ryga mentions that every time when a person is admitted to a hospital, he/she has to answer the question: “What religion are you?” He continues: “I have always considered religion to be a very personal thing, not to be publicly declared. Otherwise, you might be required to declare your religion, your political association, your race and your ethnic background. I feel that my civil liberties are tampered with when questions are asked about my political or religious persuasions” (Balan, 1982: 147–148). A writer has to be connected with the society he/she lives in. George Ryga notes: “You cannot be an ivory tower writer” (Balan, 1982: 152). To Pier Giorgio di Cicco’s question: “Do you yourself speak Ukrainian?” George Ryga answers: “Yes, but I grew up in the Hutsul dialect, which is very different from the language of Ternopil or Kiev” (Balan, 1982: 153).

George Ryga’s plays

Conflict of the marginalized and oppressors is best revealed in the language. Brian Parker remarks: “His sense of spoken language is keen: rural, Indian, or the clichés of teenage speech; his sense of character is anecdotal, not exploring motivation but building up a “myth” of personality by accumulating characteristic incidents; and his organization is that of the oral tale teller, where memory rules and the sequence of events is broken by constant flashbacks, foreshadowings, digressions, and insets (to be seen in its simplest form in his second novel, *Ballad of a Stonepicker*) (Ryga, 1971: viii).

In his play “Indian” one of the protagonists, an agent, addresses the Indian: “*I don’t care who you are or what you think*” (Ryga, 1971: 20). In other place the Indian names the agent: “*You lousy dog!*” (Ryga, 1971: 22). Later we find out about the tragedy of the Indian, whose brother tragically died, digging the well for his boss: “*White man leave me here to die!*” (Ryga, 1971: 24). The Indians use the word *sementos* for the person who lost the soul (Ryga, 1971: 27). He calls the agent by this name. Unbelievable despair of the Indian is rendered by minimal means: “*I got no past... no future... nothing, sementos! I nobody. I not even live in this world... I dead!*” (Ryga, 1971: 32).

We totally agree with Christopher Innes: “... the Indian establishes a clear moral ascendancy. The despised and degraded outcast becomes dominant through his inner dignity and the force of his despair, and by the end the audience sees the representative of its society through his eyes as an empty shell” (Innes, 1985: 25).

In the play “The Ecstasy of Rita Joe” the author uses irony to show how the white people (Mister Homer) “care” about the aboriginal population (Indians): *Mr. Homer: Sure, we do a lot of things for our Indians here in the city at the Centre... Bring ‘em in from the cold an’ give them food... The rest ... well, the rest kinda take care of itself*” (Ryga, 1971: 54). Having heard the accusations in prostitution, Rita Joe directly responds: “*That’s a goddamned lie!*” (Balan 1972, 59). Rita Joe’s language is simple, even quite often primitive: “*I haven’t had grub since day before yesterday...*” (Ryga, 1971: 68).

Dialogues of the protagonists are based on dissonance and counterpoint:

Magistrate: Have you had your lungs x-rayed recently?

Rita: I was hungry, that’s all! (Ryga, 1971: 88).

The representatives of the governmental structures are not absolutely interested in life and problems of the Indians. For them the most important thing is bureaucratic execution of the state instructions, recommendations, rules. Ordinary people do not understand this bureaucratic “slang/jargon” and even do not try to understand it. Often it leads to complete misunderstanding:

Magistrate: When was your last Wasserman taken?

Rita: What's that? (Ryga, 1971: 88).

To the accusations in drunkenness, shoplifting, assault, prostitution, Rita responds: “*You got rules here that was made before I was born...*” (Ryga, 1971: 91). Indians love near and dear nature, preserving and protecting it. This tender attitude towards nature is passed to their kids. Rita’s father recollects: “*The last time Rita Joe come home to see us... the last time she ever come home... I watched her leave... and I seen geese running after Rita the same way... white geese... with their wings out an’ their feet no longer touching the ground. And I remembered it all, an’ my heart got so heavy I wanted to cry...*” (Ryga, 1971: 93).

White guys are not able to have such emotions, they do not pay any attention to the nature, often considering it unnecessary sentimentality.

Bright memories of the childhood warm Rita in a difficult time of trials and tribulations (during her stay in prison). Meeting the priest she recollects: “*What's it like outside?... Is it a nice day outside? .. When I was a kid, there was trees an’ river... Jamie Paul told me once that maybe we never see those things again*” (Ryga, 1971: 94). A human being stays alone face-to-face with his/her trials (in the creative work of George Ryga certain Hemingway’s motives sound, conscientiously or unconscientiously), not having opportunity to receive any help or compassion: “*I don't think God hears me here... Nobody hears me now, nobody except cops an’ pimps an’ bootleggers!*” (Ryga, 1971: 95).

Rita Joe’s accusations are strong, motivated, unpleasant to the priest’s ear: “*... My uncle was Dan Joe...He was dyin’ and he said to me – long ago the white man comes with Bibles to talk to my people, who had the land. They talk for hundred years ... then we had all the Bibles, an’ the white man has our land...*” (Ryga, 1971: 96). With the help of micromeditations and microdialogues George Ryga creates the world and image of despair, doom, boundary of human existence. He proves himself to be an unbelievable master of minimal expressive means with maximally achieved effect of perception. In it is the strength of his dramaturgy, his particular dramaturgic style. Explosiveness of dramatism is his style.

“So the kind of lines I give to Rita Joe would not be different from the kind of lines I would give a Polish or Finnish immigrant who is caught in the same conditions” – underlined George Ryga in his interview (Ryga, 1982: 164).

Indians are aware of inevitability of technological process and their doomed destiny in the future. Rita’s father says: “*(sadly) If we only fish an’ hunt an’ cut pulpwood... pick strawberries in the bush... for a hundred years more, we are dead. I know this, here ... (touches his breast)*” (Ryga, 1971: 114).

Events in the play are accompanied from time to time by the singer’s singing:

God was gonna have a laugh

An’ gave me a job in the city! (Ryga, 1971: 119).

In the year 1968 George Ryga wrote the play “Grass and Wild Strawberries”. It was first staged by Playhouse Theatre in Vancouver on the 10-th of April, 1969.

George Ryga could not pass by and ignore the protests and youth movement of the stormy 60-ies. Dialogues of his protagonists are impulsive, based on counterpoint/opposition: “*NESTOR: (mocking) It’s all regression, I tell you. Just look at us – smoking pot, flying kites, chasing rainbows in a muddy ditch ... Regression!*”

CAPTAIN NEVADA: Nonsense! We are partisans of chaos ... makers of discontent ... Pied Pipers for children for dead totality! ... Killing pigs with laughter ... Building monuments of air on the sludge of the river!” (Ryga, 1971: 148).

Contradictions bother Allan, tear his soul apart. He himself renders his dubious attitude towards his father: “*You never knew him, Sue. He was a poor, petty bastard... He was a good man, my father... I wish it had been different between us ...*” (Ryga, 1971: 150). Extreme humility, openness, bare nerve are an inherent feature of plays and novels of George Ryga. It is impossible to confuse his specific handwriting with somebody else’s. Doom of the young generation is rendered by the words of young Susan: “*I could never live to be thirty. This would be a disaster...*” (Ryga, 1971: 157). Rich owners of the enterprises are not interested in issues and problems of the working class. Answering Allan’s question that probably his uncle Ted was lucky with finding a job, the latter replies: “*No so, not so. They changed their minds at the tool and dye shop... I went clear across town to be told... the time of working men has no value. The bosses don’t care if a telephone call saves you half a day riding buses for nothing ...*” (Ryga, 1971: 161).

George Ryga masterfully combines feelings and sufferings of his protagonists with description of nature which seems is helping protagonists to survive unbelievable times of sufferings and trials. Allan recollects the death of his father: “*(turning to her – Susan) He died ... I was thirteen and he died ... At the graveside it was very quiet while they lowered him down, down ... I heard a meadowlark singing...*” (Ryga, 1971: 166).

In his plays George skilfully utilizes his poetic talent when it is necessary to underline certain peculiarity/uniqueness of his protagonists or, contrary, to show an extreme degree of despair, loss of hope, dead end. The following lines render this in the best way (regarding 17-year old pregnant Susan):

*Remember to love her
She has no malice
Her lips are a blossom
Of trust and devotion
The Tide of her truth
Would fill a wide ocean
Of stones, salt and strange fishes ...* (Ryga, 1971: 172).

In his dialogue with Allan the policeman (state representative of the powerful bureaucratic apparatus) immediately shows his superiority, arrogance and negative attitude towards the young people: “*Never mind the lip ... A gang of smart asses with long hair can complicate my life ... So keep moving and go give another constable a headache!*” (Ryga, 1971: 176).

Allan’s dialogue with the officer is not better and the latter says to him: “*You lousy crud!*” (Ryga, 1971: 188). And a little bit later: “*That’s right – you’re a lump of goddamned shit!*” (Ryga, 1971: 188).

Conclusions

George Ryga stands as an innovator and revolutionary of the Canadian theatre, suggesting new radical norms and visions. Christopher Innes talks about it: "... he confronts conventional notions of theatre, while his endeavour to articulate a properly Canadian mythology provokes vital questions about the formation of literary identity in a post-colonial country with a heterogeneous immigrant population" (Innes, 1985: 19).

The destiny and tragic death of Rita Joe touched the world, forced to think over fragility of the human being. That is why after more than 50 years when it was written and staged this play continues its world marching attracting grateful spectators' audiences. Issues and problems which George Ryga advanced in it are eternal. They do not disappear with the author's death. Quite often they become bigger and more unpredictable and the mankind has to find new answers to them. And George Ryga's works serve the vivid proof of it.

Promotion of the creative heritage of George Ryga is the wide field of activity for Ukrainian Canadian specialists in Canada and Canadian Studies specialists in Ukraine. It will benefit also the development of Ukrainian Canadian Studies and Canadian Studies in Ukraine.

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