Shakespeare’s Dog
by Rick Chafe
adapted from the novel by Leon Rooke

Reviewed by Douglas Arrell

Rick Chafe’s latest play was a daring venture in several respects. With its cast of 14 – a size almost unheard of for a new Canadian play – its production was financially challenging even for that most successful of regional theatres, the Manitoba Theatre Centre, who commissioned it. Fortunately MTC was able to get a co-production with the National Arts Centre and the show was a success in both cities, at least by the standards of new Canadian works, when it was premiered in February–March 2008. Chafe proposes a system of doubling to get the cast down to 8, still a lot to swallow for most theatres; although it involves some “lightning-quick character changes,” as he says, it was successfully done in this version at Alberta Theatre Projects in 2009.

It was equally daring to imagine that Leon Rooke’s 1981 novel of the same name would be suitable for adaptation to the stage. This short work is notable for creating a vivid voice for Hooker, Shakespeare’s dog, and for its imaginative creation of a pseudo-Elizabethan world and a pseudo-dog world, one which on the one hand captures a dog’s obsessive interest in food and smells and sex but on the other hand one in which dogs can cite Aristotle and critique their masters’ political views. But the novel tells a minimal story with little of the kind of action that adapts itself to the stage; the most dramatic moment is the one in which Hooker saves Shakespeare from drowning, an incident that Chafe wisely recognized would not work on stage and omits in his dramatized version. This doesn’t leave much else except Shakespeare finally summoning the courage to leave his family in Stratford and go to London, and an inconclusive subplot about the killing of one of Sir Thomas Lucy’s deer by a dog (who turns out to be Hooker) and Lucy’s possible bringing in of a team of “Regarders” who use a hammer and chisel to remove the feet of delinquent dogs. Clearly this was not a novel that could be transposed scene by scene to the stage.

Chafe’s brilliance was to recognize that not only would Hooker’s voice be highly effective on the stage – so much so that Chafe was able to take many of his speeches
almost word for word from the novel – but that the crazy pseudo-dog world in which the dogs are both very doggy and also very human would work extremely well with human actors playing the dogs. There is a long history of actors playing animals on stage, but, except in children’s theatre, the device often misfires; the animal scenes may read well on the page, when we can imagine the animals, but on stage the result may just be embarrassing. If the actors are given full animal costumes, the absence of expressive faces soon results in tedium; if they are given some combination of human faces and animal bodies, they may seem merely cute. Because the world of Rooke’s novel is already one where dogs are not so much anthropomorphized as given combinations of dog-like and human characteristics, the portrayal of them on stage in human clothes but with dog tails was entirely appropriate and worked extremely well. Chafe may well have written the title role for Winnipeg actor Arne MacPherson, who was so memorable in the part in the MTC/NAC production that I could not help constantly visualizing him when I subsequently read the novel.

Chafe’s elaboration of the plot to work in dramatic terms is somewhat less successful. One sentence in the novel about Shakespeare’s failure as an actor in a “Whitsomtyde play” becomes a major plot line; Chafe introduces a local impresario who is bringing in the Queen’s Men to perform in Stratford and wants to get Shakespeare to write a play, but Shakespeare, it seems, is set on becoming an actor, even though all agree he is a very bad one. He also turns a minor figure in the novel – Shakespeare’s mentally challenged sister Joan – into what is a rather trite dramatic character, the mentally challenged person who has mystical insights and can talk to animals. The Regarders are brought on in full force to create suspense, and the play ends with Shakespeare getting his family to act out for a visiting actor a hastily written play that will eventually become Hamlet, a turn of events completely absent from the book. Chafe is clearly aware that he is writing for a large-theatre audience who will respond to predictable characters and broad humour, and something like these dramatic incidents are needed to fill out the novel’s minimal plot. But even on the level of dramatic technique, normally Chafe’s strong point, the Hamlet scene, though funny, is too long and too unbelievable and seriously weakens the end of the play. It also loses some the freshness and realism that made the novel and the earlier part of the play so appealing.

Still, no one would question that the play is very entertaining and much of it is, indeed, fresh and real. Apart from the Hamlet scene just mentioned, the play shows a high
level of dramatic craftsmanship. Given the difficulty of writing this kind of play for this kind of theatre, Chafe succeeds better than one might have hoped. But I think he underestimated the MTC audience, who could have taken something a little less silly and predictable. He should have stuck more firmly to the weird world Rooke created and found something more in tune with it to create the dramatic energy that the stage adaptation required.

Douglas Arrell taught theatre and drama at the University of Winnipeg from 1974 to 2009. He was chair of the theatre/film department for ten years prior to his retirement.

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