

Westword Column

"Singing Minnesota Summertime Blues"

Two years ago, in the summer of 2002, when I first taught in the Split Rock Arts Program in Minnesota, the American participants were still dealing -emotionally and artistically -with the trauma of 9/11. The whole world felt in solidarity with them, at least for awhile. This summer, participants were coping with the war in Iraq and the opening salvos of the presidential campaign, expressing to me their deep despondency over the "state of the union" of the United States of America, at home and abroad. They were feeling very much alone in the cosmos.

Minnesota is famously a very "Canadian" state - its writers at least know that there is more to the continent than meets the eye on most American-made maps - which historically has embraced what you and I would recognize as "Canadian values," such as a commitment to social goods, pride in ethnic diversity, and a state Democratic Party that includes the tags of "Farm Labor." Yet more than ever as a Canadian I felt

this summer, while leading a workshop in Minneapolis, that I and my American friends and colleagues are now consigned to different political and moral worlds. But not entirely.

Perhaps the most startling evidence of difference came the afternoon a friend and I went to see the revival of the "American tribal love-rock musical," Hair. The event was as you would expect: a lobby full of the disbelieving middle-aged reminiscing about the first time they'd seen the musical (I saw it in London in 1969, my friend in Chicago in 1968); promotional flyers for a shop selling tie-and-dye clothing, for an international hip-hop festival, "The Uprising," and for the Pantages Theatre itself, promising five dollars off tickets if you mention "peace" when making your purchase; a stageful of young actors playing their hearts out as hippies; and a string of undistinguished musical numbers I had completely forgotten I had ever heard, except for that signature tune, "This is the dawning of the age of Aquarius..." But of course it had been nothing like that - the dawning of a new age in 1967; in retrospect, we can see that the hippies and their stoned communities and their disgust with the war in Vietnam were the end not

the beginning of an age. The age we live in now is the one announced by the sign on the outside door of the theatre: "Historic Theater Group, Ltd. Bans Guns on These Premises."

I did a double-take on the sign. "Why on earth, " I asked my friend, my voice rising, "would it even be necessary to mention that you can't carry guns in a theatre?" "Because," he explained, "since we now have a Republican state government, we have new legislation that permits the carrying of concealed weapons."

Venues that wish to exclude people with their cute little handguns in their purses and underarm shoulder holsters have to say so explicitly. And so I began to notice these signs all over Minneapolis, on the doors of restaurants, condo lobbies, churches, and in the brochure lying on the desk in my residence on campus, the cheerful "Welcome to the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities:" Rules and Policies: Fire Arms/Weapons: Weapons are strictly prohibited in the Residence Halls. University of Minnesota Police Department will be notified if a weapon is being carried anywhere within the residence halls.

After that, I began to pay close attention to the

Minnesota I had taken for granted - I read the alternative newspapers, I went to a street festival, "One Day in July," commemorating the bloody end to a strike in 1934, I went to have a look at an old flour mill now museum, I visited the stunning Museum of the History of Minnesota - and began to have a more nuanced picture of what was happening in this energetic urban zone of my despondent friends.

For one thing, Canada is often on their radar screens, as in the suit being brought by the Minnesota Senior Federation for federal class-action status to make their case against Big Pharma (nine pharmaceutical giants), "colluding to keep us under the thumb of high prices" of drugs that could have been purchased more cheaply in Canada. The Federation has been transporting these cheaper Canadian drugs into Minnesota from Winnipeg since 1995, thankful that under Canadian price controls they were able to save up to 80% of the cost of the same drugs in the US. The Bush administration disapproves. I was reminded, with a jolt, of the lingering effects of the BSE crisis in the Alberta beef market when I read an editorial in the Star Tribune that, with the whole American nation in a panic over its first case of mad cow disease

(precipitated by that lone Alberta cow), the US Agriculture Secretary has nevertheless planned only for voluntary testing of cattle in the US cattle supply. At least two of the Secretary's aides came into the bureaucracy from the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, a lobby group.

Minnesota environmentalists are upset with the Bush nomination of lawyer William Myers to the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, the same William Myers who argued in court that the Clean Water Act is unconstitutional and that there is no constitutional basis for protecting the Minnesota wetlands. A Minneapolis teacher, Dave Boucher, no less confused, wrote in the Star Tribune that, despite being against the war in Iraq, for public education and trade unions, and "prochoice," he finds it harder by the day to vote for the Democrats, "because of their stance on gay marriage and their utter disrespect for the majority of America's values and morals," as though gay marriage, and not, say, the abuse of prisoners of war or the obscenity of corporate war-profiteering, represents "utter disrespect" for American values. Or how about that "free speech zone" to which protestors at the Democratic National Convention were restricted? Or New

York City's denial of permits to protest groups wishing to mobilize in Central Park during the Republican National Convention, because of "potential damage to the grass." The editors of the university newspaper, the Minnesota Daily, were offended: "Imagine," they wrote, "the Vietnam War protests relegated to obscure city streets or the Civil Rights marches of the 1950s and 1960s limited to a few square blocks."

I confess to a confusion of my own when I hung out for awhile at the "One Day in July" street festival in the old warehouse district of Minneapolis (fast morphing into high-end condos and bistros). The festival commemorated three successive strikes by truckers in 1934, which climaxed in the wounding and death of unarmed strikers by police and the establishment of industrial unionism in Minneapolis. The strikes were led by Trotskyists who had been earlier expelled from the Communist Party, and Teamsters Local 544 "remained under socialist leadership until 1941." The USA, you say?

We were gathered together by young organizers (who themselves work in bookstores and cafes) inspired by

an earlier industrial city and its working class - the millers, the boiler makers, the truckers who hauled the goods - addressed by speakers from the local Anti-Walmart Campaign, the Welfare Rights Committee and the Community Campaign to Prosecute the Police, and entertained by hiphop and post-political punk bands (I quote from the program). T-shirts with offensive political slogans were on sale, as were fair trade coffee and vegan hot dogs, and Veterans for Peace distributed their newsletter ("Support the troops! Bring them home alive NOW!"), and the Festival's official program booklet proudly carried greetings in solidarity from unions. United Transportation Union Minnesota State Legislative Board pledged that "we remember our martyrs." "Forever grateful," declared the American Federation of Government Employees. "Their broken bones and blood are the bedrock for today's unions." And Teamsters Local 120 reminded us all that "if the working class doesn't go the Union way, it remains outside a framework in which the big companies can continue to exploit and defeat." I couldn't agree more. My confusion lay in the fact that this same union, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which now has more members who are employees of United Parcel Service than of any other

employer, has renegotiated contracts with some of its members in which health care premiums have quadrupled and the time-honoured rule that made workers eligible for retirement after 30 years was eliminated. Oh, and the pension fund is in bad shape - overseen by a group of trustees (union and management representatives) who are paid US \$230,000 a year.

"Labor wide as the earth has its summit in heaven," says the inscription over the gateway to the ruins of the flour mill on the Mississippi near downtown Minneapolis. On May 2, 1879, a horrific fire and explosion of flour dust utterly destroyed Washburn Mill "A." "Not one stone was left upon another, and every person engaged in the mill instantly lost his life." The ruins have been reborn, though, as the shell of the stunning Mill City Museum.

In May 1894, Norwegian immigrants from Minnesota trekked to Winnipeg, then to Calgary, onto Westakiwin and finally to Beaverhill Lake, Alberta, sending a message back to the USA that "this is the place we are looking for."

A century later, among the compatriots they left

behind, the Fringe Theater Festival in Minneapolis in August 2004 featured a production, "An Empire Disguised as a Nation: A Call to Conscience." Please do not carry a gun into the performance.

Myrna Kostash, having completed her term as writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta, is back in her own office in Edmonton, writing two books of nonfiction: *Memoirs of Byzantium*; and *A Reader's Companion to the Saskatchewan River*.