

## THEATRE

# The spirit soars

*The Avro Arrow flies again in a new drama*

THE LEGEND OF THE AVRO ARROW

By Clinton Bomphray

Directed by Guy Sprung

It is a ghost from Canada's past, returned to startling life. In a roar of jet engines, the needle-nosed plane rises above the audience, cloud shadows streaming over its delta wings. After 31 years, Canada's Avro Arrow jet fighter is aloft again. But its flight is an illusion: the plane is a two-thirds-scale, 1½-ton model that forms the centrepiece for *The Legend of the Avro Arrow*. The timely and moving new drama, which premiered at Ottawa's National Arts Centre earlier this year, opened recently at Toronto's Bluma Appel Theatre in a Canadian Stage Company production. It runs there until March 10. The play, television scriptwriter Clinton Bomphray's first work for the stage, tells one of the most controversial and heartbreaking stories in the history of domestic aviation. When the Arrow



Czerney (left), Terry Tweed: controversy and betrayal

was unveiled in 1957, the Canadian-designed and -built jet was billed as the fastest and most advanced in the world. Two years later, it was scrapped by a Conservative government worried about soaring costs and under pressure from Washington not to allow the Canadian A. V. Roe company to capture the market for advanced fighters. But to thousands of ordinary Canadians, the Arrow's cancellation was a betrayal—a near-fatal blow to the country's technology and pride.

At a time of serious national discord and self-doubt, *The Legend of the Avro Arrow* offers a welcome look at the best and worst in the Canadian character. It also fills the stage with an epic richness that is a far cry from the intimate, almost private focus of most English-Canadian drama. While its action takes place largely on the shop floor of the A. V. Roe plant in the Toronto suburb of Malton—where the Arrow was manufactured—the focus also shifts to Ottawa and Washington.

There, Prime Minister John Diefenbaker (Ted Johns), U.S. Vice-President Richard Nixon (Ray Landry) and President Dwight Eisenhower (John Dolan) play the hardball politics that eventu-

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ally determine the Arrow's future. The actors portraying those leaders wear grotesque masks, a satirical ploy that gives the production a clearly populist perspective. The play's heroes are the workers and managers at A. V. Roe—Canadians who do their jobs well and are devastated when their years of dedication are cancelled in a single decree from Ottawa.

Their leader, an A. V. Roe executive named Reid (Henry Czerny), is a colorful, hard-drinking workaholic driven by visions of world leadership in aviation. Oddly enough, there is very little friction between him and his workers, even when he urges them on with all the subtlety of a high-school cheerleader. In Bomphray's vision, the Arrow project transcended the usual worker-management conflicts as both sides strove for something they believed in. From the perspective of the present, that viewpoint appears naïve, but in the context of the play it seems entirely credible.

Still, there are tensions on the shop floor. In a precursor to the feminist battles of later decades, aircraft designer Millie (Karen Woolridge) bickers constantly with her husband, Bert (John Jarvis): he wants her to leave the drawing board and stay at home with the children. Another source of trouble is Tony (Ted Johns), a slouching racist who taunts his fellow assembler Milakowski (Stuart Clow) because he is Polish. The exchanges show up the chief weakness of Bomphray's script: flat-footed dialogue that would fit in an industrial training film. But, through sheer hard work and

conviction, the cast usually manages to get Bomphray's lines airborne.

The actors are also impressive for their versatility, some of them taking on as many as five parts. Johns, who plays a total of three



Sprung (left), Bomphray: epic richness

roles, performs hilariously as Diefenbaker, wearing a jowly mask while intoning "My fellow Canadians" with all of Dief's famous blustering pomposity. The character demonstrates that satire, for all its hyperbole, can also be quite subtle. Bomphray's Diefenbaker is a surprisingly complex figure, a nationalist capa-

ble of dealing cagily with a villainous Nixon, who wants to sabotage production of the Arrow in order to sell U.S. jets. But Diefenbaker's nationalism ultimately collapses under the pressure of his own paranoia. Afraid that the \$400-million Arrow project is part of a plot by his enemies on Bay Street to bleed the country dry, he flies into a rage and cancels the project.

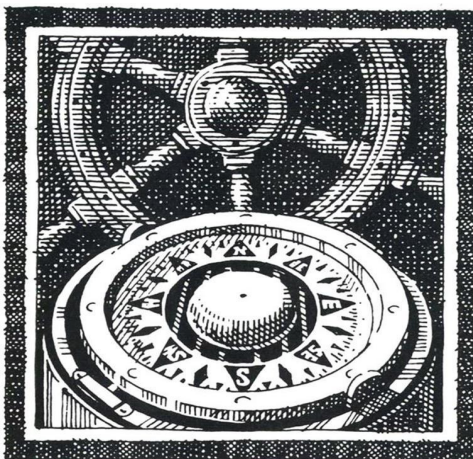
Some of the sketches are more blatantly hostile. Sucking a lollipop, a youthful Brian Mulroney (Landry) appears as a student assistant to Diefenbaker. His ambition, he says, is to be American vice-president when he grows up: Bomphray pulls no punches in suggesting that the current government in Ottawa poses as great a threat to national unity and independence as its predecessor did in the 1950s.

But, ultimately, *The Legend of the Avro Arrow* flies above mere partisanship, mainly because of the positive, central role it gives to the Arrow itself. The pure whiteness and streamlined beauty of Peter Hartwell's gigantic model has an almost surreal effect, as if the Arrow were not so much a plane as a gleaming symbol risen from the collective unconscious of the confident young nation. Never has a Canadian play put so much of Canada's psychic and historical reality on the stage. Despite its sad ending, Guy Sprung's brilliantly detailed production suggests a measure of hope. The Arrow itself may have disappeared, but *The Legend of the Avro Arrow* bears witness to the survival of the creative spirit that produced it.

JOHN BEMROSE

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