

Published in [Canadian Theatre Review](#) - Issue 114, Spring 2003

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## Where Were You in '52?

Canadian theatre on the eve of Stratford.

### [Jerry Wasserman](#)

*This 19 and 52 baby, I'm gonna turn over a brand new leaf,  
This 19 and 52 baby, I'm gonna turn over a brand new leaf,  
I'm gonna leave all of my troubles, baby,  
Gonna leave all of my troubles behind.*

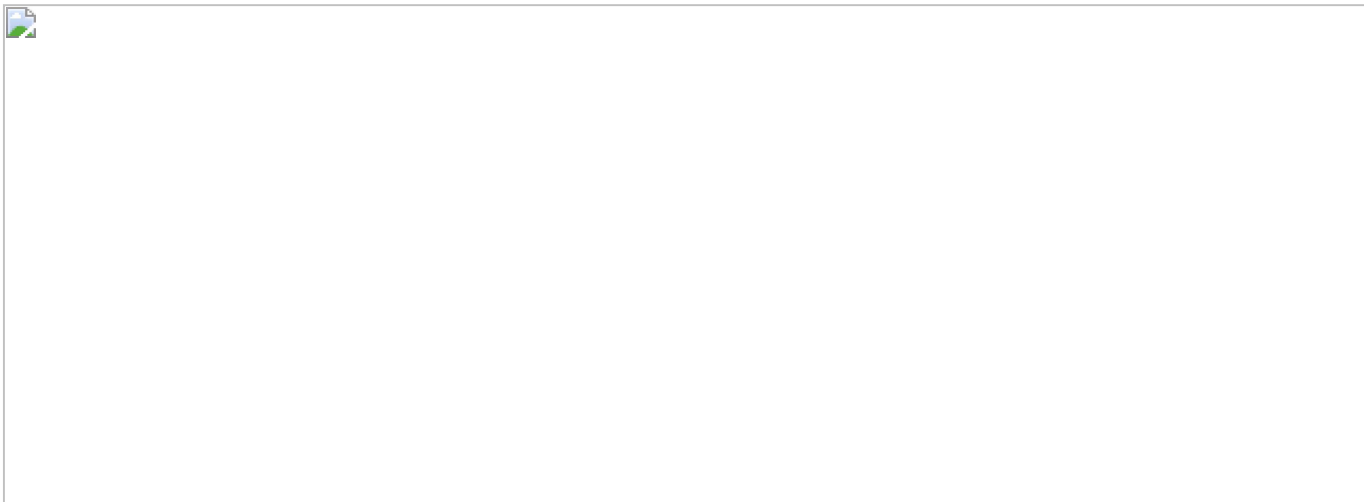
John Lee Hooker, "Turn Over a New Leaf"

Released on the appropriately named Modern label, John Lee Hooker's upbeat blues reflects the mixture of anxiety and optimism that reigned during the fall of 1952 in both the United States and Canada, as plans for the new Stratford Shakespearean Festival proceeded apace. Of troubles there were plenty. The Korean War raged on even as the Americans elected a new President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who promised to end it. The Cold War heated up under the mushroom clouds of A-bomb tests and the imminent hydrogen bomb. The Red scare was at its height, embodied in the frightening power of Senator Joe McCarthy and marked, that October, by the US Supreme Court's rejection of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg's appeal of their conviction for passing atomic secrets to the Russians, for which they would be executed a few months later.

Canadians, too, fought in Korea, suffered nuclear anxiety and feared Reds under their beds. But for Canada that year many new leaves were turning over. There was a new Queen. British Columbians had a new provincial government in W.A.C. ("Wacky") Bennett and his Social Credit Party. The first wave of baby-boomers entered the Canadian school system that fall, and they could watch Canadian TV after school as CBC television went on the air in September. Swept along by the same wave of nationalism that had given rise to the Massey Commission in 1949 and its landmark Report in 1951, Vincent Massey became the first Canadian-born Governor General in 1952. Canadians were feeling pretty good about themselves. And why not? With the post-war economic boom at its peak, Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent's Liberal government marked the fifth of what would be an unprecedented six consecutive annual budget surpluses. Ten years earlier, public opinion polls had found twenty-one per cent of Canadians willing to join the United States. By 1952 that number had dropped to a statistically almost insignificant nine per cent (Schwartz 74). Canadians had become bullish on Canada.

Theatrically, the temper of the times was reflected in productions of two new Canadian plays in the fall of '52. In November one of Canada's first post-war professional companies, Toronto's Jupiter Theatre, produced Ted Allan's *The Money-makers*. On 4 December it would become the first Canadian stage play to be telecast by CBC-TV. The *Money-makers*' stellar cast included John Drainie, who had also starred in Earle Birney's *The Damnation of Vancouver* that October, produced by Andrew Allan for live broadcast on the CBC national radio show *Wednesday Night*. On 6 December Birney's script under its alternate title, *Trial of a City*, received a staged reading in Vancouver by the UBC Players' Club to mark the opening of the university's new Frederic Wood Theatre.<sup>1</sup> Both *The Money-makers* and *The Damnation of Vancouver/Trial of a City* put post-war Canadian values on trial, examining them in the light of perceived American values, particularly crass materialism and rabid anti-Communism. In this regard the plays echo the Red Tory ideology with which Vincent Massey was shaping the cultural policy of the era. The material conditions of their productions, involving radio and TV, a new theatre building and a new company, reflect the dramatic post-war expansion and professionalization of Canadian theatre that would find its apotheosis in the Stratford Festival.

The productions of Birney's play brought together three facets of the emerging Canadian theatre: CBC radio drama, which had been Canada's de facto "National Theatre of the Air" since the inception of Andrew Allan's *Stage* series in 1944; university theatre; and the professional stage. Universities emerged as important training grounds just after the war as the University of Saskatchewan, followed by Alberta and Queen's, instituted theatre programs. The University of British Columbia had been a significant presence in West Coast theatre since 1916 when Professor Frederic Wood started the *Players' Club*. In conjunction with Dorothy Somerset, who arrived in 1921, Wood taught, directed and toured the province with the *Players' Club* for decades. Sydney Risk succeeded Somerset as director of the Club in 1940, then in 1946 established Vancouver's first post-war professional company, *Everyman Theatre*. A member of Risk's company and a former student of Somerset's, Joy Coghill, directed *Trial of a City* for the official opening of the Frederic Wood Theatre on 6 December 1952.



Opening night of Earle Birney's *Trial of a City* (aka *The Damnation of Vancouver*) at the new Frederic Wood Theatre, 6 December 1952. L-r: Frederic Wood, Dorothy Somerset, Earle Birney, Art Sager, Allan Ainsworth, Don Erickson, Eric Vale, James Johnston, Blair Baillie, Nancy Woodworth, Philip Keatley, Elizabeth Keatley, Don Withrow, Bill Buckingham. Photo: courtesy University of British Columbia Archives.

Presiding over the opening ceremonies was UBC President Norman MacKenzie, who had been one of Vincent Massey's commissioners charged with investigating the condition of the arts, letters and sciences in Canada. They predicated their Royal Commission Report on the assumption that "there are important things in the life of a nation which cannot be weighed or measured" but which ultimately "may give a community its power to survive" (4). This is also the theme of Birney's play, a futuristic fantasy about Vancouver.

In the play the Office of the Future has decreed that the city should be eliminated, and to rubber-stamp the decision a sham public hearing is being held. Northrop Frye, in a review, described it as "the kind of pseudo-legal kangaroo court which is the main instrument of McCarthyism" (273). Defending the city is Mr. P.S. Legion, a Chamber of Commerce type whose name is Legion and whose arguments focus on Vancouver's material wealth and prosperity. The role of Legion was read at UBC by Philip Keatley, who would go on to produce *Cariboo Country*, *The Beachcombers* and *Cold Squad* for Canadian television.

Because only the dead are deemed sufficiently neutral to testify, the witnesses called for the hearing are ghosts, among them Captain George Vancouver, a nineteenth-century Salish chief, and William Langland, author of *Piers Plowman*. Legion prompts them to echo his boosterism and defend Vancouver's existence. But instead, each in turn provides damning testimony: that the city is dull and spiritless; that the white man destroyed the indigenous culture, leaving in its place alcohol, disease and money. Langland perceives the city as

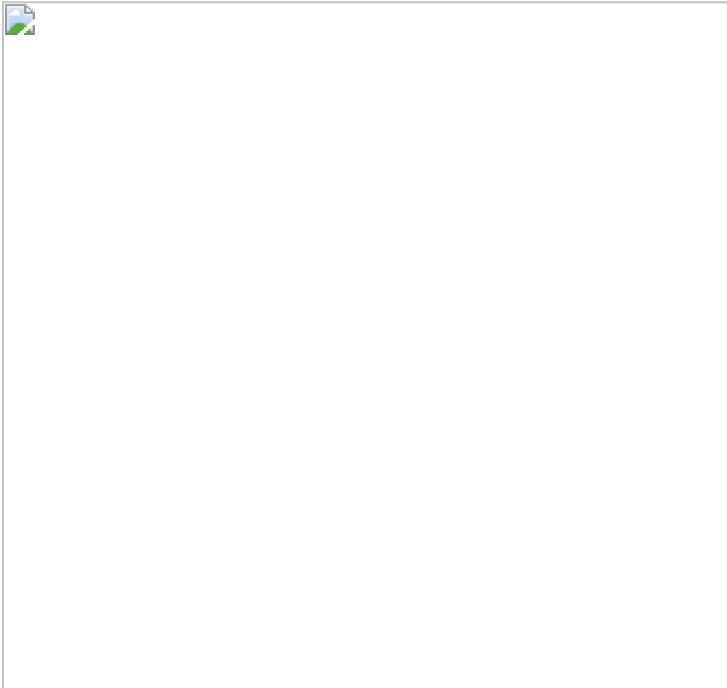
... a hoary wood-waste of houses  
 Massing to the river like lemmings on the march,  
 Jerry-new cottages jostling jowl to jowl  
 Down to the foul and profit-clogged Fraser. (59)

"[H]e's talking like a Red" (61), Legion complains, but to no avail. The verdict seems inevitable until a life-affirming housewife walks into the hearing uninvited. Mrs. Anyone, a kind of *deus ex everywoman*, dismisses the arguments of both the capitalist defence and the nihilist prosecution. In a burst of liberal humanist abstraction ("life asks, and I am made to give" [68]), she turns the play, in Birney's own words, "from damnation to assertion, to belief in the possibilities of life" (79). The hearing is suspended, Vancouver is saved and life, for the time being, triumphs.

One critic suggested that this ending represented "Birney's long-standing dream of the overthrow of the capitalist exploiters by the masses" (Aichinger 157). But the play's politics seem more accurately described by Northrop Frye as traditional Canadian opposition to "the mercantilist Whiggery which won the [American] Revolution and proceeded to squander the resources of a continent" (273). Or as Vincent Massey put it a few years earlier, Canadians face "spiritual dangers" in their exposure to the influences of the American system: "a distorted sense of values, the standardization of life, the worship of mere bulk for its own sake, the uncritical acceptance of the second-rate.... [I]f the obstacle to true Canadianism was 'Downing Street' in the nineteenth century, its enemy today is 'Main Street' with all that the phrase implies" (Massey 124).

While Birney was responding to the baneful influence of American values and the materialist Whiggery of Main Street – what in the 1970s on the Pacific coast would come to be known as Californication – Ted Allan was looking at one of the primary mechanisms by which those values were disseminated and "true Canadianism" threatened. *The Money-makers* is a play about the business and politics of the American movie industry. "The cinema at present is not only the most potent but also the most alien of the influences shaping our Canadian life," the Massey Commission reported with great concern.

"Nearly all Canadians go to the movies; and most movies come from Hollywood .... Hollywood refashions us in its own image" (Royal 50).



The Board of the Jupiter Theatre, 1951: (back row, l-r) Glen Frankfurter, John Drainie, Edna Slatter, Paul Kligman; (front) Len Peterson, George Robertson, Lorne Greene.  
Photo: courtesy the Toronto Public Library (TRL)

Allan, who had been a Young Communist in Montreal in the 1930s and had gone to Spain with Norman Bethune, landed in Hollywood in the late 1940s hoping to get a movie made of his Bethune script. But he quickly realized that wasn't going to happen. Appalled by the anti-Communist hysteria developing there, Allan left to become a mainstay of CBC radio and TV drama in Toronto, where he found himself in the midst of a burgeoning Central Canadian theatre culture that was rapidly professionalizing. Dora Mavor Moore's New Play Society had started up in 1946 and was still actively producing in 1952. The Straw Hat Players, a professional summer stock company, was in its fifth year of production, and Ottawa's Canadian Repertory Theatre was in its fourth. In the fall of 1951 a group of actors and writers involved with CBC radio drama, including John Drainie, Len Peterson and Lorne Greene, had established Jupiter Theatre with the intention of producing Canadian plays. They approached Allan, who had not to that point written for the stage. Drawing on his Hollywood experience, he gave the company a political parable dressed as a comedy of manners, *The Moneymakers*.

Drainie played the idealistic young Canadian screenwriter, David Wright,<sup>2</sup> who comes to Hollywood in the midst of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) witch hunts with the rather naive hope of getting a film made about William Lyon Mackenzie. A wonderfully loathsome, Machiavellian scumbag producer named Paul Finch (played by Lorne Greene) cons David into attaching his name to scripts by a writer who has been blacklisted for his leftist politics. Though David's wife, a paragon of integrity from Saskatchewan (Kate Reid), berates him and eventually leaves him for selling out, David can't resist the lure of the big American bucks Finch is paying him. When he finally does begin to balk, Finch blackmails him, threatening to expose David as a Red and turn the massive disciplinary machinery of American political conformism upon him: "we'll get the legion in on it, every patriotic organization in the country, and Congress! The whole country'll be on your spine, fellah!" (3.3.15). The play ends with a showdown that highlights the essential differences between the two cultures in 1952 as perceived through the lens of Canadian nationalism. The argument still sounds eerily familiar fifty years later.

DAVID: One morality ... money. One principle ... money. One ambition, one goal, one philosophy ... money!  
[...] Where I come from people still ...

PAUL: (contemptuously) You stupid jerk! Where you come from! We can buy and sell your stinking country twenty times over. Where you come from! [...] You want to do a story about a big Canadian hero nobody here ever heard about. How come you don't make the movie in Canada? Where you come from.

DAVID: You guys control the movie industry, the distribution—we haven't got a movie industry.

PAUL: Exactly! Where you come from. What do they do up there besides playing hockey, choppin' down trees and digging iron. Which we buy! [...] I once made a Mountie picture up where you come from. I saw the place. A promoter's paradise. No tax on capital gain! [...] The place is riddled with your fellow Canadians out

to make a fast buck. [...] You think they're any different where you come from than we are here? They're just smaller, that's all. [...]

DAVID: (quietly) There are just a couple of things I want to say before I go. [...] We have thieves and unprincipled bastards like you where I come from. You can buy and sell us twenty times over as you say. Too many of us are still willing to sell ourselves to you. But I have news for you. The fact that I can take your money and throw it in your face, that I know there are things more important to me than money, should announce to you that there are others like me where I come from. The news is—you can't buy us. We won't let you!

PAUL: (grinning) I dangle a hundred grand in front of your president, ten gets you one, he puts his name to those scripts.

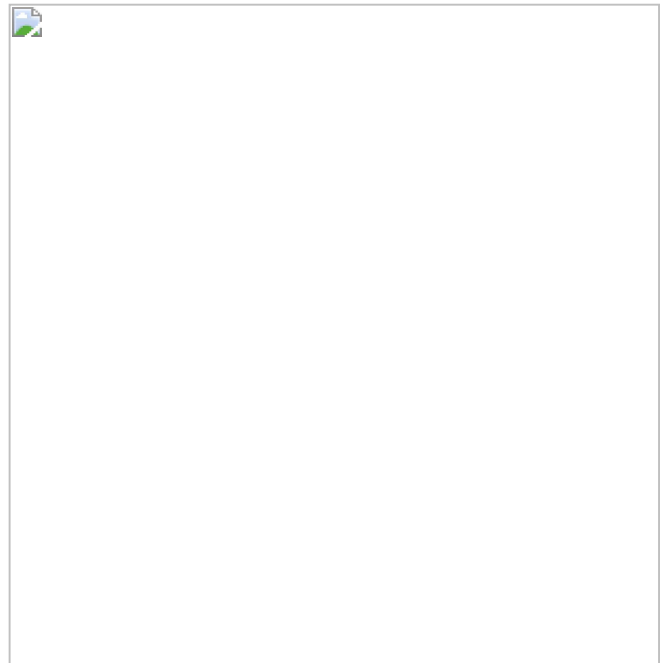
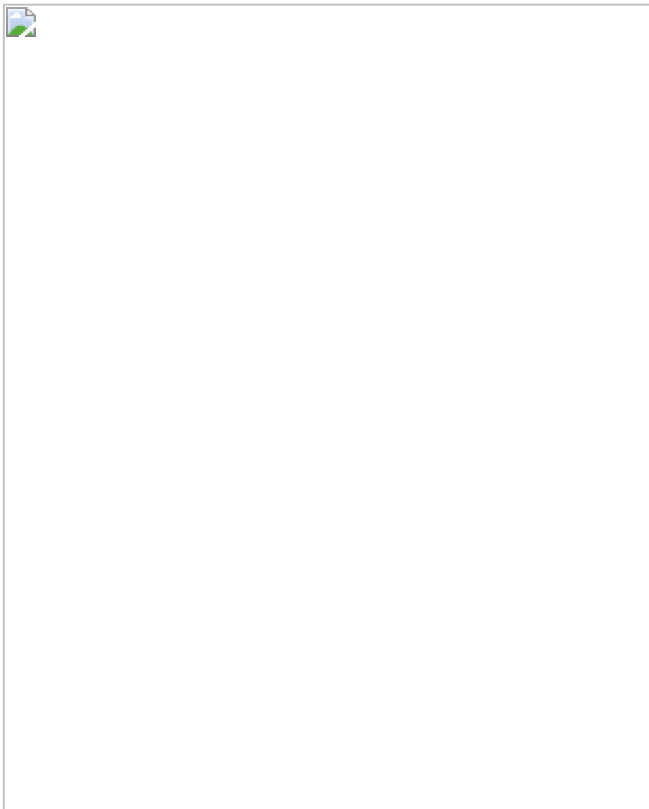
DAVID: We don't have a president. We have a prime minister. (3.3.30–32)

Take that, Red-baiting Philistine Yankee moneymonger!

"The venal Americans and virginal Canadians are hard to credit, even for 1952," Bronwyn Drainie comments (162). But invoking the parliamentary system as a snappy comeback to American boasts about their economic superiority and cultural muscle was in many ways a typical Canadian response to American hegemony in the early fifties, an assertion of meaningful national differences in the face of a growing Canadian sense of ugly-Americanism. This was a strategy shared by the Massey Commission and echoed in Herbert Whittaker's review of the play:

There's some danger of Mr. Allan's here becoming smug about his nationalism, but most of us will lap it up. The view from the north is changing, it seems, and what looked like a big brother down south is beginning to suggest a disease-ridden giant in certain lights. (16)

Jupiter's *The Moneymakers* elicited mostly good reviews from the likes of Nathan Cohen and Jack Karr as well as Whittaker (Partington 70–71). Along with *Trial of a City*, it illuminates some of the key cultural attitudes that informed Canadian playwriting at this central moment in the development of modern Canadian theatre. Both plays critique Canadian complicity with American values, reinforcing the cultural nationalism that defined itself over against them. The plays of autumn 1952 were also literally central in a historical sense. The Dominion Drama Festival had been founded exactly twenty years earlier in October 1932. Toronto Free Theatre would be established exactly twenty years later in the fall of 1972. Midway between the formal institutionalization of Canadian amateur theatre and the triumph of homegrown alternate professional theatre, these plays in their various incarnations marked a critical transition in Canadian theatrical development.



Tent-raising photo by Peter Smith, courtesy the Stratford Festival Archives; Iwo Jima photo courtesy AP World Wide Photos.

A few months later, the Stratford Festival would begin, itself a material sign of the not-American. Consider the frequently reproduced photo that shows Canadian workmen proudly raising the Festival tent like a flag. This emblematic moment of can-do Canadianism (later memorialized by a statue in front of the Festival Theatre) presents the tent, iconic of Canada's northern identity, heroically sheltering the legacy of its rich British theatrical heritage. Mirroring the most famous American icon of military conquest but substituting cultural conquest instead, the image suggests that the Festival would carry on, like those theatre productions of 1952, opposing or at least inflecting American values in a Canadian theatrical context.

### Notes

1 Birney describes the genealogies of the script and its productions in his Preface to the published play (3–6). Thanks to Ian Pratt at UBC, David Gardner (who appeared in both 1952 productions of *The Moneymakers*), Lynda Barnett of CBC Toronto and Alan Walker of the Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library for help in tracking down photos.

2 The typescript of *The Money Makers* (spelled as two words) calls the character David Wright, but in the Jupiter production he was named Michael Bedford. The script is divided into acts and scenes, with page numbers beginning afresh in each scene.

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