

ALBERT-REINER GLAAP

## **Vancouver and the Quest for Transcendence: *Life After God* – A Canadian Play**

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Contemporary Canadian playwrights no longer confine themselves to writing about specifically Canadian topics but rather use such topics as foils for a discussion of universal issues. Michael Lewis MacLennan's play *Life After God* falls into this category. It is a play about a generation raised without religion, about the quest for transcendence, about the disillusionments of adulthood and ultimately about the meaning of life, Vancouver being the foil for all this. *Life After God* is a stage adaptation of a story and prose material from the pen of Douglas Coupland. It is a collaboration of university students and the playwright, between the Theatre at UBC and Touchstone Theatre.

*Life After God*: the word 'after' makes one sit up and take notice. What is the meaning of the word in this title? Is it equivalent to 'after' (something else), or 'according to,' 'on the model of'? Or 'beyond,' because there is no God anymore? MacLennan's play is a look at a generation "raised without the stability of a certainty of belief," writes Jane Penistan (2006). *Life After God* tells the story of six friends who went to high school together in Vancouver, where life was carefree and exciting. The six are now disillusioned and trying to cope with the challenges of modern living and facing the problems of their lives as adults.

### **The Characters in the Play**

Stacey is determined to get what she wants, not caring if she hurts other people. She works as a trainer in a health club. Julie, who lives in North Vancouver, is happily married but cannot find the ways and means of bringing her sons up as less aggressive and more caring human beings. Kristy is a career woman who has no inclination to give up her job in a Vancouver office, although she yearns to get married and have a family. Dana does have a wife and two children. After having led a life with drugs, drinking and pornographic material, he is now trying to convert his friends to the Christian belief. Todd is a seasonal rice planter. With his specific attitude to life, he is the most satisfied and happy of the six friends. And – there is Scout, the pivot on which everything in this play revolves. He is a 'scout' in the true sense of the verb 'to scout' which, etymologically, means 'to listen, to hear attentively' (cf. Latin 'auscultare'). The forest is to him, a place of healing.

Another character, as it were, is Vancouver. Katharine Dunn, the director of the production calls Vancouver “a physical setting that informs the story as much as the human characters that inhabit it” (Vigna 2006). The playwright himself, in his introduction to the edition of the play has this to say:

As a fourth-generation Vancouverite, the city is very much in my blood [...]. Vancouver is a buffered place that (like our characters) is both blessed with natural beauty and cursed with having never quite fulfilled its potential. With that in mind, I wrote various “takes” of the city which also seek to further illuminate the story’s five supporting characters. (MacLennan 2006, iv)

The city of Vancouver has indeed a strong impact on the characters, though in different ways. Stacey says: “The thing about the city? It’s young. There’s no history, nothing’s happened yet. We got mountains on one side, water on the other and it’s like they’re these two buffers preventing anything of consequence from ever arriving” (4). “Everyone’s in too much pain to notice the view,” comments Kristy. “With so much beauty in the city, you take things for granted. I should know” (26).

#### **(Prior to) The Reunion**

After fifteen years the former classmates decide to hold a reunion and Scout tries to persuade them all to attend it. He meets them at various stages of their disparate lives – prior to the event. At these meetings, they give insights into their erstwhile dreams and try to assess the value of their achievements. They realise that they have found their places in society but still keep searching for the meaning of their lives. The overall question is if life can be considered valuable without a pivot that all their doings are based on. Their reactions to this question are very different.

The six friends are part of a generation without religious belief but with a feeling of emptiness in a culture in which the urge to fast-forward is so strong that it cannot be stopped. With hindsight, Scout comments on his own and his friends’ previous lives: “Back then, we never talked about ideas or the meaning of life. We didn’t have to; we lived in paradise. We lived the life of children of the children of the pioneers. We lived a life after God, where salvation was already here, on earth” (3). And now a reunion? Stacey declares that she is not going to this event: “I simply want to know that I *could* go to the reunion and the reasons I’m not going are beyond any issue I might have with the mirror” (32). Scout and Julie are sitting on suburban house steps drinking coffee:

Scout    So what are you going to wear?  
Julie    Wear where?

Scout To the reunion? [...] I was thinking a suit because it says I've arrived, but then I was wondering what *that* says. (10)

When the reunion is finally to take place, Scout does not show up. The other five wonder where he could be. The scene fades to a forest where Scout is sitting wrapped in an old blanket, getting rained on and asking himself what was wrong, whilst the reunion of the other five continues. They reflect on their past and their dreams, and – as a stage direction has it – “*There’s an awkward pause. Nobody knows what to do*” (62). “Wait. Scout’ll be here soon,” Todd says (63).

### **The Climactic Image of the Play**

Towards the end of the play, Scout stands in the water, “*plunges underwater, holds himself foetal and waits. And then? He comes up for air*” (66). This scene is a reminder of the brief opening scene where Scout is “*lost in a forest, in a rain-soaked tent*” (3), which scene, however, switched over to a suburban swimming pool, where five naked bodies are seen floating in the water. The warm water is now, at the end, replaced by a freezing mountain stream. This is not a place where you feel cosy and pampered, it won’t let you rest, it will wake you up. The frigid water does not invite you to stay, but to move on to pastures new. MacLennan says: “I think [Scout] needs engagement in his own life and the lives of the people around him. He needs to be reborn” (Thomas 2006). His immersion is an image of the Christian ritual of baptism. He says:

The water roars like truth, like citizens who behold the king, cheering for a voice that will speak to them. I’ll be that voice. I’ll tell them my quiet secret: my secret is that I need God. I need God to help me give because I no longer seem capable of giving, to help me to be kind as I no longer seem to be capable of kindness. To help me love since I’m beyond being able to love. (64)

For the author of *Life After God*, his play is “a story of rebirth, a journey through imaginative terrain [...]. In a way [it] is a collective dream. Water is everywhere: a cleansing or eroding force” (iv).

Scout’s rebirth, it seems, reflects Michael Lewis MacLennan’s own immersion in faith a few years before: “A friend invited him to a service at Toronto’s Metropolitan Community Church. Now he attends every week when he’s in town,” writes Colin Thomas and continues, “although identifying himself as Christian raises fears of being labelled a fundamentalist. MacLennan reveals: ‘The tenets of Christianity are about transformation through love’” (Thomas 2006). Apparently, MacLennan is not a hardliner who follows the basic rules of a denomination very strictly and exactly.

### A Story Adapted for the Stage

MacLennan's play is based on a story and other prose material from the pen of Douglas Coupland. In Canadian theatre, some other works of prose have been adapted for the stage. Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* (1965) has been rewritten as a play by Dave Carley (2002). Jane Urquart's *The Whirlpool* (1986) was adapted by Brian Quirt and mounted at the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto in 2000. *The Stone Angel* (1964) by Margaret Laurence was produced at Canadian Stage, Toronto, in 1999. And now, Michael Lewis MacLennan together with Katrina Dunn, Artistic Director of Touchstone Theatre, adapted the title story (*Life After God*) of Douglas Coupland's collection *1,000 Years* (1994) for the joint production between Touchstone Theatre and the theatre department of the university of British Columbia.

As for Douglas Coupland, he is the author of *Generation X* and *Everything's Gone Green*, a feature film, *Souvenir of Canada*, which yielded an art installation, and *jPod*, of which Coupland himself says: "It's about the technical disposability of your co-workers, but it's also your amoral engagement with your culture. In Vancouver we're all kind of complicit in what goes on here" (Beers 2006).

"Adapting *Life After God* for the stage," writes theatre critic John Vigna, "required thinking about the story in new ways while maintaining its emotional truth, particularly since other than informal discussions, Coupland was not involved in the collaboration" (Vigna 2006). And MacLennan himself asserts: "I wanted to be faithful to the story, discovering what the movements of the characters were. But I also didn't want to be too faithful to the original text, so I looked for dramatic moments, ones in which I could keep the heart of the story" (Vigna 2006).

While a story or novel is written for the individual experience of a reader, a play-script is written for a shared experience. Thus the questions to be asked here are: What was taken over from the Coupland story? What was altered or added to fit the requirements of the production of the play? The climactic image of the story has remained the same: Scout goes into the forest and immerses himself in the mountain stream. But whereas Coupland's story is totally focused on Scout, MacLennan has formed a new 'backbone': a 15-year high school reunion to which not only Scout but also the other characters are orienting themselves. The time prior to this reunion – with several meetings and discussions of the characters involved – gives the play a dramatic tension which is absent in the original story. MacLennan's play contains interactive scenes which reflect an ongoing communication between the characters and thus identify the play as a shared experience. Another important change that MacLennan and Dunn made to the original story was, as mentioned above, that Vancouver became a character in the play, and this on the basis of another book by Douglas Coupland, *City of Glass*, which is a collection of essays and photographs, a guide to Vancouver. UBC students were asked to write monologues which were to give insights into the diverse facets of the character of the city. Basically, Vancouver in *Life After God* is the Vancouver of the 1990s and fifteen years later.

The six friends in the play were growing up when life in this town did not involve any problems or worries. Vancouver was a town to be explored.

### ***Life After God as a Play***

MacLennan's play – as an adapted version of Coupland's story – is not a traditional dramatic piece subdivided into acts and scenes. Whatever happens is oriented to a central image and this keeps the audience in suspense. This play is a 'collage' of interactive scenes, dialogues, monologues and short story elements. Katrina Dunn has directed this "unusual and deeply introspective play with an unerring hand," writes Jane Penistan, and she continues: "The author's mordant humour in the dialogue is well contrasted with the dream sequences, and the poetic language of much of the script is delivered sensitively" (Penistan 2008). Colin Thomas, however, points to a few weaknesses in the playscript: "Scout is so front-and-centre. Some of the other characters have maybe five or six lines of dialogue." And he refers to MacLennan who argues that Coupland's "tale isn't inherently the stuff of drama" (Thomas 2006). One must admit, however, that this generally applies to stories adapted for the stage.

*Life After God* deals with several topics: the Vancouver of the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium; the problems of transition from youth to adulthood. And it asks a central question, which John Vigna sums of as follows: "Can we find meaning or connection in the madness of the modern world and in the absence of belief?" (Vigna 2006).

*Life After God* had its German-language premiere – in a translation by Ute Scharfenberg – at Theater Magdeburg on October 19, 2008 (cf. Scharfenberg 2008).

### ***Life After God – One Facet of Contemporary Canadian Drama***

MacLennan's play is but one of a number of Canadian plays which indicate that the focus has shifted from specifically Canadian topics to subjects of general concern. To refer to only two examples, Judith Thompson's *Palace of the End* (2007) is about the Iraq war, in particular about the situation before and after the US-led invasion of Iraq (cf. Glaap 2012). *Ubuntu. The Cape Town Project* by Theatrefront Toronto (2012) is a trans-hemispheric theatre project which thematises the conflicting ideas of two cultures – South Africa and Canada. In this play, an African and a Canadian storyline are intertwined (cf. Glaap 2015).

These two plays and *Life After God* also reflect different concepts of playwriting. They are not plays in the conventional sense. *Palace of the End* is a trio of vignettes, i.e. three monologues spoken by three different individuals. *Ubuntu*, the product of a cooperation between two theatres (Baxter Theatre in Cape Town and Theatrefront in Toronto), is a collectively composed play. And *Life After God* weaves dialogues, monologues and narrative elements into interactive scenes which are stages of a quest for transcendence in the characters' – and the theatregoers' – minds.

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