

AMERICA'S PREMIER "FIRST NIGHT"

---1606

By F. FRASER BOND

THE first play written and produced in North America resembled in one respect at least, the early drama of ancient Greece. . . it was acted in the open air. It had the sky itself as cyclorama, and the mountain greenery of the surrounding hills as setting. But the stage was different. The first actors here did not tread the boards; instead, they rode the waves. For the first American play, Marc Lescarbot's "Neptune's Theatre," was acted in boats and canoes on the water in front of the "Habitation" which de Monts and Champlain had established at Port Royal, Acadia, now Nova Scotia, on the fourteenth day of November, 1606.

Lescarbot wrote his play ostensibly to welcome home the fort's governor, the Sieur de Poutrincourt from an exploring expedition which reached as far south as Cape Cod. Actually, our first playwright contrived and rehearsed his show to safeguard the morale of the men which Poutrincourt had left behind at the Habitation. Lescarbot explains it all in his "History of New France."

"About the time we were expecting his (Poutrincourt's) return, whereof we had great desire, the more so that if evil had come upon him we had been in danger of a mutiny, I thought to go out to meet him with some jovial spectacle, and so we did."

No curtain went up on this jovial spectacle. The audience would hardly have been more surprised if it had. When their barque had anchored in that royal harbor, now the Annapolis Basin, and they had clambered into shallows to row ashore, the unexpected play began. They saw a gay flotilla approach. Leading in a barge stood Neptune in long white beard, with a gold crown on his head, a blue robe blowing around him, his trident in his hand. Accompanying him in lesser craft came six Tritons, and behind them in canoes, four other actors costumed to resemble savages.

Neptune himself began the play with his speech of welcome. He introduced himself as the sea deity he was "Look on a god who holds thee in his care," and proceeded in a highly patriotic and prophetic vein, which suggests that the playwright probably hoped that Neptune's sentiments, echoed from the Acadian hills, might even reach the royal ears of Henry of Navarre in the Louvre.

"Hold then thy course and fortune go with thee
 When fate decides, for destiny I see
 Prepares for France a vast and rich Empire
 In this New World, whence fame's immortal lyre
 Shall to the Old World evermore proclaim
 Thine own, de Mont's, and puissant Henry's name."

As Neptune ended his say, he noticed that Poutrincourt held his sword unsheathed in fitting salute — a governor to a god. Then a trumpet blew a loud call which summoned the Tritons and each in turn, from a pompous start through polished Alexandrines to uncouth verses in *patois*, present a variety of compliments and patriotic sentiments.

The fifth Triton introduced some comic relief by hinting at the philandering tendencies of seamen, even of old Neptune himself. He spoke in the Gascon dialect — something again to amuse the great King Henry overseas.

"I go tell you what I tink
 Old Man Neptune naughty fellow
 Dress himself in blue and yellow
 Look himself in glass and wink

Went and kissed a pretty maid
 Never asked the lassie's father
 Did she like it? She — well rather
 Not — I tell you what she said —

I dont trust a sailor man
 'Specially when he's old and dripping
 Neptune, dear, you'd best be flipping
 Out of here as quick you can.

The sixth Triton brought the sentiment back to a loftier plane with another salute to "Henry, Sovran King of France." Then the seeming savages took part in turn introducing more action if somewhat less eloquent. Each with a short rhymed speech presented a present, or rather, each one but the last. The first indian offered a quarter of moose with his homage; the second handed over some fine beaver skins. The third savage struck a romantic note for these Frenchmen exiled from their womenfolk, by bringing necklaces and bracelets of porcupine quills which he said had been fashioned by the fair hand of his intended. He hinted at the universality of romance:

“Here on Western shores as well
Sparkle eyes and bosoms swell
When Cupid’s heeding.”

The last savage offered a promise but nothing else. He bore a harpoon but no wampum. He was not even an “indian giver.”

“Red man bring no gift — no luck — bad hunting — waw;
— beat woods all day — no moose — no deer — change
business — give up hunting — waw — great chief
Neptune go fishing — waw — bring fish tomorrow
for white chief — me hungry — white chief
give food — waw — Caracona — grub — waw.”

Poutrincourt took his cue here as the dramatist expected he would, and in an impromptu speech he thanked Neptune and the indians and invited all to a feast within the fort. As the shallops brought the seafaring audience ashore, the Tritons who were sailors after all sang a sea chanty to a catchy popular tune. The little band on the shore caught it up for it echoed a thought uppermost in the mind of all.

“Great god Neptune, send our fleet
In safety o’er the waters
And bring us homeward all to meet
Our loving wives and daughters.”

But the play had not ended yet. At the entrance of the Habitation, Poutrincourt saw his coat-of-arms, along with those of de Monts and of France, set up in all their bright heraldic colors as decor and garlanded with crowns of laurel. Here stood what a printed program would have called “a gay companion.” This merry fellow declaimed his welcome in a verse of rhymed couplets, and then turned to those within the gates and ordered:

“Up then stewards, scullions, batmen
Hurry lean, and scurry fat men
Clatter out your pots and dishes
Roast your haunches, fry your fishes
Pour your flagons, fill your glasses
Drinks for everyone that passes. . . .

Turning again to his audience, he poetically enlarged the menu to include ducklings, chicken, soup and batter, and concluded the literary phase of America’s first play with a hospitable

as well as a theatrical finale:

“Come my lads from field and stable
 Set your knees beneath the table
 Come my lords, and noble red men
 Here is wine to turn your head, men
 But before you start your capers
 Sneeze aloud to clear the vapors
 The play's ended, that is certain
 Naught remains, but draw the curtain.”

No critics attended the drama's first night on this continent. If *The Times* had had a man there, he doubtless would have labelled the entertainment a masque, as indeed it was. He might have commended the acting of the cast, made up of “certain gentlemen and common men of the expedition.” He might have noted, knowing *The Time's* penchant for detail, some members of the distinguished audience — *Sieur de Poutrincourt*, his young son, *Biencourt*, *Samuel de Champlain* of *Brouage*, *Sieur de Bouillet* and other notables. Commenting on script, he might have praised the versatility of the author in his use of verse as a dramatic medium, and hinted at his probable wide knowledge of the literature of the day. Noting the incidental music, “*La Priere a Neptune*,” he would have pointed out, that *Lescarbot* had probably bagged that air from a popular ditty, “*La Petite Galiotte de France*” and had changed the words to suit his masque.

As for the setting, “where God paints the scenery,” he undoubtedly would have had unstinted praise for few sites in old world or in new can compare with the *Port Royal* district in natural beauty.

Although “*Neptune's Theatre*” lacked formal criticism, it did get some press notices. The author records it himself in his “*History of New France*”, to which work he added the full script of his play, along with other verses as a supplement under the title, “*Muses of New France*.”

“I ask the reader,” he writes, “to excuse these rhymes if they are not as well polished as a well-bred man would wish. They were made in haste. But nevertheless I have a wish to insert them here for they serve as a part of our history and to show that we lived joyously.”

And *Champlain* notes in his “*Voyages*,” published in 1613: “Upon our arrival, *Lescarbot*, who had remained at the settle-

ment along with the others who had stayed there, welcomed us with sundry jollities for our entertainment."

It seems odd that "Neptune's Theatre" should have had to wait until a comparatively short time ago to receive a modern English translation. All historians dealing with its period have of course recorded it, but even the excellent translations of Lescarbot's own "History," left the masque in its original tongue. Harriette Taber Richardson, of Cambridge, Mass., whose contagious enthusiasm for Port Royal and its history inspired the complete restoration there of the Champlain Habitation, brought out the first translation in a limited edition in 1926. Another, by R. Keith Hicks, professor of French, Trinity College, University of Toronto, followed shortly after. The foregoing quotations come from Professor Hick's fine Gallic-flavored rendering.

As a produced play, "Neptune's Theatre" has enjoyed merely its original performance. In 1932, Mrs. Richardson's translation was read within sight of the waterfront where it was first acted. The parts were read by leading members of the Annapolis Royal Historical Association, and the occasion had commemorative rather than dramatic importance.

As for the first playwright himself, he seems to have had a lingering fondness for his little *piece de theatre*, and saw to it that it circulated in good quarters. In 1609, three years after its premiere, "Neptune's Theatre" was printed in Paris, and sold by Jean Millot, "at the steps of the great hall of the Palace." In all, five editions appeared within a span of nine years.

And what of this man who first wrote and produced a play on this continent? Undoubtedly, Marc Lescarbot was a man of parts. His own varied writings, and the comments of his contemporaries all stamp him as possessing vivacity, versatility, a love of adventure, practical common sense, and a prophetic vision. He was born in France in 1570 at Vervins, near Laon, received a sound education and became a lawyer. He held no illusions however concerning his profession. In his "History" he tells us "lawsuits are the bane of man's existence, for in the pursuit of them men waste their money and their health, and often justice is not obtained after all." From the first he had the itch to write and he seldom let an official occasion slip by without producing a suitable ode or essay. When his friend, Poutrincourt, invited him to join the expedition to Port Royal, Lescarbot jumped at the chance, induced as he puts it, "by his desire to flee a corrupt world and to examine this new land with his own eyes."

In this land, the lawyer-dramatist proved wiser than the explorers, and in foresight, well ahead of his contemporaries. He started in to cultivate the lands around the fort. He had grasped the truth that the colony must be rooted in the soil, a truth which eluded the gold-seeking explorers. He set down a precept, which if heeded might have changed the whole history of French colonization: "The first mine is to have bread and wine and cattle**** Our good fortune does not lie in mines, especially of gold and silver, which are of no use in the tillage of the soil, nor in the exercise of handicrafts."

Lescarbot further showed his versatility at Port Royal by pinch-hitting for the priests. The two missionaries who had originally come with de Monts had left the fort by the time the second expedition arrived, so Poutrincourt asked his lawyer-companion to take over some of their duties. This Lescarbot straightway did, and, according to his own account, acquitted himself not too badly.

"I am not ashamed to confess," he writes, "that at the request of our chief, I devoted some hours each Sunday to the religious instruction of our men, both in order to improve their minds, and to offer an example to the indians of our manner of living. And these efforts did not prove fruitless, for several admitted they had never heard the matters pertaining to the deity so well set forth, previously being ignorant of the doctrines of Christianity, which is indeed the state of the greater portion of Christendom."

In the autumn of 1607, Lescarbot returned to France and resumed his law practice apparently with some success. In 1609 he published his first edition of the "History of New France" with the "Muses of New France" containing the script of "Neptune's Theatre" added as a supplement. In 1619 he married a lady of rank and of some property and went to live on her estates near Amiens. No record exists of the date of his death, but he was alive and writing away in 1629, for in that year he published an oration in honor of the defeat of the English in their attempted relief of La Rochelle. He is presumed to have died about 1634.

The Canadian Authors' Association in 1947 erected as a "temporary monument" to Lescarbot, a cairn of stones overlooking the site of "Neptune's Theatre." The slab which surmounted this cairn read:

Praise God for Marc Lescarbot
Who living Hereabouts 1606-07
Wrote and Produced Nearby
America's First Play

Marc Lescarbot with prophetic insight foresaw a monument in the new world more fitting than this pile of rocks already dilapidated. In imagination he looked forward to the establishment nearby of an endowed active theatre. While he patriotically dedicated his "History" to his monarch, the great Henry, he shrewdly inscribed his "Muses" and the script of his play to the Chancellor of France, stating what he had in his mind.

"Yet if it comes to pass, monseigneur, that by your favor, assistance and support, there should come a day among the mountains and the brooks that run from them, in Port Royal, that they, the Muses, should have the power to grow more gentle and should answer in more polished language to the music of Apollo. Then in their songs let them remember the kindness of him who*****would still hold it not beneath the dignity of a Chancellor of France, that he would aid the establishment of the Muses of New France across the seas."

Someday Lescarbot's dream may come true. Someday friends of the drama in North America aided by the theatre folk of Broadway and Hollywood and perhaps of France, may erect in the lovely town of Annapolis Royal, where Port Royal was re-established in 1629, a theatre to Lescarbot's memory — a theatre which through its annual Summer festivals might duplicate on this continent the cultural benefits of a Stratford-on-Avon, a Salzburg or an Edinburgh. Then Lescarbot, who saw the seeds of grain which he planted spring up and flourish, would know that the dramatic Muse which he had transplanted in 1606 had taken firm root in his beloved Acadia.