

CHERYL TAYLOR

Jean Devanny, *Paradise Flow*, ed. Carole Ferrier, with Preface by Diane Menghetti, Hecate Press, Brisbane, 1985.

This play is of considerable historical and social interest, recording the conflict between big and little cane farmers, between farmers and cutters, and between conservative and radical migrant cutters in the Innisfail district in the late 1930's. Diane Menghetti explains the complex political background: how the government's decision to protect the local industry and the falling price of sugar on the world market led to the system whereby mills assigned land which could be used for growing protected sugar; how farmers without an assignment struggled against odds to survive; how the RSL and the conservative mill owners and growers secured cane-cutting jobs for ex-servicemen, by dispossessing migrant workers; and how migrant workers were politically divided, with some Italians supporting Mussolini and others joining the Communist Party or other left-wing organisations.

Jean Devanny experienced the conflicts in the North Queensland sugar industry while helping to organise the strike over Weil's disease in 1935. In *Paradise Flow* her sympathies are with the Communist workers, Russian, Italian and Yugoslav, and there is a clear propagandist intention; but the play is as much about personal relationships as politics.

The hero (in the literary and non-literary senses) is Toni Muranovich, a Yugoslav managing the farm of a wealthy grower, Big Bill Macquarie. Toni has a love affair with Bill's wife, Laurel. Both lovers change as the affair unfolds: Laurel, as Carole Ferrier points out, has a "refining" influence on Toni, so that he comes to relate to women in an emotional way — before meeting her he has been satisfied with fleeting affairs and with weekly visits to prostitutes; and he comes to hold his Communist political faith more strongly in the end, in reaction, because his relationship with Laurel has tended temporarily to weaken it. To Laurel, Toni first appears as a messianic figure, literally in a blaze of light. He awakens her to political realities, to Big Mac's oppression of smaller farmers, Australian and migrant, and to political commitment. Women like Laurel may not have been so uncommon when Devanny wrote *Paradise Flow*, but for a reader now Laurel's ignorance of her husband's business dealings and her sexual attitudes — she sleeps with neither her husband nor her lover — are difficult to believe in. Laurel's sexual niggardliness is condemned in the play as destructive, and analysed as an instance of the middle class's moral oppression. The death of

the jack donkey bought by Big Mac, which breaks its neck on the fence separating it from the mares, is the symbol of Laurel's final sexual triumph.

Although he is heavily satirised as a capitalist, and condemned for his sly use of contempt as a weapon against the lovers, Big Mac's sufferings in his family life are in the end presented sympathetically. The unconsummated affair robs his indignation of direct expression, and in a final melodramatic scene he is shot dead by Vittioni, a small-holder whom he has deceived and exploited. Vittioni then shoots himself, a tragic figure, misguided both in his business dealings and in his commitment to Fascism.

Paradise Flow expresses Jean Devanny's well-known affection for North Queensland. The cane-farmers and their workers are shown to have a distinctive life-style. A Sunday-morning scene in a cane-barracks, although not essential to the plot, is an authentic social document. The unique man-made and natural environment is presented on stage in the sets (e.g. banana plant, with bananas) and in dialogue references, and by such props as snake skins and dead bandicoots.

The keynote of the writing is excess — an excess of local authenticity; an excess of characters; an excess of minor off-shoots of the plot; an excess of accents and dialect speakers; an excess of exclamations and strong feelings. Laurel's stilted phrases drop like lead into this living cauldron: "I firmly believe, Will, that anyone can find the strength within himself to do what is right and good. My dear father always said so."