Karl Eigsti: Imagination as Motive

by Warren Kliewer

Until very recently three truths were immutable: death is certain, taxes are inevitable, and Mennonites do not become theater artists. But the facts no longer support this third truth. There is a small but growing body of Americans and Canadians of Mennonite background who have made careers in the professional and academic theater as writers, directors, actors, designers, and theater administrators, and who are making major contributions to a traditionally forbidden art form. The most prominent of this group is no doubt Karl Eigsti, widely known and respected in the American theater for his innovative scenic designs.

The fact that such a development has occurred raises fascinating questions. How does one account for this sudden burst of imaginative activity? The formation in 1989 of the Association of Mennonites in the Arts would suggest that the imagination has suddenly become respectable. But how does one derive an esthetic from a theology and from ethnic cultures which for over four hundred fifty years did not encourage the free play of imagination? Or could it be that artistic growth was caused by the good influences of the larger society in which Mennonites now live?

This is not likely. For although great claims have been made for the power of the human imagination, especially by the philosopher-poets of the European Romantic movements, this exalted view was not easily transplanted to America. It is true, for example, that one of our presidents, Thomas Jefferson, greatly admired fine architecture and articulated in his idealistic views on education his reverence for the life of the mind. But we are more likely in this country to elect a Ulysses S. Grant who said, "I know only two songs. One is 'Yankee Doodle,' and I've forgotten the other one." And even Jefferson warned his daughter against "the inordinate passion prevalent for novels," the result of which noxious habit, he assured her, would result in "a bloated imagination, sickly judgment, and disgust toward all the real businesses of life."

It is true that in 1844 in his introduction to Representative Men, Ralph Waldo Emerson celebrated the pleasure of "witnessing intellectual feats":

Foremost among these activities are the somersaults, spells, and resurrections, wrought by the imagination. When this wakes, a man seems to multiply ten times or a thousand times his force. It opens the delicious sense of indeterminate size, and inspires an audacious mental habit. We are as elastic as the gas of gunpowder, and a sentence in a book, or a word dropped in conversation, sets free our fancy, and instantly our heads are bathed with galaxies, and our feet tread the floor of the Pit. And this benefit is real, because we are entitled to these enlargements, and, once having passed the bounds, shall never again be quite the miserable pedants we were.

The audiences that first heard this paean to the imagination probably applauded enthusiastically, as Emerson's audiences always did, and probably continued to warn their daughters never to marry one of those dreamers and their sons never to become one. American audiences are more likely to hear the kinds of lectures Sinclair Lewis put into the mouths of his characters in Babbitt, who judge the imagination by the monetary value of artists' creations. "No country," says George F. Babbitt has anything like our number of phonographs, with not only dance records and comic but also the best operas, such as Verdi, rendered by the world's highest-paid singers.

And he boasts that

In other countries, art and literature are left to a lot of shabby bums living in attics and feeding on booze and spaghetti, but in America the successful writer or picture-painter is indistinguishable from any other decent business man.

In George Babbitt's Zenith, the imagination has been tamed. Culture is good for business.

Even if we make allowances for the poetic hyperbole of Emerson and the slangy satire of Lewis, what emerges is a grim dilemma for American artists. The imagination, this uniquely human capacity for knowing the world and finding relationships among the di-