

## Great Theatre of the Soul

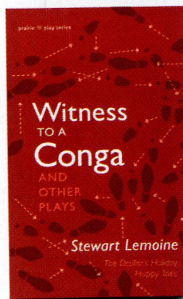
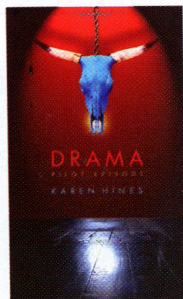
### Alberta playwrights on the page.



I may be in the minority, but I've always had a weakness for reading plays before, after or even instead of seeing them. Scripts are more focused than novels, allow for more thought than actual stage productions and come with stage directions and marked speech that ensure you know exactly what's happening. That doesn't mean all plays are worth reading, but two recent books by Alberta playwrights—*Drama: Pilot Episode*, by Calgary Karen Hines (Coach House Books, 110 pp), and *Witness to A Conga and Other Plays* by prolific Edmontonian Stewart Lemoine (Prairie Play Services, 206 pp)—show just how successful the written version of a stage production can be.

The written version of a stage production is different, of course, than the script not meant for production. The latter has pleasures of its own, but Hines and Lemoine are both playwrights, not fiction writers experimenting with form, and their works stand both as partial replications of productions of their work and as guidance for new productions. I'd be happy to be wrong, but I suspect new productions may be a little slow to come in the case of Hines's *Drama: Pilot Episode*, which is very much a Calgary play. I've never read a work in any genre that so perfectly captures the Calgary experience—a city that, as one of Hines's characters remarks, knows everything about what's happening underground but nothing about what we're doing above it.

*Drama*, as you might guess from the title, is a metadrama—a dramatic work about the human need for creating drama in our own lives. It's also a bit of pastiche of different 21st century genres, making it a drama called *Drama* that dramatizes drama through the dramatic. Let's be a little more concrete, shall we? Its characters are mostly members of professions (psychiatry and show business) who we might expect to create meaningful narrative, but who in fact mostly concentrate on selling the illusion of meaning so that we can carry on with our status-driven lives. Hines is superb at depicting in a few words the despair of people who feel forced to live lives bereft of meaning, as exemplified by The Content Creator, a would-be television writer driven to suicide by the gap between what he could do and what "the market" wants. This play vividly encapsulates everything we've become in the 21st century. *Drama* does what drama does best—holds up a mirror to the audience that makes them think their individual concerns are part of a larger drama being played out in the world. I can't imagine a person in the Western world who would be left untouched by the great drama of souls Hines creates here, and I'm kicking myself for not having seen it in



performance at Alberta Theatre Projects.

I'm not often in Edmonton, so I can forgo the kicking when it comes to Stewart Lemoine's *Witness to a Conga and Other Plays*, but the three plays in this volume are, even more than *Drama*, ones I'd like to see in performance. There's a grand sweep to *Drama* that makes it work well on the page, but Lemoine's pieces are quieter, more delicate affairs: they need the substantiality of actors and stage to be fully appreciated. That's not to say that the plays—all of which are in some way about letting go of illusions—aren't worth reading. They are. But Lemoine, a veteran playwright with dozens of plays in his portfolio, is in no way writing for the reader (I think Hines is, at times), which means that one gets the impression of a

dramatic arc. This can't help but leave the reader with the impression that there should have been more to the piece. One obvious way the book can't deliver on Lemoine's work is that it doesn't include music, which Lemoine obviously knows well and which plays a significant part in all the plays here.

The plays themselves are more personal in tone than *Drama*—there are no monsters here, and no overt societal commentary. What there is is a series of acute observations rendered in dialogue (and often in monologue) on how we construct versions of ourselves that bear little relation to who we really are. This is the theme of most (all?) of contemporary drama, and Lemoine's contributions succeed very well at what they do.

My only complaint is Lemoine's tendency to sum up "the lesson" of the play at its end. Perhaps this works better on the stage than on the page, but in fact Hines does something similar without it seeming intrusive at all. Maybe the relative largeness of her dramatic world allows her to take liberties that Lemoine's smaller worlds don't. In the end, though, Lemoine has accomplished what he set out to do—to give the reader a taste of what it might be like to actually see these plays performed.

Stewart Lemoine has been writing for Edmonton's Teatro la Quindicina for 30 years. He may not have another 30 in him, so I, at least, will make a point of heading up Hwy 2 to get the full experience. ■

Alex Rettie is Alberta Views' long-time monthly books columnist.