


The Arts



Kikauka, Monahan: 'no phobia about alternative culture here'

Then we take Berlin

When Toronto experimental artist Laura Kikauka and her composer husband, Gordon Monahan, arrived in Berlin in 1992, they scoured the garbage heaps on the east side of town for electronic gadgets they could use in their art and music. The capital city of a defunct Communist state provided a gold mine of funky possibilities—obsolete cables, generators, alternators and light bulbs—which they stored in a downtown warehouse space that soon began to overflow. That's when Kikauka and Monahan opened The Glowing Pickle, a late-night bar and surplus sale outlet, where cocktails were served in test tubes, and patrons could redeem coins inspired by Canadian Tire dollars. Encouraged by the German response to her off-the-wall humor, Kikauka went on to set up Spätverkauf (After Hours Shop), a pseudo-store poking fun at the country's restrictive retailing hours that featured kitschy items such as lamps made from jars of sausages. The couple's latest spoof on life in Germany is Schmalzwald (Lard Forest), an "irritainment" venue in east Berlin's Prater culture centre, featuring Monahan as a Liberace-style character playing lounge-lizard music.

Kikauka, 34, and Monahan, 41, who came to Berlin on a prestigious German arts fellowship, have become darlings of the Berlin avant-garde, courted by network TV crews and featured in newspapers as influential as the national weekly *Die Zeit*. Their success is just one indicator of the current German fascination with Canadian creative

artists. There is a growing enthusiasm for a Canadian viewpoint—in film, dance, music and, especially, literature. Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces* was on best-seller lists for seven months this year and has sold more than 80,000 copies—a runaway best-seller by German standards. Barbara Gowdy says she is better known in Germany than in Britain or the United States and has sold more books there than in Canada. "That's where I earn my living," Gowdy told *Maclean's*. Canadian choreographer Reid Anderson, artistic director of the

Stuttgart Ballet, has won nonstop kudos since he took over the company a year ago. In film, Patricia Rozema's *When Night Is Falling* scored sales of more than 200,000 cinema tickets in the summer of 1995, and then aired on prime-time television. And Quebec's Robert Lepage, best-known as a theatrical wunderkind, had a repertory-house hit with his film *Le Confessionnal*.

Germany is not the only European country to embrace Canadian creators. Britons, too, adore the fiction of Margaret Atwood and Carol Shields,

and the French also flock to movies by Atom Egoyan and David Cronenberg. Germans, however, seem to have a special affinity for the Canadian imagination. German youth discovered the Toronto alternative rock band Surrender Dorothy before it had a North American recording contract. And the trend embraces mainstream culture as well as the fringe, says Astrid Holzhamer, who has been promoting Canadian culture for the embassy in Bonn for nearly two decades. German arts consumers are drawn to a Canadian view that is "mul-

Canadian creators are revered in Germany

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ticultural, tolerant and level-headed," she notes. "Canada has become more and more attractive—even to German tourists."

Most striking, says Holzhamer, is the hunger for Canadian literature. And German publishers, buoyed by a string of successful Canadian books, are actively seeking Canadian talent. This fall, in greater numbers than ever before, they are swinging north of the 49th parallel after their annual trips to New York City. Toronto literary agent Denise Bukowski helped set up three scouting trips to Canada for German publishers in the next few months, and many have requested that their United States scouts report separately on Canada. "It used to be a black mark against you, but now its sexier to say you are Canadian," says Bukowski. A paucity of serious fiction in New York has helped spur the growing interest in Canadian writing, she adds. "Commercial fiction doesn't travel well. Other European publishers are looking to Canada for similar reasons."

Bukowski's hottest client this year, first-time novelist Kerri Sakamoto of Toronto, earned a high five-figure sum for German-language rights to her novel *The Electrical Field*—before she even had a publisher in English. The buzz surrounding the preemptive move by Munich-based List Verlag caused a rush for English-language print and film rights to the book, a murder mystery set among a Japanese family in Ontario. It was ultimately bought by New York-based Norton books on the eve of the all-important Frankfurt Book Fair in October. Domestically, Knopf Canada will publish the Sakamoto novel next May.

Carsten Sommerfeldt, spokesman for Berlin Verlag, which publishes Margaret Atwood as well as Anne Michaels, agrees that Canadian literary sensibilities are striking a chord in Germany.

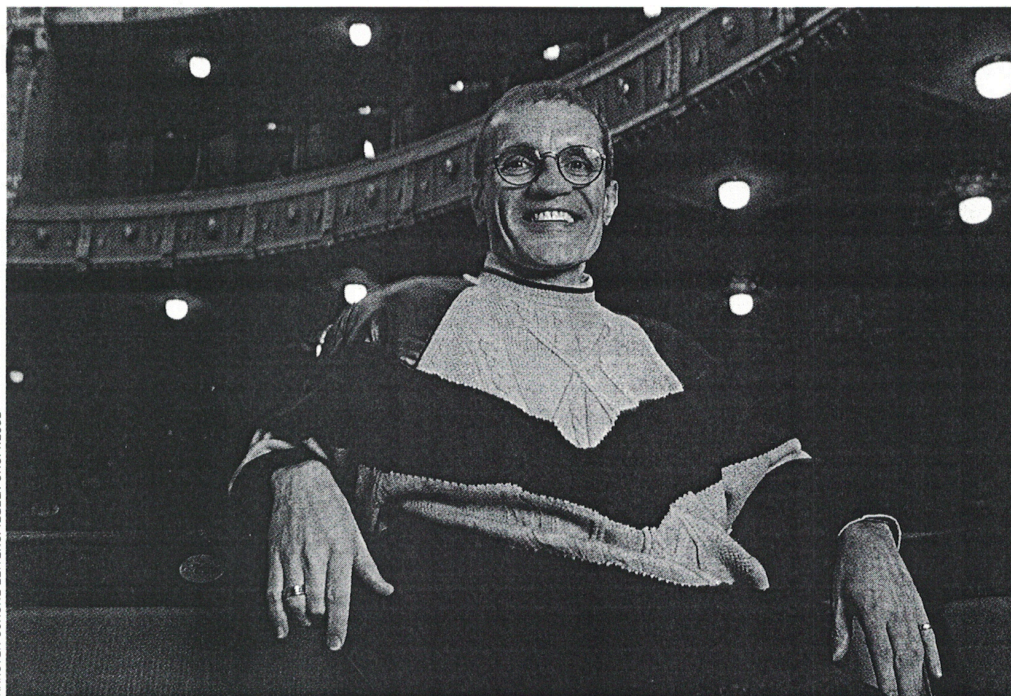
"Critics are aware of a difference in the Canadian and American voice," he says. Jane Urquhart's novel *The Underpainter*, which last month won the Governor General's Literary Award, is the German publisher's top title this fall and has sold 20,000 copies in 15 weeks. It may be that the public's curiosity was twiggled by a slew of good Canadian books, led by Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, muses Sommerfeldt. Or it may be that things Canadian are just the current vogue.

Such is the German taste for Canadian cinema that Munich-based TiMe Film and Tv Production has developed a specialty in marketing made-in-Canada movies, and has installed a permanent employee in Toronto to scout new opportunities. "The way Canadians tell stories in film is closer to the European sensibility than the American film culture is," says spokesman Christian Berg. "They are handcrafted, not assembly-line productions." TiMe's collaboration with Salter Street Films of Halifax scored a hit earlier this year with a science-fiction mini-series *LEXX—The Dark Zone Stories*, which aired on the commercial Vox network and sold out its initial 15,000 run in video stores. Another 20 episodes of the co-production are now in the works. The hit Canadian series *Due South* played weekly to more than a million German viewers earlier this year under the title *Mountie in Chicago*. And

PSI Factor, billed as true tales of the paranormal and hosted by Dan Aykroyd, has been netting a similar audience since August.

Penetrating a market of 80 million people, many of whom are consumers of high culture, is a dream come true for Canadian artists. "Germany is a great place to work because people are steeped in the arts," says Anderson, the 48-year-old former director of the National Ballet of Canada who currently heads the Stuttgart Ballet. "They grow up with it. It's an extraordinary public. Germans go to the opera and theatre and they take their children with them." German taxpayers are also prepared to fund the arts, notes Anderson, who left Canada after being told in 1995 he would lose \$425,000 from his budget virtually overnight. He took four National Ballet dancers with him to Stuttgart, and has made a point of showcasing Canadian talent.

Montreal choreographer Jean Grand-Maitre premiered his *Exilium* last spring in Stuttgart, just after he created a work for the Paris Opera Ballet. In October, Karen Kain, Rex Harrington and Greta Hodgkinson were among the Canadian guests who appeared in a gala



Anderson in Stuttgart: "Germany is a great place to work because people are steeped in the arts"

evening that capped a John Cranko festival of 16 sold-out performances. It was South African-born Cranko who began the long-standing relationship between the two companies when he arrived in Stuttgart in 1961. He was still with the Stuttgart Ballet when he died in 1973. Almost 25 years later, audiences and critics hailed the Cranko event as a triumph for Anderson. And this month, Anderson is staging the premiere of *Aria for my Father* by Ballet British Columbia artistic director John Alleyne.

As for Kikauka and Monahan, they have no plans to quit Germany in the near future, having stayed several years longer than they originally intended. "There is no phobia about alternative culture here," notes Monahan. "What is viewed as weird in Canada is considered interesting." Monahan has concert bookings lined up for months, and Kikauka snagged a lucrative set design contract at the publicly funded Volksbühne, a major Berlin theatre known for its experimental productions. Canadian pianist John Henry Nijenhuis, whom Monahan lured to Berlin from Toronto, was also hired by the Volksbühne. For dozens more Canadian artists—both those who are acclaimed in their own country and those who are overlooked—Germany has become a home away from home.

NOMI MORRIS in Berlin