

## *A Precision Act*

*Like Any Other Monday*, Binnie Brennan. Gaspereau Press, 2014.

In Binnie Brennan's first novel, *Like Any Other Monday*, it is 1916, and young Billy Pascoe has been forced by his father's alcoholism and increasing unreliability to disband The Three Pascoes, the successful stage act he shared with his parents all through his childhood. Facing an uncertain future as a solo act, he can derive some comfort from knowing that while still a teenager his comic talents and slapstick dexterity have been on display for more than a decade and are widely admired by audiences and fellow performers in the U.S. and Canada.

Billy retreats with his mother, Myra, to an actors' colony to take stock of his career, and it is here that he becomes reacquainted with the Hart sisters, Norma and Lucinda, whose own career as a song-and-dance team is at a standstill because of Norma's pregnancy. Squeamish and doubtful of her talent and readiness, Billy is persuaded by his mother and Norma to give Lucinda a chance. And really, what choice does he have? Billy, young though he may be, is a shrewd businessman as well as a seasoned performer; he understands that he needs a partner: someone to act as "straight man" to his goofy, slapstick stage persona.

With Lucinda Hart, an accomplished soprano and dancer, though even younger than he is, Billy Pascoe devises a comic act: Lucinda in the role of a ballet dancer in rehearsal and himself as the clumsy janitor smitten by her beauty. It is an act that will showcase the unlikely pairing of her voice and luminous stage presence with his uproarious brand of physical comedy.

The strongest scenes in Brennan's novel are the numerous descriptions of Pascoe and Hart, backstage and onstage, working together, calibrating their movements, refining their gestures, boosting each other's confidence. And in the process, they are getting to know each other. At a certain point it seems inevitable that *Like Any Other Monday* will become a love story, and it does, in a sense, though it is more concerned with providing a glimpse into an important period in the history of the performing arts. Along the way, it also shows us that people who are in constant close contact with one another and whose fates are intimately linked moment by moment while performing in front of an audience, must learn to trust one another implicitly, or else fail.

The author's extensive knowledge of the vaudeville years (1880-1930) is on display throughout this brief novel. Brennan is a precise rather than a flashy writer. Seamlessly weaving period detail into her prose, she provides the reader with a vivid sense of what it must have been like for performers to travel the vaudeville circuit, from town to town, venue to venue, putting on several shows a day, often under circumstances that many would find daunting, and often while weary to the bone. There is no glamour in these pages. Success is never a given. Having polished their act until it shines, Billy and Lucinda still face the unknown every time they hit the stage. It's the kind of uncertainty that some entertainers find challenging and thrilling, while others crumble under the pressure.

Tonight feels different: The two of them, the audience, the crackling air. It's Saturday night and the crowd is waiting to see what she will do next. Hands on hips, she swings beneath her corset as she walks back on stage, giving him time. She pauses mid-stage and looks over her shoulder. He is watching her with a smudged half-smile, the broken hat dangling around his neck and his eye rimmed with black. She lifts her chin, rolls her eyes at the audience, and languidly makes her way to stage left and into the wings to the swell of laughter. Three beats and he's stumbling after her, tripping once, twice, picking up speed and then diving over the piano stool and landing in a somersault on the floor by her feet.

In her acknowledgements Brennan notes that her model for Billy Pascoe is Buster Keaton, who also spent his early years on vaudeville stages with his parents and struck out on his own when his father's heavy drinking and erratic behaviour signalled the end of the family act. This may be so, but in these pages Billy comes across as his own person; the story of his personal and professional growth follows a steady course, drawing the reader along with it. In the end, he wins our admiration for any number of reasons, not the least of which is for recognizing that the act has run its course.

Binnie Brennan is to be admired, as well, for giving us a lively and thoughtful rendition of a time that most of us rarely think about. Like its protagonist, this novel wins over the audience by keeping us entertained while staying true to its purpose.

— Ian Colford's  
novella, *Perfect World*, will be published by Freehand Books in 2016.