



When Marshall Button returned to Dalhousie, his hometown, for a performance last November, he sensed an unusual, nervous energy in the crowd before the show.

There were whispers, back then, that the mill in town would soon close.

"I've played that town at least a hundred times, but there was a feeling in the hall I'd never quite had before. People were almost desperate to laugh," said Button, best-known for his portrayal of the Dalhousie mill worker Lucien, during an interview.

"No one knew for sure, but I think there was a sense they were all coming together, saying, 'Damn you if you're going to shut our industry down, but you're not going to destroy our spirit.' "

Four days later, the impending closure of the mill was made official.

At a time when Dalhousie and other communities across the province are facing dire economic circumstances, Button says comedy - and all the arts - serve an important function.

And apparently, some of New Brunswick's top academic institutions agree.

Earlier this month, Button was awarded an honorary doctorate from St. Thomas University for his contribution to New Brunswick arts; on Monday, Miramichi-born writer David Adams Richards received the same honour from Mount Allison University.

In an interview following the ceremony, Richards said it was not his place to give specific recommendations for what ails his hometown.

"I'm not a businessman or an industrialist, and that's what the province needs," said Richards, who still spends his summers in the area.

"I write fictional books 90 per cent of the time. I can only do what I can do. And writing is pretty much all I have ever done."

While Richards and Button may not have the solutions to their town's economic woes, they do offer the province something equally important - though perhaps less tangible.

Tony Tremblay, the English professor at St. Thomas who nominated Button for the award, says both artists have helped give rise to a homegrown culture in the province.

"It's so rare that New Brunswickers see a play or read a book about themselves. That is what we call culture - when artists start representing where they are from, and interrogating the nature of that place," said Tremblay, who holds the Canada Research Chair in New Brunswick Studies, and will soon release a biography of Richards.

"These artists give us a sense of our citizenship, a sense of who we are. For the longest time we've heard myths imposed on New Brunswick from the outside. We've heard that we're a defeated people, we get handouts, dealing with regional disparity."

In their own way, each artist has helped the province manufacture its own, more positive myths - from the inside, said Tremblay.

But, Tremblay adds, some people along the Miramichi River believe Richards perpetuates precisely the stereotypes they are trying to debunk.

Many of Richards' characters, after all, suffer from one ailment or another - whether it be poverty, alcoholism, or abuse.

Still, Tremblay, and professor Carrie MacMillan at Mount Allison University, say that upon closer reading, Richards' stories go beyond these stereotypes, to unearth something more profound.

"(His characters) are not victims, they respond and they do the best they can, and there is something noble about that," said MacMillan, who introduced Richards before he received his honorary doctorate.

"I think it's very important for him to show that there is something more, beneath the rough exterior of these characters. He helps us to see that dignity and beauty are there."

Button has also succeeded in bringing to life a little-known side of New Brunswick.

Through Lucien, Tremblay said, people across Canada have encountered a working class guy who speaks two languages, and has "an Acadian and English sensibility."

Button says the best review he ever received came not from a critic on television, radio or in a newspaper, but from someone in a show back in his home province.

"Apparently, a woman in the audience was having difficulty hearing because the man beside her was laughing so hard," Button said.

"And he told her, 'Leave me alone, that's me I'm laughing at up there.' "