



SHARON POLLOCK: FIRST WOMAN OF CANADIAN THEATRE Edited by Donna Coates

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Pollock on Plays

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2006

Urinetown The Musical

The Calgary Theatre season is up and running. It kicks off with Ground Zero's co-production of *Urinetown the Musical* at The Grand Theatre, and introduces artistic director Ryan Lunning's co-producer, Joel Cochrane and his Hit and Myth Productions.

The musical hits town legitimized by 6 nominations and 3 NY Tony awards in 2001, rave reviews and numerous productions. It's even hit the college circuit in the States. Given the way Calgary's artistic directors search NY and West End stages for season offerings, the question is why was *Urinetown*, so long getting to our town?

Some say the title scared producers off. Some say Calgary audiences are stuck on *Guys and Dolls* and *West Side Story*. If so, this production is going to prove them wrong.

Urinetown is to musicals what Leslie Nielsen's *Airplane* or Mel Brook's *Blazing Saddles* is to movies, but its satire is smarter and more subversive.

It's a mellerdrama that shamelessly exploits the conventions of musical theatre, and the roars of laughter and standing ovation on opening night indicate all involved in this production have every right to feel flush with success.

The plot: a 20 year drought has resulted in draconian measures to conserve water. Private toilets are outlawed; public facilities are the only way to go, and if you gotta go, you gotta pay to go.

If you don't have the pennies to pay to pee, well, you're in a tight spot. Get caught relieving yourself, and officer Lockstock and his sidekick Barrel march you off to Urinetown, a mysterious and no doubt damp place from which no one ever returns.

In Urinetown it's "a privilege to pee" – words right out of the mouth of Penelope Pennywise, manager of one of those public amenities owned and controlled by the entrepreneurial and villainous villain Caldwell B Cladwell. And we're witness to his bribing a slimy senator to ensure government approval of an increase in the price of a pee.

For "the hopeless, down and out" that increase is disastrous news. Enter our hero Bobby Strong who inspires the penniless poor to revolution, and, no meller-drama being complete without romance, enter our villain's daughter, the naïve and innocent Hope.

It's all a little predictable but it's leavened by the sheer silliness of it all, as well as by throwing a few unpredictable curves when least expected.

Nothing is sacred in Urinetown. Songs and dance numbers morph into send-ups of iconic choreography, styles and stylists, movie and stage musicals. From Brecht through Les Miz to West Side Story, all is fodder for exaggeration, mimicry and mockery. Hilarity reigned on opening night and I wondered if there'd be a dry seat left in the house.

We've heard a lot about Calgary talent meeting the demands of this production but our talent pool is broad and deep. We don't need this show to prove it.

Tim Koetting as the corrupt and corrupting Cladwell, exudes a sinister charm. Every gesture and phrase holds an undercurrent of possible actions within his power, and none of them pleasant. "Don't Be a Bunny" he cautions daughter Hope, and as he dances and sings his way through the fate of bunnies in this dog eat dog, or, in this case, I suppose, dog eat bunny world, I couldn't help but think that if Fred Astaire had an evil twin it surely was Cladwell as played by Koetting.

Esther Purvis Smith as Little Sally, clutches a once plush bunny in which she conceals her not quite enough pennies for a pee as she begs for more. Purvis Smith's Little Sally shines with integrity. She finds an authentic emotional core to the character while creating within the stylistic demands of the spoof and parody of Urinetown.

Carson Natrass' Bobby Strong's stirring gospel rendition of "Run Freedom Run" came close to bringing the audience on stage to join his reluctant revolutionaries, and that was only one of a number of show stoppers.

Victoria Lamond playing Hope made a nice transition from vapid beauty to fearless leader and Elinor Holt was a spirited and hard-hearted Ms Pennywise fearlessly wielding a toilet brush in defense of exploitation and profit. Although ... although her heart will soften in time ... but that's a secret.

Lampoonery is seductive for actors, directors and for audiences, but I felt the performances of both Purvis Smith and Carson Natrass had at their centre a truthfulness that provided an emotional connect to the production, and that's needed as one tends to forget there's a serious issue buried beneath all the fun and fooffahrah.

It's a cast of 16, and the collective energy and focus of the ensemble supported and enriched the work of the principal characters, thanks to the crisp and detailed co-direction of Kevin McKendrick and Mark Bellamy, the latter also handling choreography. Deneen McArthur's costumes were appropriately grungy for the poor and dressy for the rich, while co-set and lighting designers Terry Gunvordahl and Cimmeron Meyer created a multiple level playing space which served the production well as did their illumination of the whole proceedings. And I mustn't forget the contribution of music director Randy Mueller and his five piece band that kept everyone on their toes and in fine voice.

Occasionally, not too often, I found it a bit unrelenting in volume and energy, a bit of a one note, which for me exposed a kind of vacuum beneath the busyness of it all, and there were a few sound problems rendering some lyrics unintelligible and the Act One Finale, loud but less than musical. I'm certain that's been solved even as we speak.

I must confess I find it a bit disconcerting to sit with an adult audience upon which one can absolutely rely to greet every "pay to pee" "pee for free" "privilege to pee" bit of dialogue with howls of laughter. Only recently I'd been telling a 4 year old we don't yell out, in a public place, references to peeing as it isn't really funny. It turns out I was mistaken.

And then there's a "Hail Malthus" at the unpredictable, in a good way, ending of Urinetown. I'm not sure who in the audience reads the orange insert explaining the Malthus reference. I suggest you do. And if you don't want to read all of it, just read the last paragraph.

Then you might recall a headline on the Sunday's Herald's front page "Calgary must limit water use. The province is committed to protecting watersheds while sustaining the economy."

I wondered if the authors of Urinetown had written a prologue to their musical, whether this might be it. In "Hail Malthus" we have the authors' epilogue. Scary, if it's prophecy. I hope, with all the laughter, glee and mirth, Urinetown The Musical's serious underpinnings aren't lost on an audience.

At any rate Ground Zero and Hit and Myth Productions have a hit on their hands, and Calgary has a grand opening to the 2006-2007 theatre season.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 1, 2006

Of Mice And Men

Theatre Calgary has a new artistic director. Last Friday night Dennis Garnhum introduced himself and his first season of plays with the classic "Of Mice and Men" by John Steinbeck.

A brief summary of the plot for those who need a reminder - two migrant farm workers in California during the Great Depression share an impossible dream and goal, to own their own small farm and stop their wandering. Lennie is a giant of a man with the mind of a child. His love of stroking soft things has led to never-ending trouble including a charge of rape from which the men are fleeing. George's compassionate nature has burdened him with the care and protection of Lennie and just when their impossible dream of owning a farm seems possible, tragedy intervenes and George must make a dreadful decision.

As an introduction to the new artistic director the production gives a somewhat ambiguous hint of things to come. We have new boy, old play. 70 years old. Which shouldn't be held against it. It won the NY Drama Circle Award in 1937. Perhaps it seemed a safe bet for director Dennis Garnhum to open his season. He's directed 2 other productions of this play. He obviously loves it well as he tells us in his notes. Maybe too well. They say familiarity breeds contempt, but it also can breed adoration, and when the revered object is a play you run the risk of sucking the life right out of it. It becomes a beautiful thing in performance, but a beautiful inert thing.

There are no safe bets in theatre. With every production you undertake risk. Hedging your bets in theatre brings its own risk. I'll mix metaphors here and say you have to play in theatre without a safety net. Many Calgarians were hoping for a braver production choice to serve as our introduction to the new artistic director.

As for the production – the stage is framed by a rough wood border. The title of the play is projected on a scrim prior to the play's beginning which opens with a brief sequence of men working the fields. That scrim closes the play with a projected quote from Robbie Burns telling us what the play has illustrated. I got it without the quote.

Allan Stitchbury and John Jenkins' set design of multiple interiors and exteriors are gorgeous to look upon and ingeniously manipulated and transformed from one location to another by a cadre of farm workers. These transitions are scenes in themselves and are all quite graceful but they impede the forward action of the play.

The soaring classical music which accompanies the scenes of scene changes lends an air of romanticism which seems at odds with the gritty depression era of these indentured migrant workers.

I don't know whether it was that wooden framing of the stage or the scrim or the moving set scenes within the scenes proper of the play but the production had a cinematic feel and look to it. Much of the action, or perhaps I should say dialogue, took place centre stage with a panorama view of what could be seen around and behind with the odd character coming on in the background, sitting or standing a while and moving off. It made a wonderful picture but when I try to understand why there was such a static or tepid feel to character interaction centre stage I wonder if it diluted focus. The unfolding of the play's story often seemed like a series of still photos which failed to carry and build dramatic tension.

Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men" is beloved by all who know it and on the curriculum of schools without number. I have no doubt it will sell well. But that is not the only criterion for theatrical success. Theatre Calgary is our flagship regional theatre. It has more human, technical and financial resources than other Calgary theatre companies along with a host of talent at its contractual fingertips. All involved with this production have resumes documenting their many roles, raves and experience. When you have much, more is expected of you. And when a classic is produced I want it to be as alive as the day it was written. I don't want to feel I'm viewing a skeleton, beautifully rendered, but still a skeleton.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2006

Down With Up With People

The Calgary theatre scene is bubbling with activity. It's curtains up on One Yellow Rabbit's season opener "Down With Up With People: The Untold Story of Anthony Curtola" at The Big Secret Theatre, starring Andy Curtis.

Anthony Curtola is a wannabe celebrity, best known, if known, for his hosting of the Big Rock Eddy Awards. He's a mid-Atlantic David Niven in a white dinner jacket who oozes ersatz charm reminiscent of a waiter at the Keg. Anthony Curtola is a great pretender, just a boy from Alberta with pretensions, and even his Medicine Hat origins change with his telling of them. The character is the alter ego of One Yellow Rabbit's comedic master Andy Curtis and when Curtis slips into Curtola's skin it's a seamless fit. Every twitch of the thin penciled on moustache, or lift of the similarly applied eyebrow, a bite of the thumb, a touch to the nose, elicits laughter. He takes the stage with confidence knowing he holds the audience in his hand and they'll go where he takes them. In fact when house lights go out and the stage is still black, audience members burst into laughter so wide spread I can only assume it was in anticipation of what was to come.

Curtola's "untold story" is a series of monologues, I could call them rambling, or a stream of consciousness, made up, as Curtola tells us, of digressions, anecdotes, some amusing, some iffy, revelations, epiphanies and sidebars. They're interspaced with musical song and dance by Curtola and his back-up 3 member chorus of The Oh Lay girls. Krysten Blair, Onalea Gilbertson and Denise Clarke. Denise Clarke is a pleasure to watch. Back-up, background or not, every fiber of her being and body is committed to the moment. I found my eye drawn to her, not that she was drawing focus in any way, or that Curtis' performance was lagging, but primarily because I found the material itself slight, and not up to the usual One Yellow Rabbit standard.

One can't fault Andy's performance, and the Oh Lay girls are a treat. The lyrics and choreography are ersatz renditions themselves drawn from musical sources from Bobby Sherman to Loverboy; I found them the cleverest and best aspect of the show. Shades of Urinetown, we even have Curtola's major epiphany, brought on by either a bad olive or a nasty pudding, accompanied by the evacuation of body wastes. I won't be more specific. Blake Brooker's script just seemed thin, a quickie kind of thing, an anorexic Rabbit that didn't hop despite the sparkly Oh Lay Girls and the considerable talents of Andy Curtis.

Overall the show doesn't have the sizzle we've come to expect from One Yellow Rabbit but is worth taking in for Rabbit fans.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2006

Wait Until Dark

It's Vertigo Theatre's 30th anniversary and they're celebrating 3 decades of mystery theatre with the 60's thriller "Wait Until Dark" made famous by its incarnation in film with Audrey Hepburn. The plot relies on a suspension of disbelief so great that it strains one's imaginative powers and reveals how the unfolding of story on stage and our expectations of what constitutes thrilling and terror has changed over the last 40 years.

As for the plot, criminal mastermind Harry Roat enlists a couple of ex-cons to attain a drug-packed doll Roat believes is hidden somewhere in the apartment of Susie who's blind and her husband who's unwittingly brought the doll into the country and apparently mislaid it. The baddies concoct an elaborate plan with more twists than a corkscrew to gain Susie's confidence and assistance in finding the doll during her husband's absence. Her blindness seems to make her an easy mark but appearances are deceiving. With the help of a neighborhood kid the tables are ultimately turned, the lights go out and the disadvantage is in the criminal's court for Susie has been in the dark all along.

I thought Adrienne's Snook's Susie hit one note – that of high anxiety. It was as if her blindness was her character. There're more notes to be played in that character than I got from the performance. Christian Goutis as Mike the ex-con masquerading as an old Marine acquaintance of Susie's husband moved from manipulating Susie to, despite his best, or worst intentions, finding himself having a degree of sympathy for her which he knew he must suppress. I found his characterization and that of Sydney Nicole Herauf as the smart and sassy Gloria, the most fully formed of the evening. Trevor Leigh's Roat was sinister if not terribly believable but perhaps I wasn't working hard enough with that suspension of disbelief so essential to the play itself. And I just felt really sorry for Chad Norbert as Mike's partner in crime for having to wear that awful wig. I tried to convince myself it was part of his character, but failed. It ended up having more presence than he did which was not his fault.

Scott Reid's set was utilitarian as needed and Glenda Stirling's direction kept things moving. I didn't get shivers and tingles along the spine and you'll have to wait until the dark of the final confrontation between Susie and Road before thrilling and terror sets in.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2006

10 Days On Earth

Alberta Theatre Projects has launched its current season with Ronnie Burkett's latest puppet creation "10 Days On Earth" which premiered earlier this year in Toronto and concluded a successful three month run.

The Village Voice describes Ronnie Burkett as "one of the world's geniuses" and adds "seeing his troupe every few years has become a necessity of civilized theatre-going." He's a grand master of puppetry, with an international reputation and is truly a Canadian national treasure. To top it all off, he's one of our own, a real Alberta boy born and bred in Medicine Hat.

Calgary theatre-goers have a long, warm and heart-felt association with Burkett's Theatre of Marionettes from 1986's "Fool's Edge" to "Provenance" in 2003. So electricity was in the air, and the theatre crackled with audience excitement and anticipation as lights went up on Burkett's latest creation. That's the way it should be particularly when the work is by one of the world's significant theatre artists. And for those who may not be sufficiently aware of Ronnie's work, it's puppetry for the legitimate stage and an adult audience. He deals in serious themes with outrageous wit that cuts to the core.

Burkett has spoken in interviews of a catalytic and haunting experience that inspired "10 Days On Earth." In an English shopping mall he saw an elderly woman with a developmentally disabled adult, her son or so he thought. Burkett was touched by the woman's loving care and attention to the needs of this child in a man's body and the man-child's affectionate response to his mother. The question of what would become of him when his mother died solidified in Burkett's mind as "if you were alone and didn't know it, would you feel lonely?" And so "10 days On Earth" came into being.

In the play Burkett presents us with Darrell a mentally challenged middle-aged adult who lives with his elderly single mum who was abandoned by Darrell's father when she found herself pregnant. One day she retreats into her room, closes the door, and dies. Darrell returns home from his shoe shining job, knows he mustn't intrude when the door is closed, and continues on for 10 days, talking to her through the door, mourning the loss of the rituals and routines that have governed his life, and gradually realizing that something is not right.

He finds solace in recalling his favourite book in which a terrier, Honeydog, nattily attired in a cranberry waistcoat and bow tie, and a tutu-clad duckling, Little Burp, search for a home. They meet a variety of animals from a raunchy rat in pink to

a seductive sheep, Blanche Dubaa. The story of Darrell's 10 days, his simple conversations with street acquaintances from Lloyd, a foul-mouthed preacher who just may or may not be God, to Irene, a Salvation Army worker, and the story of Honeydog and Little Burp's quest for a home are interwoven and, for me, subtly reflect each other.

"10 Days On Earth" is a deceptively simple story told with wit, insight, sensitivity and affection. But the plot is merely the surface of "10 Days on Earth." Burkett's Theatre of Marionettes is hypnotic and multi-dimensional which deepens and enriches our engagement with the characters and the story. And that has something to do with the art of puppetry itself.

First we have Ronnie Burkett's marvelously and beautifully crafted puppets with their faces permanently etched into an expression, a smile, a frown, a grimace. I see those expressions change and I know that cannot be. Yet it is. A theatrical miracle. Then there's Ronnie's manipulation of his cast, each broad or subtle manipulation true to the character of the individual puppet and the emotion or action of the moment. But economical as well, conveying the essence of that movement and moment. And the characters' voices, all given voice by Ronnie ring authentic for each.

The puppets are real, as real as you or I am. In fact they're more real than we are, and more real than any actor could be for Burkett's puppets are people stripped to their essence. Our awareness that the source of this magical multi-dimensional world is given life and unfolds before us through one multi-talented individual amplifies our engagement and entertainment. Viewing that world is like looking through a microscope at our own world. It magnifies, penetrates and illuminates.

Some have an unfortunate tendency to define and circumscribe, an individual's work. "Ah, that's the kind of thing he or she writes or directs or paints or role he or she plays." The work and the artist are labeled and his or her new work compared to old work. If the label no longer quite fits, there is a sense of unease, an unwillingness to reassess the trajectory of the artist's creations. I think Burkett is exploring a slightly different path than in his previous work. With the Honeydog and Little Burp story Burkett reveals himself as the Narrator. He's lit and speaks directly to the audience. The Creator is acknowledging himself, inserting himself in the work, in a way I find significant. And I find it exciting.

I wonder if it is an indicator of where Burkett will go next. I know he'll go where his vision takes him. It won't be determined by the expectation of those who prefer an artist to run in the same spot.

As for his central question “if you were alone and didn’t know it, would you feel lonely?” One answer is you can never be lonely so long as you have access to stories. Unlike Darryl most of us are seldom alone, yet we’re told feelings of loneliness are pandemic. Perhaps Honeydog and Little Burp’s story is an offering by Ronnie to us, as well as comfort for Darrell.

Popular as Burkett is, there are often good seats left in the run so try not to miss this latest work by a master of his art form.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2006

Insomnia

Theatre Junction has joined forces with the Toronto theatre company Necessary Angel to open its 2006–2007 season. The two have co-produced “Insomnia” authored by award-winning theatre artists Daniel Brooks and Guillermo Verdecchia.

Necessary Angel and Brooks have almost iconic stature in Canadian theatre with a lengthy list of awards and recognition of the contribution of both to the national theatre scene. Calgarians may remember a 2003 Theatre Junction production “The Good Life” which introduced them to Brooks and laid the groundwork for this co-operative venture.

In “Insomnia” we have a central character John F. and his whiny wife Gwen. John is riddled with anxiety over almost everything. His deteriorating marriage, his unfinished “opus”, his finances or lack thereof, the responsibilities of fatherhood, the state of the world, and his insomnia. And that insomnia gives rise to the structure of the play. The plot, if plot it is, unfolds in a series of short concise scenes. Landmarks that move things along and often seem to emerge from that dream-like state brought on by extreme lack of sleep. Things pick up with the arrival of John’s brother William, a successful Disney executive, and his narcoleptic wife, Kate.

John yearns for Kate but they’re ill-matched, given his insomnia and her narcolepsy. And William is apparently boffing Gwen. Or maybe not, given the central character’s altered state of consciousness due to insomnia. There are laughs, but it’s not a comedy. Unless I’m sadly mistaken. To be honest, I didn’t find the text of the play compelling.

The production of the text, however, was stunning, a visual treat.

Set designer Julie Fox creates a stark stage curtained in black. A dark void with a forced perspective leading the eye to a red exit sign. Above it a small window through which we can see a bedroom lamp and a few metal bars of a crib's headboard. Downstage an easy chair, and a floor lamp in a cool pool of light.

All minimalist. There's a sense of restraint. But restraint suggests an explosion of emotion or a physical act that requires restraint. So there's a tension in the set's classic simplicity. There's a red floor. So when lit we have red corridors delineated and piercing through areas of charcoal and black. Characters move through the light and shadow. Come and go randomly but with strong intentions. They enter and exit through passageways in the black void that envelops the space.

Lighting by Andrea Lundy is ever so precise. She paints the stage and characters with a palette of light and dark that surprises us on occasion. A bar of lights for example will suddenly expose the audience reminding us that we are participating in this imagined series of events in performance. We might ask who and how real are we. And enriching all this is designer Richard Feren's soundscape. It adds an aural dimension heightening, pointing and counterpointing key moments.

Every production choice enhances a theatrical expression of John's insomniac state of mind.

There's no deficit of talent in the cast. Daniel Brooks' John is understated and naturalistic. He can turn on a dime, effortlessly and credibly transforming into an emotionally charged violent individual. A stylized physicality that sets us back in our seats. Randy Hughson is William, irritatingly successful, liberal with his advice, certain and secure. Fiona Hightet as Gwen and Columbe Demers as Kate ably inhabit their characters. Well, what there is of character. The text doesn't really give them much to work with.

Direction is clean and clear. Christopher Abraham maximizes the effect on the audience of the highly theatrical elements of set, light and sound. He creates images that imprint on the eye. Stage pictures that we carry with us as we leave the theatre.

With this wealth of talent in performance, design and direction I should be over the moon. But I'm not. I'm high in the sky but not over the moon.

Maybe it's because I'm a woman, or maybe because I'm a playwright. The script strikes me as 90 minutes of male angst. But male angst with the pretensions. We're supposed to find a deeper universal meaning resonating within what is essentially just a domestic drama. It has vapid female characters and a central male character whinging on about his wife, his work, his child, his sex life, politics and the state of the world. At one point he engages in a long political rant. I had

to fight the urge to mutter “yeah yeah yeah. I know that. Stop yelling at me”. I don’t know. Maybe that was the desired effect. Then there’s a dinner scene near the end with a surprising meat entrée. It’s reminiscent of the playwright who finds the only way to end a play is to shoot someone and go to black. Something I confess I did myself in an early work.

With “Insomnia” the rich theatrical spectacle floods our senses. So we don’t pay much attention to What is being presented and a lot of attention to How it’s being presented. The lushness of the production blinds us, in a manner of speaking, to the thinness of the material being produced.

It’s a polished production. My reservations around the written text are fairly apparent. But the sheer theatricality of the production, its visual impact, the command of the art and craft of the theatre artists involved make “Insomnia” a production worth seeing.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2006

Trainspotting

Calgary’s Sage Theatre is attracting audiences with its present production of “Trainspotting”, a stage version of the 1996 hit movie and novel by Irvine Welsh.

It’s darker in tone and content than the movie. And it has nothing to do with spotting trains. But it’s still definitely not for the faint of heart or stomach. The play rubs our face in the grim underbelly of Edinburgh Scotland. And it does this through a series of monologues and short sketch-like scenes. These reflect and reveal the junkie high jinks and heroin hell of addiction.

The play’s principal character, a kind of narrator, is Mark. Monologues and scenes shadow disconnected events in Mark’s life. He opens and closes the play as he wakes covered in his own vomit and excrement.

Mark’s caught in a circle of addiction and death. “Caught” may not be the right word for he apparently chooses this over a life of bourgeois boredom, tedium, or employment in any job for which he might be qualified. Although it’s difficult to imagine what that job could possibly be. He’s surrounded by a variety of characters played by three actors. They ride a heroin roller coaster of highs and lows, their lives driven and defined by their need of the drug. It’s not a pretty picture.

Between the start and stop of the play this crew of desperate deadbeats cook up smack, pop up veins, and shoot up. All is most realistic. A pregnant girlfriend is sadistically beaten. Mark fishes for opium suppositories in a filthy blocked toilet and reinserts them in his rectum. He has sex with his dead brother's wife at the funeral. All mourn briefly an addict's overlooked and dead baby discovered between cooking up hits. A waitress dips a used tampax into a rude customer's soup; this and more fueled by a cynical humour and rage. "Trainspotting" is what's known as "in yer face" theatre. It's a bleak and shocking comedy laced with dark despair.

The actors handle the text with a great deal of energy and emotional intensity. Geoffrey Ewert plays Mark. He hits all the bases of rage, anguish, despair and depression. It's mixed with a kind of contemptuous joyful exuberance at giving the finger to society's conventions. Christopher Austman is triple cast. His most significant role is Tommy, a lamb looking for a slaughter. Mark introduces him to heroin and it's not long before this gentle soul staggers naked on stage, and slumps to the floor. With his veins collapsed, he injects his penis for a final and fatal hit.

David Trimble is Franco Begbie, raw, violent, sadistic and abusive. He roars dialogue in a staccato stream punctuated by a torrent of profanity rarely if ever heard on Calgary stages. And Jennie Esdale capably takes on the roles of June and Alison and delivers a couple of monologues recounting small victories in an otherwise dreary existence. I couldn't really keep each female character straight, but it didn't seem to matter. One character is a bit more spirited than the other; I think that's June. My clue is her costume.

In any other play this might constitute a major flaw but not so in this one.

I think it's because there's a certain sameness to all the characters. Their brutal and squalid existence. The onslaught of horrific images and actions that most of us don't ordinarily see. The bombardment of profanity. The audience experiences shock and awe mixed with laughter and that tends to disguise the lack of any real depth or dimension to the characters. It seems not to matter. We're swept along in the play's sheer audacity, anecdotal story-telling and great dialogue. Although I had a small difficulty there.

Remember the play takes place in Edinburgh Scotland. The Scottish accent is most evident. Accent work's a challenge. The line between a seeming authenticity, and the audience's comprehension of what's being said is a fine one. The actor needn't duplicate exactly the thick Scottish brogue for it to ring true for the setting. I felt some actors walked, or talked, that fine line better than others. Quick calculation - I couldn't understand probably 20 to 25% of what was said.

Maybe it's my ears. Maybe the director feels that's acceptable. It's certainly true I didn't find that percentage of dialogue loss an insurmountable barrier to the play. One just goes with the play's flow of energy and action.

The portrayals of the characters, as far as they go, feel honest and true. But it's not a play that's delving into how these people individually got to be where we find them. If a finger is pointed, it's pointed at society in general, class and economic distinctions, consumerism, and I suppose I could say etc.

And I could say it suggests subliminally the characters' drug-addled lives reflect a slice of life in our own city's underbelly for the same reasons. I should mention the play has a caution – stimulated sex and drug-taking, violence, nudity and profanity – plus a ray of hope the program said, although I missed that. It must have been a very very small ray.

"Trainspotting" plays in the Joyce Doolittle Theatre at the Pumphouse. It's a small intimate space. Very intimate and sometimes a challenge. This play suits the space well. Set and lighting designer Ian Martens places a couple of seedy bits of furniture against a the theatre's worn brick wall, It's spare and bleak, and the lighting projects a gloom matching the characters' lives. Small changes, a table here, a chair or a coffin there are slipped in or out by the actors when needed. The violence is carefully choreographed and realistic.

Director Kelly Reay uses the space well although I found the end of Act One unfocused and unclear. And there was that one note quality to the characterizations which I'm not sure lies at the feet of the director or the actors. It may be inherent in the play. All in all, "Trainspotting" is a good production as well as an example of theatre of the "in yer face" genre. If the warnings don't scare you off, it's worth seeing.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2006

The Goat

Alberta Theatre Projects is causing a stir with its present production of Edward Albee's acclaimed and controversial "The Goat or Who is Sylvia". Why the controversy? In two words, interspecies sex. Thus the Goat, named Sylvia.

Here's the plot. An opening scene of marital bliss. Martin, a successful architect at the top of his game. Stevie, his liberal and loving wife of 22 years. Billy, their

17 year old gay and much adored son. Martin seems a trifle distracted. But no, it's not Alzheimers, as we learn when he confides in best friend Ross – Martin's having an extra-marital affair. With a goat. Named Sylvia. Ross gives the game away in a letter to wife Stevie, and as you might imagine this shatters Martin and Stevie's idyllic union. That's mirrored in Stevie's smashing of all breakable objects and overturning of furniture. Understandably she's upset. But determined to learn every detail of her husband's bestial relationship. Well, maybe not every detail, but enough. After releasing a torrent of disbelief, anger and pain, she storms off, warning Martin she'll bring him down. I can tell you this does not bode well for the goat

The playwright has laced all this with a mega dosing of wit and humor. The audience laughed a lot on opening night, and were suitably hushed when a comforting hug between father and son turned into a passionate embrace and more passionate kiss. Gotta tell you I didn't buy that for a minute. I feel an immensely talented playwright has done a con job on us. He's baiting the audience with a shocking situation, and what makes it controversial is that a lot of people rise to the bait.

Somewhere I've read that Albee's plays "command our attention not because of their depth but because of the extraordinary vitality of their surface." Tolerance, which we're told the play is about, is not actually addressed but we do get sparkling clever dialogue, fireworks on stage, witty digs at political correctness as well as descriptions of the epiphany of gazing into a goat's eyes.

Set designer David Fraser gives us a tastefully decorated living room as befits an architect. The walls are slatted, subtly echoing for me, sophisticated barnyard fencing. Jennifer Morehouse provided the fireworks as Stevie. She teeters on the edge of overplaying an overwrought Stevie confronting the destruction of her happy family unit. David McNally is Martin, at first serene, if a bit distracted, in his love for both Stevie and Sylvia. Complacent, believing he can explain his happiness and the rightness of it all. And into depression with his realization of the destruction unleashed. In Martin's view it is not his own actions but the meddling and judgmental best friend Ross played briskly and competently by Paul Cowling that's led to his family's break-down. The cast is rounded out by Christopher Duthrie's Billy and directed by Kate Newby.

Much as I wanted to be engaged emotionally, intellectually or morally, I was unmoved by the production (with the exception of feeling badly for the goat). Don't know if the failure is mine, the production or the play's.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2006

Glorious!

Theatre Calgary's founding artistic director has returned to Calgary to direct "Glorious" which we're told is the true story of Florence Foster Jenkins. The first question for me was – who is Florence Foster Jenkins?

Florence is, or was, the worst singer in the world, usually referred to as "the soprano of the sliding scale". She was wealthy, came from Pennsylvania, and financed her own career. "Glorious" by Peter Quilter is a hilarious and charming comedy tracing Florence's career, from her performances at recitals for NY society ladies to her last performance, a sell-out at Carnegie Hall in 1944.

Canadians have a national treasure in Nicola Cavendish who plays Madame Jenkins. She simply takes command of the stage, embodying this Pennsylvanian "artiste" with every gesture, tilt of the head, and vocal cadence. She sings operatic arias, and she sings them atrociously. She's a dreamer but a pragmatic dreamer who will let nothing, not even a lack of talent, stand in her way.

Supporting Florence's dream is a covey of friends. Her pianist, Cosme McMoon, as played by Jonathan Monroe is sensitive, shy, gay. He's a sweet man, at first appalled by Jenkin's vocal abilities (or lack thereof) and later moved by genuine affection for her. Dixie Seattle is Dorothy, a stalwart friend and would-be theatrical designer. Seattle is captivating with a lightness of touch that plays perfectly with and against Cavendish's straight-ahead drive to achieve her dream. Maria Vaccratsis as the insubordinate Mexican maid has us in the aisles without our ever understanding a word she says. Gesture and expression tell all we need to know. Florence's "significant other" St Clair Byfield is played by Calgary's Christopher Hunt. He's a bluff fellow with a hearty guffaw, a failed actor with a British accent that comes and goes.

Theatre Calgary's founder and Shaw Festival's former artistic director Christopher Newton directs the production with a sure hand. He's drawn out the humanity of a glorious cast of characters never allowing the production to slip into caricature and cartoon. Every aspect of the production comes together to create a jewel of a show.

A lush set by David Boechler leads us through a doorway to Florence's NY apartment, and on to a recording studio, a ballroom, a cemetery and finally Carnegie Hall. And then there's elegant and fantastic costume design by Phillip Clarkson. As for lighting design – I urge you to see this production if only for the lighting design by Adam Brodie. It's beautiful and evocative, illuminating external settings

and heightening internal moments. “Glorious” is a polished and delightful production. The night I attended we all laughed ourselves silly.

If you’re looking for frothy, funny, well played and produced, don’t miss “Glorious”.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2006

In Fine Form

A couple of wild and crazy guys have taken over One Yellow Rabbit’s Big Secret Theatre to present “In Fine Form”. They appear in pajamas, and invite you to wear your pj’s when you attend. I declined the invitation but did take in the show on opening night with a host of others, some in pajamas.

Mark Chavez and Shendoah Allen, are a madcap duo who offer up a “faster than the speed of light” series of sketches and characters. They blend physical, mimed and stand-up comedy, spice it with improv, add strands of mini-plots and recurring characters, and turn up the heat with amazing performance skills and high energy. The two reveal an astounding on stage ability to read each other’s minds and creative intentions. They seamlessly morph from one character to another to another, even exchanging characters within a sketch. “In Fine Form” manages to keep two balls in the air. It’s hilariously chaotic, and at the same time it gives us fragments of multiple stories and plot lines we can follow.

“Chaotic” and “stories we can follow” may seem a contradiction but the style of “In Fine Form” is the bond between the two: lighting speed of presentation plus instantaneous physical and vocal transformation from one character to another. Once Chavez and Allen step on stage we’re caught in a riptide of hilarity. There’s no stopping. We’re propelled from one bit to another bit to another bit. That’s what gives the sense of chaos but it’s also what weaves the recurring characters and stories into a unified theatre piece.

The show’s a wonderful example of the saying “less is more” in the theatre. Particularly when you have performers possessing the degree of art and craft Chavez and Allen display. The production begins with a completely bare stage. Two conservative looking guys in their conservative pj’s enter with two folding chairs. They stand there, awkward and embarrassed, have nothing to say, don’t know what they’re doing there – it’s the actor’s nightmare. The pj guys slink off stage. They reappear – and from then on, the audience is on the comedic ride of their life. The stage is suddenly populated with a world of characters. There’s

Leopold and his talking horse Fredrick, Mr X and Lower Case t, two old fogies, a father and his adenoidal daughter Jennifer, a haunted hotel, its eerie night clerk, a couple of old ladies. Each mini scene reveals a changing relationship, a conflict, an event. Jennifer and her dad, for example, seeking accommodation at a hotel where every opened door reveals freaky inhabitants, some of whom we've previously met in their own mini scenes. Then Chavez and Allen flip the audience back and forth between the various comic tales. They weave them together in surprising ways.

The Pajama Men defy easy description. "In Fine Form" is certainly more than a comedy revue, at the same time less than play. It's in a class of its own, an excellent performance piece and the genre really is irrelevant.

There're some good shows playing in Calgary at present. I hope folks can find the time to take them in. There're always one or two "pay what you can" performances as well as cheaper matinees. Check that out if ticket price is an issue.

And don't forget – wear your pajamas to a performance and you'll receive the admiration of Chavez and Allen.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2006

Show No. 1: Archeology

If you're thinking of "archeology" as commonly thought of, that ain't what you're gonna get. In fact you're not gonna get much of anything. "Show No. 1: Archeology" is a grab bag of disconnected and incoherent bits and pieces. Some of the bits are self-indulgent and personal, others are a party piece to show off the performer's particular talent or lack thereof. A monologue here, a banal platitude there, some video clips, an exceedingly physical movement piece, some songs, less said about them the better, a rap with the rapper writhing about on the floor – we even got some male frontal nudity at which I wanted to scream "Is that all there is?"

In addition the production attempts to ingratiate itself with the audience by having performers greet friends as we enter, serve a beverage mid show, join us to watch parts of the performance, and then hang out in the lobby as we exit the theatre. The whole thing is pointless and directionless. I was torn between weeping with despair and chewing my tongue off in a rage.

The production has failed badly. The net result of this introduction to Mark Lawes' new direction for Theatre Junction and its ensemble creation work was a

collective shudder throughout the audience. Disappointment and disbelief was palatable on opening night.

Any performance piece requires a spine. It can be any one of a number of things, including such things as a story, or a thesis, or a style of presentation. That spine is an organizational principal. It determines what you keep and what you discard in creation. This piece has no spine. It can no more stand upright than you or I could minus a spine. That's one problem.

Next is Lawes' idea of ensemble creation as evident on the stage. Talk is cheap and we've heard a lot of it about Theatre Junction's ensemble. Ensemble creation in theatre means more than a long-term contract. It's not a mutual admiration society, nor is it a company hopping up and down more or less in unison on the stage. There is not an iota of ensemble creation, in the true meaning of the word, evident in "Show No. 1: Archeology." The phrase seems to be used to deflect and deny any critical assessment of the work.

Theatre Junction has a prestigious production history in the city. With "Show No. 1: Archeology" some money and a great deal of trust and good will has been lost. One can only hope that someone in the company has the brains, the guts, the artistic integrity or the financial responsibility to ask some hard questions.

If they're still selling tickets the theatre police should be arresting someone for fraud. Lovers of theatre are threatened with "Show No. 2: Atlantis" in March 2007.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2006

Something True and Wonderful

"Something True and Wonderful" is a light lunch. Steve, an inveterate liar, and Evelyn who's seeking a truthful mate, meet up at one of those self-improvement retreats. There's an attraction between the two. But Evelyn demands truthfulness only in so far as it meets her needs, and Steve can't seem to break out of his habitual lying. The play's mildly amusing. And the amusement is heightened slightly by the video documentation of their attempts at establishing a relationship. Both the characters and the audience are aware of the camera and the video is played on a screen centre stage simultaneous with the story unfolding. Evelyn turns the tables on Steve and what may be true love triumphs.

There's solid performances from Curt McKinstry as Steve and Shari Watling as Evelyn. McKinstry's Steve is a kind of "ah Shucks" likeable liar, a bit bumbling and easy to forgive, even as he tries to negotiate his way into Evelyn's bed, while Watling gives Evelyn a nice underplayed desperate edge to her search for a truthful partner. There's an ironic twist in that it's ultimately a lie that brings them together.

The script by playwright Doug Curtis is slight and skips across the surface of the characters. A little tonic is added by the video camera. It becomes a kind of character with Steve and Evelyn acknowledging it and playing to it and with it. It's a fun device that both McKinstry and Watling use to their advantage.

Margaret and Bartley Bard, the founders of Lunchbox Theatre, returned from a busy schedule in L.A. to direct "Something True and Wonderful". They've made the most of the material with the assistance of a strong cast. Nevertheless I find the script minor fare and a strange choice to showcase the Bard's comedic directorial talents. Their brief return to Calgary is a welcome one.

MONDAY, JANUARY 14, 2008

Sylvia Plath Must Not Die

Every year the appetizer on One Yellow Rabbit's menu for the Rodeo is their sponsorship of Ground Zero's 10 Minute Play Festival, a one night stand of 6 sketches by "Calgary's rising theatre stars" created in the 24 hours preceding the presentation. It's a hit and miss affair with a most forgiving audience and I was only able to take in the first half. It was "miss" but the folks around me ate it up and for all I know the "hits" could have strutted their stuff in the second half, which a prior engagement prevented my taking in.

All of that is merely prelude to what is billed as the Rodeo's highlight: One Yellow Rabbit's celebratory 25th anniversary creation "Sylvia Plath Must Not Die" - Sylvia Plath being the young American Poet, born in 1932, first poem published at the age of 8; first book at 28, married to and essentially abandoned by English poet Ted Hughes, mother of 2 children, suicidal from an early age and prone to severe bouts of depression, killing herself at age 30. In 1982 Plath, already an iconic figure, became the first poet to be posthumously awarded a Pulitzer Prize,

I wouldn't say "Sylvia Plath Must Not Die" offers any real exploration, theatrical or otherwise, of the poet's life and relationships. What the One Yellow Rabbit

ensemble has done is pair the poetry of Sylvia Plath with that of Anne Sexton. The two met at a poetry workshop in Boston, and though living on different continents, apparently remained friends. They are generally described as belonging to the school of “confessional poets”.

Sexton, born in 1928, suffered from bipolar disorder, with manic episodes that fueled her poetry writing – writing which originally began as therapy suggested by her psychiatrist. The raw emotion and confessional aspects of her work drew immediate attention and success. She married, had 2 children, was divorced, had many affairs as well as an incestuous sexual relationship with her young daughter that was revealed after her death. She received the Pulitzer Prize in 1967, and committed suicide in 1974.

A mother lode of rich material here, as well as questions without number about literary genius, madness, love, lust, family, friendship, and the female, as manifested in the lives and deaths of Plath and Sexton. But *One Yellow Rabbit* really doesn't dig into any of that in the sense of a conventional play or drama, except in so far as the women reveal themselves in the poetry they created.

So what we have is Onalea Gilbertson as Plath (looking very much like her) and Denise Clarke as Anne Sexton delivering as the characters 23 of the poets' works. The poems are separated by transitional scripted mini-scenes primarily between Sexton's husband Kayo played by Andy Curtis and Plath's Ted Hughes played by Michael Green.

The two men share biographical information about their wives in an informal and sometimes amusing fashion. For the most part they seem structural devices for exposition and to illustrate the women's marital relationships, as well as to provide some physical movement to the piece. There's a funny little sparring scene between the two men with Green describing most poetically what poetry is, while Curtis counters with what poetry is not – as in “poetry is not your drunken wife falling face down in the mashed potatoes.” We hear a large number of the women's poems and learn something factual of their lives. It's a kind of Wikipedia approach but with the added attraction of *One Yellow Rabbit*'s considerable performance skills and the opportunity to hear some wonderful poetry.

The production takes place on the open expanse of the full Vertigo stage surrounded by blacks with two cape cod chairs isolated in pools of light. The chairs are sometimes moved and the lighting design takes our eye where the director wants it to go. Plath's poetry is dense and detailed. Because of this I felt the additional time one has to digest it when reading it on the page allows greater access and engagement with the words and images than when they're spoken. But I thought Gilbertson captured an internal repression, like a spring wound too

tight in an effort to prevent its flying apart, and yet leading to that very thing. Her last two poems “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” were most powerful. I loved her red shoes, reminiscent of the fairy tale of the girl with the red shoes that danced her spirit to death. Although we don’t hear it Sexton has a poem “The Red Shoes”, and husband Kayo’s refrain of “You’re a good girl” is essentially saying to both women don’t try to escape the snare of being a good girl, continue the dance of domestic isolation, child-rearing and society’s norms though it leads to depression, madness, and death of the self.

Everything we know of Anne Sexton tells us her mental illness was on public view and she reveled in it. Denise Clarke portrays this with physical contortions and a fairly broad comic delivery. This Sexton might be nothing more than a maudlin drunk with a dark wit and a way with words. What I found missing was the bitterness, bite, deep pain and anguish that was the stimulant, catalyst, and foundation for the poetry. And perhaps because of the resonance of Gilbertson’s red shoes my mind occasionally wandered to why Clarke’s unattractive black and white dress? I kept thinking this costume must mean something, perhaps Sexton was drunk or maniac when she bought it – or it means black, white, polarizing? She’s bi-polar and the dress illustrates this? I had to pinch my arm and get back to listening to the poetry.

Curtis as Kayo doesn’t say much but exudes a kind of droll long-suffering husband wedded to a mad woman and at one point driven beyond endurance to violence. Green gives a moving rendition of Hughes poem “Lovesong” with an accent that is ... or isn’t . . . whatever, I’m not quite sure. However the two contrasted each other nicely.

The evening was more of an introduction to the lives and poetry of two important figures in the literary world. For those who were aware of them and their work it was probably wonderful to hear their words spoken on stage, a kind of beefed up poetry reading. For those who were unaware, it may lead them to a Google search and a bookstore to learn more.

Essentially, I think the Rabbits achieved their objective: A celebration of the poetry and a showcase for two talented women in the ensemble. As an intro to the High Performance Rodeo it’s no high risk ride.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2008

Security

Calgary is home to the world's longest running professional lunchtime theatre. It enters its 33rd year with the present production, a premiere of "Security" by Calgarian Neil Fleming.

In recent years the company in its search for scripts that meet its mandate has taken to annually commissioning and work-shopping 6 plays via their Petro Canada Stage One program. At the end of the season the plays are read before an audience, feedback solicited, and the favoured few, or many in some cases, continue on to production in the following season. You could say the scripts are tailored to meet the particular demands of their theatre. Audiences are juggling coffee in one hand, sandwich in the other, and a number are coming from and returning to work in the city centre. So the plays are under an hour in length, the form is comedy, with cast numbers and staging requirements that match the intimate venue and the company's budget.

While some see this as the restrictions of lunchtime theatre, I don't. I do see challenges to the playwright's imagination, to the actors and designers' interpretative art, and a test of the artistic director's vision of what theatre can be as it tickles our funny bone and revives our spirits. Lunchtime theatre is like knocking back a shot glass of energy as we take a mid-day break.

The present production, "Security" by Calgarian Neil Fleming, was commissioned and developed through the Stage One program, and deemed ready for production. It's billed as "a feel-good farce" so we know off the bat we're into broad comedy and amusing improbable situations, a hallmark of Fleming's other plays "John Doe/Jack Rabbit" and "Gnomes".

The plot: Miles McInnes (Curt McKinstry) and Andy Bastichuk (Trevor Rueger) are two security guards, hence the title. They work in a high end apartment complex that caters to celebrities and on this occasion they receive word that movie star Anna Monk (Nicole Zylstra) and her friend/agent/fellow star Patricia McGovern (Jane MacFarlane) are arriving. Andy is a little guy, shy, nervous, and Anna Monk's biggest fan. He just happens to have written a film script for Anna who also is shy, nervous, and not the brightest bulb in the box.

Miles is as large and imposing as Andy is small and timid. Miles is a fan of Patricia who is as brash and sexually aggressive as Anna is self-conscious and retiring. Andy's no salesman so at Andy's request Miles will pretend to be Andy

and pitch Andy's script to Anna. But Anna, trying to avoid a stalker, has exchanged identities with Patricia.

So we have the stallion Miles passing himself off as Andy connecting with the cougar Patricia passing herself off as Anna. (Apparently this works as Anna always wears a mask in her serial movie role. I'm unsure why Miles doesn't recognize Patricia.)

The stalker (who never appears) is also a star with a household name and fortuitously for the farce a cat bearing the same name is loose in the complex and must be caught. Of course Anna thinks it's the stalker, but, as you may guess, the real Anna and the real Andy meet around this, discover they're kindred souls and go for coffee and perogies at the French Maid strip bar while Patricia and Miles, foregoing the script pitching, are having it off in an off stage bedroom. Everyone discovers who everyone really is and Anna and Andy end up producing their film starring Miles and Patricia. I think. That bit, though elaborately costumed, was a trifle unclear. Or possibly I wasn't paying attention.

I mentioned the playwright's imagination in meeting the perceived needs of a particular theatre when writing on commission. There may be certain patterns to any dramatic form, like farce, but imagination and invention make character and situations fresh and new. They render the formula invisible. With this script I'm too aware of a farce template, a visible contrivance to the characters and events. The playwright gives us two couples, the individual personalities of each of the couples are as opposite as possible, as if one had sought antonyms in a thesaurus to characterize them. Then you have exchanged identities Andy / Miles, Anna / Patricia and mistaken identity, the cat and the stalker. The events, the "this happens which makes that happen which leads to this" is thinly plotted and highly predictable. "Security" seems rushed and insufficiently thought-through writing.

Perhaps a different performance style would have diminished the overt formula feel to the script. Instead, for me, it highlighted it. Performances were broad, cartoonish and one dimensional. Too shallow for stereotypes. There was a forced element to the vocal delivery of lines. Everyone was pushing the volume button and striking poses on the stage. A lot of the dialogue was delivered full front to the audience, directorial choices that did nothing to silence my inner voice whispering "if you really think this is so funny why are you working so hard and making it so artificial?"

On the other hand - Terry Gunvordahl's marvelous set and lighting, with multiple inverted city skylines as background provided numerous locales with minimal means. Two benches in front of two large glass panels that by turns were

revolving doors, an airport lounge, an elevator, living room, lobby, you name it. Set and lighting served in both utilitarian and elegant ways the needs of the play. I couldn't find a costume credit in the program but I thought they were appropriate and visual indicators of the characters. Word of mouth gives the credit to Amy Dettling.

Farce is easy to imitate but difficult to create. What makes it so funny is the tension between the credible and the ridiculously improbable. The further you can stretch that line of tension without snapping it, the funnier the farce. I'm afraid "Security" is no high wire act nor is it well served by the production.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2008

Our Town

In 1938 American playwright Thornton Wilder grew weary of sumptuous set elements, chronological time and realism in the theatre of his day. He did something about it by breaking with convention and writing a Pulitzer Prize winning play which virtually eliminated any set and props, and jumped through time with a narrator who filled the audience in on past, present and future events. The author created, on basically an empty stage, and with a large cast, a simple portrayal of life in small town Grover's Corners, New Hampshire. Universal, timeless truths were revealed, at least in theory, in the commonplace events and ordinary lives of the town's citizens on an average day in 1901, in 1904, and in 1913.

Wilder's "Our Town" is said to be the most produced American play of all time with a production running somewhere on each and every day of the year. While I don't vouch for the veracity of that claim, "Our Town" is indeed the production chosen by Theatre Calgary to celebrate its 40th birthday.

The play unfolds in 3 acts each dedicated to a day: "Daily Life" followed by "Love" followed by "Death". It focuses in an understated way on two families and their oldest offspring, the son of one and the daughter of the other. I suppose you could say the town itself, Grover's Corners, is really the central character and the play is that central character's monologue delivered in the multiple voices of the townspeople.

The portrait of Grover's Corners begins with the Stage Manager (aka. Narrator) setting two tables and chairs plus two ladders on the empty stage. The top of the ladders will represent the sill of two upper story windows. A couple of arches are

pushed out for “those who need scenery” as the S.M. puts it. He’s a chorus-like figure who speaks directly to us in describing the layout of this imaginary town, providing background to the characters, the town and the day, sprinkling his monologues with tidbits of homespun observations and a kind of Farmers’ Almanac philosophy with a gentle “ah, shucks, we’re just plain folks” humour.

An imaginary street separates the home of Dr. Gibbs and his family from that of the local newspaper editor and his family, the Webbs. Each residence is defined by the table and chairs on opposite sides of the stage. Folks eat breakfast, kids go to school, the milkman and paperboy deliver, wives garden & gossip & go to church choir, the town drunk staggers by, the policeman walks his beat - you get the picture.

Teenagers George Gibb and Emily Webb, neighbours since birth, converse through their respective bedroom windows, visually represented by each perching on the top rung of their respective ladders. They will sip drugstore sodas at the local pharmacy, graduate high school, and marry. Their relationship is a primary thread in the tapestry of ordinary life around them as a father-in-law gives advice, the bride and groom have prenuptial doubts, and the guests cry at their wedding.

In the final act, the Dead of Grover’s Corners, some of whom we’ve met previously, sit peacefully in their graves “waitin’ for somethin’ they feel is comin’. Somethin’ important and great,” “somethin’ eternal”. It’s the day of a funeral, and the Dead welcome Emily who has died in childbirth shortly after marriage. The Stage Manager allows her to relive one day, her 12th birthday, but her stay is brief. She quickly returns to the dead sobbing with the realization that life rushes by too quickly to apprehend and appreciate it.

“We don’t have time to look at each other . . . do human beings ever realize life while they live it?” she asks. The Stage Manager’s answer is “No”. And Emily, weaned from Earth, settles in with the Dead, as the day ends in Grover’s Corners, and the play ends for us.

If one thinks of drama as a series of exciting or emotional events (as some do) nothing happens in “Our Town”, although a lot goes on. The days on view are full of small, routine and predictable details of life that, even when first produced in 1938, is a nostalgic and romanticized look at life in the first decade of the 1900’s. I’m afraid I question its dramatic viability in the first decade of the 21st century. The playwright was breaking with the theatre conventions of his time and place with his minimalist, next to non-existent set, actors miming props and actions as they played out the minutiae of life in placid small town New Hampshire. In 1938 that approach was fresh and new. That’s not true anymore.

Sumptuous sets and technological spectacle have recently been the earmark of Theatre Calgary productions, thus it may be innovative for the company to mount a minimalist production on a relatively bare stage. But theatre audiences generally have become more familiar with the power of such minimalist settings, mimed action, non-linear time, and the diverse ways of creating drama in performance of what appears to be non-dramatic. So my attention is caught and maintained, not by the uneventful minutiae, but by the stage direction and the performances.

I'm looking for visual moments that imprint on my mind and my eye, images that I carry away with me as I leave the theatre. I'm looking for a style of production in which the stripping away of set and props is matched by a clarity and preciseness in the physical realization of the script. Actors playing surface as opposed to depth in characters and relationship is a sure path to tedium for an audience. Every action and movement is significant because these characters in all their normality nevertheless stand for more than themselves. It is in finding the essence of a moment between characters and within characters that the images I speak of are created.

I didn't find a strong directorial concept regarding this production's style or staging, thus those resonating images that stand for more than themselves were few and far between. And though we may be looking at a broad overview of life in Grover's Corners it does not dictate what I found to be a general flatness to the lighting design. It all added to a prevailing lack of focus.

I'm not sure if there was a fear that dialogue would drift off into the wings or up into the fly gallery but actors on opening night, with the exception of Dave Kelly as the Stage Manager and Tyrell Crews as George, too often delivered dialogue in a declamatory tone, I suppose to assure that audience in the back row could hear. Then there was the New England accent everyone assumed, and that lent an air of artificiality to the proceedings rather than authenticity. Plus it kept giving rise to the question, why is an American play set in a Northeastern state at the turn of the 20th century seen as an appropriate production with which to celebrate TC's 40th birthday season? We were informed in that now ubiquitous pre-show chat that all "Our Town" are played by Calgarians, but that hardly answers the question.

What about "Farther West" by John Murrell, or any play by W.O. Mitchell, both playwrights whose identity and work were founded and formed by the Canadian West and both having a past connection to Theatre Calgary?

Back to "Our Town" which certainly holds a rightful place in the American historical canon of classics. But how well does it translate to a contemporary

audience? I can't help suspecting the S.M.'s assertion that "This is the way we were in our growin' up, our marryin', our livin' and our dyin'" in Grover's Corners, N.H. is not the full truth. All the characters are white, protestant with anglo-saxon names, and Emily, the smartest of the lot, is destined for an early marriage and death, despite her brains and suggested ambition. We're told there's a factory in town plus a Polish area just off stage but no one from there figures in the growin', livin' marryin' or dyin'; these kinds of things rattle around in the back of my head as I watch "Our Town". The only way to avoid them is to experience a stunning production of a deceptively simple but really difficult play.

This isn't it.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2008

The Premature Burial

It seems as if Calgary births a new company every day. It speaks to the wealth of emerging young theatre artists in the city, as well as to the interest of many in collaborative creation. Perhaps that's in reaction to larger companies' more hierarchical rehearsal and production structures, and the lack of opportunity within most established companies for young, emerging, or even old established artists, to explore and stretch the boundaries of live performance, often by mixing and melding artistic disciplines and mediums.

Motel is an intimate theatre space opposite One Yellow Rabbit in the Epcor Centre. It's the birthing place for many artist-generated projects – and kudos to the Rabbits for making the space available.

Raven Theatre, at Motel, is the new kid on the block. Its mandate is the creation of experimental projects and performance pieces employing diverse artistic mediums. Their introductory production is the company's Artistic Director Simone Saunders's adaptation, or performance extrapolation, of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Premature Burial."

In Poe's story a narrator gives various examples of people being buried alive and relates it to his and our fear of death that until confronted, symbolically through premature burial, prevents life being lived to the fullest. Raven's acting ensemble of Simone Saunders, Leda Davies, Lorianna Lombardo with Director Charles Netto gives us three Raven shape-shifters who narrate Poe's story in a

multi-textured way by breaking the prose into individual voices, and by expressing an action, character or emotion by gesture or stylized movement.

Visually there are arresting moments – a long stretch of rich bright red material drawn slowly from a coffin entraps wrists and arms signifying a woman's struggle with illness; then represents her death when wrapped round and encasing her head and eventually becomes the shroud that strangles her and from which she hangs when prematurely entombed. There's a most effective scene with masks (created/constructed by Douglas Witt) and their power of mask work seems ideally suited to the play's content and style.

Designer Anton de Groot, composer Brian Bergum and the Raven Theatre ensemble have done well with minimal means but boy oh boy, do I ever wish they had access to all the bells, whistles and time with which to continue the R & D on this text and process. That's not a comment on the quality of the production. It is a comment on my unhappiness (and sometimes rage) that the full realization of Simone Saunders' vision, the achievement of its theatrical potential, and that of other creative artists drawn to this kind of process and performance, is so dependent on resources that may not be within their reach.

I always say creativity can replace money but sometimes you just need more lighting instruments, a venue in which a true velvet blackout with pin spots of light is possible, a state of the art sound system, plus other elements and tools that contribute, support, and reveal performance – and time, precious time to play, to try out, to discard and to choose. The first public presentation of "The Premature Burial" is really the first step. I hope Raven will find the resources to continue refining this performance piece.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2008

Snake in the Grass

At Motel in Epcor Centre is Raven Theatre's A. D. Simone Saunders' performance adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Premature Burial." It's only a block and a half walk from Motel to Vertigo, but it's a world away in terms of theatre.

At Vertigo the mandate is Mystery Theatre and "Snake in the Grass" by Alan Ayckbourn fills that bill. Author of over 70 plays, Ayckbourn's generally acknowledged as a Master Wordsmith. With an Ayckbourn play on the boards one's pretty well guaranteed a leisurely night out with engaging characters, entertaining

dialogue, in this case with a light comedic touch, and a plot that will keep your interest.

The playwright refers to “Snake in the Grass” as a ghost play. Though no ghosts appear, the spirit of a deceased abusive father inhabits the minds and memories of his two offspring. Annabel Chester escaped in her teens leaving behind her younger sister Miriam. Miriam has cared for her father over the years, sacrificing any life of her own and enduring his verbal and physical assaults. None of this bodes well for her mental health and one would not be surprised were she driven to desperate measures that did not bode well for papa.

The play begins with Annabel’s return, in ill health herself, to claim her inheritance such as it is. There is much to be resolved between the two sisters but the most immediate problem is a former employee, Alice Moody, who’d assisted Miriam in caring for the old man before his death. An untimely death, claims Moody, and threatens blackmail. We know Miriam, under stress, is prone to impulsive actions and as things go from bad to worse for Annabel, as well as for Moody, the very air vibrates with malevolent intention.

Laura Parken is, at first, a confident Annabel. But as events and memories overcome her, her strength in fleeing a past abusive marriage, and her careful planning for the sisters’ future, are gradually eroded. In Val Planche we see a Miriam, abandoned, isolated and victimized, who has survived by erasing who she once was or might have been. She’s rendered the real Miriam invisible and thus invulnerable, creating a public persona somewhere between an eccentric bag lady and a stubborn impulsive child. The subtle conflict between the two as to who is the pawn, and who is moving the pieces, is nicely played by Parken and Planche.

An important figure is Alice Moody, the blackmailing nurse. Kathryn Kerbes as Moody captures the smugness and self-satisfaction of the employee, finally in a position of power over her supposed betters and intent on taking full advantage of it.

Terry Gunvordahl’s set deserves star billing. It’s truly stunning in its realistic exterior of an English cottage, the garden, summerhouse, and portion of a tennis court. It’s lovely to look at and yet has an ambient mustiness and hint of decay just beneath the surface. Vanessa Porteous’ direction is detailed and seamless, the production delivering what Vertigo promises to its loyal patrons.

<http://www.sharonpollock.com/pages/Reviews/Archive.html>

Contributors

LINDSAY BURNS is an actress and playwright living in Calgary. She was fortunate enough to attend *Blood Relations* in 1980 at Theatre Calgary. A professional actress since 1988, Lindsay had her first one-woman show, *Naming Names*, produced in 1995. In 2000 she co-wrote the popular one-act *I Eat for Lunchbox* Theatre, followed by *Risking Rapture* in 2002. In 2005 she wrote and performed *Dough: the Politics of Martha Stewart*. In 2007 Lindsay debuted *The Vajayjay Monologues* at Urban Curvz. It has travelled to the Winnipeg, Edmonton, and New York Fringe Festivals. *Sharon's Tongue* was designed as a deep dive into the work of Ms. Pollock served with delicious food and sparkling company.

KATHY K.Y. CHUNG received her Ph.D. from the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Toronto, where she completed a dissertation on the drama of Sharon Pollock. She has published on Pollock's plays, on Vancouver arts history, and on the experience of co-editing Margaret Atwood's juvenilia.

DONNA COATES has published dozens of articles and book chapters on Australian, Canadian, and New Zealand women's responses in fiction and drama to the First and Second World Wars and to the Vietnam War. With Sherrill Grace, she has co-edited and selected plays for *Canada and the Theatre of War, Volumes One and Two* (2008, 2010). With George Melnyk, she has edited *Wild Words: Essays on Alberta Literature* (2009). She is currently completing a full-length manuscript on Australian women's fictional responses to twentieth-century wars and coordinating and editing a series of volumes on Women and War for Routledge's History of Feminism Series.

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SHERRILL GRACE is an Officer of the Order of Canada, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and a University Killam Professor at the University of British Columbia, where she has taught Canadian literature and culture for many years. She has published extensively on twentieth-century Canadian literature and lectured across Canada

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PAMELA HALSTEAD is a freelance director, dramaturg, actor, teacher, and arts consultant. She is the former Artistic Director of Lunchbox Theatre (Calgary) and Ship's Company Theatre (Parrsboro, Nova Scotia). In her ten years between these two companies she directed and/or produced over sixty productions, the majority of them premieres of new works. Pamela is co-founder and Artistic Producer of DMV Theatre (Halifax, Nova Scotia), Artistic Adviser to Valley Summer Theatre (Wolfville, Nova Scotia), and the PERFORM! Coordinator for Theatre Nova Scotia. In 2013, Pamela was awarded the inaugural Evans Award at the Calgary Critics' Awards for her contribution to the vibrancy of the Calgary theatre community.

GRANT LINNEBERG has performed in theatres across Canada, from Stratford to Vancouver and most points in between. Favourite roles include Bob in *Nisei Blue* (Alberta Theatre Projects), Squash in *Victor/Victoria* (Stage West), Lenny in *Of Mice and Men* (Vancouver Playhouse), Big Jule in *Guys and Dolls* (Stratford and Stage West), Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Shakespeare in the Park), Gordon in *Some Assembly Required* (ATP), Roy in *Middle Age White Guys* (Lunchbox Theatre), Joe Gage in *The Ginkgo Tree* (The Arts Club, Vancouver), and John Chisum in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (ATP). He is a Betty Mitchell Award Nominee and a Jessie Richardson Award Nominee. He lives in Calgary with his wife, actress and writer Lindsay Burns, and their son, Jasper.

MARTIN MORROW is an arts journalist and critic who has been covering the Canadian theatre scene since the 1980s. Originally based in Calgary, he served as the *Calgary Herald's* chief theatre critic from 1988 until 2000, and as the Arts & Lifestyle Editor for *Fast Forward*, the city's alternative weekly (2003–2006). In between, he published *Wild Theatre: The History of One Yellow Rabbit* (Banff Centre Press, 2003), a popular chronicle of one of Canada's leading avant-garde theatre companies, which was nominated for an Alberta Book Award. Since 2007, Morrow has been based in Toronto, where he has continued a long relationship with *The Globe and Mail* as the paper's second theatre critic. He has also served as an arts producer for CBC.ca, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's website (2007–2011), and as a film and theatre columnist for *The Grid* (2011–2014). A two-time winner of the Nathan Cohen Award for Excellence in Critical Writing, he is president of the Canadian Theatre Critics Association and a jury member of the Toronto Theatre Critics Awards.

JETON NEZIRAJ is a former professor of dramaturgy at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Pristina (2007–2008) and former artistic director of the National Theatre of Kosovo. He is the founder and director of Qendra Multimedia, a cultural production company based in Pristina. He has written over fifteen plays, some of which have been translated from the Albanian and published and performed in both Kosovo and abroad.

LAURA PARKEN, a native Calgarian, has been performing locally and nationally for over thirty years. Laura has worked with virtually every professional theatre company in Calgary, but her favourite and most rewarding achievements have been in the independent realm, creating and collaborating with other artists in productions including *Sharon's Tongue*, as well as her solo show *Might As Well Live*, a fictional, emotional autobiography of Dorothy Parker, created with Ken Cameron, and *Adventures of the Trick-Riders* with Sheri-D Wilson for the One

Yellow Rabbit High Performance Rodeo. Laura has also collaborated and performed in acclaimed productions with Michael Green, Doug Curtis, Gail Hanrahan, Andy Curtis, Sharon Stevens, and Sandi Somers, among others. Laura is the recipient of two Betty Mitchell Awards for Acting.

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JASON WIENS is an instructor in the Department of English at the University of Calgary, where he teaches Canadian literature. He has published articles on prairie poetry, Dionne Brand, Margaret Avison, the Kootenay School of Writing, and George Bowering, and regularly reviews contemporary poetry for *Quill and Quire* and *Alberta Views*. He recently received a grant to develop a new undergraduate course that will ask students to digitize selected papers in the Canadian

literature collection of the University of Calgary's Archives and Special Collections. In recent years he has delivered conference papers on Frederick Philip Grove, John Glassco, and Roderick Haig Brown, as part of a developing interest in modernist non-fiction. This is his first published article on Sharon Pollock's work, although he has taught her plays – including *Blood Relations*, *Walsh*, *Whiskey Six Cadenza*, and *Generations* – numerous times.

CYNTHIA ZIMMERMAN has been a commentator on Canadian playwriting and on the voice of women on the Canadian stage throughout her career at Glendon College, York University. Now professor emerita, she continues to publish and teach in her research specialty areas, Canadian theatre and contemporary women playwrights. Previously book review editor of *Modern Drama*, an omnibus reviewer of drama for "Letters in Canada," the *University of Toronto Quarterly* annual survey of publications, she has authored or co-authored a number of books and produced numerous articles, chapters, and public papers. Her most recent works are as editor of the three-volume *Sharon Pollock: Collected Works*, *The Betty Lambert Reader*, and *Reading Carol Bolt*, all published by Playwrights Canada Press. *Reading Carol Bolt* is both an anthology and a collection that commemorates and celebrates Bolt's important pioneering contributions to Canadian theatre.

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“Pollock’s contributions to Canadian theatre are indisputable – not only as a playwright but also a director, actor, mentor, and educator. This collection reminds us of the wide range of social, political, and historical subjects she has interrogated, and the imaginative theatricality of her work. . . . It brings together essays by established Pollock scholars and emerging scholars, whose diverse theoretical approaches further illuminate the plays and extend the analysis into a wider socio-political arena.”

- Anne Nothof, editor of
Sharon Pollock: Essays on Her Works

Sharon Pollock has played an integral role in shaping Canada’s national theatre tradition, and she continues to produce new works and to contribute to Canadian theatre as passionately as she has done over the past fifty years. Pollock is nationally and internationally respected for her work and support of the theatre community. She has also played a major role in informing Canadians about the “dark side” of their history and current events. *Sharon Pollock: First Woman of Canadian Theatre*, comprised entirely of new and original assessments of her work and contribution to theatre, is both timely and long overdue.

The collection includes a new play titled “Sharon’s Tongue” by the Playing with Pollock Collective, as well as transcripts of seventeen of Pollock’s own reviews of plays from her CBC Radio feature *Pollock on Plays*.

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