



Photo: Mark Scherman

Phoenix Theatre's season premiere challenges audience

Mind shows ambition

A Lie of the Mind
Phoenix Theatre
at the Kaasa Theatre
Runs till November 15

By Randal Smathers

Phoenix Theatre opened its season on the weekend with Sam Shepard's newest — most complex, and longest work (three hours). As with most ambitious projects, this one is not quite a complete success, although it is certainly a fine effort.

The entire cast is excellent. There are no weak performances, although John Wright is slightly flawed as Jake. Given that the role requires him to be lover, wife-beater, and man possessed, the necessary range is huge. Unfortunately, Wright's "man possessed" does little but stare stone-faced into space. This is simply inadequate for a character whose growing lunacy is the driving force behind the plot.

At the other end of the scale is Wright's sister Susan, and Marianne Copithorne. Ms. Wright plays Jake's mother, Lorraine, and is wonderful. Her portrayal is funny and accurate, evoking memories of similar people from one's own past.

Edmonton product Copithorne has the play's toughest role as Beth. At the start of the action, Beth is in hospital, having suffered brain damage as the result of a beating at the hands of her husband Jake. Copithorne is brilliant at depicting the partial return to "normalcy" of her character. She blends voice and gesture to show the struggle of a woman limited in ability to do many things but not in memory of what she once was capable of doing.

Tony Yamie as Beth's brother Mike, Wendell Smith as her father Baylor, and Maralyn Ryan as her mother Meg, work well together. They give an insightful look at what is a family in name only. When Jake's brother Frankie (Joel Stewart) joins the group, the

interaction gets even better, and funnier.

Lorraine and her daughter Sally (Jane Spidell) are a nice duet in counterpoint to Beth's family.

The sets by Stencil Campbell and lighting by Don MacKenzie both work well, with some of the light effects being especially nice. The use of music varies from intrusive to indispensable.

I've left the two main off-stage components — writing and directing — until last, because they have me puzzled. One or the other does not work in the third act, which becomes tedious. Tediousness at the end of a three hour play is serious stuff, and someone should answer for it. It is tempting to blame the director, because the playwright Shepard is a minor deity, and the first two acts were so well written. The third act is a little repetitive, however, and the male lead doesn't do much except stare and stagger by this point, so maybe it's not all the director's fault.

Director Jim Guedo is taking over at the Phoenix this year, and has undertaken a difficult first show in *A Lie of the Mind*. He certainly gets everything out of his actors, and he made the first two-thirds of this play work wonderfully. He has challenged his audience: this is an absorbing play which drains the watcher, not a light entertainment in which one merely sits back and lets the art flow over one.

These points are all to Guedo's credit; however, in the first act he turns his audience into a seething mass of fidgeters. The pacing simply escapes and there is a struggle to finish this play, instead of having it build up towards a climax. Once again, this may be partly Shepard's fault.

Altogether, this is an enjoyable if not perfect evening of theatre. Audiences should expect to feel as if they worked as hard as the actors, but they will also find some satisfaction in doing so.

Jazz dancers display humour and grace

Decidedly Jazz
SUB Theatre

review by Rosa Jackson

The latest production by Decidedly Jazz, called *Peripheral Visions*, was above all a demonstration of guts. These dancers used traditional jazz dance and music to tackle modern themes while adding their own originality, wit and grace to every number. Whether or not you are interested in dance, this show could not fail to entertain and intrigue you.

What do you expect to see on stage at a dance concert, when you know the company consists of six attractive women? Decidedly Jazz shattered preconceived notions of what dancers should wear from the very start of *Peripheral Visions*. For their first number, "Re: Action," they dressed in pin-striped suits, and with completely deadpan expressions on their faces depicted with their bodies the lifestyle of our modern times. Sometimes organized and in unison, occasionally chaotic, they demonstrated the contradictions and confusion in working people's lives.

This theme was expanded upon with "But I Didn't Like the Sushi," a solo in which Donna Larson portrayed an '80's "Superwoman" to the singing of Lana Skaug. These women each captivated the audience with their performances, and worked so perfectly together that they seemed to be a single embodiment of voice and movement. And if you ever thought bathtubs would be out of place in a dance show, this piece proved you wrong. As props, the two bathtubs were vehicles for some incredibly sensuous dancing. Fragments of commercial propaganda, with which women are constantly bombarded were effectively used as an introduction to the piece, creating an atmosphere of tension but at the same time humor.

"Sophisticated Ladies' Suite," which followed, was the only number which allowed the dancers to use facial expression to the utmost. Once again, it was a piece full of contrasts. Dressed in evening gowns, the

women at first put on a beautiful facade of pretension; that is, until they gave way to their individual quirks which were far from refined! They were hilarious to watch as, perched on chairs, they began to scratch themselves, pull up their nylons, lose their balance—all the things people do when they think there is no risk of being seen. And their competition for the one extra chair which came into the picture about halfway through the piece showed the everpresent human belief that what we can't possess is necessarily more desirable than what we have.

The second half of the show was both innovative and thought-provoking. It consisted of two pieces: "Iconoclasm" and "Thick Mystery Gang."

The word "Iconoclasm" does not exist, but an "iconoclast" is defined as "one who attacks cherished beliefs and institutions." Replace the "clast" with "chasm" and you have a rebel in a gorge — or something! Well, the meaning of the title didn't seem to matter too much in this artistically choreographed piece, which was also presented at the Dance in Canada Conference in Ottawa last summer. The dancers alternated between coming together in harmony in one corner of the stage and scattering throughout in a disarranged pattern. The lighting brought to my mind at least religious images, but the costumes — jeans and t-shirts — opposed this. Whatever the piece implied, it was fascinating to watch.

But perhaps the most intriguing performance of all was the last one. This was the only piece choreographed by Denise Clarke, and the music of Prince provided an appropriate background to this strange but powerful number. For the first few minutes, the dancers created their own rhythm with only their heels and voices, and things were getting a little weird, but it was an appropriate introduction to the music which followed.

Vicki Adams Willis showed her abilities as a choreographer in integrating such detailed dancing to the complex rhythms of jazz by artists such as Thelonius Monk and Duke Ellington. The history of jazz dance will not be forgotten in Canada as long as it is being preserved by this talented company.



Decidedly Jazz of Calgary in "Sophisticated Ladies Suite"

Photo: Peter McEwen

Mermaids has a magical charm

I've Heard the Mermaids Singing
A Cinephile Release
Principal Plaza

review by Terry Gale

Not since *The Decline of the American Empire* has a Canadian film generated so much international press as *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* has during the past year. Since it was screened at the Cannes Film Festival, a lot of praise has been heaped upon this low budget picture, its director/writer Patricia Rozema and its star Sheila McCarthy. But all this praise does not even come close to capturing how delightful this whimsical, quirky little film really is.

I've Heard the Mermaids Singing is the story of Polly, a temporary secretary and amateur photographer, who lives out her fantasies through the black and white photos that adorn her walls. Polly is so distracted by these fantasies that her past employers have

not been happy with her performance at work.

This situation changes when Polly is hired by the owner of a trendy Toronto art gallery. The owner is so charmed by Polly's klutzy and unassuming behaviour that she offers Polly a permanent position. Trouble occurs for Polly though when she becomes taken with the gallery owner, and her fantasies come into conflict with reality.

The strength of Patricia Rozema's film lies in the character of Polly. Polly is an Everyman type of character; there is a little bit of her in all of us. Polly is a vulnerable, naive dreamer who is constantly making mistakes. She is uncomfortable and does not know how to behave in new situations; and therefore is constantly getting herself into embarrassing and comic situations. She is a lovable klutz.

Sheila McCarthy brings a warmth and charm to the character of Polly. Because of McCarthy's considerable acting talent, Polly

is not just a character up on the screen, she is your best friend. McCarthy brings a truth and honesty to this character that captures the audience members' hearts as they become her trusted confidantes. They share in Polly's happiness and in her pain and they experience her dreams with her.

Polly's dreams are an integral part of the film, as the difference between fantasy and reality is a recurring theme. In her fantasy, Polly soars high above her earthly reality. She is refined and cultured as she talks knowledgeably about art with the gallery owner. She is not afraid to climb tall buildings, nor is she afraid to experience the joy and freedom of flying. She is superhuman. These dream sequences are so beautifully photographed, even though they are in black and white like the photographs Polly likes to take, they are able to capture the essence of Polly's dream world. These moments of beauty are further enhanced by a magical score created by Toronto based musician Mark Korven.

Polly's fantasies, however, clash with her reality as she discovers that people and situations are not always what they appear to be. Her simplistic view of life is no match for the complexities of a modern urban society which she discovers is full of lies and half-truths. She feels betrayed, and so do we. Through this betrayal, Rozema makes a strong statement about the pretentiousness of the Toronto art scene, and about the charades in which people become involved.

All is not lost for Polly though as she returns to her simplistically honest fantasy world. She even has "opened the doors" to this world for the gallery owner and the owner's lover. So as the film closes, the "mermaids" are not only just singing for Polly alone but they are also heard by others as well. The audience has the opportunity to experience their beautiful voices as it becomes captivated by the pure magic that this film creates. As one immerses himself into the world of Polly and her follies, one is escaping from his own reality for awhile. The audience, like Polly, is living in a world of dreams, but in a darkened theatre instead of the dark room of Polly's apartment.