

# Skillful production wades through soggy script in Eclectic's latest

By CHRIS WARREN

The relatively young theatre group, Eclectic Theatre Productions (composed of several York graduates) has now put on four highly successful productions, including *Fortune in Men's Eyes* and *Creeps*. The fourth, *Female Transport*, which recently concluded a run at Tarragon Theatre's Extra Space, establishes an adherence to high production values and the choice of socially relevant plays, usually about imprisonment.

The play, by Steve Gooch, a young British playwright, concerns six young women, convicted of various light crimes in the early nineteenth century, and sentenced to outrageous terms at a prison camp in Australia. The female prisoners are "transported" in the hold of a ship on the six-month voyage from England to Australia.

Now, there is plenty of room for exploration with a premise like this. The playwright has tried to examine questions of justice, humanity, the corruption of innocence, and the influence of greed, heavy questions that have been explored now by most major playwrights. But if the play,

for all its highly-wrought emotions, tension, and occasional violence, seems a bit contrived, sentimental, and self-righteous, the blame does not fall on the production.

ETP, under the direction of York theatre grad Jordan Merkur, has staged the play with so much energy and thoroughness that the parts that are written well stand up as very fine theatre. But unfortunately the play is conventional in so many ways, and betrays its own dynamite premise with such false contrivances, that I began to feel as trapped as the convicts.

You have a corrupt prison guard, Sarge, bent, squinting, and drawling from one side of his mouth. When he sits with the young lad just hired for his first voyage, you expect him to say "Ar, Billy, have yer ever bin ta sea?" Trevor Bain as The Surgeon strove valiantly with lines like: "You've heard of humanity, I presume?" and several preachy monologues establishing the play's "moral voices."

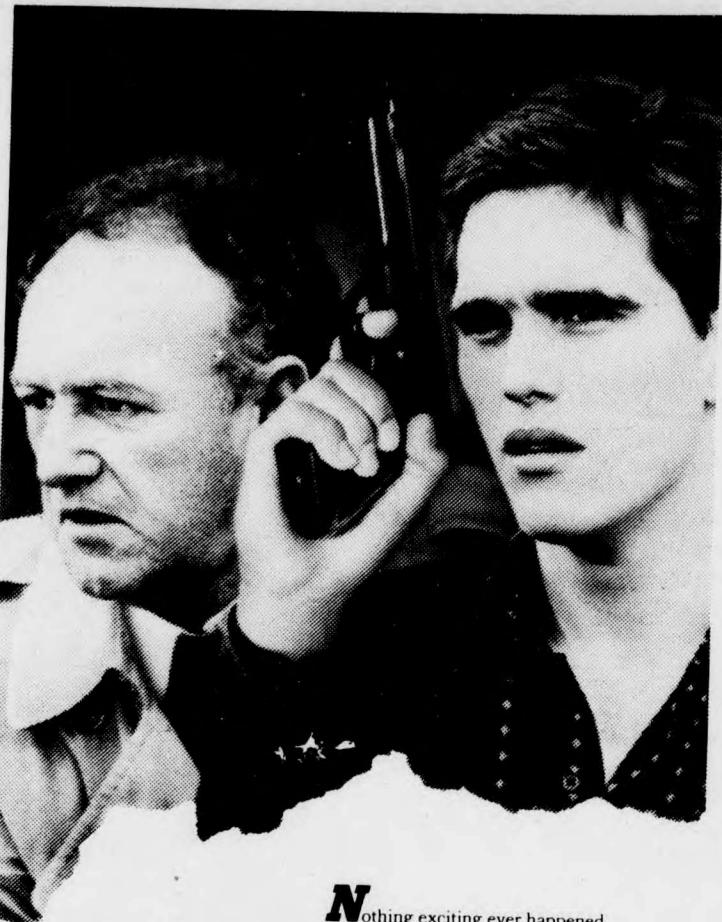
The finer characterization fell to the women themselves, and with a fine cast, led by Alison Smiley as the

gusty Charlotte and Jackie Samuda as Nance, the rebellious, righteous prisoner, the six sad characters came to life. But the script frequently becomes journalistic. For instance, all the women tell each other (and, conveniently, us) their life story in one chunk, one by one. Gooch is too timid with the circumstances, which, if you have any imagination, would have had to be awful.

When the ship reaches Sydney, you have a neat ending: the good surgeon has been bought off and won't report the terrible conditions, the innocent boy, untouched by the squalor and violence, is dreaming of seeing the world, and the women...I'll put it this way: I was thankful not one of them said: "Gee I—I'm kind of sad it's all over now—let's keep in touch."

Complete with interesting set and quick pace, ETP's production was enjoyable in itself, but the play is hardly one that disturbs or stays with you. With their mounting skill and experience, the new company, with good material, promises to be an exciting one to watch.

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