

Staging Stoppard

BY ANDREW SIMPSON

Five years ago Michael Sanderson was studying physics at the University of Manitoba. Today he is in theatre at Dalhousie, although to say that he is simply "in" theatre is an understatement.

It is not hard to tell when someone loves what they are doing, even if they are trying to control their enthusiasm for the sake of a professional appearance. At odd moments during my interview with Sanderson, I could see the reins slipping — his accelerated speech, and my aching pen hand, betrayed the joy he found in discussing theatre.

"I wasn't enjoying science so I thought, 'Why not do something I love?'" said Sanderson.

Sanderson does more than just discuss theatre: he is assistant director of this week's Dalhousie Theatre Department Production, *Arcadia*.

Arcadia is the latest offering from Tom Stoppard, and some critics claim it is his best. The British playwright is renowned for his extravagant use of language and obscure references, most famously

in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* which he wrote almost 25 years ago.

Sanderson says *Arcadia* is no lightweight either.

"The text is very dense. There are a lot of issues dealt with in one play — from sex to the second law of thermodynamics. It takes this huge variety of stuff and equates it to life, which is what makes it a great play."

Grab hold of something heavy, here comes the plot summary.

Arcadia is set in both 1809 and the present, in the

same room of an English country home.

In 1809, Septimus Hodge is tutoring 13-year-old Thomasina Coverly in her family home. While enlightening his student, Hodge is frantically trying to avoid Ezra Chater, a minor poet. The poet has challenged Hodge to a duel, having caught the tutor mucking about with his wife.

In the present, meanwhile, Bernard Nightingale is a grumpy academic doing research on an obscure poet called Ezra Chater. Hannah Jarvis is a feminist writer interested in studying the lover of



Jodie Stevens and Matthew Kennedy lighting up Dal Theatre's production of *Arcadia*. The show runs from February 12 to 15 in the David Mack. Murray Studio Theatre of the Dalhousie Arts Centre.

the late, great poet, Lord Byron. Both are the guests of the Coverly family (the present generation still living in the same country home).

When evidence is discovered suggesting Byron had once visited the Coverly home, along with evidence that Chater died in a duel against an unknown opponent, Nightingale concludes it must have been Byron who killed Chater.

While this summary barely scratches the surface of *Arcadia*, Sanderson — who did extensive background research and wrote the program notes for the show — promises *Arcadia* won't go over

its audience's head and seemed reasonably certain it hadn't gone over his.

"There is a lot of information in this play, and I'm sure people won't get it all because there is just so much, but I'm sure they'll get a lot," he said.

By showing the past and the present simultaneously, Stoppard reveals the danger of drawing speedy historical conclusions based on loose correlations.

"It's the chaos theory. Small little things can change the whole outlook of the future," continued Sanderson.

Working under director Jean

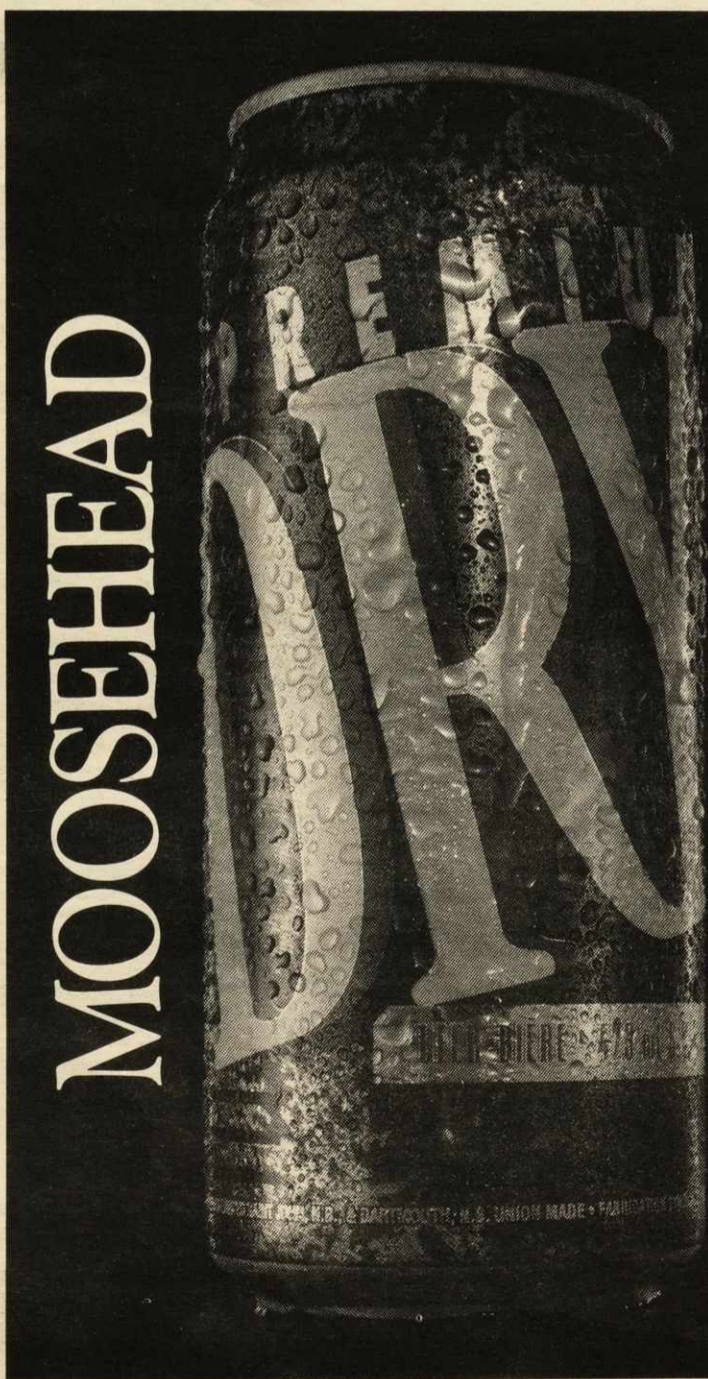
Morpurgo — a 1996 graduate of Dalhousie's Theatre program — the entire production has been put together and run by active theatre students.

"The great thing about theatre is that so many people work together to give you that finished product," said Sanderson.

Does theatre get enough support from the student body?

"I don't know and I'm gonna stick with that," said Sanderson with an ironic smile.

Arcadia is playing in Studio One (David Mack. Murray Studio Theatre) of the Dalhousie Arts Centre from February 12 to 15.



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