

## Revenge tragedy and Wasyk's *Ubu* challenge their audiences

*The Changeling*  
by Middleton and Rowley  
Toronto Free Theatre  
until Feb. 14

*Ubu the King*  
by Alfred Jarry  
Toronto Free Theatre  
until Feb. 3

By JASON SHERMAN

In January's Atlantic Monthly movie reviewer David Denby explains why he prefers the cinema to the theatre. He writes: "The 'distinguished' plays and musicals I've dragged myself to in recent years seem clichéd, obvious, crude, or else intricate and clever in ways that I didn't care about."

Perhaps Denby merely lacks the imagination and desire to be involved in the theatrical experience, preferring to watch the same drama transferred onto celluloid where it becomes somehow subtle, inviting and, we suppose, intricate and clever in ways he *does* care about.

There are a lot of people who feel the same way as Denby, although at any given moment there are far more awful films around than plays. Film caters directly to people who want to be indirect, theatre to people who know that the invisible barrier wants only communication to be broken down.

York Theatre Professor Neil Freeman directed *Romeo and Juliet* here recently which attempted and succeeded in bringing the actor and the audience to a shared level of understanding: that is, words were spoken as a means of bringing together, not separating. Modern productions of classical theatre suffer from this phenomenon. Those involved in Toronto Free Theatre's production of *The Changeling* were aware of this common problem.

*The Changeling* is a revenge tragedy with a perverse sense of humor, one emphasized by director Guy Sprung. Beatrice-Joanna commissions servant De Flores to murder one man so that she may marry another. De Flores commits the murder, then coerces Beatrice into a sexual relationship. Sprung, designer Terry Gunvordahl and music composer John Mills-Cockell have created an atmosphere in which scenes and speeches full of horror become so grotesque that they are humorous, just as scenes of apparent humor become hideous.

In what should become an infamous scene, a finger is chopped off and dropped to the floor one storey below. The theatre is dark. We only have the suggestion and the sounds of the act: the severing of flesh and bone, the thud of the finger hitting concrete, the dripping of blood.

"I love that scene," says Rosemary Dunsmore, who plays Beatrice. "We're so blasé about violence because of television and the movies. You hear the sound (of the finger being cut) and people go 'ooh, that's gross.' It puts you in touch with something real." Yet Dunsmore, speaking about the apparent resurgence of interest in classical theatre and opera, says that "people want to see something more refined, more beautiful." It's a statement which perfectly summarizes the complexities of this production.

Dunsmore is a product of the York theatre program; more accurately, of the fledgling York theatre program. She says the four years—1970 to 1973—she spent here was an exciting time. Much of the reason for this was David Benidetti, who then headed what Dunsmore refers to as an "eclectic" program. Theatre training was just beginning in earnest in Canadian universities, and York's program was no better or worse than anywhere else.

"I never had any acting classes, any training in technique," Dunsmore says. "Nobody was teaching that. There was a lot of group theatre, a lot of trust."

And, at a time when the teachers (really, theatre professionals with no teaching experience) and the students were learning together, Dunsmore felt they weren't learning enough together. In fact, she feels "it's a crime" that the program wasn't put together with more of an eye toward practical education.

"I came out of York," Dunsmore said, "and I realized I didn't know anything about how the world worked." To learn more about acting, at least, she studied another two years. Dunsmore moves easily from classical to modern, even doing such commercials as the 'Griswald' Bell Canada ad.

Through it all, but more so in theatre, Dunsmore says she wants people "to feel sexy and hot. I want people to be disoriented. You just can't do safe acting, or you get a safe show."

*Safe The Changeling* is not. It throws itself at the audience and, in a sense physically surrounds it, with madhouse scenes played well into the theatre, off to the side. Dunsmore looks the part to perfection, all passion and sensuality, embodying both power and vulnerability in a way which allows us to accept the contradiction. If she has occasion to extract more humor from her lines than the lines seem to call for, her exuberance is well balanced by the understated performance of R.H. Thompson.

Thompson plays the murdered with an empathy rarely seen. His De Flores actually grows more and more attractive as the play



"SHERMAN'S OUT THERE": Rosemary Dunsmore works on getting audience 'sexy, hot and disoriented.' Aaron Swartz plots along.

builds, and in the final bloody tableau, we feel that this is the only right ending. The sense of inevitability of the play is never given over to a sense of stock plotting.

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Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* was first staged nearly 80 years ago, and the riots, arguments and influences surrounding what was originally a puppet-play is well documented. *Ubu* was ahead of its time, as they say, a time of volatile change in all the arts, and its renewal by 45.3 Production is at first a trifle anachronistic. After all, one of Jarry's main concerns was in shocking an audience, used to the well-made play, out of its complacency. He succeeded. And yes, audiences today are complacent unless asked—begged—to get involved, as with *Trafford Tanzi*. The problem is that the play has been categorized, so that we can react by saying, ah yes, this is supposed to shock me, and little more.

Director Daryl Wasyk must have taken this into consideration, because what he seems to have done is internalized the dialogue—that is, the actors emote their lines, they are not merely caricatures, and the horror of the play is no longer dependent upon the audience's reaction to the form of the play as much as the ideas of the play. And an idea of an insane dictator willfully destroying everything around him is never a stale one.

This *Ubu* has been adapted by Wasyk, former university Professor Judith Rudakoff

and former Free playwright-in-residence Walter Bruno. They have decided to transfer the topical references to this part of the world (from Poland) although there really is nothing to be gained by such a move. None of this, after all, is real. They have also opted for a freer use of obscenity than traditional translations, which amounts to overkill. *Merde* in French means shit, but *merdre* only sounds like it: it's up to the audience to determine what has or has not been said. But again, the audience here is given little to do but sit and watch.

And watch we do. The costumes are striking, grotesque, malproportioned and exaggerated, like the play itself. Played against a black box set and with actors who, like those of a Tom Stoppard play, "blend into the background" the dress really does stand out. The point may be that these characters are defined, if at all, by outward appearance since what lies beyond is indistinguishable from their environment.

45.3 was daring with this production and much of it works. The sort of reaction we read in the *Toronto Star* concerning the play's supposed inaccessibility is more indicative of the mind of the theatregoer rather than the theatre piece. There is something threatening about *Ubu*, and there are genuine moments of horror; but we are too easily frightened off by a little exaggeration. It's one thing to close our eyes to a finger dropping to the floor; quite another to close our ears, too, when an idea lands directly in our lap.

## Quebec author spins poetic tale of '80s angst

*Anna's World*  
by Marie-Claire Blais  
Lester and Orpen Dennys, 176 pp.

By KEVIN CONNOLLY

Since her explosive arrival onto the Canadian literary scene at the age of 18 with *Mad Shadows*, Marie-Claire Blais has distinguished herself as one of this country's finest writers. A two time Governor General's Award winner, for *The Manuscripts of Pauline Archange* (1967) and *Deaf to the City* (1980), Blais has also won international acclaim with *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* which won her both the Prix France-Quebec and the Prix Medicis in 1966. *Anna's World*, her latest release, maintains the high standards we have come to expect from this talented writer.

The novel, which is essentially a rather complex study of teenage despair, hinges on one all pervasive stylistic technique. In essence, *Anna's World* is a series of extended comma splices, powered by a lyric quality that makes the work more of a prose poem than a traditional narrative. Narrative clarity is sacrificed for emotional impact and psychological realism, the language lapsing easily from colloquial speech to poetic reverie in a seemingly random collection of personal impressions.

The narrative, what little of it there is, is a fragmented flashback that follows the psy-

chological journey of Anna, a young runaway who returns to her affluent Quebec family after a trek through the Caribbean drug culture. What little we see of Anna's history is related in snippets of localized trauma, most of which are merely displaced extensions of her everyday despair. Running parallel to, and occasionally overlapping Anna's story is the ongoing struggle of her friend Michelle, an emotional outcast who experiences much the same sense of emptiness and moral isolation. The novel is very much a novel about the eighties, but familiar themes of moral lethargy, spiritual dislocation and the fear of imminent nuclear destruction are filtered through a highly subjective series of individual perspectives. A common thread of mutual confusion runs through the merging monologues of Anna, Michelle and their respective parents; in the end we get the sense that the same dilemma is transferred from generation to generation, the parents at times appearing more confused, more pathetic than their children.

Choosing this highly specific and subjective approach provides Blais with the organizing principle of the novel, and while it allows for great emotional intensity over an extended period of time, it demands a lot from both the author and the reader. Except in isolated instances, Blais seems equal to the task; she chooses her images so carefully and manipulates them with such a keen poetic instinct that the intensity never lets up from the first page onward. She deals with large

subjects with incredible ease, distilling the essential paradox of the eighties in tight, isolated incidents. And because her approach is consistently subjective, she never gives the reader the luxury of detachment.

Michelle and Anna are far from the stereotyped 'poor little rich kids.' Throughout the work there is a sense of sincere personal suffering that attends their privileged position, the suffering of the alienated individual and the pangs of international conscience. Michelle is nauseated by the food, the clothing, the rootless and hypocritical standards of her upper middle class heritage, humiliated by what she feels to be complicity in a world wide crime. Anna has an even keener sense of helplessness, realizing that action is meaningless in a morally diseased society, and that action or inaction become irrelevant in a world on the brink of annihilation. She looks at her father, a conscientious objector, a product of the sixties, and all she sees is the complement to her own paralysis: her vision is one of a world cut off from any recognizable spiritual frame of reference, lost in a flood of overwhelming forces it has ceased to understand, and carried toward oblivion by sheer inertia:

*Anna glided past walls, past houses, she would shut herself up in her room and never come out, perhaps in her mute, cloistered existence these tormenting thoughts would gradually be obliterated and the flood would ebb from her, or*

*must she live like Tommy and Manon, always on the lookout, they watched constantly, their eyes, their hands never knew a moment's rest, a picture on the wall, a tip left on a restaurant table, wherever they went this power to assimilate was awakened, and they couldn't meet anyone, even the most destitute of drifters who had come from Arizona on foot, Anna thought, without considering robbing him of who knows, a bit of rope, a knife that might be useful, they never stopped watching, evaluating, at the mercy of this unacknowledged passion, ritual and obsessive, the passion to devour the other alive, is this the way we must live, Anna wondered, or should we succumb to a comatose peace in which the other was not eaten alive, but killed indirectly, in a mute, cloistered existence made up of inertia, in which all that was human and hence the cause of suffering would be overshadowed by memory...*

To Anna the question is not whether one should participate in the madness (that is already decided), but what form that participation will take; is one to be an individual or a collective criminal? It is little wonder that Anna feels powerless in the face of such a nightmarish world vision.

cont'd on p. 14