

Jane Spidell bringing colour and consequence to Rice

interview by Kevin Law

The cramped Citadel dressing room looks just as spartan as the last one I was in a year ago. Nothing decorates the room except a banana yellow tape player, a dart board (with darts), and a cardboard fish bowl that stands on end and looks almost real. The items belong to Jane Spidell, and they are meant to beat the tension of rehearsing some eight plus hours a day on David Mamet's *Speed-The-Plow*, a co-production between the Citadel and Phoenix Theatre that will be performed in Rice Theatre.

Spidell is well known to Edmonton audiences, having performed in such critically acclaimed productions as *The Last Bus* for Theatre Network, and *A Lie Of The Mind* and *The Flight Of The Earls* for the Phoenix. As well, she has performed in numerous Stewart Lemoine productions, including *Bad Seed* and *The Vile Governess*. Unlike many of her contemporaries in this theatre berg, however, she is not a University of Alberta BFA drama graduate.

"I couldn't make it through a year of arts at the U of A which is what is needed to enroll in the BFA program," Spidell says with a wry smile that denotes an aversion to a university curriculum. So she applied to all the well-known regional schools like the Vancouver Playhouse and the National Theatre School in Montreal. But the one that came through was the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York, and she grabbed it.

"Winter was coming and I was dreading another winter in Edmonton with nothing to do. I didn't want to go back to the University and I didn't want to do amateur shows, so when I was accepted at the Academy of Dramatic Arts, it was spur of the moment; I left even before I had finances arranged," Spidell explains.

Once there, she concedes that part of her baggage was a smug attitude toward the Academy. She admits she went with an "I'm-gonna-show-them-how-it's-done" attitude, but, "I soon realized I had a lot to learn after all," she says. Not all of her New York education was formal, however. Part of her experience included working at a public theatre, and just generally hanging around and seeing "tons of celebrities and tons of plays," not all of which she was enamoured with.

"More than two thirds of the stuff I actually saw on Broadway was empty, mindless theatre," Spidell says, citing as an example a



Actress Jane Spidell looks relaxed and unwound

production of *The Three Musketeers* that closed within two weeks of opening. "Big names, no risk; that's what sells," she emphatically asserts. "That ties into the play we're doing, except it takes place in Hollywood and it's in the movie industry." The premise of *Speed-The-Plow* is initiated through two Hollywood film producers who hope to make big money by producing a formula movie with a big name star.

Spidell plays the lone female character, Karen, in the three character play. The two male leads, says Jane, fit into the vacuous, deal-making Hollywood machine. They operate "the way they have to in order to get along in the business. Karen, a secretary temporarily hired by the two producers is, according to Spidell, "a bit more naive and a bit more idealistic". Karen questions the shallow principles involved in the movie that is about to be made. Her notion of film is closer to the reality of audience sentiment than the tainted ideals of her employers. People, Spidell explains by way of her

character, don't want to see degrading trash. "they want to see things that will uplift them; they don't want to see (the movie about to be made) because it just creates more anger, it just perpetuates itself."

Mamet's play makes the venerable observation that people in Hollywood strive for the elite pinnacle of their profession. "People in this Hollywood machine use what they have in order to get to the top," says Spidell, explaining that, being a woman, Karen "knows that her sexuality is a tool to use and she's using it as much as she needs to." With that she pauses, and then adds with a pensive grin, "Everybody's a whore basically. Both of the men as well as the woman."

Initially, Spidell was less than enthralled with Mamet's seemingly chauvinistic characterizations. "When I first read it, I didn't like it," she says. "I thought it was too misogynistic, too cynical. I read it a few more times and got to like it more and more. The thing about David Mamet, the way he writes, there are

very few words, but they're really meaningful words; it's like stew without a lot of filler, like barley and all that stuff." Spidell, reflecting some more on Mamet, adds, "You have to be specific about each 'if', 'and', 'but', and pause, because he uses them very pointedly and deliberately; there's not one thing wasted in the script, and that's the challenge of working on it."

As for a working philosophy, Spidell approaches every character she plays in basically the same manner. "Beginning with the hairdo," she says with a laugh. Like most actors, she looks for something in a character she can identify with, and if that proves intangible, she looks for important traits in other people to help understand a particular character.

"But I do think hair is very important," she reiterates more seriously. "Hair is part of a person's fashion sense. How they present themselves is very important to a character. What you see on stage is very important, whether a person is aware of fashion or not so aware, or cares about it or doesn't care. How they do their hair, how they dress or sit says a lot about how they feel about themselves. That's what you have to understand first: how a character feels about him or herself."

Spidell notes that her overall acting philosophy changes everyday. "I don't know about working from the inside out or the outside in, I think I do a bit of both." She accentuates this remark by pulling back her straight blonde hair and saying, "I'll try my hair like this one day and see if it works, then I'll say to myself: 'I think I'll try her from this emotional standpoint today,' so I do a bit of both."

Spidell agreeably incorporates her assimilative philosophy into an analysis of genres. "I don't know which is more satisfying, comedy or drama, because I think there are elements of both in everything. Even a heavy drama cannot be approached without humour because life's like that, and usually comedy will come out of really dire situations."

Again smiling, she concludes these sublime musings with ambiguous resolve. "There's no black or white as far as I'm concerned," she says scratching her chin, "but there's no grey either." Such mutable introspection then, once instilled on stage, should spur Jane Spidell to a performance that is neither black, white, or grey, but colourful and consequential.

Loose Ends unexpectedly involving

Loose Ends
Michael Weller
Studio Theatre
through November 18

review by James Ingram

The Studio Theatre's production of Michael Weller's *Loose Ends* was a disappointment, but not in the obvious way. I was expecting and even hoping for one of those tedious, irritating baby-boom dramas that have become so popular in the movies and on TV, where over-dressed Yuppies whine about how misunderstood they are as they cry into their Heinekens. I was relishing the thought of cutting into not only the play, but into the cult of self-pity that has become the religion of one of the most fortunate generations in human history. The disappointment came when it became clear that the play is an unexpectedly thoughtful and involving exploration of relationships and maturity.

Loose Ends traces the nine-year love affair of Paul and Susan, which begins on a beach in Bali in 1970 and ends in an apartment in New York in 1978. At the same time, it explores how the children of the 60s reacted to the increased responsibilities and diminished possibilities that time forced upon them, and how that eventually made them the neurotic, self-involved adults of the 80s. It's a play about the 70s, and how that decade forced decisions and problems onto a generation that wanted to avoid the more burdensome aspects of maturity altogether. Weller's script brings insight, sympathy, and humour to this ambitious subject, although it does so at considerable length.

The central couple of the play personifies the uncertainty and lack of direction with which the products of the Kennedy-Peace Corps era met the decade of Woody Allen

and Watergate. They spend most of the play fighting against the increasing complexity and ambiguity in their lives. They get married ostensibly for tax purposes and profess to have an open marriage even though they are insanely jealous at the thought of the other being "unfaithful" (however much it pains them to use such an illiberal word). They reluctantly develop successful artistic careers as a concession to society and to one another and finally discover that, contrary to the Beatles' wisdom, you really do need more than just love.

Both David Thompson, as Paul, and Patricia Drake, as Susan, take an understated, introverted, but highly effective approach, communicating with careful silences and gestures that work well in the Myer Horowitz Theatre. Thompson's Paul is a brooding, perpetually discontent young man of talent, torn between proving himself and avoiding the hypocrisy he sees in his older brother, a successful securities dealer. Drake's Susan is somewhat more open, though just as confused, trying to reconcile her own ambition with her commitment to Paul. The actors' success is perhaps best shown by how they manage to make the audience sympathize with two selfish, rather unlikeable characters.

The supporting roles are also well done. David Pearson, playing a long-haired Vietnam veteran who accidentally becomes a successful contractor, and Shannon McQuillan, playing his unshakably down-to-earth wife, convincingly portray the spirit of the 60s uncorrupted by the doubt and ambivalence that afflict the self-conscious protagonists. Lisa Chapman, as a friend and intermediary, and Christian St. Pierre, as Paul's outgoing brother the broker, manage to carve believable characters out of subsidiary roles, as does Claudia Buffone as Susan's dizzy childhood friend, who gives up Eastern spiritual-



Two U of A drama students capture a shared moment in Studio Theatre's production of *Loose Ends*.

ism, confessing she was just "taking" meditation, to marry an urban planner. And Aaron Goettel is brilliantly comic, first as a laconic, Lenonesque California guru, and later as a gossipy, purse-toting Manhattan decorator.

Director Lawrie Seligman succeeds with the long, talky script, maintaining a reasonable pace throughout. Even staging the play on a divided, somewhat skeletal set doesn't interfere too much with the action, except for

occasional crowding problems, such as a supposed back yard that seems to be closer in size to a large elevator. Another problem occurs when music, from Alice's Restaurant to Star Wars, is used to establish time and the emotionally charged climax is directly followed by disco fave "Staying Alive." Still, *Loose Ends* is an intelligent play, well performed by the student cast, and well worth the while of those with an appreciation for character drama and an interest in the problems of love when life gets complicated.