

York grads take High Park in new production

by JASON SHERMAN

For recent theatre graduates Eric Trask and Alvaro d'Antonio, taking part in Toronto Free Theatre's third Dream project in High Park represents opportunities won and possibilities unrealized. The two have landed positions in the project's Young Company, a sort of glorified extras group which, aside from taking part in the production, works with theatre professionals in a series of wide-ranging and intensive workshops prior to joining the main cast in rehearsal.

This pattern was established during the first Dream—so named for the production of that year and last, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—under the direction of the Free's artistic director Guy Sprung. Sprung also directs this year's offering, *Romeo and Juliet*. Trask and d'Antonio concur that the production is not, as the latter says, "an actor's show . . . bigness is the big thing." The key here is spectacle and storyline, and Sprung is being as merciless with his textual cuts as he is being inventive with his visual appeal. "If it were a 'literary' production," says d'Antonio, "it wouldn't hold in the park." Well, no, says Trask, but it certainly wouldn't enjoy the large crowds expected: "one

goal of the show," he says, "is to have everyone in this city see it."

d'Antonio speaks of the projected stage, with a marked degree of respect, as "a monstrosity with 70-foot high platforms." The playing area will cover just as much space horizontally as vertically, with the actors spread out over the now extended Dream site. Being dwarfed physically, or being made to appear as one with the landscape, appeals to the two actors in quite different ways. Although d'Antonio calls the project as a whole a "great educational experience" (having never encountered a Shakespeare play in his York training, he calls it all "a foreign language to me"), Trask offers something less of a rhetorical response.

Although he speaks in a positive way about the workshops, he remarks that they are rather "like practising your scales." In addition, *Romeo and Juliet* happens to be a play Trask appeared in at York, last year under the direction of Neil Freeman. The part Trask happened to play was Romeo.

"It's a little frustrating," he says, "for me to have to sit through the readings listening to people who don't know the script. This is not simply a matter of sour grapes, although there

has to be some way of reconciling the fact that one can go from a lead character to a mere prop in the space of a few months. As far as going from Romeo to a page," he continued, explaining why he was given a particular role, "I'm the only one in the cast who can play the flute. I feel as much a part of the company as anyone. I also know I'm doing something nobody else can do."

The competition among the members of the young company for the choicest parts may well have approached d'Antonio's observation that "every actor counts his lines." d'Antonio argues that everyone had a fairly equal shot at taking on the part of, say, Benvolio. Trask, however, says he "never felt that. I felt that there was probably nothing I could do to alter the role I was going to get." Trask's comments, here and elsewhere, should be read in the manner in which they are originally spoken: straightforward, thoughtful observations about the work he is doing. Both he and d'Antonio share an intensity and enthusiasm for their work which clearly manifests itself in the way they express their thoughts. Reduced to the black and white of a newspaper article, it would be easy to mistake lucidity for mere griping.

At any rate, a young actor could do worse than to work with Martha Henry, David Smukler and R.H. Thompson. The workshops these and other actors held for the Young Company covered everything from voice and speech to firebreathing and swordfighting. Trask and d'Antonio feel that, with their background at York, they are coming into this "big" production with what Trask calls "solid, good training." "I was made aware," he says, "of the vast potential in myself in theatre. Whether it's realized is up to me." He suggests that without York, he would not have been able to go out into the world of theatre. d'Antonio, who entered York as a business student, suggests that Trask's timidity in such a case might arise from "a lack of confidence." "No," says Trask, "I just would have been scatter-brained."

Romeo and Juliet plays at High Park, just east of the Grenadier Restaurant, from July 13 to August 11, Tuesday through Sunday at 8:15 with Wednesday shows at 2:30. Performance confirmation: 368-2856. Bring a blanket, a picnic, your grandmother, a guitar, incense. And, oh yes, as the performance is free, we suggest a donation: support living artists.

Huston's black comedy a cunning 'love story'

by RICK KUSH

Prizzi's Honor is a love story set in that adverse climate commonly known as big business. Charley Partanna (Jack Nicholson), chief hit-man apprenticing for chairmanship of one of America's oldest and most influential crime families, the Prizzis, makes the mistake of falling for Irene Walker (Kathleen Turner), a girl from the wrong side of the tracks. In the present case, that division is not only socio-economic (bourgeois/upwardly mobile middle class), but also ethnic (Italian/Polish, though more characteristically WASP) and sexist (traditional patriarchal/popular feminist). In the end, Charley's real problem is not the Prizzi family's reluctance to embrace his new bride, but whether or not he can accept her himself, for better and for worse.

Things turn to the worse when his beloved is caught in the act of stealing Prizzi money, and is exposed as a freelance "contractor" for the mob. Charley deals with this by simply stating: "I look at you, I see what I want to see. That's what love is. If you were anybody else, I'd blow you away!"

These are loaded lines contained in an extremely complex film—enhanced by the talents of Nicholson, Turner and director John Huston, applied to a generic mélange of the gangster film, *film noir*, and black comedy from a screenplay by Richard Condon (*Winter Kills*, *The Manchurian Candidate*) and Janet Roach. In light of its sophisticated construction, the most admirable aspect of *Prizzi's Honor* is its refusal to develop a more complicated, palatable representation of modern love.

Here is a film which takes as its subject the irresolvable contradictions between middle-class ideals and actual capitalist practice. Here the sanctity of human life and love, together with yuppie and pop feminist aspiration, are realistically put in their place—brass-knuckled under by the exigencies of free enterprise.

But then nothing is sacred in black humor. In taking this sardonic, satirical approach, Huston's construction appears flawless on first viewing. His acute sensibility for the ambivalence such a viewpoint reserves for its audience—there where we choke on our laughter—allows for a graceful, immaculately precise play between narrative realism and self-conscious, materialist expression. Shrewdly and competently, he never oversteps those boundaries, for this is dangerous ground where just the slightest slip in either direction runs the

risk of viewer alienation.

This same control comes out in the acting. Nicholson as Charley bravely struggles to hide the fact that he is really Jack Nicholson behind an ambitious characterization. It is to Huston's and Nicholson's credit that this endeavor never succeeds entirely, that it is always presented as a conflict between performer and performance. The star persona glares through the mask of the "All-American hood," and this is not only for the convenience of viewer identification; the performance becomes another ring in Huston's arena of stylistic play.

In this respect, Turner is even more outstanding. Her popular image is less entrenched than Nicholson's, hence she is forced to rely less on convention and more on invention when grappling with this material. Turner gives us an Irene whose fascinating beauty owes itself to her unfathomably equivocal presentation. With true cunning, Huston never allows us to place her: we are never sure that she really loves Charley, never certain whether Turner's frequent, intentionally stilted acting is to be taken as cynical parody or revelation of Irene's opportunistic deceptions. As she repeats the words, "Yes, Charley, I love you," Huston's refusal to bring her into close-up is but one example of the many ways he resists full compliance to stylistic transparency.

Turner's puzzling performance coheres flawlessly with this highly suspect, cynical world. It is unfortunate that some of that same suspicion must rub off on the way most audiences will receive this film. In order to make this radical statement accessible, Huston is obliged to clothe it in highly entertaining spectacle overtly addressing itself as fantasy. Through his adept manipulation of the black comedy tradition, he builds a sense of unreality beneath the movie's consummate display of Hollywood illusionism. The result is an impediment of the viewer's suspension of disbelief. Within the present social context, such an effect can only render the project innocuous, no matter how caustic or subversive its message may be. It becomes just another tolerable exception to the rule of contemporary mass entertainment.

Still, in a cultural marketplace overstocked with *Goonies* and *Golden Ponds*, this is a somewhat refreshing item. If *Prizzi's Honor* is a fable "not to be taken literally" as *Time's* Richard Schickel argues, it at least should be taken a lot more seriously than its "adult comedy" market label recommends.

ETP falls short in double play presentation

by ALEX PATERSON

Lonestar and *Laundry and Bourbon* are two one-act plays that are sometimes performed separately, but when put together, add up to one full-length play. Unfortunately, what they *don't* add up to is good theatre.

Eclectic Theatre Products (ETP), who made such an impressive debut recently with *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, are back at Tarragon's Extra Space with their second outing, a dreary pair of plays about dreary denizens of Maynard Texas, circa 1970. The first, and the better half of this James McClure double bill, is *Laundry and Bourbon*, in which we meet Elizabeth (Deborah McLean), an unhappy housewife who makes the mistake of marrying the town stud. She is hanging her husband Roy's boxer shorts on the clothesline, despite his having disappeared several days before. Her friend Hattie (Joni Wieggers) comes a-calling to escape her three bratty children with some Jack Daniels and conversation. Their woman-to-woman talk about Elizabeth's suspicions of pregnancy is soon interrupted by the unwelcome arrival of Amy Lee (Wanda Buchanan), the parsimonious and obnoxious local social climber and Baptist fundraiser. Amy Lee and Hattie have been feuding over the latter's attempt to join the weekly bridge game at Amy Lee's exclusive country club. What is worse, they are both wearing the same pink and white K-Mart dress, which was an old gag even before *The Honey-mooners* did it many moons ago. It is also painfully predictable that when the abstemious Amy Lee agrees to join the other two in bourbon ("Well, maybe just a teeny one") she's going to have a teeny one too many.

Not only is McClure's device of using liquor as a truth serum tiresome (O'Neill, Albee and Williams all did it earlier and better), it does not even cause the characters to make any very interesting revelations about themselves. The women in *Come Back To The Five and Dime*, *Jimmy Dean*, *Jimmy Dean* (which this play superficially resembles) found much more to confess while quaffing Orange Crush. This "in vino veritas" business has been in cliché country for some time now, and playwrights need to seek fresher methods to provoke their creations into soul-baring. They also need to come up with more shocking skeletons from the closet

than—Hattie was pregnant before she was married! Amy Lee married for money! Elizabeth's husband has been seen with other women! McClure needs the crutch of alcohol more than many drunkards: the "Lonestar" of the second half is a Texas beer, which does to the husbands what Tennessee sour mash does to the wives in the first.

Deborah McLean's portrait of Elizabeth has a convincing air of lower-middle class resignation to it, and her laugh is refreshingly unforced. Joni Wieggers makes some amusing facial contortions as harried Hattie, but she flails her arms and yells in a performance rather too big for this walk-in closet of an auditorium. Wanda Buchanan's Amy Lee is bigger still, and would be outsized for any venue smaller than Maple Leaf Gardens. McClure's clumsy swipes at such sitting ducks as the hypocrisy and bigotry of fundamentalist zealots make for a character so hackneyed that it borders on camp, so Buchanan can be forgiven for resorting to wild exaggeration out of desperation. It may have seemed the only way to make the best of a bad situation, and no actor would be saddled with lines like these.

The men of *Lonestar* fare even less well—I doubt if *anyone* could salvage this script. It should be tossed aside like a used beer can. In it Roy (Chris Owens) lurches drunkenly around the back alley behind a redneck saloon, reminiscing to his submoronic younger brother Ray (Kevin Prentice) about his experiences in "Vit Nam" and with his car, which we are told repeatedly is a pink 1959 Thunderbird convertible. The car, which Roy associates with his youth, has been wrecked by Cletis (Stuart Dowling), Amy Lee's husband and manager of the Maynard appliance store, who borrowed it for a joyride. Owens has a certain presence, though it would be best not to invite comparisons with Paul Newman in *Hud*, as Elizabeth does. Prentice's Ray makes Gomer Pyle seem like a member of Mensa, and Dowling's caricature of Cletis appears to have studied at the Don Knotts School of Dramatic Arts.

Mary Spriakis has provided ETP with another fine set. The junk-strewn alley is nicely detailed, complete with a threadbare couch from the back seat of a car. Paula DeJesus' costumes, especially for the men (a John Deere baseball cap for Ray, plaid golf slacks and a plastic shirt-pocket pen holder for Cletis) have been carefully assembled with an eye for small but significant touches. Jordan Merkur's direction again encourages the cast to physically abuse each other, and both the men and the women brawl, overturn props and throw cocktails in each other's faces. The violence here, however, doesn't ring as it did in *Fortune*, and seems like the proverbial drunk leaning against the lamp-post: more for support than illumination.



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