

the ARTS

JOE EGG :

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Walterdale Playhouse is currently offering a rather fine production of Peter Nichols' play *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*. This play almost defies description. It would be almost impossible to define its theatrical dimensions without giving away some, if not all, of its delights and yet to assess it only as a biting comedy about life with a spastic child is to do the play a disservice.

Nichols' play is a brilliant piece of theatre that treads through an area of human condition that is normally hidden in dark corners. Bri and Shiela are the reluctant parents of a spastic child; a constant nightmare which is relieved only by black comedy arising from their despair. It is a wry gallows humour that takes full measure of the situation and finds release in the hysterical response of laughter.

Nichols' drama is some what marred by an unevenness of tone. The play's nature and method of dramatization changes dynamically and slightly clumsily in the second act; a difficulty which amidst no easy, facile resolution. In Act I Bri, Shiela and spastic Josephine are presented to us: Bri is an exasperated grammar school teacher and frustrated artist; Shiela is a formerly promiscuous woman now turned into a housewife of earth mother tendencies which are extended to all living creatures; and Joe, the spastic, a victim of medical incompetence.

Nichols' magic begins to work early on as Bri and Sheila in direct confrontation with the audience act out the passage of their lives dating from the appearance of spastic Joe. Slowly the audience is drawn into the nightmare as its full dimensions are revealed. As audience we are challenged to grope for solutions of our own and dared to disapprove of Sheila and Bri's sardonic attitude towards their predicament.

In Act II the charade parade is over and attendant society is revealed. Enter the wealthy industrial socialist do-gooder and his recalcitrant wife. Do-Gooder Freddie is all fired up with a glad hand vainly thrust forth into the empty atmosphere and his wife Pam is a squeamish embarrassment more for leaving immediately than confronting the freakish nature of a spastic. Freddie is ready to embrace Bri and Shiela's misfortune but Pam desires only to deny it because she cannot bear to face it even on a "there but for the grace of God go I" basis.

Bri's mother Grace drops into the picture and adds to

the embarrassing tension with her witless mutterings. Her presence completes the eclectic microcosm of a lower-class living room. The evening runs a collision course where the clash of egos takes on a terrifying reality. The dismal reality is relieved only by its statistical improbability but as we are reminded there is a spastic child born every eight hours. It could happen to anyone of us. This implication is disturbing and dramatic in itself. Nichols' handling of the whole affair is quite dazzling in its originality.

Most striking about Keith Digby's production is the generally high level of acting which is several cuts above what one might normally expect in an amateur production. Ray Hunt's handling of the demanding part of Bri is quite satisfying, lacking only the fine edge of precision in his mimicry of an inept Austrian doctor and a with it minister. Over the long run he scores with all of Hickols' humorous lines, grotesque or other wise. If he fails at all it is only in the revelation of Bri's humanity which lies hidden, but then that humanity has been so long buried that the undertaking is a major excavation.

Jeremy Fuller is quite at home in the uncomfortable part of the bumbling social minded industrialist. Seldom has a character with

his head in the clouds been so appealing.

Susan Woywitka as Shiela requires some time to warm to her part. She gathers steam and fullness of characterization as the dilemma progresses through the evening. She is overshadowed by Mr. Hunt in the first act, coming into her own only in her soliloquy near the end of act one. She never quite manages to come to grips with absurdity of her character and find its full nature as a human rather than as a theatrical creation.

Kim Culkin as Pam is plainly too young for her part in any sense of character but she plays the part well. Her characterization is somewhat too broad but she makes the most of a rather stingy opportunity. Elsa Houba does not suffer from the same difficulty and is a garish delight as Grace, a mother-in-law quite refreshing for her dithering but well-meaning quality which comforts herself more than anyone else.

Even the part of Joe (played alternately by Vicki Watts and Fiona Cambell) was well played. Sparse of line and movement this part is nonetheless demanding for all its lack of opportunity. When I saw it Miss Watts was impressive in that her portrayal of a spastic child was painfully accurate.

Digby's direction has a vitality that revels in the play's originality. His talent as a director is marked most plainly by an ability to keep the black comedy funny and the tragedy tragic, giving both their full due without losing sight of the potential impact of either. Perhaps the ultimate tragic twist of this play lies in Freddie's line: "Isn't that the fallacy of the sick joke? It kills the pain but leaves the situation just as it was?" Digby seems well aware of this limitation and has decided to live within its boundaries and make the most of them and that is quite considerable in its achievement.

The set for this production was designed by Joe Smith. It's hardly a demanding

poetry lives

39 Below is an anthology of greater Edmonton poets and five of the represented poets are coming in out of the cold to join artistic director John Neville on the Citadel stage to read their poetry on November 21, at 12:15 noon.

For the small admission price of only \$1.00, everyone is invited to listen to readings by Richard Emil Braun, Isabelle Foord, Tim Lander, Thomas Whyte and Stephen Scobie.

Richard Emil Braun is internationally known for his three published works *CHILDREN PASSING*, *BAD LAND* and *FORECLOSURE*. He is presently engaged in translating Greek plays, the first *ANTIGONE*, published by Oxford University Press will be out later this month. He is indeed known... "as the Master of the long dramatic monologue... a much neglected genre in contemporary writing." Of *FORECLOSURE* published in 1972 Jerome Mazzaro wrote... "powerful and splendid... none of his generation has his magnitude."

Tim Lander can most often be found in front of a cup of coffee somewhere between Edmonton and Victoria. He has travelled extensively doing readings at

designers problem to solve, being a lower class living room of decidedly common ilk. Still one is grateful that the set is workable and not overburdened with fanciful flights of knick-knackery.

It's a great pity that the run of *Joe Egg* is sold out because I would recommend this production to anyone. Call up and find out if anyone has cancelled out because they just found out the play has some bally language: their loss can only be your gain.

Walter Plinge

universities, junior colleges, coffee houses, art galleries, libraries, and high schools. Mr. Lander prefers to design his own books and thus did three "longish poems" entitled *FACES*, *SENTIMENTAL EXERCISES*, and *BUTTERFLIES*. At present he is working as an editor for Intermedia Press. Thomas Whyte, is known primarily as a playwright with his most recent play *DISMISSAL LEADING TO LUSTFULNESS* being produced by Theatre 3 this season. Other works include *FREE BEER* and *THAT TIME OF THE MONTH*.

Mr. Whyte's talents also extend into other areas of the Fine Arts as he is also a noted painter with one-man shows in London and Edmonton, a novelist and composer. Stephen Scobie is a Scot writing in Canada and in trying to define to the influences of his native country and his adopted one a book has emerged. *THE BIRKEN TREE* will be off the press this month. Mr. Scobie is Vice-Chairman of the National League of Canadian Poets and presently teaches English at the University.

Returning to the Citadel is Isabelle Foord, who read the moving poems of Sylvia Plath in a previous noon-hour performance. Ms. Foord is a professional playwright with many TV and stage credits.

The third in a series of noon-hour poetry readings *39 Below* promises to be an entertaining event. The sponsoring Citadel Houselighters invite everyone to attend with bag lunch in tow, accept a free cup of coffee and listen to poetry which will take the chill off your bones.

Readings by Sid Marty from his new *HEADWATERS* is next in the series and is slated for November 29.



The ESO in action from above

photo by Doug Moore

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story from page nine

costs too much to incubate writers, critics, directors and producers of a native ilk. All too seldom does the Canadian play have the right to fail: it has to be a success because second chances are few and far between. Still we can put our faith in those few adventurous souls driven by a suicidal drive to commit financial

emasculatation and a growing desire for Canadian work on the part of our indigenous audience. Perhaps we can learn something from the French-Canadian scene, they certainly seem to have found some answers. Failing all else, we can hope that Canadian scripts of quality will find their way across the desks of

artistic directors in this country and that those same artistic directors will recognise the unique Canadian voice. Hopefully that voice will also have universal impact and then it won't be just a good Canadian play but a good play because that's what the Canadian theatre scene is basically about: producing good theatre.