

# Murdock probes heart of Russia

interview by Anna Borowiecki

Tonight at the Studio Theatre the U of A's Bachelor of Fine Arts program begins its production of Nikolai Erdman's play, *The Suicide*.

Director Michael Murdock, a ten-year veteran as a teacher of acting and characterization at the U of A, began preparations for this play last August. Members of the Edmonton Russian community and the Department of Slavic Languages were contacted for their knowledge and expertise.

Several days ago, against the soft background hum of the air conditioner of an empty Studio Theatre, Murdock sat down to grant the Gateway this interview.

**Gateway:** How well known in North America is Nikolai Erdman?

**Murdock:** Not terribly well known. *The Suicide* was done very successfully in Chicago at the Goodman, on Broadway and at the Shaw Festival and of course by the Royal Shakes-

Siberia. I think there is some record that he lived to the age of 68, which is quite old for a Russian writer who is controversial.

**Gateway:** How did the Drama department select the play?

**Murdock:** I selected it. I saw it at the Royal Shakespeare in Stratford on Avon. I was very excited about it and I wanted to do it ever since.

**Gateway:** What attracted you?

**Murdock:** It brings together farce and tragedy. Through the vehicle of humour you gain a lot of insight into what the people are going through. The characters are very rich and challenging for the actors and there's a real sense of ensemble that is necessary for them to create.

**Gateway:** How are the actors stretching themselves?

**Murdock:** The demands of farce — the

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peare Company. But that was the first time it was produced, because it has never been done in the Soviet Union.

**Gateway:** Why?

**Murdock:** If you see the play you'll know why they banned it. It's a very lively farce but it's also a passionate plea for the little man — for the individual who is trapped in a very oppressive society. Through humour you get a keen insight into Russia of the late 1920's early 30's. It's quite astounding that it came that close to being produced when you consider what we know about that oppression today.

**Gateway:** What happened to Nikolai Erdman?

**Murdock:** No one is really sure. We know that he wrote some fables that a friend read one evening at a party in the Kremlin and it got him into a lot of trouble. His friend was sent to a work camp and he was sent to

exaggeration. The extension that comes out of farce is very seldom connected with great emotional demands. I think these two elements come together in this play. The actors are having to do outrageous things, quite exaggerated extensions in their work, but at the same time bring a lot of emotional integrity and fullness to it. We begin to realize that some of these absurd images in the play are the only way that some of these characters have of coping with a very real problem in their society.

**Gateway:** What did you learn from the play?

**Murdock:** I learned what an invigorating sense of surviving comes from humour and looking at things from different angles. I feel there is a lot of love for Russia in the play — a lot of love of the Russian culture. Yet, it is also searingly honest about the lack of freedom and the other problems they were going through.

**Gateway:** Canadian humour and Russian humour tend to be very different. How do you think the audiences will respond?

**Murdock:** The play creates a lot of questions and that's very healthy. That's part of its theatricality. It brushes aside cobwebs and makes you think while at the same time you are laughing and crying. I find North American humour more unabashed, more free-wheeling than what we know of English humour and French humour, which is more traditional and structured. From what I've experienced, our humour is closer to the Russian humour. People will identify in a way that they are not used to in the theatre, but they will identify.

**Gateway:** Are there any special production elements that we can look forward to seeing?

**Murdock:** Our brilliant property master has built a casket because the discount mortuary's caskets just didn't fit the bill. He built a Russian casket very much after the style of the ones used in *Dr. Zhivago*. He's in love with it so it means it's pretty high quality. I think he wants to use it himself. There aren't a lot of scenic effects. There are only two scenes in the play.

**Gateway:** What are all the functions of the director?

**Murdock:** To make sure that the actors are creating as freely as they can, and that their individual creativity comes together in a collective ensemble that is clear, entertaining, insightful and uplifting. This play really is a

gentle, step-by-step, layered approach. Other times we'll crash through like summer stock and get it mounted very rapidly and then work from the outside in. I'll give all kinds of notes and turn into a broken record with corrections.

**Gateway:** What was your approach to this play?

**Murdock:** Actually it was both. We started out in the theatre which is quite unusual here. We usually start out upstairs (the rehearsal hall in Corbett Hall). We spent two weeks and mounted it physically so the actors would get used to the theatre itself. And upstairs we dealt more with what was going on in the inside with Russian music, the background, the culture and the particular crises the characters were going through.

**Gateway:** What do you hope to accomplish with this play?

**Murdock:** I hope that the actors grow a great deal with this play and that it will be a positive creative experience for them. I certainly hope the audience will think differently about the character of Russia at that particular period in history and think about the great potential and witty perspective of its writers. Those writers had a wonderful ability to laugh at themselves and sense the struggles of their own society.

**Gateway:** What do you hope the audience will see when they come to the theatre?

**Murdock:** I hope they will see people one

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team effort even though some parts are larger than others. Sometimes the smaller parts take a very important focus.

**Gateway:** How would you describe your style as a director?

**Murdock:** I enjoy directing a great deal. The way I treat it is different with every play. Sometimes I'll deal on a purely emotional, personal base and work with the actors in a

can identify with. I want them to laugh and enjoy and participate in their struggles. There's a universality in the play. We're not doing a Russian accent. There's a silent movie queen who has a French accent just because she's very affected. Hopefully we will all see ourselves and our individual struggles and have fun with it but also learn something constructive.



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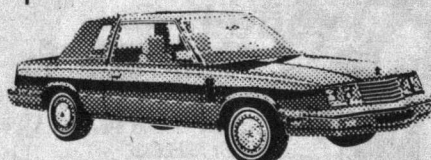
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- (2) **MAID SERVICE (Lister Hall)** Elimination of the bi-weekly room cleaning by maids.
- (3) **WASHERS AND DRYERS (Faculte St. Jean, Lister Hall, Pembina Hall, Garneau)** To increase prices from 50¢ to 75¢ and from 25¢ to 50¢ for washers and dryers respectively.
- (4) **LINEN SERVICE (Lister Hall, Pembina Hall, Faculte St. Jean)** Elimination of the option to students of being provided with linen (presently available for a \$50 deposit).
- (5) **DAMAGE DEPOSITS (Garneau, HUB)** Increase from \$50 to \$100 per tenant.
- (6) **CHRISTMAS CLOSURE (Faculte St. Jean, Pembina, Lister Hall)** To close these residences completely for a fourteen day period during Christmas.
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