

Players go out of way to improve selves, humor

By JASON SHERMAN

The Out of the Way Players are impressing more than the patrons of the Bethune College pub Norman's, where they return for their sixth visit tomorrow night. The improvisation troupe has won, in one incarnation or another, the past two *ImprovOlympix* held in Los Angeles and New York, and has set a 48-hour endurance mark for their continuous improvisation called *Improvathon*. We might wonder why anyone would want to bother setting such a record, but in the case of The Players, it's a fairly good indication of what they're all about: flux.

Since their inception in the summer of 1982 the group, currently a four-member outfit consisting of Bob Kirk, Ellen Hitchcock, Ian Algie and pianist James Gray, has seen not only members but playing space come and go. They began with the West End The Out of the Way Place (from whence their name) which, for want of a higher ceiling, was closed down by zoning inspectors.

They have since performed among other locations on Centre Island, at the Canadian National Exhibition and most recently and eclectically, at Ukrainian Caravan, where we caught up with Kirk, Hitchcock and Algie.

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These three are, in Kirk's terms, "the core" of the group, the three who set up The Place. They are also the three who remained loyal to the idea of The Players: improvisation.

"It was loose for the first six months," says Kirk, "we had six or seven steady people. But people want to go on to other things."

Hitchcock, who runs an improv workshop, agrees, saying, "A lot of people use (improv) as the way to a means. Various people who have left us left to develop skills in other ways."

But not these three, who have so much faith and confidence in what they do that occasionally, as with their York shows, they will perform two sets of straight improv (whereas they usually do a 60-40 split between improv and set pieces). This is something they can do only because of the enthusiasm of their York audience, which Kirk calls one of their "most receptive."

Kirk and Algie, actually, have been to York before, in slightly different circumstances. Kirk studied, of all things, Physical Education in the mid-70s, while Algie opted for film in 1979, and then opted out. York is only one stop on their campus programme—they are about to embark on a tour of Quebec colleges and universities. And, in a way, the move to different locales, promoted by the closing of The Place, is a blessing in disguise. "It forced us to get out," says Kirk. "Although it's nice," he says, "to have a home base, we adapt ourselves to different environments. And it's hardest adapting to an audience not specifically there to see us."

It's even harder, we suppose, when there isn't much of an audience, which unfortunately was the case when we saw them at Caravan. Slow-motion sprinting on stage to Gray's rendition of the Chariots of Fire Theme, The Players attempted to get the small crowd into the act as soon as possible, and with a great deal of success. They're hard to resist, and inhibitions get destroyed in a hurry. In fact, The Players seem to be very keen on audience psychology. They know who they're playing to, although they're not always sure what's going to happen. Much of the show hinges on audience response—in improv calling for names of movie directors, television program types, emotions, catch phrases—and one thing The Players have to be worried about, as Kirk puts it, is that "in some colleges, apathy is rampant. People are under the onus of thinking, 'If I say something they'll jump down my throat.'"

Of course, audience involvement can backfire, as was the case during Stong Orientation when, says Hitchcock, "the audience just wouldn't shut up." "They were totally bombed," adds Algie, "and they had masks on, so they were doing things they wouldn't ordinarily do." They also recall the time when a huge commotion in the audience was caused by enthusiasm of a slightly different kind: "They were passing a woman through the audience," Hitchcock remembers.

Somewhere between apathy and overexuberance, however, lies what Kirk calls "the magic" of a live audience, when everything works smoothly. But The Players, too, can be their own worst enemies, particularly when they run up against the curse of improv, blocking. "Everyone can improvise," says Algie, "if you can only get rid of the blocks," like hesitation ("thinking 'that's not original enough'"); censoring ("eventually you have to do real humour"); and denial, which is simply saying no to a partner's suggestion on stage.

"You have to trust yourself and each other," says Hitchcock, "not to come out with something that won't work." To this end, they are always rehearsing their skills, and prior to a show will practice "character agility." Characterization, in fact, is their strong suit, so much

so that an American colleague once noted, "Gee, you use a lot of characterization." But whereas performers in the States tend more toward set and political humour "we try more universal stuff," says Hitchcock. "I can't say we're not politically oriented, but we aim more for conventional things people can recognize."

Which may be one reason so many of their requests for suggestions are for emotions, and why their set skits centre around such domestic and personal scenes as a first date at a drive-in, a lesson in how to pick up girls, and a housewife driven mad by commercial slogans. "A character helps you through a scene," Hitchcock says. "Characters will say things you'll never say."

The Out Of The Way Players



The Out of the Way Players: (l to r) Bob Kirk, Ian Algie, and Ellen Hitchcock.

That the skits are less successful than the improv few would disagree with, perhaps not even The Players themselves, who see the pieces as a bit of a respite not only for themselves but, more importantly, for the audience. "The audience is so involved in the improv," says Hitchcock, "that the set material gives them a chance to just sit back and watch."

But again, The Players likely won't resort to the rehearsed sketches, which seem not only a mite too tidy but more importantly a mite too rehearsed. And the success of this show is almost entirely dependent upon spontaneity. "Very rarely will a show work 100 percent," Kirk says. "But then, there wouldn't be much suspense if it did."

The Out of the Way Players are at Norman's tomorrow night for two sets beginning at nine. Anyone wearing a Hawaiian shirt, Kirk tells us, doesn't have to pay the free cover charge. Highly recommended.

President's Prizes '85

Student writers recognized in second annual contest

By HELEN HINKLE-SMYTHE

The Second Annual President's Prizes for excellence in poetry, fiction, drama and screenwriting have been announced. The winners receive a cash prize of \$250, which is being split between the co-winners in two categories. No prize was awarded in screen-writing.

First prize for poetry is shared by Lynn Wells for "Mr. O Goes to the Laundromat," and Barry Mandelker's "Francis of a tea tea." The judges, who remain as always anonymous, called Wells' piece "an immaculately crafted poem, not a syllable out of place, and ringing with its bright images." Mandelker's work was deemed "adventurous, brimming with metaphors, with more than one brilliant moment lifted out of a real depth."

Paul Pivato and Brian Singleton share first prize in fiction. Pivato's "The Wine Cellar" was called "a completely persuasive and finely honed story, centred in the sensitive and exact observation of a young girl's vulnerability in the damaged world of adults."

Singleton's story "In Lord Paltrey's Time: The Hex" is, in the judges' opinion, "a brilliantly handled story, evoking with great intensity a landscape, time and *dramatis personae* which is at one and the same time energizing, unsettling and disturbingly believable."

First prize for drama was awarded to Jason Sherman for his two-act play *Pamela*, which the judges called "a remarkably intelligent and poetically allusive play which deals with the obsessive quest for innocence and its destructive effect on the lives of a group of students."

A ceremony, at which York President Harry Arthurs will award the prizes, and a public reading of the winning works, will be announced shortly.

Artist wants to get under our skin in alienation show at Glendon

Ida Applebroog and Jana Sterbak
Glendon Gallery
until March 23

By HENRY SUM

Feelings of isolation and alienation creep into our lives from time to time. Whether walking through school hallways or along the street we can experience ourselves as an entity divorced from others.

Sculptor Jana Sterbak and painter Ida Applebroog attempt to explore these feelings in their recently opened show at Glendon Gallery. The exhibition has a stark naked quality about it that's disturbing and at times embarrassing.

Sterbak's sculpture, for example, is practically stripped bare of all form. Using simple chicken wire to create a female configuration of five-and-a-half feet in height, our eyes can peer right through the sculpture to the opposite wall. The emptiness of the form is belied by the energy of the piece. By running a couple of old cloth toaster wires from the wall sockets up through the exposed filaments of the chest cavity, the electrical heat that's generated from the sculpture proves to be both uncomfortable and oppressive. One is forced to keep a safe distance away from it for fear of shock or burns.

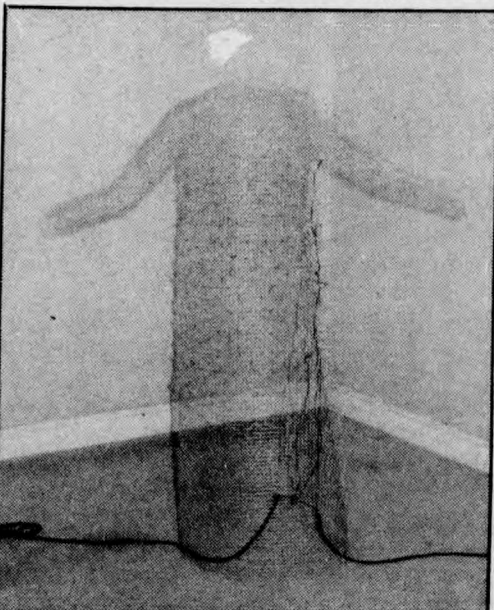
Sterbak augments this disconcerting sensation with some paradoxical text which is projected onto the adjacent walls.

The words read "I WANT YOU TO FEEL THE WAY I DO" and "I WANT TO SLIP UNDER YOUR SKIN." These suggestions leave us cold and leaves the sculpture to burn in its own isolation and unfulfillable desire.

The gallery's invitational text by Cartier Ratcliff phrases it thusly: "This insubstantial

wire figure serves as an emblem of a self-focused woman on the anguish of her autonomy. The figure wants to eradicate the distance separating it from its audience." Unplugging the current might be a good start but any further attempts at socializing with this spiky hunk of chicken wire is certain to run one up a blind alley.

Confronting Ida Applebroog's work for the first time is like meeting an eager Johnny-Come-Lately in some evening art course. Long on enthusiasm but short on technique, Applebroog's drawings look unabashedly amateurish. Carter Ratcliff's jargonese is only too kind



Jana Sterbak's wire sculpture serves as an emblem of a self-focused woman and the agony of her autonomy.

when he writes, "Her blunt line registers nuances of the commonplace with finesse."

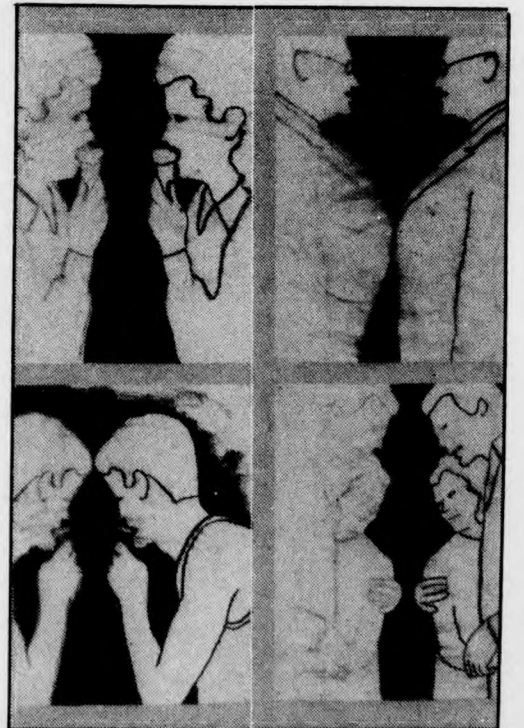
Despite its clumsiness, Applebroog's "art" further explores the sensation of loneliness but ironically it is a loneliness experienced when we are in genuine physical contact with other people.

Applebroog's work — like a Johnny-come-lately and an evening art course . . . long on enthusiasm but short on technique.

Couples in her oil-on-paper drawings appear arm in arm or locked in an embrace, yet their reactions to one another are coolly detached. Titles to the drawings allude to distracted, private thoughts like "Yes, I'm fine. Thank you," "I'm talking to you," and "We're out of vodka."

This series of drawings include curious, surrealistic silhouettes of formed and partially formed bodies which pop up and intermingle with the life-size adult characters. They seem to suggest metaphorical slips of the tongue or even fanciful flights of the soul that take place in the midst of some living room melodrama with one's spouse.

Alone, we can rationalize to our heart's content. In Applebroog's *Mirror Image* series of raw, charcoal drawings we are shown, for example, a man shaving in a mirror with his pale reflection opposite him. Although captioned by "I don't know you," it's a little early in the morning for metaphysics as far as this character is concerned. The way this man is slumped over, the drawing might even be retitled, "No philosophy. Just a shave."



Ida Applebroog's drawings further explore loneliness, this time in a social context.

Innocuous enough, but what about the fat unctuous businessman who grunts back at his reflection with a "I don't make the rules?"

These desolate gulfs in our social relationships are certainly a worthy theme for any artist to pursue but do they not merit a much subtler shading than the brusque impression Applebroog paints for us? Like Sterbak's lone, wire sculpture, Applebroog's blunt, ambiguous execution abruptly isolates the audience in speechless perplexity.