

Theatre student workshop

# Progressive actors tackle tough women's dramas

PAULETTE PEIROL

*Women in Progress*, a workshop production of three plays at Atkinson's Spotlight Theatre last week, could have been as aptly titled "Works in Progress", "Progress in Women", or "Women at Work". The third- and fourth-year female York theatre students were generally well-cast for their roles in *Dusa*, *Fish*, *Stas and Vi*, *The Ladies Should be in Bed*, and *the Maids*.

The aim of a workshop production is to provide an experimental environment in which a play can be

developed, one which is responsive to audience feedback. Each of the three directors exploited this freedom in a unique way, stressing different aspects of their productions.

*Dusa*, *Fish*, *Stas and Vi* shows the result of four eccentric women being lumped together like four mutant peas in a pod. Inevitably, the "pod" bursts from the tension created within it. The feature the characters share is their pre-occupation with the opposite sex, yet their individual methods of coping with these

all consuming" men is what distinguishes each female from her counterparts.

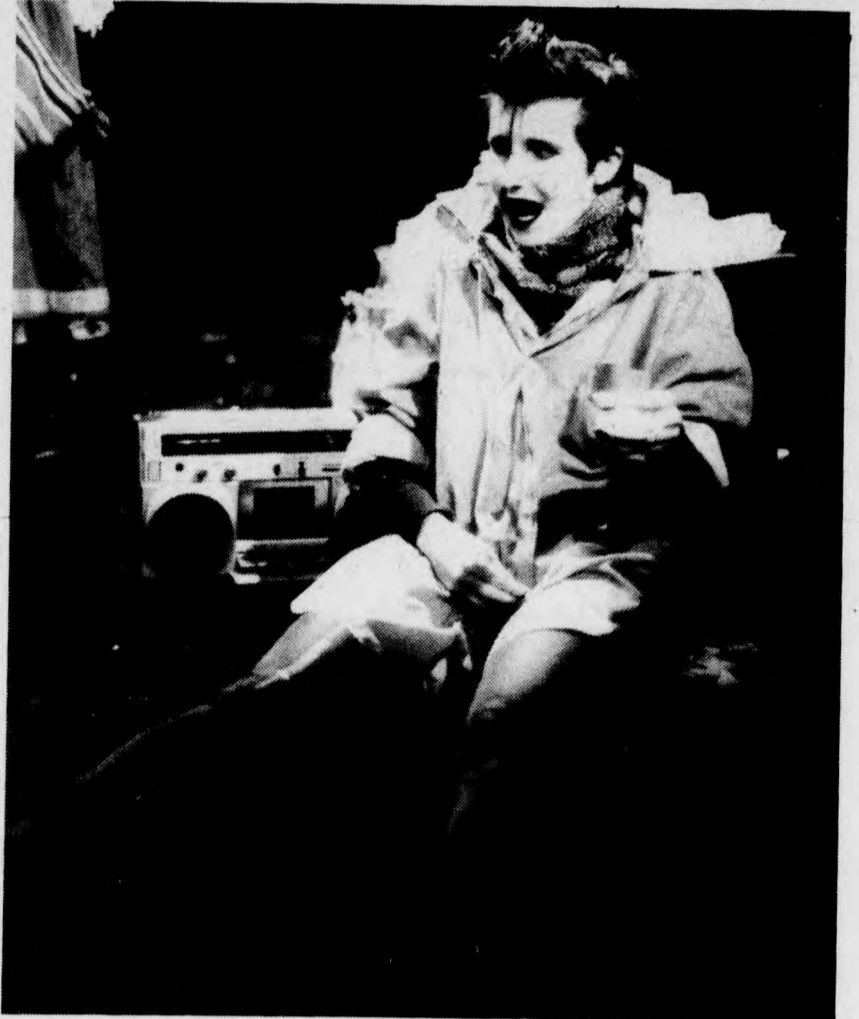
The physically static plot demands vivid characterization which Roberta Kerr (*Fish*) and Heather Wilson (*Vi*) achieved remarkably well. Wilson's transition from anorectic apathy to a drug-induced frenzy was superb.

Director Ines Buchli effectively assigned to each character one corner of the stage, using the centre as neutral territory for the women to interact in. The script was shortened considerably to squeeze into the 45 minutes allotted. Buchli accomplished this smoothly, retaining the essence of each character as well as the skeleton of the plot.

Carry Lewis' direction of *The Ladies Should be in Bed* fulfilled playwright Paul Zindel's theme of the sublime evolving into the ridiculous. By the end of the play, the characters themselves do not know whether they should laugh or cry. Lewis' geometric staging afforded the audience an omniscient view of the plot's dynamics. The idiosyncrasies of each of the "Ladies" were boisterously exploited by the well-cast actresses. Marea Van De Saden's portrayal of Mrs. Steele, the stiff-upper-lipped housekeeper, was impeccable. She appealed to the audience's sense of detachment from the frivolity of the Ladies' "bridge game". Yet after Mrs. Steele leaves, the audience is drawn into the Ladies' drunken emotions and finds itself laughing aloud with them, only to become beguiled by the director's ironic change of plot, from laughter to tears.

*The Maids*, directed by D.D. Kugler, was disappointing: it showed immense potential, but was not sufficiently developed. Kugler's brilliant use of three full-length mirrors as a backdrop to literally involve the audience in the maid's enacted fantasies, seemed to be ignored by the actresses. They played to the mirror itself, but failed to see the audience within the reflection. Alexandra Harding Brown, playing the high strung younger maid Claire, was excellent in the sudden transitions of emotional states that her difficult role required. Her imitation of Madam was even more realistic than Carol Whiteman's acting of Madam herself. Elizabeth Leigh, as Claire's older sister, Soulange, used her eloquent voice to its fullest, which enhanced the poetic language of Jean Genet's script. *The Maids*, setting a rather dark and sombre mood, would have provided more variety to the programme if it had been the second rather than the last piece performed.

Actress Roberta Kerr commented that "the workshops helped the plays develop, since we could gauge their effectiveness by the audience's reaction". Hopefully, the "Women" will continue to "Progress".



Workshop theatre and women

## EXTRACTS

### Every Home Should Have One

Patti Austin

Qwest Records

W. HURST

Patti Austin is a singer's singer—a vocalist appreciated by fellow artists but not necessarily familiar to the listening public. However, Austin's new album, *Every Home Should Have One*, should gain her a wider audience—too bad it's not a better product.

Her earlier albums lacked direction and focus but they contained a few real high spots. On *Live at the Bottom Line*, Austin punches and swells through "Love Me By Name" and validates the otherwise trivial "One More Night".

This new album, produced by Quincy Jones, aims not only for consistency but also accessibility. There's a pop ballad, a reggae ballad and the expected but superior dance tunes. "Come to Me", a mellow duo with James Ingram, has been released as a single and is climbing the charts.

However, *Every Home Should Have One* is so accessible and consistent that its range is limited, musically and emotionally. Austin isn't. She never, on any cut, hits a dead note or blurs a rhythm pattern. She revitalizes the old "Stop, Look and Listen", and surges past the fussy production values that weigh down the album.

This is a good album by a great singer held back. Quincy Jones has known Austin for years. Unfortunately, familiarity has bred constraint.

### Music Spoken Here

John McLaughlin

WEA

ROMAN PAWLYSZYN

John McLaughlin has always been in the forefront of one jazz fusion movement or another. First, the fusion was with rock—McLaughlin's searing electric guitar work with Lifetime and the Mahavishnu Orchestra established an idiom. Then, with Shakti, he went acoustic, recording three superb albums with traditional Indian instruments. With his current Paris-based group, the fusion has been a classical guitar centred hybrid of those two extremes.

*Music Spoken Here* is the second of this group's platters. It's a rather inconsequential follow-up to last year's *Belo Horizonte*. Whereas that album was a buoyant and seamless blend of acoustic and electric elements, *Music Spoken Here* comes across as disjointed. The disparate ingredients never cohere into a whole. As well, it lacks the diversity that the violin and sax gave to the earlier disc, replacing them with greater doses of Katia Labeque's synthesizer. Labeque's solos are far too often accelerated up-the-keyboard-and-down-again affairs. Her playing is distinctive in a monotonous sort of way, but one suspects her prominence has more to do with her romantic ties to McLaughlin than with her musicality. As for McLaughlin himself, he too gets a little speed-happy at times; his best work is the pliant electric guitar that graces a couple of tracks here for the first time in years.

The record does have its good points—the Weather Report-like textures of "Honky Tonk Haven", or the synthesized rusticity of "The Translators", for example. Still, although music may be spoken on *Music Spoken Here*, consummate artistry isn't. Coming from John McLaughlin, that's disappointing news.

### Concerts

Keith Jarrett

ECM

STEVE HACKER

Keith Jarrett squeals, wheezes, grunts and sighs his way through another live concert recording, this one documented merely as a single disc. Of course there's nothing wrong with not mixing out the artist's natural sounds, in fact, Keith Jarrett is a very adventurous musician. Each time he steps onto the stage, he takes the chance that someone might cough or sneeze during his recital. Unfortunately, the excitement provided by his reaction to such and outburst is not featured on this album.

Bregenz, Austria provides the setting for this concert and the majority of the album is a piece aptly titled "Bregenz." It begins quietly and in the typical sensitively-melodic Jarrett fashion. After a few minutes in the upper octaves, Jarrett bottoms out somewhat and discovers some hard driving rhythms that really please him. Then it's on to some more subdued introspective explorations—this time much less melodic. And on he goes, never overstaying his welcome in any particular mood. The album is fairly wide ranging and should satisfy those new to the work of Keith Jarrett (and those who have procrastinated about the purchase of a Jarrett album).

If you are familiar with his previous solo-live recordings, the Bregenz concert should be no surprise. This is not to say that Jarrett is completely stagnating. The last few years have seen him involved in a variety of different projects ranging from the orchestral *Celestial Hawk*, to music of G.I. Gurdjeff (*Sacred Hymns*) and the jazzy Village Vanguard quartet sessions (*Nude Ants*). However, with more than 20 Jarrett discs of solo piano available, I wonder why a lot of people anxiously await the release of yet another solo-live album by this man.

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