Entertainment

"Reason poisons desire"
Jean-Paul Sartre

Singer: literary magic

Leora Aisenberg

When Isaac Bashevis Singer speaks, people listen. In fact, the renowned Yiddish writer, at York last week to read from some recent works, cast a storyteller's spell which was impossible to resist.

Standing at the podium in front of a large audience in Burton Auditorium, what first appeared to be a nice elderly man was soon transformed into a grandiose master of language. Although Singer writes in Yiddish, his accented English did not hinder his tales. Just like his characters, he was alternately sinner and saint—but never boring.

In 1978, at the age of 74, Singer was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He is most famous for short novels and stories, such as *Gimpel the Fool* and *The Magician of Lublin*, which was made into a movie. According to Singer-lover Professor Isaac Bar-Lewaw, the author's genius lies in his ability to make the reader forget that he's reading. Bar-Lewaw ranks Singer with the likes of Moliere and Shakespeare. "Only classical writers can survive in the immortal." If anyone seems to be immortal, it is Singer. His vivid blue eyes and mellifluous speech belie his age. Much of his writing concerns human weakness; sex is among his favourite topics.

Frequent characters include angels, demons and spirits; the mysticism of Jewish folklore is prevalent. When asked if he was superstitious, Singer replied mischievously, "No, because I believe such things as demons do exist. A superstitious person believes in things that don't exist."

Singer's great love is reserved for a dying language. Yiddish was mainly spoken in the Jewish ghettoes of Europe, and much of the language perished in the concentration camps of the Second World War. Whether there is a way of making Yiddish live again, says Singer, "is the 64 dollar question."

The author does very little of his own translation. "I don't want to lose my roots," he explained noting that "Jews suffer from many sicknesses, but amnesia isn't one of them."

Although he has lived in the U.S. for 45 years, Singer still traces his roots through all his stories, whether it is Warsaw in 1930 or an Eastern European pogrom in 1648. His timeless work centres on two time-proven literary techniques: humour and characterization of the underdog. Singer recognizes that there is a little Gimpel the Fool in all of us.

A taste of cynicism can be detected in almost every piece of Singer's writing. In a hilarious new story about life in Hell, "sinners with spiritual goals" create a list of demands, i.e. more sex and less heat, to make damnation just a touch more bearable. Another story wryly depicts the trials of being a journalist (another of Singer's vocations): "99% of all writers die from misprints."

Singer thrives on fiction. Although he was really a member of the Writer's Club which he describes, he purposely related his experiences in an imaginative piece. "Fiction was created to describe characters without insulting people," he said.

But beneath Singer's mask of cynicism and humour lies a compassionate "believer". Prof. Bar-Lewaw likens him to the sabra, an Israeli cactus fruit—"prickly on the outside, sweet on the inside."

Singer writes about the plight of the Jew. Pogroms and persecution are powerfully depicting within moving anecdotes. Discussing Hitler's motives for the Holocaust, Singer said: "Of a person wants to kill, he can always find a provocation. A murderer stays a murderer, whether provoked or not. Decent people don't kill."

His audience is not restricted to Jews. SInger's worldwide success attests to his talent of creating literature which transcends linguistic and cultural borders.

He believes that the concept of the Messiah is universal. "There is in every human heart some hope that evil will not go on forever, that life will be more bearable than it is today."

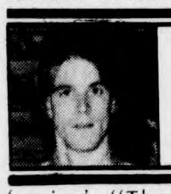
Isaac Bashevis Singer certainly makes life a little more bearable. Listening to his stories is reminiscent of sitting on your grandfather's lap, and realizing that his words of wisdom are magic.

Fantasies of the macabre

The Idee Gallery is presenting *Communication Breakdown*, an exhibition of Gonzoilla Art by Carl Chapin, a widely recognized illustrator-turned-painter.

One quickly notices various themes repeating themselves throughout Chaplin's work, themes that he has rigidly classified into ten different 'series'. One 'series' is "1985?", a terror-filled fantasy of the future.

Another, the "Wish You Were Here" 'series' gives way to a slightly macabre but severe wit around the destruction of famous cities. Still a different 'series', "The Biosphere", is pastoral and nature-loving.



Ronald Ramage at the Galleries

When questioned about the widely divergent themes of his work, he said, "I have to maintain a balance. If I did just that (pointing to "The Feast", a severely malnourished child with bucket in hand approaches a vulture gorging a soldier's body) I'd go crazy. Whereas if I did only goody-goody stuff like "Humpback Whale" I'd upset my karma."

Born in Windsor, educated in Detroit, Chaplin has retreated to Northern British Columbia where he can devote more time to his work. There is no mistaking the powers of Chaplin's imagination, but his history as a commerical illustrator betrays itself, giving a sense of cartoon to his work. Of one painting, "My Red Brother", a South American Indian gazing benignly from a lush tropical forest teeming with color and wildlife, he himself says, "It is a cross between Rousseau and Walt Disney."

There are fifteen original works hanging, (for sale at corporate office decoration prices) as well as reproductions at a much more reasonable cost. The show is dominated by "Terra de Libertad", a hot-air balloon drifting in a pristine blue sky, dwarfed by surrounding mountainscape that is aglow with the light of still virgin sunrise. The use of color and detail in this picture is Chaplin at his best. However, the reproduction prints, all numbered and signed, transform this brilliantly coloured Maxfield Parrish-type poster into garish technicolour kitsch.

Communication Breakdown, by Carl Chaplin, at Idee, 112 Queen Street East. Easy to get to, in an area of Toronto worth exploring, right across from the wonderfully eclectic This Ain't the Rosedale Library bookstore. Until November 7. It's a nice show, but only Ralph Steadman should be allowed claim to the title Gonzoilla Art.

The legs help too

Lillian Necakov

Theatre of Solitude's *Phantom of the Opera* is an experimental playground. Victor Solitario directs the cast in games they've never played before. There are fragments of talent up there on the stage, but nothing to hold it all together.

Joe Hall as the Phantom, whose face has been disfigured by a ruthless opera producer, is clumsy and indifferent in the opening scenes. But by the end he builds his confidence and assures us that he can really bring it home with the powerful "Talking of Death I Sing". It's refreshing as a grapefruit in the morning to see Hall and his band (the Quarringtons, Martin Worthy, but where was George?) in this adventure (acting, playing, and writing the score) even though their full potential is not realized.

Joe Hall

Most of the spoken lines are spoofified melodramatic cliches, and "everybody-knows-this-one" one-liners, transforming badness into an art. Spunky toss-offs such as "My mind is playing parcheesi with me" run rampant.

Daniel Simon Brooks, playing the wonderfully charismatic lady-killer Raoul gives an inspired performance—particularly in the dance routines. His movements are coordinated with a good sense of timing and rhythm.

The off-the-wall costumes and bizarre set enhance this interpretation of the classic horror tale. The costumes make up for the lack of colour the characters themselves project. The legs help too.

Overall *Phantom* is an enjoyable experience, but it lacks depth and continuity. The actors are somewhat amateurish, but they have a charm that makes them likeable.

The Phantom will be howling tonight thru Sunday, 8:30 p.m., at Harbourfront's York Quay Centre. Admission is $4. Zoom on down and get ready for some real mind parcheesi.

Me and my shadow

Kurosawa and Li'l Francis Coppola talk shop.

Ric Sarabia

Kagemusha—The Shadow Warrior by Akira Kurosawa, which opened at the Sheraton Cinemas last Friday, is quite simply a beautiful movie.

Winner of a best film award at the 1980 Cannes Festival, *Kagemusha* is a three-hour epic of warring Japanese clans in 1574.

Emperor Shingen, the Shadow Warrior, the feared and respected leader of the nation's strongest clan, is killed inadvertantly by a rival soldier.

On his deathbed he asks his closest ministers and family to keep his death a secret for three years, fearing his armies may weaken and his many enemies may conquer his empire.

The emperor's advisors find a soldier/thief who is physically identical to the late Shingen and convince him to act as an imposter for three years.

The imposter fools the emperor's unwitting war minister, grandson, and mistresses as he becomes more familiar with his new role. Seemingly, the spirit of Shingen comes to inhabit the soldier's body. The empire flourishes when this reincarnate of Shingen is able to lead the armies to victory by merely waiting on the battlefield for the enemy troops who turn and run away at his presence.

The style of acting is refreshingly static and formal. The actors don't move an awful lot—the movement is minimal, controlled and *very* expressive. This economy of gesture is quite powerful.

Images such as the dead Shingen's rainbow warning and the imposter's nightmare sequence are powerful and beautifully filmed. There is even an interesting but short Japanese Noh Theatre performance in the film. *Kagemusha—The Shadow Warrior* is very funny at times, has a cast of hundreds, and is really easy to follow considering the film is in Japanese with English subtitles. No lobsters, though.