

Entertainment

Arts in Banff

by James MacDonald

There is something inherently magical about Banff. "Majestic" is a word that can't be overused in describing the peaks of the Rocky Mountains which envelope the town of Banff, and all the magnificent outlying lake and forest areas. It is indisputably one of the most beautiful places in the world.

Small wonder, then, that a school of the arts should thrive in this perfect setting.

The Banff Centre School of Fine Arts was founded in 1933 by the University of Alberta's Department of Extension, offering summer programs in drama. In 1936, programs in playwriting, painting, and music were introduced. The school moved to a permanent campus on Tunnel Mountain in 1947, with the introduction of ceramics and stage design courses. 1950 saw the introduction of opera and ballet programs, as well as the founding of the annual Summer Festival of the Arts, featuring major productions in both these programs, as well as the theatre, music, and musical theatre divisions.

Over the past fifteen years, the Festival of the Arts has gained international prominence as a showcase for young talent. The School has expanded to offer courses in all facets of the visual arts, the electronic media, and writing and publishing workshops, as well as incorporating a School of Advanced Management. The School has also commenced offering winter programs in many areas.

The Drama program has undergone some modification since head Bernard Hopkins (artist-in-residence at the U of A's Department of Drama last year) assumed his position last summer. In its present incarnation, the program is divided into two parts: an Intermediate workshop, composed of 36 young performers, most of whom have yet to be formally trained; and a Master Class, featuring four actors with more theatre training and/or professional experience.

Next year's program will attempt to combine these programs in an effort to give the Intermediates an environment in which they can learn from their more experienced counterparts.

After being directed by Mr. Hopkins in last season's Studio Theatre production of *Love's Labour's Lost*, I had the good fortune to spend six weeks this summer as part of the Intermediate workshops.

I went to Banff with preconceived notions. I thought that the school would not be unlike a far-out summer camp. This was based on experiences related to me by previous participants. At the same time, however, I was apprehensive about adopting too much of a summer camp attitude, thereby neglecting the necessary work.

My preformed visions and worries proved completely unfounded.

To begin with, at the B.S.F.A., there is no time to develop a "summer camp" attitude. Most weekdays were spent in 10-12 hours of classes in speech, movement, text, and acting. Saturday mornings and afternoons, too, were often devoted to rehearsal.

If this sounds like an oppressive work-load it wasn't; it was in fact just the right amount to keep participants from twiddling their thumbs looking for more work, while allowing time for necessary scriptwork and, of course, necessary social activities.

The main advantage to the constant work-load is (and the School is based on this attitude) that it requires total immersion into one's subject. The geographical location of the School allows a student to escape urban pressures and distracting outside influences. Indeed, it is an escape from reality.

Total immersion also manifests itself in the artistic atmosphere created by the copious quantities of dancers, musicians, singers, painters and actors wandering about campus, the cafeteria, and through the residence. An incredible amount of artistic creativity and an intense desire to perform is generated by the constant presence of this amazing array of performing artists.

The desire to perform well is increased through interaction with other actors (or

dancers, etc). You cannot help but develop close personal relationships, even over as short a period of six weeks, when you eat, breathe and sleep with the same 40 people. There is an intense feeling of satisfaction when one shares work with others.

The wondrous thing about working so closely with others is that there is little or no competition, per se, among the various participants. A student realizes that what there is to be learned can be greatly enhanced by working *with*, and learning from, other actors. This is not to say that conflicts never arose (for they did), but such conflicts rarely arose from any sort of competitiveness or professional jealousy. The conflicts that did arise could usually be solved when one realized what could be learned from the situation.

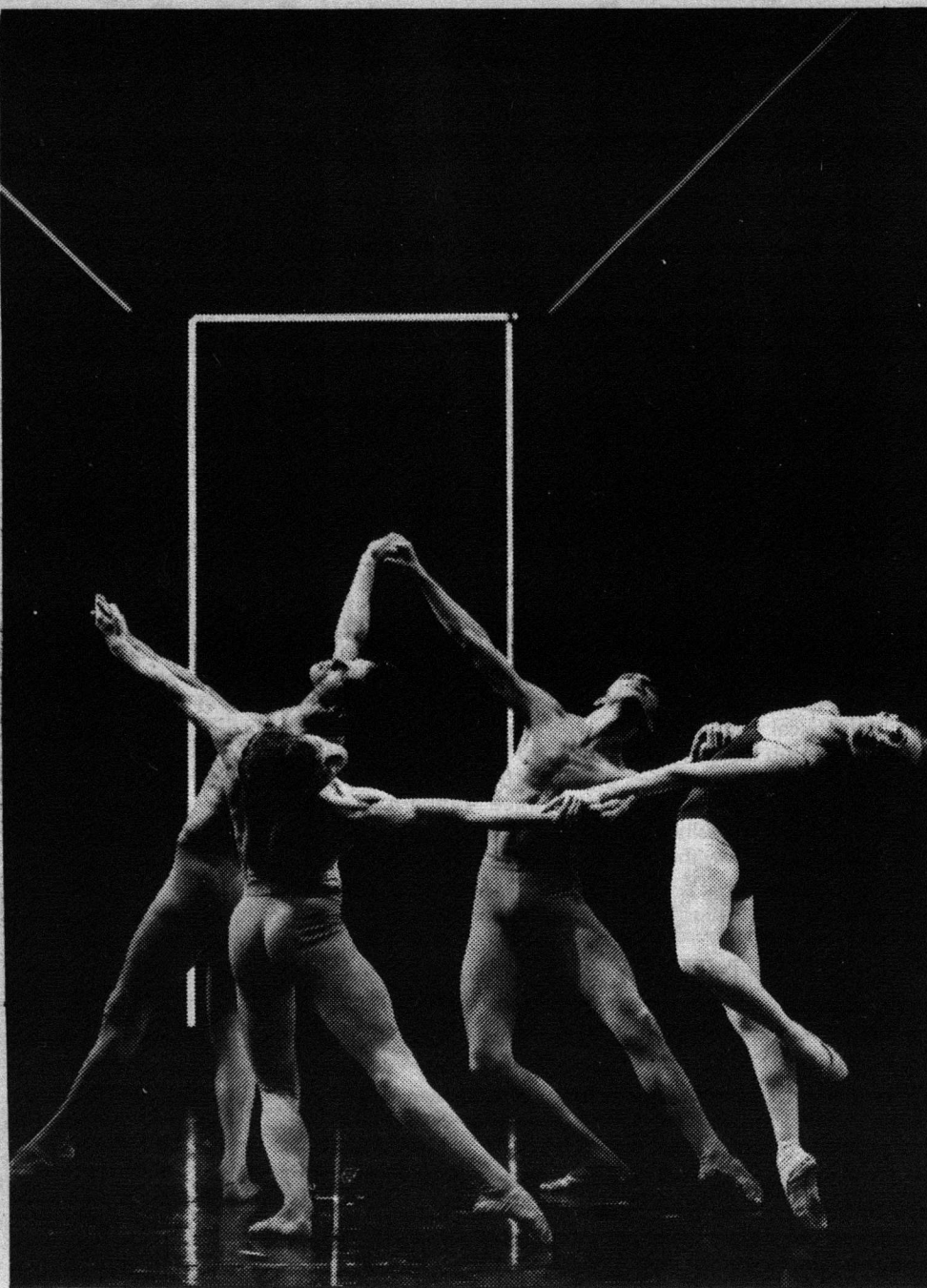
As a (mild) lover of the outdoors, the Banff experience was augmented by the Centre's spectacular setting. Where else can one release tension by taking a stroll in solitude by the Bow River in a torrent of rain, or by chatting with a grazing elk? How many actors have gone to rehearsal (outdoors), only to have it cancelled (almost) by the presence of a curious black bear (maybe he wanted to act)? There can be few sights more inspirational than the top of Tunnel Mountain by day (except maybe the view by night), or more serene than drifting on the Vermillion Lakes in a canoe on a sunny Sunday.

By personal preference, the only way to improve the School's setting is to remove the Banff townsite itself. This obnoxious tourist mecca of gift shops and motels frazzled me more than once on my weekly trip to the liquor store (oops).

Successful productions in both the dance and the drama divisions highlighted the Festival of the Arts during my stay. Under the artistic direction of Brian Macdonald, The Festival Ballet was a moving and exhilarating experience (it was my first ballet, and I was sure I'd be bored stiff). Closer to home (for me), the Drama Master Class' production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* received national acclaim for its charm, fun, and freshness. It was well deserved.

The Drama Intermediate class was divided into four groups, each working on a shortened version of a Shakespearean comedy. As a critic, colleague, and friend, I was both pleased and amazed at the capabilities of such young and diverse talent.

The entire drama program worked to-



Courtesy of Banff Centre School of Fine Arts Magazine.

gether on a production of an updated medieval mystery play. This play led me to believe that one has never truly acted until one has kneeled on a soaked flatbed wearing a luminous orange robe, screaming absurd rhyming triplets in sub-zero weather after midnight. There is an attractiveness to these plays, however, as our rather large, appreciative (and brave) audience would have told you.

One does not learn at Banff through teaching, one learns through experiencing. The "directors" of the workshops, for example, are all young professional actors and directors, each able to share their own positive theatre experiences and technique. As such, the program strives for a studio atmosphere, and attempts to downplay itself as a "school".

And in the end, this is the beauty of the Banff School. In Banff, a student is only pressured by himself to achieve his highest personal accomplishment. It is astonishing to

realize the possibilities of learning without the unnecessary pressure of an overdue term paper or a stanine of 3 hanging over one's head. A student is not a student; rather, he is a "participant", and can only learn what he personally makes of the experience.

What ultimately makes the Banff School experience memorable, however, are the people. In a short month-and-a-half, I grew incredibly fond of some of the other participants in a way I would not have thought possible. It was difficult to leave them, and ten times worse when they were gone. It makes one realize the importance of a genuine "friendly" atmosphere to one's development, not just as an artist, but as a person.

In the end, it was a volatile, constantly evolving experience. Every day brought a new outlook, a new event, a new feeling. I'll miss it.

Melville Boys is gutwrenching

The Melville Boys
Workshop West
til September 21

review by Michelle Kirsch

Workshop West kicked off Edmonton's '86-'87 theatre season with Norm Foster's "The Melville Boys."

I'd already been exposed to the usual blanket-like themes about what to expect from "Melville Boys": "coming...to...terms...with...death," or "reaching...self-awareness," and, of course, "appearance...versus...reality." But-surprise-as the work unfolds further it becomes a serious comedy pushing the audience to awareness. In fact, superficial mediocrity is a major current of thought throughout Foster's piece.

Melville Boys has its tragic themes, but Foster manages to develop them with the sort of humour that says, "Yeah, life's rough — are we having fun yet?" Thus, the death theme becomes only one dimension (be it an important one) of a multidimensional work. The four characters each have one major individual emotional problem to deal with but at the same time, the four occupy equal dramatic space (no one overpowers another). This arrangement (on a set that almost emits the musty odor of lakeside cabins) of the characters adds to the strength of

the play. While all four people are partially revealed through the death theme, a higher common-ground of emotional catharsis leads each to vent (additional) individual resentments. Other dimensions, beyond superficial appearances, are explored. Four people — Mary, Loretta, Lee, Owen — find themselves clashing one weekend in such a way that will alter their lives. Young Owen Melville is a young stud; he appears to be a complete contrast to the older dying Lee. However, these two brothers, locked in a love/hate relationship, come to discover a mutual resentment of their deeper similarities.

The sisters are a reverse mirror image of the brothers; Loretta is a sleazy-but witty-"dumb Blonde," while the older Mary is a benign image of patience. These two discover that *difference* is the foundation of *their* resentment and envy.

A deeper parallel links Mary and Lee — both married, yet not quite; both are unhappy with the cards that life has dealt them. Loretta and Owen are paired. These two are afraid of becoming confined in the mediocrity they already sense in their lives.

Amidst the intricate quad-tangle of relationships, "should've, would've beens" emerge; fingers of blame are too eagerly pointed at the other. Deeper fears and uncomfortable truths are shielded with

mockery and humor. But this shield is not self-delusion; it is self-protection at its best.

Heart-stopping moments are few and far between. But when they occur time grinds to a halt. The audience, with gut-wrenching force, cringes at the humor which had previously elicited peals of laughter; now it emphasizes tragic, self-protection.

Each character is forced to mature; each must learn to say "Good-bye" to illusion, the necessary tool of survival.

During this fateful weekend, dimensions of Order are discovered: Lee must reorder the past to prepare for death; Owen must reorder the future to repair the past; and the sisters must oppose traditional order to build the present. Emotional survival, cloaked in witticism, is a twilight zone of reality; these characters are threatened by an intricate web of resentment, envy, and stasis. Survival becomes a matter of searching out truths, and more so, of accepting them.

The four have little choice. Glancing up toward the catwalk during Intermission, I could see Ms. Houg surveying the scene below — a pleased teacher admiring a bright student. And rightfully so, for this student had all the makings of a prodigy. "The Melville Boys" is a winning combination of talent and hard work, an extraordinary display of dedication to theatrical art.