

Joe Orton's black comedy on Citadel stage

## Loot's value debased

Loot  
Citadel Theatre  
Run ends February 28

review by Matt Hays

On August 9, 1967, playwright Joe Orton was beaten to death in his sleep. What was a tragic end to a career cut short, was also a somewhat ironic one. Orton often dealt with death in his writing, and always poked fun at society's attitudes toward it. His death was macabre and gruesome — as were many of his plays.

Loot is no exception. The play revolves around a family who is mourning the death of its mother. The coffin sits centre stage. The lead character is a homosexual bank robber. When the police show up to investigate the bank robbery, the robber merely replaces the 'loot' with his mother's body in her coffin. The remainder of the play revolves around various characters' attempts to keep the police from discovering the body.

Attitudes towards the corpse are strange, to say the least. At one point, the corpse's glass eyeball drops from his head. At another, the corpse's dentures are removed, and one character does a Spanish dance using them as castanets.

During Loot's original 1966 run, Orton's mother died. Orton returned to London from the funeral, and forced the cast of the play to use his mother's actual dentures! Apparently it "was a symbolic gesture to prevent the play from lapsing into an empty and mechanical farce."

Perhaps, then, what the Citadel's production of Loot needs is dentures from a real corpse, because the play is certainly empty and mechanical. The cast is uniformly competent, but seem to take the script nowhere.

Marcia Cash is good as Nurse Fay, who has a distinct walk and a sharp accent. Somewhere in the second act, however, her character seems to slip and she loses her walk. Warren Graves does a fine job as McLevey, the only innocent on stage.

The Citadel does deserve commendation in its choice of script. Loot is a real gem and can be a great show, and the choice of this script is of reasonable risk for the Citadel. Lord knows, Loot's vicious attack on the middle class could easily offend Citadel clientele. All in all, however, this is largely uninspiring theatre.

Perhaps, through some minor miracle, this production will receive some new life and improve during its run. My personal advice to Bill Fisher is to head to the nearest morgue and see if he can dig up some false teeth.

But don't give up on Joe Orton — there's a good film version of Loot (starring Richard Attenborough) and a fine biopic called *Prick Up Your Ears* — both are worth catching. The story of Orton's life explains much of his offbeat wit — his story is equally as interesting as any of his plays.

Orton was noted for his amazingly black sense of humour. His plays were also highly risqué. Orton's characters were often homosexual and his dialogue was laden with gay innuendo. Orton entered the theatre as an actor, and studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). There he met Kenneth Halliwell, who would soon become his collaborator on literary efforts and his homosexual lover. Apparently, Halliwell wasn't nearly as talented as Orton, and when Orton attained success, Halliwell succumbed to intense jealousy.

Orton's success peaked when he was offered the job of writing a screenplay for the Beatles. The subsequent product, *Up Against It*, was considered too outrageous by Beatles manager Brian Epstein. Apparently Epstein was offended by a scene in which the fab four smoked a marijuana cigarette. Another scene had the Beatles in bed with one woman. Epstein worried that four men in bed with one woman would make the Beatles' sexuality seem ambiguous. (Which is ironic — Epstein was himself a homosexual who later died of drug overdose.)

Halliwell's jealousy peaked in 1967. Then mentally ill, Halliwell, in a fit of rage, wielded a hammer over the sleeping Orton's head, bludgeoning him to death. Halliwell then proceeded to take his own life through an overdose of pills.

After seeing this production, I couldn't help but become cynical about the Citadel's brand of theatre — which seems to consistently rely on big budgets, but seems equally consistently to be empty and uninspiring. The Citadel continues to receive funding from government and corporate grants. While never advocating a reduction in funding to the arts, perhaps I might suggest that some of this funding is misallocated. There are a number of fine theatre groups within Edmonton that receive very little funding, operate on shoe-string budgets, and still manage to produce worthwhile theatre.



Stewart Lemoine: "You start with the weird..."

Photo Elaine Osty

## Lemoine to open new Phoenix

interview by Elaine Osty

This weekend, the doors of the new Phoenix theatre, "Phoenix Downtown", will open. Two one-act plays by Stewart Lemoine, *Neck-Breaking Car Hop* and *Swiss Pajamas*, will usher in this event.

Stewart Lemoine's name is usually associated with the Fringe. His first performance work, *All These Heels*, was produced at the first Fringe ever. His plays have been a mainstay of the Fringe ever since. Some familiar titles are *Cocktails at Pam's*, *My Miami Melody*, and *The Vile Governess and Other Pseudonyms*.

After performing at last summer's Fringe, Lemoine and the cast of *The Vile Governess* went on tour. They sold out in Toronto for a solid three weeks. Lemoine was even nominated for the Chalmers' award for best Canadian play of the year.

Over the years, Lemoine notes, the Fringe has grown but not fundamentally changed. "It's still the same idea: you can do what you want there, and know that there's going to be an audience." He admits that "there's more pressure to do well than before, which is not a bad thing."

The core group of actors, which includes Jane Spidell and Leona Brausen, of his Fringe plays will be seen in the Phoenix Downtown openers. *Neck-Breaking Car Hop* is "the first thing I've written that's been set in Canada. It's — in a way — a parody of a kind of Canadian drama, but the characters are still real."

*Neck-Breaking Car Hop*, "a surreal drama," is set in Regina, and features a kitchen sink in

the middle of the set. The play mocks, as Lemoine says, certain "conventions that don't always make a lot of sense." He cites "monologues in standing pools of light" as examples.

*Swiss Pajamas* is set in Chicago in the sixties. "If you cross *Mission Impossible* with the *Dick Van Dyke Show*, this is what you get," offers Lemoine. It's performed on what resembles "a Laugh-In set." The show presents a time when, as a result of the Cold War, "people were very interested in espionage." The characters are "pretty hip," says Lemoine.

Lemoine has the reputation of being a "bizarre" playwright, but insists that it is not something he consciously pursues. "If I get hung up on thinking 'how can I make this more wacky?', it's not going to work."

The use of juxtaposition and unusual situations is important to Lemoine's writing. Says Lemoine: "You start with the weird and look for the logic, rather than try to make something weird." His plays "make sense although (they're) completely ridiculous." He adds: "you have to go very fast so people don't stop to think about what it is you're doing."

Lemoine's plays are the sort of theatre which Phoenix Downtown will encourage. This venue will feature experimental theatre plays that are, as Lemoine comments, "less of a sure thing." He hopes that "people will always be looking to the Phoenix Downtown to see what's happening."

The new theatre is features a small thrust stage — and no room for 'big productions.' "It's like the Fringe," says Lemoine. "The play has to get to be small, got to be simple." And a little different.

interview by Rod Campbell

The sun is setting over the Georgia Straight on the final night of the Vancouver Folk Festival. Onstage, Capercaillie is into their final collage of reels and jigs. It's the best set the band has played all weekend, and the appreciative audience are aware they're hearing something special.

"Thank you very much! Hope to see you all again soon!" And they're gone. The crowd, appetites whetted, are immediately on their feet. Backstage the band is ecstatic — shaking hands and hugging each other — providing a rare glimpse of the mutual pleasure received from the interaction between audience and performer. Six months later, Capercaillie is in the middle of their first coast to coast tour of North America, which includes a stop here in Edmonton.

For the uninitiated, Capercaillie is the most successful group of traditional folk musicians to come out of the Highlands of Scotland since the Jacobite Rebellion. The band was formed at Oban High School in 1983, says accordionist Donald Shaw on the phone from Boston. Two years later they won the Pan-Celtic Song Contest at Killarney in southern Ireland with a Gaelic song concerning the famine in Ghitopia. They've appeared on television with rock groups such as Big Country. Both their albums were well received by the critics. Arguably, they are now the leading exponents of Celtic music.

Oban sits on the north west coast of Scotland; it's a town directly exposed to the last remnants of the Gaelic culture which once dominated all of Europe. Both Shaw and lead singer Karen Matheson are fluent

Gaelic speakers. Matheson's ethereal vocals and the band's fresh interpretations of Celtic songs and dance tunes are the hallmarks of Capercaillie. "Oban's fairly exposed to traditional music," says Shaw. "There's a lot of good piping and Gaelic singers. I suppose that's why we picked up the Gaelic songs, really."

Although the band plays pipe tunes, it doesn't have a piper. Marc Duff (recorder, whistles and bodhran) used to play the lowland pipes, but once got the chanter the wrong way round and all hell broke loose on stage. The pipes have now been dropped from live performances.

In 1985, the band moved out of Oban and turned professional. Founding members Martin MacLeod and Joe MacLachlan left to pursue their studies at university; fiddler Charlie McKerron was picked up "at some session" to fill the gap. Guitarist Shaun Craig left last summer and has since been replaced by John Saich. Along the way they've added the brilliant Irish musician, Manus Lunny, who came through Edmonton last month with Silly Wizard's Andy Stewart.

The seminal traditional Irish folk bands such as Planxty, Clannad and Moving Hearts, who emerged in the mid seventies, also played an important role in the development of Capercaillie. Says Shaw: "I would say that the band is closer to an Irish influence than any Scottish band." The Irish influence clearly shows in their fearless approach to traditional music. They are constantly re-defining methods of interpreting both songs and dance tunes.

"We're not frightened of doing things with traditional music," says Shaw. "You can go as



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far as you want as long as at the end of the day the music is good. As long as you produce good music, your traditional character will come through every time. We're using a lot of synthesizer and effects. We do it to create exciting sounds for traditional folk; we're trying to write it into a contemporary mold, I suppose."

However, Shaw finds writing his own material more challenging: "Self penned songs gives you more scope; it takes everything from scratch." He hopes to complete a few airs for the band's upcoming album.

Capercaillie is playing at the Edmonton Scotmen's Society Friday and at the South Side Folk Club Saturday.