

Ouimette's great craft saves condemned *Property*

arts
 excalibur march 18, 1992

by Harry Rudolfs

On the surface, *Property* looks like a winner. A noble theatre house (Theatre Passe Muraille), in financial straits and close to going under, piggybacks a new Canadian production by a feisty-but-homeless theatre company (Necessary Angel), and gets some money from a drug manufacturer who's under the gun to find politically correct advertising media for the legal, but lethal, drug they sell (Molson's beer).

A fiercely independent Canadian director (Richard Rose) brings in the quintessential Brilliant Canadian Actor (Stephen Ouimette) to save an overworked, wordy and at times, thin script (adapted by D.D. Kugler), and the beleaguered theatre fills a hole in their March schedule. Simultaneously, the book by an aspiring Canadian writer (Marc Diamond), is printed by a revolutionary, but hard-pressed Canadian publisher (Coach House).

Everybody wins. The major papers (*Star*, *Sun*, *Globe*) write careful but uncritical reviews. Another play gets added to the canon of "Canadian Theatre." Another Canadian book gets published. Everyone lines up for another round of grants. And the body of Arts Canada keeps staggering blindly down Queen Street looking for another drink or handout.

Property does have some effective elements. There is no question, though, that without the wonderful abilities and generosity of actor Stephen Ouimette, the production would have fallen flat on its face. Ouimette assumes 17 personas; the most touching and empathetic moments come when he assumes these identities. Too much of the rest of the two-hour, one-person monologue is given to essays, digressions and rants.



On the surface, Richard Rose's production of *Property* seems like it has all the elements to be a winner. Unfortunately, the writing doesn't go much beyond the trivial and mediocre. The play, adapted by D. D. Kugler from a novel by Marc Diamond is worth attending for actor Stephen Ouimette's wonderful abilities and generosity. • photo by Lydia Pawelak

THEATRE

Property
 directed by Richard Rose
 adapted by D. D. Kugler from Marc Diamond's novel
 Theatre Passe Muraille
 until March 22

The obsessive verbiage often detracts from Ouimette's spellbinding craft.

Property contains good lines and excellent concepts — almost. A letter comes floating through the mailbox of Ouimette's Vancouver home, drawing us into the subject's convoluted psychological world. We learn of his unhealthy relationship with his mother; his equation of business and killing ("riding our lazy boys into slaughter"), and of property and suffering. He refers repeatedly to Lon-

don, Ont., his own private hell, with its twisted streets and psychiatric hospitals — but it could easily be Downsview, Ont., or Burnaby, B.C., or Syracuse, N.Y.

The author tries to tie the vast bundle together with catchphrases that begin to gnaw. "And who can blame them" is the worst example, but by no means the only one.

We learn the narrator is a writer who once was chosen by the CBC to

attend a television development workshop. Ouimette's characterizations of media executives are exceptional, but the author uses CBC jokes to buttress a good deal of tedious text. The closest the playwright gets to finding a Canadian pulse is when an executive is called away from a seminar because someone has hijacked a bus to parliament hill. For a second, the storyline becomes interesting and has some realistic basis. Then the

monologue slips as quickly back into mediocrity.

Ouimette uses stage materials cleverly. He gets a lot of mileage out of the letter from London, Ont. The phone provides an interesting dynamic and vehicle for Ouimette's impersonations, and actually gets the audience counting rings. A toilet seat that lowers itself off the wall provides another visual focus. A lighted lariat provides an innovative foil to a well-constructed conversation about big cats and the rodeo. In fact, cats and cat-killing ("felicide") are a prominent theme.

At times, the work attempts to go beyond its trivialities. There is a Chomsky-esque tirade on American complicity in an Indonesian dictator's unpunished murder of innocent people. Mention is made of the hypocrisy of Canadians producing arms for the Viet Nam war while publicly condemning it. The narrator allows access to his mother's belief that she is responsible for world war II, providing an intriguing investigation into collective guilt. At the same time a projection of a postage stamp of Queen Elizabeth II appears on stage.

However, one is left with the nagging feeling that the script is overextended and tired. There's no question that there is sincerity in the production. No one can fail to see the genius of Ouimette's acting. But the stiff, contrived writing leaves the audience hungering for less.

And who can blame them?

An odd assortment of Canadian sketches

by Josh Marans

A man walks out on a ledge of a building. A woman notices him and

yells out a window, "Hey, Mister! Don't jump!"

He pulls out a cigarette and shakes his head. "I'm not jumping: this is the only place in this building where I can have a smoke."

"Oh, thank goodness," she replies. "For a second, there, I thought that you were trying to kill yourself."

So begins Second City's 33rd revue, *Ontario, Yours To Recover*. The show is an odd assortment of sketches, featuring everything from Christopher Columbus having self-doubts to news reports of a Conservative Party coup overthrowing Brian Mulroney and causing Canada to splinter into such states as "Saskalbertitoba" and "The People's Republic of Ontario."

Refreshingly, the jokes are mostly Canadian. One unforgettable sketch features an anglophone Reform Party member on a francophone television show.

The cast works well together, each

THEATRE

Yours To Recover
 directed by Bob Derkach
 written and performed by Second City
 The Old Fire Hall
 indefinite run

member having enough distinct qualities to make virtually any situation realistic.

Unfortunately, the cast cut things short opening night, foregoing the improvisations they usually perform after the rehearsed show. What little they did do was enough to make me want to come back to see the cast improvise.

If you want a pleasant night out, see Second City's *Ontario, Yours To Recover*. I don't believe there was ever a fonder tribute to our Prime Minister than their interpretation of Bryan Adams' *Robin Hood* theme song: "Everyone He Screwed, He Screwed For You."

Engaging monologue on myths about love and women

by Moira MacDonald

"Life as a myth is no picnic these days."

So says mythical mer-woman Shawna Dempsey in her engaging and comical monologue, *Mermaid in Love*. Well, really she's a mermaid, but the parallel is clearly drawn between the mythical images of woman and mermaid, with no room left for a human soul. In *Mermaid* Dempsey shows these myths and others for what they are, but in a way that keeps the audience laughing.

Mermaid is the third in Factory Theatre and Crow's Theatre's four-week "Solo Flights" series. Presented in the laid-back Factory Theatre Studio Cafe (you can have a coffee or

THEATRE

Mermaid in Love
 written by and starring Shawna Dempsey
 Factory Theatre
 March 10

a beer while you watch the show), the series presents different solo performances each week as well as special late-night weekend performances at 10 pm. The beautifully furnished Studio Cafe provides an intimate and comfortable atmosphere for watching this kind of theatre.

In a piece she also wrote, Dempsey appears in full mermaid regalia: tumbling voluminous blonde hair, long sparkling tail (including a frontal zip pocket which looks remarkably like a vulva) and a boob bustier

whose suction-style nipples could make Madonna jealous. She is the last of her kind on earth.

The mermaid speaks about what Ulysses was really like and how atrociously he treated her sisters; about how the end-result of love for mermaids is always the same: death; and how love itself is a product of centuries of myth-making.

But love and romance aren't the only myths we suffer from — Dempsey shows how myths are made all the time in order to control society. Dempsey uses a slide projector in part of her performance to replicate an evening TV news report — another form of modern myth-making — which portrays Ulysses' actions at sea as triumphs while ignoring the mermaids' grievances. An interesting mythical connection is also drawn between the toxic wasteland of romantic love and the wasteland of the Love Canal which was covered up for years by yet more governmental and corporate myth-making in the 1970s.

Dempsey-as-Mermaid gives a strong and well-articulated performance. She delivers her wit in soothing tones, shocking the audience out of possible complacency, with an occasional cool dry bite. Unlike most fairy tales, which are supposed to put you to sleep, there is never a dull moment in *Mermaid in Love*.

Dempsey follows up her performance with a screening of her bopping rap video, "We're Talking Vulva," and a brief live piece featuring the artist in a white paper dress. Again Dempsey criticizes the myth of romantic desire cloaked in terms like "I want you," opting for more truthful and direct terms of lust like "I want to fuck you."

Attention theatre students

Contact Productions: Theatre for People with Disabilities is presenting David Freeman's play *Creeps!* at Harbourfront from April 7 to 12. The production, about seven people with various disabilities who steal time in a washroom and spit out their frustrations and dreams, will be the first since the play opened in 1972 in which people with disabilities have made a major creative contribution.

According to its literature, the aim of Contact Theatre is "to integrate both people with disabilities and able-bodied people in producing a professional theatre company." The 11-member cast includes six able-bodied actors and five with disabilities; the administrative and technical staff is similarly integrated.

The six-month-old theatre company is having difficulty getting charitable status, which is putting a crimp in its fundraising efforts. However, tax receipts will be issued for all donations over \$10.

In addition, the donation of time to help with administration, fundraising, the building of sets or the set up of the show in April would be greatly appreciated.

For more on financial contributions to Contact Theatre, call Rhona Michelson at 321-0404. For other information, contact David Type at 593-8743 or Cynthia Richardson at 863-9829.



From left to right: Ed Sahely, Jenny Parsons and Christopher Earle in a scene from Second City's latest show, *Yours To Recover*. The show, the company's 33rd, contains the usual mix of social and political targets, and a lot of — shudder! — Canadian content.



Excalibur arts —
 Justified and Ancient