

What happened to the hangover?



From left to right: Ian Deakin, Graham McPherson, and Keith Dinicol.

Photo by Richard Gishler

Sharon Pollock's *Compulsory Option*, currently running at the Citadel Too, is a self-styled "black comedy". Well, there's no denying it is a maniacally witty play iced with a cool intelligence. But it remains essentially too heartless and gutless to call itself black comedy, or even good comedy.

Three men show up in the same room - a difficult dramatic premise unless one's name is Pinter, but all power to Ms. Pollock for digging her own deep chataqua at the same time as she travels through it.

One is a gay physical education instructor who fancies being bound in ropes as much as climbing them. Another is a critically paranoid English professor in a jungle jacket, vaguely reminiscent of Hemingway on a bad day, who is constantly checking out and nearly leaping out nearby windows to see if "the big money boys" have caught up with him yet. The third is a sedate history prof consigned to mediate between the other two.

Now, though this trio proves fodder for a good many funny lines, no real dramatic

situation develops between them. Rather, it infringes upon them from outside the room, in the emerging notion that paranoia is to be more closely studied in a world where cars seem designed specifically to run over one's toes.

And so these characters simply bounce off one another, without changing, being already too scarred and steeled to be further damaged. *Compulsory Option* finally has all the flash and consequence of a pinball game.

Such masters of black com-

edy as Joe Orton and Peter Nicholls use splashing farce and slashing repartee to lower an audience's defenses; they wait until that moment when we're punchy with laughter, and so most vulnerable, to deliver a message we would otherwise refuse or dismiss. Black comedy prospers in the 70's as the only form still able to disturb its anaesthetized audiences.

But Ms. Pollock refuses to take advantage of her devastating talent to amuse in such manner, and this is frustrating. But what is deadening is that the characters are so brutally drawn as to be unrecognizable. One is so busy laughing at them that no time is left to understand them. Their dialogue isn't so much tight as rigid, flowing smooth and easy as good whiskey without similar loosening effect (a good black comedy is like a good drunk, complete with hangover). We know nothing of these three in the end, and so when one is shot, he is easily and with relief dispensed with.

Again, for all their peculiarities, characters in an Orton or Nicholls play are never

gratuitously aberrant. Too often, Pollock's are.

All would be well, and this review excessive, if *Compulsory Option* aspired to be nothing more than another goodtime, lotzalaffs comedy. But to its credit it wants to be more. And, I suspect, might have been, if Ms. Pollock has used her clear capabilities to prime and prepare the audience.

Keith Digby's hilarious direction rightly employs the script's tumbledown energy to gloss over its few clumsy pretensions. Graham McPherson and Keith Dinicol, as the English and History profs respectively, respectfully make the most of Ms. Pollock's extraordinarily economical dialogue, flipping it between them expertly. Had Ian Deakin offered something stronger than the mincing characterization that he does, *Compulsory Option* might yet have had the sinister resound it requires.

Still, it is a refreshing piece presented with a zeal too often missing from the Citadel's Mainstage. And it runs through to Saturday.

Richard Rohs

Intelligent people won't buy this book

The Intelligent Consumer, by Gershon Wheeler. 198 pages. Prentice Hall of Canada \$9.95.

Everything which is written in Gershon Wheeler's *The Intelligent Consumer* can be found in a dozen consumer affairs pamphlets put out by the Canadian Gov't or, if you get really desperate, in a certain magazine you can find in every credit union in Edmonton. The book has nothing to say that hasn't been said before, and from the viewpoint of Canadians, spends too much time dealing with methods that U.S. gov't agencies use to check out banks and appliances.

That's all very fine, but what do you do when you can't find American gov't seals of approval on goods which you buy in Canada?

Moody, murky murders

A dark street in the early morning hours, splashed with a sudden downpour. Lamps form halos in the murk. In a walk-up room, filled with the intermittent flashing of a neon sign from across the street, a man is waiting to murder or be murdered ... the specific ambience of Film Noir, a world of darkness and violence, with a central figure whose motives are usually greed, lust and ambition, whose world is filled with fear ... such films reached their fullest realization in the 1940's.

Film Noir is a matter of manner, of mood, tone and style. Early examples of Film Noir penetrate the masks of middle-class probity, later ones are in the outlines of their plots indistinguishable from traditional thrillers.

It is no wonder these old movies "hold up" so well today. Masked as genre entertainments, the finest Films Noirs are "escapist" works only in the

Despite all this, though, the book itself is a fairly accurate guide to things which everyone must face at some point in their lives.

The book is split into ten sections, each dealing with subjects like home-buying or fraud. In each case, the author does a good job of showing which course of action is most profitable for you as a consumer. He surveys enough different areas so that one is almost bound to find something which is of interest or importance to his own plans. However, there is nothing here that one cannot find in other sources. When you are paying \$9.95 for a book, you have the right to expect more.

The book is marred by an excessive concert with the American scene. When a Cana-

dian buys a book on consumer affairs, he expects to find something which he can apply to consumers in Canada. Though the purchase and use of appliances is not much different between Canada or the U.S., and fraudulent methods very similar, there are huge areas in which the laws of the two nations differ. To use the information about U.S. government agencies and regulations presented in the book, you'd have to move to the United States. It is simply not applicable to Canada. If this book is going to be sold in Canada, a special section on Canadian consumer laws should be included.

Finally, the book is marred in design. Every second page seems to have a picture credited to "General Kazoos, Ltd." or whatever, showing a smiling housewife or cute kid falling into a refrigerator. Not that the pictures aren't nice, mind; it's simply that they don't fit in with what the book is saying. Mr. Wheeler makes nasty comments about the methods, by which advertisers con us into buying things which we don't need, only to have the design of the book give page after page of examples of these methods.

If it was intended as an ironic comment, it sure seems assinine; if it occurred through accident or (horrors!) design, it is out of place. Beside which, at some points the book seems to be half pictures, which is fine for an art book, but not for a book on consumer affairs.

The work is good, but there are better ways of spending your money. If you feel masochistic you can read Nader or the ilk; if you're lazy, you can pick up a copy of *Everybody's Money* down at your local credit union. For free. Either way, you'll learn a lot more for a lot less money.

John Owen Robert Ferris

John Owen Robert Ferris

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