

# ENTERTAINMENT

...music...films...exhibitions...theatre...arts...

## Offstage with C. David Johnson

PETER J. COLLEN

THE BRUNSWICKIAN

Theatre New Brunswick's latest play, *Misery*, certainly has a lot going for it with its intense script, the rotating sets and the intriguing characters. More importantly, however, it has C. David Johnson.

The star of CBC's long-running television drama *Street Legal* and a former UNB student, Johnson has returned to the city in which he began his career to tackle the role of Paul Sheldon, the central character in *Misery*. And as Johnson adores returning to Fredericton, the town appreciates Johnson as well, as the preview night crowd - mostly university students - gave Johnson a standing ovation.

As a student himself, Johnson spent three years at UNB, beginning in Arts but later switching to Education and then to Psychology. He also involved himself with CHSR, audio-visual work and an "extraordinary amount of partying." But Johnson left school during his third year of university to try his hand at theatre.

Oddly enough, Johnson didn't initially envision acting as a future vocation. "A friend of mine had gone on to Toronto to become an actor there, and I went down to visit him and I thought, 'This is a stupid profession, all these weird people and no one's making any money.' I thought it was ridiculous."

Coincidentally, Johnson's theatre experiences began at TNB. Upon returning to school after spending a year in Montreal working for an optician, Johnson was hired out of class to work for TNB. "It was just by sheer fluke I got working in the theatre," says Johnson. "So, I worked for TNB for a couple of years and I had a number of directors tell me that the best thing I could do would be to get some solid training, which I wasn't going to get at UNB. So, I went out to The Playhouse Acting School in Vancouver and studied out there for a couple of years."

After building his foundation skills, Johnson moved on to the next level, enrolling as an apprentice in the National Arts Centre Company in Ottawa. "As apprentices, we got reasonable salary in those days. We had classes every morning: dance classes, music classes, movement classes, voice classes, and, as well, you were either in two or three productions at the same time, so you really worked your tail off. It was a fabulous experience."

Johnson participated in ten plays in two years, then turned towards Toronto for future success. While working various jobs, Johnson attended auditions and hired an agent, which eventually garnered him some success. However, he didn't hit the big time immediately. "I did this show called *Red Surge*, which was a reality... Johnson searches for the correct term - "short-lived" (*laugh*) little family series about a bunch of Mounties in the 1880s out west. So there were lots of uniforms and riding horses and stuff like that."

However, the following summer yielded *Street Legal*. The popular drama series ran from 1985-1993, and C. David Johnson's presence eventually became a recognizable landmark on CBC Television.

However, there was no real guarantee of success when *Street Legal* started. "It had been years since anyone had tried a one hour drama [in Canada] and they were just becoming popular in the States, so we decided to try it up here," Johnson says, commenting on the initial uncertainty of the project. "When we went into the first season, nobody knew what they were doing. Nobody had tried to produce a weekly



"SELLING THE DRAMA": C. David Johnson stars in TNB's *Misery*, which ends its run at The Playhouse on Sunday.

one hour drama. It costs a lot of money and it takes an incredible number of talented people. And after a while we started to learn to do it faster, cheaper and better."

Ultimately, Johnson and *Street Legal* went on to enjoy eight seasons of success, despite taking constant criticism for simply being a Canadian production. "There was always the old comment that 'Oh, it looks like such a Canadian show,' and we tried to eliminate that... The first two seasons, to go back and look at them, are just embarrassing - for me to look at, anyway. Plus I look like I'm about twelve years old... [But] we tried to use good lighting, really good film stock and to really add as much production value as we possible could."

Although *Street Legal* ended of its own accord, and while it made Johnson's name distinguishable and marketable in Canada, the exposure he received from the series also reduced his chances for some jobs. "I probably get specifically ignored for things because I'm associated with *Street Legal*," he admits. "I think it is [a drawback at times]. I think everybody who has done a series in this country... [experiences] a hang-over effect where nobody wants to see you. You're too closely associated with that show. Or there's some bizarre attitude that, 'Well, they had their chance, now it's someone else's turn.' I've never been able to figure that one out... I'm not bitter or grumpy, but it is a reality in this country."

While Johnson has kept busy with CBC Radio, acting classes and a role in the *Imax* film shot in Saint John last summer, he has, for the time being, turned back to the avenue of acting that spawned his career: theatre. In *Misery*, Johnson undertakes one of the most challenging roles he has ever accepted.

Since *Misery* focuses primarily on dialogue and character development - and because there

are only two characters in the play - Johnson endures an extremely demanding performance, especially since he never leaves the stage. "It's the first time I've ever spent that concentrated amount of time onstage. When we first started I was worried about holding people's interest... I think the tension is built in so beautifully because of the script that we just carry it along... I think the story keeps the people's interest."

The story itself is quite basic: Paul, a best-selling romance novelist, leaves the genre to write a meaningful story, but after the book's completion he crashes his car in the Colorado mountains. Paul is rescued by his "number one fan" Annie Wilkes, who pledges to nurse Paul and his two broken legs back to health. However, when Annie discovers that Paul has killed off *Misery* to end the series, her maniacal tendencies increase tenfold, and the incapacitated Paul is at her mercy. Towards the end of the play, though, Paul realizes that his only chance of survival is escape - an option Annie refuses to allow, thereby resulting in a physical, tension-filled finale.

"Once you get going the play kind of carries you. The only thing I can equate it to is high school football. Once you get into the game, the emotional level just kept you so high... You could be playing with a broken arm and would never notice it."

"I come offstage with [misery] and I've got little cuts and bruises and scrapes and I've no idea where they came from. You're so caught up in it, it just kind of carries you."

After *Misery* ends its run throughout New Brunswick, Johnson will return to Toronto and will attempt to pitch his own fly-fishing show to TSN. However, any future opportunity to return to Fredericton will receive serious consideration in Johnson's mind. "It's always hard to turn down a trip to Fredericton," he comments. "I've spent so many years here. I really love coming home."

## Kiss Me Arse - Here come The Mahones

AARON MACEachern

THE BRUNSWICKIAN

On March 17, 1990, Mauro Sepe, Fintan McConnell, Andrew Brown, David Allan and Owen Warnica celebrated Saint Patrick's Day in a very special way: they formed The Mahones, a Celtic-Folk rock band now taking Canada by storm.

Sepe and McConnell grew up playing in rock bands together, and McConnell's father opened the very Irish pub in Kingston, Ontario the town the band calls home.

The name 'The Mahones' comes from the Gaelic phrase 'Pog-Me-Thoin', which means

'kiss me arse.' "The group plays a traditional grass roots type of music, one that is honest and sincere, and that makes for an hot and sincere recording," chuckles Sepe.

The members of the band are all masters in their own instrumental realms. "Violinist, 'Doctor' Dave Allan has done some live shows with the Rheostatics, and he's on the both the movie and the album version of the Canadian film, *Whale Music*," Sepe says. The drummer and back up vocalist went on to comment, "The whole band has played with what we consider our peer influences, bands like The Skydiggers, Great Big Sea, and soloists like Ccclin James and Ashley MacIsaac."

The East Coast and the Maritimes have a wide variety of talented musicians, from Natalie MacMaster to the Irish Descendants. "The traditional godfathers of contemporary Irish euphony, The Pogues, have influenced so many of the East Coast bands that if you sit down and listen to almost any traditional sounding compact disk, you will find one of The Pogues tunes in the band's repertoire," said Sepe.

Sepe began to recount one of the band's highpoints in their musical career, a show the band performed in a small bar in Albany, New York. "This performance was about two years before the movie entitled *Celtic Pride*, starring Dan Aykroyd, hit the big screen. We had written the title track for the movie and there was a tonne of hype and publicity for the upcoming flick," Sepe reminisced. "The entire place was going mad, even as we were unloading our junk, three hours before the gig... It was almost embarrassing because the crowd thought we were these big stars. But, they were really getting us pumped with all the cheering and roaring. When we went on, the crowd went through the roof. It was a combination of the shock element and all the hype for the movie. It was indeed a very memorable event."

However, The Mahones haven't had more success than since their appearance as guests on CBC's *Rita and Friends*, a couple of years ago. "MacNeil is really great for the Canadian music industry. I mean, two million people got to see us perform on television," Sepe enthused.

On January 25th, two million people will not have the opportunity to see The Mahones live, but UNB students who act fast can leap at the chance to see this incredible band. Tickets are \$10 for UNB students and \$12 for non-UNB students.



"KEEPING UP WITH THE MAHONES": Fintan McConnell, Andrew Brown, Dave Allen, Owen Warnica and Mauro Sepe play *The Cellar* tomorrow night.



EVITTA

It would appear that Madonna has finally found the right vehicle to earn her credibility and praise of a Hollywood actress that she has craved for so long. Alan Parker's *Evita* is everything she has sought and more. From the rich scenery and stunning sets and costumes, *Evita* is a spectacle to behold. Parker has taken every theatre-goer who has sat in the balcony lamenting "I wish I could see better," and made it so. The film is concentrated, through song, on the life of Argentinian Vice President Eva Peron and her rise to stardom, power and near Argentinian godliness. Parker's film also allows another particular insight for the audience: the ability to become more involved with a theatrical script.

Because *Evita* was originally a script for the stage - and has, until now, only been performed as such - it has always only been able to be perceived as tangibly as where you were sitting. People sitting in the front row could easily be more affected than those sitting in the back row of the balcony. With the film version of *Evita*, everyone in the

audience can experience the details of such a dramatic musical.

Did I say music? Yes. And there's a lot of it. It's all music, song and dance, performed mainly by the three characters of Eva Peron (Madonna), Juan Peron (Jonathan Pryce) and the floating narrator CHE (Antonio Banderas). All three give dynamic performances with great vocals. I was curious and nervous that in the transfer from stage to film the traditional opening overture would be lost or absent from the film, but I'm happy to say that I was satisfied. Not only was the overture present, but it was handled in a very appealing, albeit elaborate, manner.

Although two-plus hours of Andrew Lloyd Webber's music set to film may not be everyone's idea of a good time, those with the curiosity or



MADONNA AS EVITTA

interest shouldn't be disappointed. As I noticed many audience members shedding a few tears towards the end of the film, I thought, "Wow, Madonna's performance is actually making people cry, not groan." And all she had to do was play a power-hungry wannabe actress who slept her way to the top. Now that's acting!

KENNY FITZPATRICK

## Sweet Sweet Poison

LAURA GUAY

THE BRUNSWICKIAN

Friday, January 17 at STU's Black Box Theatre, Felix Mirbt with his two company actors/puppet artists (Almut Ellinghaus and Marcelle Hudon) presented *A Sweet Round Of Poison*.

I really don't know how to describe this play. It was like watching a moving piece of art. I believe this was intended since each act was called a "tableau." Every character was a colorful puppet. Yup, no actors here, but don't get me wrong - these were not your typical Jim Henson Muppets. Mirbt's puppets had heads made of plaster and picture frames containing coffee cups and hankies for bodies.

The set itself was impressive in its simplicity; only a child's table and chair were used as props. That is if you don't count the ten puppets that were used.

The play's story line was a sleeper. Mirbt told the story of Geesch, a 1920's German woman who poisoned anyone who irritated her. The growth of Geesch's character was amusing, she progressed from a woman who was abused and suppressed by her husband and lovers to an independent murderess. The problem with this was that the story was entertaining for the first half hour, but then once you could get over the realism of the puppets the plot simply got tiresome. You can watch a woman poison people with a cup of coffee for only so long.

This, of course, is not Felix Mirbt's first play using the medium of puppet actors. His productions include Brecht's *Happy End*, DeFalla's *Master Peter's Puppet Show*, Stravinsky's *Histoire du Soldat* and many more great works. What makes this work truly different from his usual shows is that he adapted this script himself. The tale of Geesch Gottfried is a true story Mirbt borrowed his script from a German television show, about Gottfried, written by Rainer Fassbinder in the early seventies.

Overall, *A Sweet Round of Poison* was a good show. Caution to those who have no interest in the abstract: This is no child's puppet production - this is art at its peak.

Our Lady Peace is here next week, and the good folks at Sosy want you to hear their brand new album. You can win your own copy of either *Clumsy* (we've three for you for free!) or *Navesed* (we've two to give to you!) if you can do TWO SIMPLE THINGS: (1) Write down the name of OLP's latest single from *Clumsy*, along with your name, telephone number, and student number, & (2) drop off your info to The Bruns or e-mail your statistics to bruns@unb.ca.

The deadline for entries is Tuesday, January 29 at 5 pm. The draw will take place later that day. Winners will be notified by telephone, so PLEASE INCLUDE YOUR PHONE NUMBER.



### Know Where to go?

- The Beaverbrook Art Gallery  
Atilla Richard Lukacs: *E-Work* - Now - Mar 2/97  
*The Power of Images: Atilla Richard Lukacs* - Jan 28 & Feb 4/97
- UNB Art Centre presents *Common Ground* (clay works by Craig Schneider) and *Tempting Fate* (paintings by Phillip Iverson) at Memorial Hall. Now - Feb 23/97. FREE. 453-4623.
- Gallery Connexion presents *Sepe* by Beaty Popescu and Shawn O'Hagan. Jan 17 - Feb 28/97. 454-1433.
- Capital Film Society presents *Hard Core Logo* at Tilley Hall 102. Jan 27, 8 pm. \$3 members, \$5 non-members.
- CHSR presents *Alien* at MacLaggan Hall. Jan 28/97. \$4.
- Theatre UNB presents Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit* at Memorial Hall. Jan 28, 30 & Feb 1. Also, Martinez Sierra's *Kingdom of God*. Jan 29, 30 & Feb 2/97. \$4 students, \$5 all others.
- New Brunswick Museum presents *Jewels of France* at Market Square in Saint John. Now - Apr 30/97. (506) 643-2300.
- Shed, 8 Months, Connexion Fit & several other bands at St. Charles's Hall. Jan 24/97. 7 pm. \$5 at the door. ALL AGES.
- UNB Art Centre presents *Showcase '97 UNB/STU Talent*. Feb 27 - Mar 30. Deadline for entry: Feb 7. 453-4623.