

# No travesty here

Theatre review by Beno John

With a little help from Tom Stoppard, Kiernan O'Malley and his cast have pulled off another fine Walterdale production. Stoppard's challenging but provocative *Travesties* is an excellent selection; in O'Malley's adept hands it is realized on stage with a professional finesse that much of the so-called professional theatre in this city could emulate.

*Travesties* is an excellent example of Stoppard's unique and fresh approach to theater. Stoppard exploits the odd historical coincidence which brought Lenin, James Joyce and Tristan Tzara (one of the original proponents of the Dada movement) to Zurich in 1917. The historicity of the play is limited only to the time and setting; Stoppard's Lenin, Joyce and Tzara meet only in the unreliable memory of the central character, one Henry Carr, who served as a minor official for the British consul in Zurich at the same time.

Carr, historically a minor figure, has the somewhat dubious distinction of having taken James Joyce to court (and vice-versa in a counter suit promptly filed by Joyce) over financial irregularities involving an amateur production of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a play Joyce produced and in which Carr acted. Carr, who invested his own money on the wardrobe for his role as Algernon, resented Joyce's persistent demands for a marginal sum of money Carr had failed to return to Joyce after selling a few tickets.

Not surprisingly, it is this incident which dominates Carr's reminiscences of life in Zurich; Stoppard, in his usual tongue-in-cheek fashion, gives Carr the last word on this petty affair which won Carr a place in Joyce's *Ulysses* as a loutish soldier in an act of literary revenge which matches Dante, who condemned his personal enemies to the various levels of hell in the *Inferno*.

Carr's failing and distinctly prejudiced memory is where Lenin, Joyce and Tzara collide, representing the distinct historical movements that each personality initiated. The effect is hilarious as all three belong to categories which are mutually exclusive. Joyce's deliberate, intellectual and traditional approach to his craft is anathema to Tzara's Dadaist conviction to destroy all conventions which "are emptied of all human substance." Similarly Joyce sees in Tzara the breakdown of art to the vulgar; where talent is replaced by exhibitionism. For Lenin, Joyce and Tzara are bourgeois artists who represent the worst aspects of a culture at war with the proletariat.

Carr's nearly senile memory becomes Stoppard's medium for conducting a rambling discussion on the function of art in politics, the function of politics in art and the futility of the words — amply demonstrated by Carr's splutterings — which describe and define the ever-elusive aspects of art and politics.

Joyce wanders in and out of Carr's recollections as a magician; punning and rhyming his way through the world. Joyce is a crafty master of illusion, but his craft is, at the same time, ephemeral and poignantly insignificant to the ugly rumblings of the world war which is continually raging in the background of Carr's

narratives. Tzara, the anti-magician, chops up Shakespeare sonnets and pulls them out of a hat to create the new order, which is random and arbitrary.

Lenin, stuck in his Zurich library, is strangely ambivalent about his new order; the freedom he advocates is simply another word, another hat trick which is remembered by Carr for its paradoxical views towards art. Every argument becomes reduced to the fashionable cant of Zurich's cafes. Meanwhile, the war takes its millions in the mud and trenches of Europe and in front of the Czar's palaces.

O'Malley's treatment of this play is sensitive to the many, subtle levels of irony integral to it. For the most part he elicits finely-balanced characterizations from his players. Peter McNab's portrayal of the old and young Carr is fascinating; McNab straddles the wide range between a fashionable young Englishman in the Zurich of 1917 and the near senility of the old Carr looking at a world which has left him behind.

Bob McRae's Joyce is well realized; the elfish Irish magic of the master illusionist is exploited with charm, grace and a bouncy gait. Phil Zyp's rendition of Tzara is forceful. The Dadaist sense of despair, anger and absurdity with a world gone mad is explicitly understood by McRae. Unfortunately, Lenin is overplayed by Barrie Fenton. Fenton's Russian accent is exaggerated to the point of caricature; he destroys the fine balance achieved by the other actors who portrayed Joyce and Tzara. For this reason much of the irony contained in Stoppard's realization of Lenin is lost.

The female roles in this play — as in historical fact — are subservient to the men they serve and admire. Terri Flanagan, who plays Gwendolyn Carr (Carr's sister), portrays Tzara's lover with extreme sensitivity. Similarly, Phyllis Lennox plays Lenin's wife with the self-consciousness of the individual who is close to a character thrust into a historically significant role. Lennon is always consciously in the background, explaining some of the more paradoxical qualities of her husband with a touching humanity.

Orla Golden, playing Cecily (Carr's eventual wife), had some difficulty with her large blocks of dialogue, but brought a fine understanding of her role as a woman passionately dedicated to Lenin's work before he was thrust into his historical role. Golden also does the can-can quite well.

Essential to Stoppard's work is the sense of play, and how it realized at the level of words. Like Tzara's hat tricks and Joyce's word games, Stoppard's language demonstrates a belief in the ability of words to create new worlds which infuse the old, institutionalized vocabularies of politics and art with a new vigour. In a world that has made Lenin an impenetrable enigma, Dadaism a quaint, esoteric historical movement relegated to the field of academia, and Joyce into a literary religion, Stoppard's work restores some of the original freshness to the historical period which spawned these three distinct movements. In Walterdale's production, this freshness and originality is realized with a rare sense of fun and spontaneity.

# Heller's still good as gold

Book review by Greg Harris

What's so funny about life in the twentieth century? What is so humorous about living in a society that condones ineptitude while passively witnessing its own destruction?

Joseph Heller tells us in his latest novel, *Good as Gold*, that everything about our contemporary culture is funny — funny on the surface, but frightening as hell underneath. The author of *Catch 22* focuses primarily on two components of society: family, and government. He has produced an excellently crafted work of cynicism and wit that is capable of eliciting both laughter and revulsion in a single sentence.

Bruce Gold, the hero of the story, is a middle-aged Professor of English who writes intellectual articles that are occasionally published in high-brow literary magazines. He is the unwilling member of a large Jewish family that is fond of getting together for dinner parties, most of which turn into heated feuds. It seems that everyone in the family is against him: his brother starts ridiculous arguments that Gold can't possibly win without appearing pompous, his senile stepmother is convinced that he is a babbling moron, and his father thinks he is a failure, a schlemiel. They all admire his success as a free-lance writer, but vehemently disagree with his published material, even though they don't bother to read it.

Gold's sanity is put to a further test when he is offered a job in government. The President, having seen a few of his articles, is particularly admiring of his ability at phrase-making — he decides that Gold belongs in the Administration. A middleman contacts Gold and tells him that it is "practically guaranteed" that he can become the head of the C.I.A., or F.B.I., or Secretary of State, "although it's not for sure."

Gold's protests of inexperience are waived off: "In government, Bruce, experience doesn't count and knowledge isn't important. It's fun, Bruce. There are lots of parties and you get lots of girls. Even actresses." Gold is eager to move to Washington.

But he soon discovers that "nothing succeeds as planned", and that "every change is for the worse". At the end of the story Gold reflects on his recent experiences and comes to a conclusion: "No society worth its salt would watch itself perishing without some serious attempt to avert its own destruction. Therefore, Gold concluded, we are not a society. Or we are not worth our salt. Or both."

Although Heller spends most of his time mocking familial relationships and government incompetence, he still manages to cuttlingly expose several other idiocies of life: racism, marriage, sex, success, principles, and truth, to name but a few. The basic message that he seems to be continually hammering away at, is that we have deified stupidity while growing dangerously complacent in our attitudes — we are a slothful culture that settles for mediocrity while constantly searching for the easy way out. Our society is dying.

Perhaps the most striking feature about *Good as Gold* is the cast of characters. Although most of them are outrageous eccentrics, they never cease to be believable; in spite of their quirks and personality defects, Heller makes it plain that they are human, indeed only human.

Whether you read *Good as Gold* as social comment, or simply as a riotously hilarious novel, or both, you won't be disappointed. It is a virtuoso performance from an accomplished artist who will not soon be forgotten.

# Thursday Thursday

## RADIO

### CJSR

#### Rendezvous

Mar. 13, 9:10, The Faces live in London.  
Mar. 20, The Motels live at the El Mocambo and a retrospective look at Emerson Lake and Palmer.

#### Golden Bear Hockey

CJSR presents live coverage of the Canadian National Hockey finals in Regina as the Bears try to make the most of their wild card spot.

Mar. 13, 4 pm, Bears vs. Calgary.  
Mar. 14, 5 pm, Bears vs. Concordia.  
Mar. 16, 1 pm, possible final.

#### Probe

Mar. 16, 4 pm, a look at scientology.

## GALLERIES

### SU Art Gallery

Mar. 13 - 15. The gallery is sponsoring the sale of a major art collection that includes primitive New Guinea carvings, 18th and 19th century watercolors and etchings and engravings that are as old as 400 years.

## THEATER

### Walterdale Theatre

Until Mar. 22. *Travesties* by Tom Stoppard. Tickets are \$3.50 Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and \$4 Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Available at all BASS outlets.

### Theatre 3, 10426 - 95 St.

Until Mar. 29. Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations*. Tickets are available at the Theatre 3 ticket office.

### Northern Light Theatre, 112 St. 82 Ave., 429-3110

Mar. 18 - April 13, evening performances at 8 pm.

Northern Light Theatre presents Ben Tarver's *The Murder of Auguste Dupin*, in co-operation with the University of Alberta Department of Drama: a slender haunted youth; a French coquette; a six-foot-tall butler; all are under suspicion as Edgar Allan Poe's Gallic detective tracks his own assassin through an elegant theatrical house. Tickets available at HUB and Northern Light Theatre Box Office.

## CINEMA

### SUB Theatre

Mar. 13 - 14, 7 and 9:30 pm., a Lina Wertmuller double bill, *Swept Away* and *Seven Beauties*. Times reversed for Friday's double bill.

Mar. 15, *Shampoo* with Warren Beatty, Julie Christie, and Goldie Hawn.

Mar. 16, *ABBA*, a film from 1977.

Mar. 19, Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*.

### Tory Lecture Theatre, Centennial Library Theatre

Mar. 17, 8 pm. The Edmonton Film Society presents *Shall We Dance*, a Fred Astaire - Ginger Rogers musical. Admission: \$3.

### Edmonton Public Library

Mar. 18, 7 pm. The EPL is showing the third movie in a "German Film" series. *Urlaub Zur Beerdigung/Holiday For the Funeral (1978)* is the story of Jurgen, a prisoner who attends his mother's funeral while on a day leave. A confrontation with his relatives proves unbearable and Jurgen flees "home" to prison. Admission: free. This film is in English.

Mar. 15 and 16, 2 pm. *Paint Your Wagon*, a musical from 1969 starring Lee Marvin and Clint Eastwood. The second in the "You Asked For It" film series. Admission: free.

## MUSIC

### SUB Theatre

Mar. 18, The British new wave group 999 is in town for one night only. Tickets are \$8.50 in advance and are available at Mike's Tickets and HUB.

### Espace Tournesol, 11845 - 77 St., 471-5235

Mar. 14-15, 8:30 pm, jazz with the Bill Jamieson Quartet featuring Bill Jamieson, brass; Bob Meyers, percussion; Bob Tildesley, reeds; and James Young, bass. Tickets are \$3.50.

### Dinwoodie

Mar. 15, 8 pm. The Students' Union and the Social Welfare students are co-sponsoring a cabaret featuring The Models. Tickets, if available, are \$3.50 at the door.

### Convocation Hall

Mar. 14, 8 pm. The Department of Music presents Catherine Vickers, pianist and winner of the 1979 Busoni Competition (visiting Artists Series).

Mar. 16, 3 pm. Michael Massey conducts the Edmonton Youth Orchestra through the music of Berloiz, Mozart, Tchaikovsky and Hindemith. Tickets are \$2 for adults and \$1 for students and seniors.

## DANCE

### SUB Theatre

Mar. 20 - 22, 8 pm. The Brian Webb Dance Company will celebrate its first anniversary with a program of dance premieres and works from the company's repertoire choreographed by founder and Artistic Director, Brian Webb. Tickets are available at Mike's, HUB and at the door. Admission \$6, students \$4.