

arts

Sound poet from France stops at York to display his bodily parts

By SHEILA HIRD

French performance artist Jean-Paul Curtay made a special stop at McLaughlin College while visiting Toronto last week to perform his *Territorial Body Music*.

Curtay performed five pieces using a limited number of words, relying on his teeth, tongue, lips, nose, hands, and the microphone to create sounds. He also made use of taped sounds and slides.

Curtay began working on this unique and undefinable art form while studying medicine in France. He became interested in the musical capacities of the human body as an alternate form of expression to free communication from the fetter of words.

The first piece was a short, extemporized work that prepared the audience for Curtay's technique and language. The rate of breathing conveyed various emotions, the tone of

grunts for the degree of puzzlement and wonder, and the length of moans for the depth of despair.

After this initiation, a piece called "Biorhythm" explored childbirth. The mother's heartbeat, in harmony with the humming of an inchoate life, was heard above the watery womb-like background sounds. Overwhelming feelings of amazement and joy usurped an attempt to speak. Finally, in drawn-out fashion, Curtay uttered the words mother, mouth, and me to intimate that both a mother and a mouth can give birth to new life.

In "From Head Through Sex," the highlight of his performance, Curtay discovered his body. He began by uttering the first sentence of the piece, "I feel my left foot." He then moved up his body, touching each part with his hand. He repeated the procedure claiming that each part was "heavy and slow like an elephant," then stripping slowly to reveal the

"offending" parts.

While Curtay ran around the room naked, imitating the movements of a swimmer, slides of heads, buttocks, breasts, and walls with messages such as "signs" and "jigsaw feeling" scrawled on them were shown. The screen blackened and Curtay danced around the room with a square piece of plexiglass. This bizarre piece ended with Curtay standing defiantly in front of the screen, boldly holding the plexiglass over his navel as the sound of dripping water died out in the background.

Although Curtay had to tell the audience when his five-part performance was over, he received a hearty applause. Curtay has been successful in developing a revolutionary method to express himself; he now needs to develop a revolutionary message.



Jungle of Cities presents mixed metaphors for a mixed up world.

Brecht's best is Sprung

By JASON SHERMAN

The Toronto Free Theatre's Guy Sprung has been getting a fair bit of press lately. Bertolt Brecht has been getting a great deal of production lately. A recent forum sponsored by the Ontario Goethe Society for which Sprung served as a panel member, asked the question "How effective is Brecht today on stage?" Sprung's production of the playwright's early *Jungle of Cities* running at the theatre Downstairs, until December 18 indicates that with the right amount of understanding and talent, Brecht can be very effective.

Sprung explained his interpretation of *Jungle*. "It's a fairly poetic analysis of human motivations. It tries to—almost as a devil's advocate—attack human beings and their systems of values and why they get up in the morning. It is totally nihilistic about this."

From the program to the end of the show the audience is shown a boxing match between Shlink, a Chinese lumber dealer, and Garga, a young man Shlink first encounters in a lending library when he tries to buy Garga's opinion. Satisfied during this first bout that Garga is "a fighter", Shlink hands over control of his business to Garga to see if Garga is strong enough to make use of this as a weapon. From here on in, everything that surrounds the two men becomes their boxing gloves.

In what is a sort of recognition scene, the two realize that the only way to see one's own humanity is through fighting. "We're companions," says Shlink, "comrades in a metaphysical action." It is easy to see the seed here for such later Brecht as *The Good Person of Szechwan*, where good must of necessity be coupled with evil to achieve anything positive.

To say the production is flawless would be to indicate a favorable bias toward Sprung and the Free Theatre which has redeemed itself after the dreadfully unprepared *Booster McCrane*. The five-tiered set is utilized to its full advantage, each level vying for audience attention. It is a three-ring circus. The main stage area is a square riser—the boxing ring. Although the circus and boxing metaphors are mixed, they work successfully, complimenting each other.

The circus qualities are brought out by the costumes. The first characters on stage wear loose-fitting black and white creations that suggest the battle of two forces—a battle which indeed appears black and white in the first scene. Good Garga against bad Shlink. But when Garga starts boxing, we are introduced to characters with red in their outfits, because the match isn't as black and white as it had seemed. The lighting ranges from an unobtrusive

white to a lurid green (during the scene changes). One scene that is particularly vivid takes place in the Chinese Hotel, with smoke rising from the floorboards, characters suspended from the roof, and dark lighting, all reminiscent of a scene out of *Blade Runner*. The music is suitably subtle, giving an ironic punch to various lines, or setting whole scenes, like the Hotel.

Sprung has done nothing less than a brilliant job directing the large cast. Never is there a moment when a character seems out of place on stage, never is an opportunity missed to cash in on the central theme. The pacing is consistent and complimentary to the text, flowing along slowly like the poetic prose.

An added irony that Sprung and his cast face is the futility of this struggle, futile because both men have been created: their wills are predetermined. The characters are thus suitably absurd. Depending upon your point of reference, they have been made up to look like either puppets in a surrealist nightmare or refugees from an episode of *Batman*. Sprung pulls the strings perfectly, allowing Richard Donat's properly overplayed work to strut about the stage, or Michael Simpson's Maynes to cower quietly in a corner of the stage.

Lubomir Mykytiuk, as Shlink, should be commended for not making his character a caricature. There are flat and round characters in this play and Shlink is a round one. Mykytiuk is so restrained that Shlink's evil is at once hidden from view and evident as the motivating force of his character. Less successful is Paul Gross as Garga. He doesn't handle his constant outbursts well and, in fact, overplays them. Garga is a young man letting loose his hatred on the world. He has no focus. Because of this Gross overcompensates. His character becomes borderline two-dimensional.

Jungle of Cities is a terrific theatrical experience. It comes straight at you, assaulting your senses in the same way the characters assault each other. Sprung has even opted for scene-setting songs rather than the traditional placards—everything has been utilized to the fullest.

It seems curious however, that the Free Theatre should be producing a Brecht play when their tacit mandate is to present new Canadian scripts. But Brecht's play has a message for today's audience. It is, simply stated, the story of two opposed forces working in perfect unison struggling to destroy the other and everything around them. One need not look much past the first page of any newspaper today to find a parallel. The question the play seems to ask is: need it be so?

The wormwood in Silkwood

Nuclear activist's life reduced to dull love story

By ROMAN PAWLYSHYN

The story of Karen Silkwood is one of the investigative stories of the 1970s, perhaps second only to Watergate. Silkwood was a petite, tenacious young woman with an interest in science who worked in a plutonium processing plant near Oklahoma City. Disturbed by appalling safety conditions at the plant, Silkwood became an activist. She got involved in union organization and fought for safer working conditions.

She didn't know what she was up against. She was fighting a corporation with billions of dollars in assets—the Kerr McGee corporation, a corporation that rides high on *Fortune's* list of the biggest U.S. corporations. She was fighting co-workers who weren't told by their employer that plutonium causes cancer who assumed that since you couldn't see or feel radiation there was nothing wrong with it, and who were happy just to have a job in a part of the country where jobs weren't so easy to come by. And most of all, Silkwood was fighting the status quo of the U.S. atomic energy industry. She lost.

She was deliberately contaminated with an alarming dose of plutonium. Kerr-McGee hinted that she did it herself to discredit the company. She decided she'd try to embarrass the Kerr-McGee corporation by slipping samples of falsified quality control documents to the *New York Times*. In November 1974, while driving down a back road to meet a *Times* reporter, Silkwood's car went off the road and hit a concrete culvert. Her death was hastily pronounced an accident, despite mysterious circumstances that went uninvestigated at first. The file folder she was carrying was never recovered.

The story mushroomed from there. The



Meryl Streep & Cher in *Silkwood*

Silkwood estate eventually took Kerr-McGee to a three-month trial in 1979 and won. The case set many precedents, and the jury awarded the Silkwood estate \$505,000 and assessed a punishment against the corporation of \$10 million (although the amounts were later reduced).

In the *Silkwood* story, there is enough natural mystery, conspiracy, lying, wire tapping, assassination, FBI complicity, union busting, and high courtroom drama to make any filmmaker drool. It's doubly ironic, then, that the makers of *Silkwood*, the movie (which opens December 14) have chosen to ignore most of this and instead focus on a fictionalized account of Karen Silkwood's personal life. *Silkwood* is more than two hours long, and two-thirds of it seems to take place in Silkwood's bedroom; watching the film, you'd think that Silkwood's significance was that she was a tragic romance figure who just happened to work with plutonium. With its typical aplomb—that is to say, all the aplomb of an obese ballerina—Hollywood has botched the job again.

The film would seem, at first glance, to be promising. The director is screen and stage veteran Mike Nichols (*The Graduate*, *Catch-22*), Meryl Streep plays *Silkwood* and Cher plays her roommate Dolly, the screenplay was co-written by journalist Nora Ephron, and the film's executive producers are two men who compiled such a file of information on the Silkwood affair that they were subpoenaed to appear in the court case. Where did all this talent go wrong?

The first mistake the filmmakers made was to end the *Silkwood* story with her death. In fact, in the *real* version of the story, Karen Silkwood played an almost secondary role. She had no idea about all the juicy details that would be unearthed after her death; *Silkwood* served more as an instigator. And to portray *Silkwood's* story as climaxing with her death, as *Silkwood* does, is like saying the Watergate affair ended with Nixon's reelection. Admittedly, to tell the real Karen Silkwood story would be to create a film of epic proportions, but why bother making a failure of epic proportions instead—one that verges on the irrelevant?

Technically, the film is fine, as you might expect. The acting is excellent throughout (Meryl Streep can do an Oklahoma accent much more successfully than a Polish one), and so is the photography. There are some particularly moving shots early in the film of the Texas oil town where Silkwood's ex-husband and children live: there are oil tanks and smokestacks bellowing orange everywhere, and the feeling of industrial desolation hits you like something out of Antonioni's *Red Desert*.

The script takes many unnecessary liberties with reality. Her boyfriend Drew (Kurt Russell) played a considerably smaller role in Karen Silkwood's life than the movie would have us believe, and Dolly is almost pure creation. Also, *Silkwood* makes the Kerr-McGee plutonium plant seem a good deal better run than it actually was. There's a lot of potential drama in a dangerous nuclear facility that the filmmakers never bother to exploit.

And the film always comes back to the love plot. The energy in *Silkwood* is continually dissipated: a tense two-minute scene between union negotiators and Kerr-McGee is followed by a 10-minute romance scene. It happens again and again, and the romance scenes are dull, dull, dull. It's beyond me why Nichols and crew would turn the cause célèbre of the decade into a weepy melodrama.

Save your money and buy one of the excellent books on *Silkwood*: *Who Killed Karen Silkwood* by Howard Kohn (a writer whose articles in *Rolling Stone* helped break the *Silkwood* story), or *The Killing of Karen Silkwood*, by Richard Rashke. And wait until someone makes a documentary.