



Photo Mark Seemann

Raunchy Restoration comedy made bland

Country Wife lacks life

The Country Wife
Walterdale Theatre
Runs 'til October 10

review by Raymond Ryan

William Wycherley is very lucky he is dead for, if he wasn't, after seeing Walterdale Theatre's rendition of *The Country Wife* he would be. And it would be a painful death. Slow and painful. Admittedly, this excellent restoration comedy is not an easy piece, particularly for an amateur cast. But adapted into a sort of pseudo-opera cum melodrama, it is impossible for the inexperienced actors to sustain.

The play concerns Horner, a libertine who feigns impotence in order to convince everybody he is no longer a threat to the women's virtue. The play wittily satirizes the hypocrisy of so-called virtuous women, such as Lady Fidget who claims no interest in Horner but is only too willing to participate in his seduction. Horner elegantly battles with a whole entourage of characters from Sparkish, a faggy fop, to Pinchwife, an angry, overprotective husband whose wife is a naive young country woman and the target of the lustful Horner.

In the hands of director John Madill, however, all the steamy and often licentious scenes are quite bland and lacking in the essential crotch-centeredness of the Restoration Comedy. With the unnecessary intrusion of grafted-on musical bits that don't

really fit into any period the production waffles between various styles and nonstyles. Sometimes the music, created by an anemic electronic harpsicord, sounds like it might be the music of the late seventeenth century, other times it sounds distinctly like a cheesy Broadway musical, and other times like it may be a parody of an opera. One is just never sure and, unfortunately, the cast is not strong enough, vocally, to pull any of it off. Save Michael Handcock, as Pinchwife, who manages to strike fear into the audience's heart as he sustains an evil note while squishing an orange, bathing the first row with the juice.

The energy and outward elegance of the Restoration period is also washed away in a sea of vagueness. Robin Bouey, playing the horny Horner, is miscast as the libertine as one never believes that he is not a eunuch, a fact which is not only central to the play but is its foundation.

Fortunately a few kudos deserve to be handed out to a number of the cast. An "A" for effort to Allan Grant and Peter Adamski for their work as Dorilant and Harcourt. Debbie Stephen as Lady Fidget is tolerable to listen to and nice to look at. And congratulations to Michael Handcock for breaking away from the rest of the cast and actually creating a character. Overall, however, the most interesting and enjoyable action on the stage are the little pageboys who change the

Madill tackles restoration comedy

interview by Elaine Ostry

"The Walterdale Theatre is small," says John Madill, director of the theatre's latest production, *The Country Wife* by Wycherley. "But the actors are lifesize; the production hits an immediacy that TV and motion pictures don't get. There's the feeling in the audience of 'I can do that'."

The Walterdale Theatre supports amateur theatre, a form which is difficult to produce. "Doing an amateur show is, to my mind, ten times harder than a professional play," comments Madill. For instance, *The Country Wife* has had several changes in the cast which causes "personal and visceral problems" for the other actors and the director. "An actor is always going to bring his own persona — his own strengths and weaknesses — to the role and the whole show is going to change." Madill even had to cast his own son as a doorman at the last moment. "It's not romance, the theatre — it's panic," states Madill.

However, these hassles have not lessened Madill's enthusiasm. He describes *The Country Wife* as "a study of hypocrisy and social manipulation," which suits the times in which this restoration comedy was written. "An extremely chauvinistic attitude pervades the play," says Madill, "but if we cut particular lines, we would lose the grittiness of the play." Madill claims that these restoration characters "are people you meet on the street every day."

A modern audience may feel intimidated by the language in a restoration play, but Madill claims that the language of *The Country Wife* is "fairly direct." "It is a fairly crude play in a lot of ways," says Madill. There is, however, a redundancy in its language "to accommodate for an audience that was coming and going." And the play is long — three hours — despite some cuts.

To relieve the audience of these characteristics, Madill has added twenty-four short musical numbers. These include solos, duets and mock-opera verses. Janice Flower composed these tunes, integrating four songs from *The Beggar's Opera* into the play.

Madill concentrates on stage design rather than on directing. He has a BFA in theatre design from the University of Alberta. He has taught set design and stagecraft at the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and the University of Saskatchewan.

Madill is presently teaching design in Grant MacEwan's Theatre production pro-

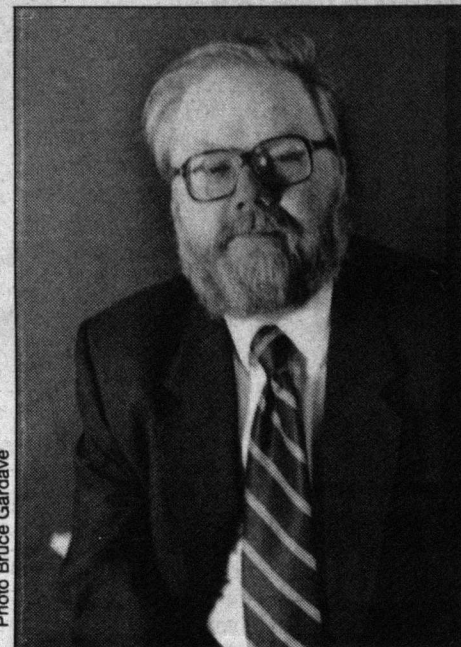


Photo Bruce Gardave

John Madill

gram. He has taught with the program since its inception nine years ago. This program trains people for technical positions in the theatre.

This technical background has certainly influenced Madill's treatment of the play. "I prefer historical plays," says Madill, "but every show's a period show. Characters must always be specific to a particular area." But a period play is more interesting in matters of stage design "than yet another play set in a New York apartment."

Madill has taken care to produce *The Country Wife* as closely as possible to how it would have been originally presented. He is pleased with the size of the Walterdale, which is "not much smaller than the original Drury Lane Theatre," where *The Country Wife* debuted. The "modified thrust" stage of the Walterdale, Madill claims, is useful to provide greater interaction between the actors and the audience. The audience's seating area is actually lit, as it was in Restoration times. "The charm of *The Country Wife*," claims Madill, "is going to lie in visual detailing." This includes the costumes. Madill thanks the U of A drama department for lending costumes to the production. To Madill's surprise, some of these costumes were ones he had designed as a student when he helped with the Studio Theatre production of *A Country Wife*.

Harpist O'Hara sings

interview by Rod Campbell and Tracy Rowan

"I'm a singer first and foremost," explains Mary O'Hara from her hotel room in Halifax. It appears that O'Hara is alarmed with her current tour posters, which proclaim her virtuoso on the harp, while neglecting to mention her singing abilities.

Born in Sligo on the west coast of Ireland, O'Hara was educated at a boarding school near Dublin, where she received formal training in music. "The harp was put in the hand so to speak in my final year at school," she says.

By the age of twenty, O'Hara was appearing frequently on national television and touring regularly throughout Britain. "It wasn't as though I had a mapped out career, it just happened," she says.

O'Hara married the American poet Richard Selig in the early sixties. Tragically, Selig died after just fifteen months of marriage. While she continued to perform in the U.K., and record albums for four years, she ultimately left the music scene to enter a strict Benedictine monastery. She lived there for twelve and a half years.

Although she was initially reluctant, it was not hard for O'Hara to get back into playing music. "Songs never leave the mind," she says. "Once out I had to earn the bread and butter again, and since I had been a successful professional singer beforehand, everyone said I would be silly not to try it again. Thank God it worked." Her comeback concert was held before a full house at London's Royal

Festival Hall in November 1977.

To date, O'Hara has recorded twenty-one albums, two of which have gone platinum. However, all the material is either traditional or written by someone else. "I have written music, so far I have not produced any words. The gift doesn't seem to be there," she says with a laugh.

O'Hara is fluent in Irish gaelic and admires the work of traditional musicians, but she has her own approach to arranging music. "I try not to be influenced by somebody else. I try to get hold of sheet music so that I will learn it for myself, and arrive at my own interpretation."

Although Mary O'Hara's name is most often associated with traditional gaelic folk music, her current Canadian tour also features contemporary songs by such artists as Gordon Lightfoot and Simon and Garfunkel.

Apart from a busy performing and recording schedule, O'Hara is the author of three books. Her popular autobiography *The Scent of Roses* is in its fifteenth reprint, and has sold 201,000 copies. Recently remarried to a Canadian citizen, O'Hara splits her time among homes in England, Dublin and Spain when not touring.

O'Hara will be performing at the SUB theatre. The original concert date of Thursday October 8th has been moved to October 9th. Tickets purchased for the October 8th date will be honoured at the door, or they may also be exchanged at the Students' Union office.



"Songs never leave the mind," says Irish harpist and singer Mary O'Hara.