

The "poetic truth" of Artaud

By PAULETTE PEIROL

Is there lucidity in madness? This question has tempted and tormented playwrights since the inception of theatre itself. Joan of Arc, Le Marquis de Sade, Mozart, and Antonin Artaud, to name a few, have all been resurrected on stage to explore this issue.

Not surprisingly, we inevitably give the mad person the benefit of the doubt—sometimes out of sheer sympathy rather than understanding. Lucidity in madness has become more of an assumption than a query (especially after the person in question is safely dead). The danger of this is that all too often the mad person is idolatized.

Charles Marowitz is one playwright who deals with this social heroism in madness head on. His play, *Artaud at Rodez*, scrutinizes not only the tortured consciousness of theorist, actor, playwright, poet and artist Antonin Artaud but also that of Artaud's psychiatrist, Dr. Gaston Ferdiere. Marowitz writes: "Here was a man of genius under the strict control of a man of science who, as it happened, was also a would-be poet and essayist . . . two very distinct (and opposed) world-views came into dynamic collision in this encounter . . ." Yet in *Artaud at Rodez*, "it is 'poetic' rather than 'literal' truth which is being sought."

Theatre Glendon's production of *Artaud at Rodez* last week took full advantage of the poetic license inherent in the text. It was more emotionally provocative than didactic or propagandistic, and this worked in the production's favor. Artaud has become a 'hot topic' since the 1950s (just after his death), and the last thing needed is another sensationalistic account of his life.

Artaud at Rodez illustrates the salient periods of Artaud's life: born in 1896 in Marseilles, France, his mother died when he was 18 years old and he was sent to a sanatorium, already estranged from his society. The play follows his meeting with publisher and confidant Jacques Riviere, his Surrealist associations and the later severance from them,



In last week's Glendon production of *Artaud at Rodez*, actor Veljko Pajovic, playing Artaud, didn't look quite like this. But he did evoke an equally turbulent range of emotions. Woodcut above by Jasna Stefanovic.

his dramatic performances, his visit to Ireland and subsequent deportation in a straightjacket, and finally, his three year stay (1943-46) at the asylum of Rodez.

Yet the play is structured as a collage rather than in chronological order, using both flashbacks and flashforwards throughout. Although the Glendon production lasted for over two hours, it was quick paced with exceptionally smooth transitions from each short scene to the next. Director Robert Wallace, a Glendon theatre professor and co-ordinator of the Etudes dramatiques/Drama Studies programme, used an 'open concept' set with translucent flats (scrim) instead of curtains to provide continuity.

Scrim is such that when illuminated from in front, it is opaque, and when illuminated from behind, it produces silhouetted shadows of the

actors and objects behind it. *Artaud at Rodez* opens with Dr. Ferdiere (Rene Lapalme) introducing Artaud while slides of Artaud flash centre stage, and is quickly followed by a powerful scene showing Artaud's electroshock treatment in shadow behind a screen. Hence the play not only begins in 'media res,' but also in the midst of the protagonist's madness.

Scene by scene, we are introduced to the people who influenced Artaud's life. This encompasses a wide variety of characters, from medical personnel to fellow artists and writers (Jacques Riviere, Louis Jouvet, and Van Gogh), to reporters, henchmen, and even Artaud's muse. *Artaud at Rodez* lists a cast of 26 characters; the Glendon production used 12 actors to portray them all.

Needless to say, this doubling, tri-

pling, and even quadrupling of roles is problematic. Actors playing more than one role must exaggerate their various characters in order not to confuse them. And indeed, many of the minor characters were performed almost as caricatures. This was effective, especially since these characters are often used as a surrogate chorus or as a comic relief. The costumes, however, (by Patricia Hajdu, Lise Hawkins, and Cathy Bussey), were not differentiated enough for each character, and it was often difficult to tell who was who (or what) unless an actual name was spoken.

Any play, and especially a non-professional one, is dependent on the group effort of its participants. However, in this production, actors Veljko Pajkovic (playing Artaud) and Rene Lapalme (Dr. Ferdiere) were outstanding, making the Glen-



don show exceptional, rather than merely good. Quite simply, these two students made all the difference with their intensity of concentration and attention to both broad and minute aspects of characterization. Pajkovic, in particular, was utterly convincing, allowing his actions to speak at least as loud as Artaud's prolific words. Even the movements of his bare feet, often curling and clutching the floor in anguish, did not go unnoticed.

This was due, in part, to the lighting design of Randy Thomas, assisted by Antoinette Alaimo and Lynn Quan. Subtle color and changes in intensity signified mood changes, while sharper fade-outs and black-outs effectively delineated scenes from each other. Scene changes were accompanied sometimes by minimal prop adjustments, and always by movement of one or more of the four screens. For the most part, these transitions blended well with the action on stage. Only in one scene, that of Artaud with Rancinian actor Louis Jouvet (Charlot Royer), was constant shifting of the flats distracting.

The final act of *Artaud at Rodez* is as startling and arresting as its first (electroshock) one. The infirm and exhausted Artaud, just released from Rodez and suffering from rectal cancer, struggles to give one last performance at the Sara Bernhart Theatre. Yet instead of hearing the words of this genius, we listen to a long and painfully wrenching monologue of breathing, coughing, and spitting: his last testament to society before complete nervous breakdown. In a surreal scene, the audience helplessly watches Artaud being buried alive by his contemporaries, a single microphone laid to rest on his coffin as witness to the immortal voice.

Playwright Charles Marowitz writes of *Artaud at Rodez*, "There is nothing 'authoritative' about this interpretation of events. On the other hand, it is derived from authoritative sources." Likewise, the Glendon production last week was not strictly "professional," but was theatrically inspirational and polished nonetheless.

Philosophy prof M. Gilbert avoids arcane language in new thriller

By STEPHEN MILTON

Yellow Angel
by Michael Gilbert
Pocketbooks, New York
\$4.50, 276 pages

It would appear that students aren't the only ones who find themselves dreaming up fantastic adventures while being bombarded by dry academic fare. Professor Michael Gilbert of the Philosophy department obviously day dreams a fair bit himself, as proven by the release of his latest novel, *The Yellow Angel*, an adventure thriller.

Yellow Angel is Michael Gilbert's second novel, although it constitutes a departure from the style of his first work of fiction. In 1981, Gilbert published *The Office Party* which was chiefly a character study of a group of people who are taken hostage by a man with no demands. *Yellow Angel*, by contrast, is a more playful book of the thriller genre, complete with an evil genius who wants to take over the world by infecting everything except the Chinese with incurable diseases.

The novel's protagonists are an American woman and man who are, respectively, the president and vice president of the world's largest orbital mining corporation. The story

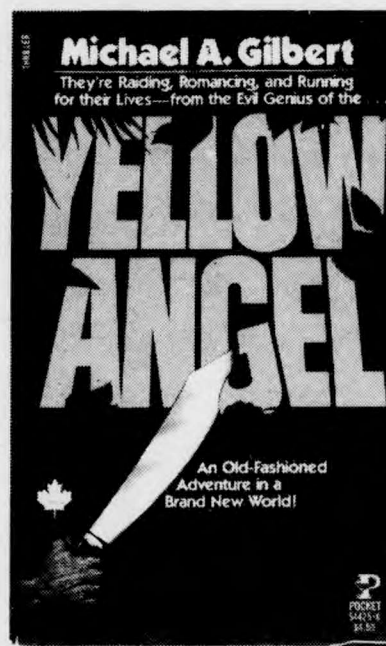
follows the adventures of the vice president, Carson, as he tries to discover why the mysterious Doctor Meng is monopolizing the world's supply of a seemingly worthless mineral produced by asteroid mining. In the course of Carson's search he is taken to such exotic locations as the depths of the African jungle, as well as the Muskokas.

In style and content, Gilbert's novel will appear familiar to anyone accustomed to paperback thrillers. *Yellow Angel* features the standard

"Then she undressed Carson, item by item, and put him into bed, following him after she had removed her remaining clothes, "Now you just relax and take it easy," she told him as she began to stroke his body. "I'm going to make sure that you experience the real Toronto."

array of evil henchmen and plots of world domination, as well as the valiant efforts of a hero to foil the evil-doer's plan. Gilbert acknowledges that *Yellow Angel* is operating within the constraints of a formula, although he insists that such a formula is as much an aspect of the reader's approach to the book as it is a feature of the book itself. "You can take an arbitrary bit of data and look at it and find a formula that maps onto it," states Gilbert, "but when I writing the book, I didn't have any particular formula in mind. I didn't know what was going to happen. At times I would have to spend days thinking about how to get them out of this jam. So to say that it is a formula is really just a way of saying that it is in a genre."

Nevertheless, Gilbert's novel shares many aspects of the thriller, although at times the book plays with the formula. Whereas in most thrillers the hero is reasonably successful at rescuing himself and others from danger, in *Yellow Angel*, the hero is rarely able to take care of anyone, including himself. He is almost killed in a vat of bean sprouts in Toronto's Chinatown, and is held captive by a vicious African tribe. In the latter case it is actually his arch enemy who rescues him, with the intention of killing him all over again.



Yes Folks...*Yellow Angel* is certainly "An Old-Fashioned Adventure."

Despite this departure from the canon of thriller novels, the novel's treatment of women is all too conventional. There are far more sexist thrillers around, and Gilbert is to be congratulated for presenting a heroine who is the president of the corporation which employs the protagonist. Unfortunately, this nod to feminism is compromised by the fact that of the four women characters who are developed in the novel, one is a nubile young chauffeur intent on bedding the hero, another is a pygmy woman ("with pointed breasts") who is used by the evil Dr. Meng as a guard dog, and the corporation president is found checking her nude

body out in a mirror, with the text elaborating on just how many inches off her chest her breasts are. When asked if this was sexist, Gilbert replied, "We live in a society where the emphasis is that way. I'm not writing a book that doesn't take place in this society. That's part of it. There's nothing wrong with a woman caring about how she looks; it would be totally out of character for Carson (the male hero), on the other hand, to care about how he looked."

Gilbert's academic career has not been subsumed by his fiction-writing pursuits as he released *How to Win an Argument* in 1979. Novel writing is a time-consuming activity, Gilbert says, but each novel's writing is spread out over a long period of time. In the case of *Yellow Angel*, "the book in its original conception was thought out in 1980 or 1979 with the actual writing of the book taking about two years, writing and rewriting it. *Yellow Angel* took something like 11 different drafts." The main difference between fiction writing and academic tomes is the style of the language that one uses, according to Gilbert. The author has to be careful not to use "arcane" language that would restrict the book's appeal to a small academic audience.

With *Yellow Angel* Gilbert has certainly addressed the largest possible audience, although perhaps to a fault. The book is a good quick read as thrillers go, yet it would have been nice if the author's insights into the world could have been integrated to check more of the excesses of the genre.