

Walter Kaasa, pioneer of Edmonton theatre.

Kaasa returns to stage

interview by Elaine Osty

"A phenomenal change" is how Walter Kaasa describes the growth of theatre in Edmonton. Kaasa has witnessed this development from the very beginning. In fact, he performed in one of the first plays in this city, as Wily Loman in *Death of a Salesman*.

Kaasa's experience, however, extends beyond acting. He worked his way through university by performing as a figure skater. After graduation, he taught for eight years.

During this time he worked in a one-room schoolhouse near Merrit, and as a drama teacher at Victoria Composite. In 1956, Kaasa became the co-ordinator of Cultural Activities in the provincial government. He retired twenty-seven years later as the Assistant Deputy Minister of Culture.

Aside from these contributions to culture, Kaasa performed in sixty plays for the university and the community at large. He has also performed on London's stages. The

list of Kaasa's past roles is impressive: it includes the roles of Hamlet, Beckett, Shylock, Galaban and Thomas Moore. His favourite role, he says, was Captain Edgar in Strindberg's *Dance of Death*. Another special role for him was Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. This play opened the Kaasa Theatre, the actor's namesake.

Five years ago, Kaasa retired from his government position and established the Kaasa Academy of Speech. This is the only such school in Edmonton. "Anyone who retires from a job he's been doing for a long time just can't quit," says Kaasa. "You have to have something to go to."

"Because of the teaching, though," Kaasa says, "I haven't been able to accept a role." His role as Harold in *Orphans*, therefore, marks his return to the professional stage after a four-year hiatus.

Kaasa admits that he is a little nervous about acting again. "There are fears, but you have to conquer them. You have to rely on your instincts."

Certainly the role of Harold is different from Kaasa's previous characters. Harold is the man who stumbles into the lives of two brothers and, as Kaasa says, "takes over." Kaasa describes Harold as "calmly menacing...but not outwardly so. He knows exactly what he's doing when, where and why." Harold manipulates people psychologically, in a "cold, calculating way." To depict this kind of role, Kaasa says, it is important to exercise much control in containing the intense emotions within the character.

According to Kaasa, *Orphans* is "a delightful script" featuring three characters "each so different from the other." It is a "play of violence taking different forms" in the characters.

"There seems to be a new license for playwrighting," comments Kaasa on modern drama. In these plays, "you can talk about

things you couldn't talk about before...there's a new language." For instance, *Orphans* contains a lot of profanity. "But you get used to it, as I know," he observes.

Kaasa is enthusiastic about the advent of experimental drama in this city. "The Fringe," he says, "is one of the most wonderful things of Edmonton." This summer he performed in the Fringe for the first time, as John A. Macdonald in *Ursa Major, Ursa Minor*. "I enjoyed it immensely," Kaasa says.

The Fringe festival gives artists the "opportunity to put the play they've written on the boards," comments Kaasa. "The best place to workshop a play is to perform it on the experimental stage. But theatres in the provincial vein can't afford to take the chance." During the Fringe run, Kaasa notes, improvements can be made and then the play has a better chance of being accepted by the major theatres.

Kaasa emphasizes that Edmontonians should support the theatre more during the regular season. "Art has to become an everyday institution in our lives," he states. "People should take art as a matter of course. We are a rich people. But if we are poor in the arts, we are poor indeed."

What advice would Kaasa give to a student of drama? He should work to develop "a high degree of skill in voice and speech." Kaasa says, "Your voice needs to be flexible to fit the needs you will face. You can never let these skills show." If you are a drama student, he states, you need "to acquire a habit of reading, a habit of investigating — and practice all your life."

Kaasa hopes to act in a play each year, and to experiment with different kinds of plays. He intends to keep on teaching. "I'll teach until I'm 100 years old if I can." He is confident that he can manage the two careers. Kaasa's philosophy is to have a positive outlook. "Thinking negatively," he says, "is admitting failure."

Orphans features interesting if unlikely plot

Orphans Citadel Rice Theatre til November 15

review by Mike Spindlow

In Lyle Kessler's award-winning drama *Orphans*, we join two orphaned brothers in their North Philadelphia slum flat, just as their unfortunate lives are about to be transformed through a fortuitous blunder made by the elder brother.

The two boys have been living alone for years in a relationship straight out of some Freudian treatise on deviancy. Treat, the older brother, roams the streets robbing and mugging to support them. He controls his younger brother Phillip by vague threats of outside dangers and real threats of physical violence. Phillip, who is supposedly illiterate, although he seems to be teaching himself

how to read on the sly. He spends most of his time hiding in a closet in abject terror of the imagined evils of the outside world. He also fears his brother, whose "care" has left Phillip essentially a young child mentally, although in age he is an adolescent.

Treat, then, brings home one older man one night whom he has met in a downtown bar. When he finds that the man's briefcase is loaded with securities, Treat decides to turn the escape into a kidnapping. But Harold, the old man, easily slips his bonds and by the time Treat returns from making ransom enquiries the next day, Harold has befriended Phillip. He decides to take the two boys on as his wards, or as he put it, employees. He transforms their shabby apartment into a luxury suite, improves the boys' steady diet of tuna and mayonnaise and begins teaching them social skills.

All the action of the play takes place in the

apartment in a broken series of scenes usually involving two of the play's three characters at a time. In such a setting, the individual performances become essential to the success of the play and in this case, while all three roles are carried off well, none stands out to transcend the rather unbelievable plot.

Local legend Walter Kaasa plays Harold as a world weary but compassionate character, belying his occupation as a slippery under-world trader. Harold grew up in an orphanage, has been unable to maintain a successful romantic relationship and is now on the lam from old friends in Chicago, but still shares his wisdom and love with the "dead end kids" now under his wing. He brings Phillip out of the closet and into the world with some new clothes and a map of the city, and adds some savvy to Treat's previously uncontrolled violent streak.

Treat and Phillip, played by Weston McMillan and Graham Bell respectively, occasionally seem somewhat overdone: Treat's constantly exaggerated threatening gestures and Phillip's moaning and moaning are over-telegraphed, but the message gets across despite these distractions. The two do contrast well: Treat, a swaggering, self-confident

punk versus Phillip, a cowed six-ten-year-old with the world-view of a six-year-old.

One of the play's funniest scenes, however, has the two boys stepping out of character to act out a scenario set up by Harold. Treat has committed a major gaffe by confronting a large black man on the bus that afternoon and Harold, wishing to teach him a better response to the situation, has Phillip act out the part of a black man refusing to let anyone share a bench seat on the bus, and Treat try to imagine his own correct response. The scene is hilarious, but illustrates as well one of the many underlying subtleties which give *Orphans* from itself. Phillip acts out the black man's part convincingly, suggesting that he has somehow learned a few things about human behaviour during his years spent staring out the windows of their apartment.

Orphans, despite its shortcomings, is entertaining. The main story, of course, is really about the redemption of the boys through love, in which Phillip has never lost hope, as symbolized by his refusal to discard his mother's shoe which he finds beneath the couch. Their redemption, with Harold as the catalyst, makes for a somewhat sappy, but powerful and satisfying ending.

Montanaro on dance

interview by Rosa Jackson

The title of the Montanaro Dance company's latest production, *The Theory of Everything*, may sound overly all-inclusive. But Michael Montanaro, founder and artistic director of the Montreal company, justifies this generalization on a number of different levels.

Firstly, there is the style of the company, which Montanaro refers to as "integrated media." He distinguishes this term from the more commonly used "multi-media", because he feels that this implies "the use of technology for technology's sake." His aim is to integrate dance, music, film and special effects in a way which humanizes the piece, rather than creating gimmicks.

"One of my favorite sayings is that if you can hear the dance and see the music, then it's perfect integration," Montanaro says. "I don't want to use technology unless it brings something to dance that I can't achieve live. It should be another element of life, part of the big picture, not a decoration."

In this sense, *The Theory of Everything* is intended to be a celebration of life... a

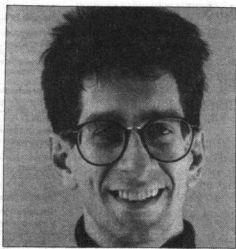
reflection of is going on in the world, and especially what is human," says Montanaro. "Our audiences range from people 85 years old to punk rockers, and when the show is over, they're all smiling."

Because of the wide range of people to which his work appeals, Montanaro hates to be "pigeonholed" by the press. "We're not like anything else, so they start to get confused and feel like they have to put a label on us — they come up with a different one every year," he says. "The problem is, we lose people that way."

"The general audience isn't confused," Montanaro points out. "I'm not esoteric, I don't need pseudo-intellectual meaning in my work. If a message is important, it shouldn't be hidden."

How does Montanaro go about creating this complex yet straightforward form of art? "I strongly believe that a piece takes on a life of its own," he says. "I come up with the original concept of the piece, and then I allow it to grow in the direction it wants to go. Everything evolves at the same time, and once it takes shape it is hard to separate the elements."

Montanaro feels that his work is "autobiographical in the sense that it lives. Even I'm



caught off guard." However, he stresses that it is the performers' role to "breathe life into my work."

"Any artist is not God," he says. "The performer has the last word... it takes a special person to relate what they're doing to the world." Montanaro appreciates the input which the other artists in the company provide. "I am not a dictator. I create very

much for the individuals I work with."

Montanaro founded the company two and a half years ago, out of the desire to form "an organization that could support a group of dancers who are artists." He was lucky in that he managed to pick the entire company of six female dancers in one day, from one dance studio in Montreal. "Some companies search for years," he laughs, adding that he has not had any regrets about his choice of dancers.

In fact, the original members are still with the company today, which must say something about their compatibility with Montanaro's ideals and with each other. Since its inception, a male dancer and a musician have also been added to the company, allowing for greater variety. And as if putting the shows together isn't enough work for Montanaro, he also performs in them himself.

Yet it is not surprising that Montanaro does not wish to give up his life as a performer, as he has been involved in dance and theatre since the age of three and a half years. "I am not afraid of myself," he says. His ambition for the future is to "create by touring and performing the perfect environment to evolve in as an artist."

The Theory of Everything plays at the John L. Haar Theatre on November 2nd and 3rd.