

arts

The theatre needs the people

Arts Editorial

by Alan Filewod

There's a curious singularity about Canadian culture; while we have in the past fought for and achieved responsible government, we tend to overlook the need for responsible art.

In 1837, patriots took to the streets because government was the property of an elitist minority. Today we take pride in their actions, and give thanks for their vision. Why is it, then, that we so happily cede our art to that same minority? Not only is our society intolerant of those radicals in the arts who agitate for the democratization of art, but it ridicules them.

There is a prevalent myth in Canada that our culture does belong to the public a myth encouraged by the extent of government funding and subsidy in the arts. The artists and politicians who embellish that myth are generally sincere; they believe that they are creating and developing a cultural apparatus in this country for the benefit of the general public. But in fact, that apparatus is unjust.

The existing funding systems exist for the encouragement of artists who tend to perceive their art in terms of their own careers, and rarely exploit opportunities to define their work in terms of their audience. And because most Canadian artists receive subsidy and because they can find work, those who argue that the present system is unjust, are discouraged. It's a problem of consciousness, and nowhere is that problem more evident than in Edmonton's new pride and joy, the 6.3 million dollar Citadel Theatre complex.

Injustice. Any industry (and there is no doubt that the Canadian theatre is an industry — just examine the roster of the board of directors of any regional theatre in the country) which invests 6.3 million dollars into a machine which produces an elitist and expensive commodity for the benefit of the few, is unjust.

You can step out of the new Citadel, benevolent with memories of Romeo and Juliet, emotions mollified after "masturbating with members of Actor's Equity," (as Cedric Smith once so lovingly put it), and turn the corner into a different world, peopled by cops and liquor store clerks, whores and drunks. The location of the new Citadel is a vicious irony, but a telling one, for as long as our theatre remains out of contact with the population of this city — especially in its immediate locale — it is elitist.

Seduced by the edifice complex, an ideology which sees the quality of theatre as a function of the size and grandeur of the architectural structure, our theatre artists and administrators

have yet to discover the essential fact that Shakespeare knew, that film and television mandarins know: unless you can attract the attention of the common person, you have a sterile art. It's not a matter of compassion, but commitment. Our theatre shares the moral dilemma of the true Christian: how can you justify owning three suits of clothes if your neighbour is naked? How can theatre develop as a popular art when it repudiates the people? In the case of the Citadel, that repudiation is blatant. By charging \$6.75 and \$7.50 for tickets, the Citadel effectively locks out the very people it presumes to serve.

In the past few days, Edmonton's monopoly press has overflowed with platitudes about a new era in theatre, an era that will see the emergence of the Citadel as a true meeting place of the people. The seats of the Citadel may never go empty, but let us not confuse the potential audience with the majority of the people in Edmonton. I suspect that most people would rather go down the street and watch two movies for the price of one play, and I further suspect that the Citadel management isn't unduly alarmed by that fact.

The true position of the Citadel may be sketched in more vivid lines by comparing it with one of the more blatant examples of cultural hypocrisy in Canada. In the working-class city of Grand Falls, Newfoundland, a city dominated by one industry, the government erected a multi-million dollar arts and culture centre, resurrected from the remains of the Czech pavilion at Expo '67. That centre sits empty for most of the year, because the management has deliberately alienated it from the people of the city. The result is that the centre is not merely ignored by the public — it is an object of derision and contempt.

It stands sullenly as an apostle of middle-class values in a working-class community.

I suggest that the Citadel Theatre, while it may exploit its resources actively, and produce some good theatre, has taken the wrong turn in the road. It has aligned itself with the top layers of a stratified community.

The Citadel management must charge \$6.75 a seat because of the massive expense of a white elephant. They have constructed a monstrous egg, hoping it will hatch a great chicken, but forgot to fertilize the thing.

For in fact, in the midst of the excitement, nobody has really explained why the Citadel needed a new space. Of course it's desirable, but is it necessary? Or even beneficial? Will it improve the standard of theatre in Edmonton? The established theatre in this city (and it is all

established) exists as an organ of social gratification, concealing weaknesses behind insufficient platitudes.

The Northern Light Theatre excuses a repertoire of mediocre plays by stressing the need of audience development; Mark Mac Theatre Network excuses derivative and aimless collective creations by affirming the need to develop community awareness; Citadel Theatre excuses an orgy of spending by referring to a long found artistic maturity in Edmonton.

None of these companies — with the potential exception of Theatre Network — will confine themselves to developing a truly popular art. They share a sort of medieval consciousness, seeing themselves as the monastic guardians of a culture while the masses are converted to barbarian creeds of televised ignorance. They fail to recognize that the appeal of television, and vulgar arts as a whole, lies not in vapid content but in form. The Canadian people have rejected the theatre because it continues to perpetuate social incongruity.

There have been successful attempts in Canada to popularize the theatre without compromise, and in those cases, the theatre invariably gone to the people, performing in public spaces in a popular idiom. The most successful of these, such as Newfoundland's Mimmers Troupe, and the earlier Theatre Populaire Muraille in Toronto, existed as alternate theatres for art, like government, needs a loyal and vociferous opposition if it is to maintain its integrity.

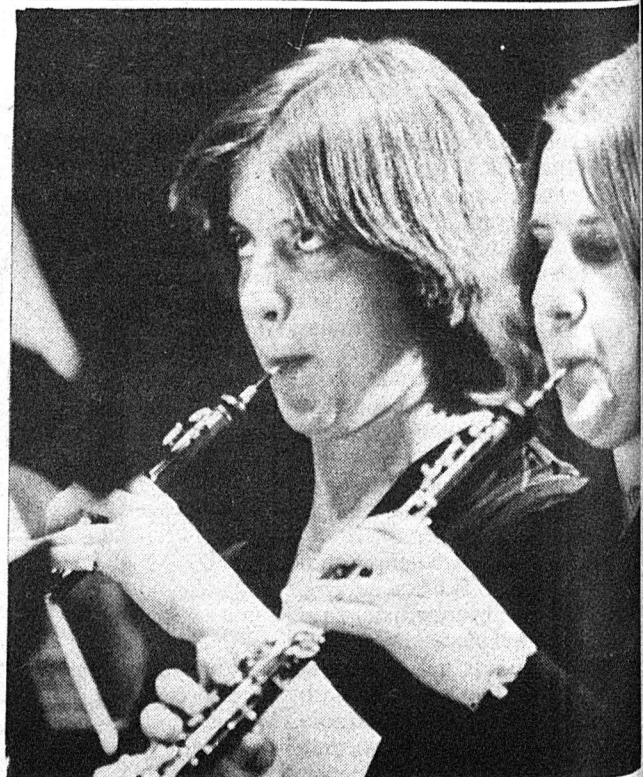
Edmonton may soon acquire such an opposition. It is almost certain, according to several sources, that John Juliani, the controversial director of *Savage God-Research Institute of Plague*, will be relocating in Edmonton within the next month. Juliani's work is by no means populist — he relies instead on an esoteric mysticism. But his work is important, for it challenges the common tenets of theatrical actor's training, and dramatic structure.

His work in Edmonton may awaken a realization that the model of theatre perpetuated here by the Citadel Theatre and the University drama department is by no means the only model. I am not fond of Juliani's work, but I have a great respect for his radical impulse and his stubborn refusal to accept that we live in the best of all possible worlds. His radical impulse is not only political, but experimental, and I have a feeling that in the star-crossed shadows of the Citadel and the University, any experimentation will prove radical.

Experimentation, like traditionalism, is no virtue in itself. But it is necessary here as a beginning, as a means of stretching the theatrical spectrum. If Juliani can succeed in inspiring a continuing debate on the meaning and function of theatre in Edmonton, then there will be hope for the future.



The University of Alberta Symphonic Wind Ensemble's director Fordyce Pier coaxes oboist Ann MacDonald for a shade more at a concert held in SUB, Sunday.



Photos Don Truckey