

Fredericton: An Overview

be dimmed and there are a few bright white lights that focus on the "stage area". There are two exits to the left and right of the stage and they lead to some mysterious place that no student knows or should know. Because of its size, there is little problem with acoustics. The rooms eat under a hundred people and the seats are all fitted with folding desks. Not exactly what one would call the ideal theatre setting. However, it has been used to extremely impressive effect by a number of theatre groups that have dared to use the space. Wings and a backdrop of sorts have had to be imported and installed. Lights have had to be put in place to supplement the limited white lights that are built into the space and all staging has to be minimalist as there is virtually no space for large props and sets.

The charm of this space is its immediacy. The actors are into your face; they spit on you, and if they sweat, drops of it will spill on you if you are close enough. Even the subtlest of expressions is captured by an audience member sitting at the back of the room. This means that actors who have little or no experience in the art of projection are relieved of the pressure to throw their voices through huge open spaces to impress an audience member. Also attractive is the fact that this space is virtually free of cost. True, some money has to be spent bringing in additional lights, but overheads are usually minimal in a space like this for it encourages a theatrical style that incorporates copious helpings of poor theatre techniques.

L'Ecole Ste. Anne

While I have never watched a live production in the auditorium of L'Ecole Ste. Anne, I have been there to watch a few films and I have been impressed by the soft red decor, the carpets, the comfortable setting and the arena stage area. There is a tight cyclorama and from what I could make out from the house there are a number of lamps installed in the building. The P.A. system is in "mellow-stereo" and the room looks like it could seat upwards of three hundred people. There is something especially appealing about this space and it puzzles me that more theatre groups have not sought to use it.

The Playhouse

Most Frederictonians are aware of the Playhouse, I am sure, and they should be aware also that the theatre is very well-equipped with a computerized lighting and sound system, an excellent P.A. system for theatre, excellent acoustics and quite a large backstage area. The wings are spacious and there is quite a bit of fly space for the moving of sets and backdrops etc. This is a professional space and in many respects it lives up to that reputation. Most of the set building is done in the building, there are wardrobe design rooms, rehearsal rooms, and fairly spacious dressing room areas. I have seen bigger theatres in larger cities, but the Playhouse is still a respectable space. The problem with the Playhouse is its size. The theatre holds upwards of seven hundred people which means that anyone who plans to stage a play in the space has to be thinking of that size audience on a nightly basis.

The Playhouse has no second stage and there was a time when TNB produced plays which were not mainstage productions had to be staged in the Edmund Casey Auditorium. Small theatre companies who are seeking to get a start in this city must rule out TNB as a theatrical venue for economic reasons, but there is no other smaller space with equally professional equipment and staging capabilities in the city. The result is that semi-professional shows are rarely staged in this city. The bulk of the productions staged here over the past few months have either been professional productions

by Theatre New Brunswick, or student based productions done in one of the spaces on campus.

New Playwrights

New playwrights have very little chance of seeing their work staged in even an amateur setting because the student productions won't take on a new script simply because most of these student productions are tied to course requirements. These courses demand an adherence to certain literary criteria when it comes to the selection of plays. The people who select the plays tend to go for the safe and tried shows and the works of established playwrights. At the same time, with the limited number of adequate theatre spaces, few fledgling theatre companies can afford to stage professional shows in the already available spaces. So we are treated to the occasional new play and a barrage of productions of the works of established playwrights.

What Fredericton needs is a small second stage - a professionally equipped theatre that holds no more than two hundred and fifty patrons. The theatre ought to be a flexible space in which the physical arrangement of audience/performer can be altered to suit the requirements of the production. This space could be used for small scale productions for local playwrights, play readings and staged readings of works by such writers. With the development of these writers will come the development of local actors and directors leading to the birthing of a dynamic and groundbreaking theatre community in the city. There is little reason why it shouldn't happen. The fact is that there are enough patrons of the arts in this city to make such a venture worthwhile. Over the past eight months, I have attended several amateur productions on the UNB campus and each of them has done quite well. Audiences have filled Memorial Hall, Marshall d'Avrey and the

Edmund Casey Hall.

One should not expect TNB to provide Fredericton with the wide range of theatrical productions that would be desirable. TNB is committed to bringing professional theatre into the province but it is limited to the staging of five mainstage productions each year, a series of touring Young Company productions and the occasional summer series. The Summer exercise is never guaranteed - it all depends on the artistic director of the company at the time. With a theatre the size of the Playhouse, once can understand a reluctance on the part of the company to stage shows that would interest a limited audience. There is very little room for experimentation. Even when a premiere is staged (as in Norm Foster's *The Affections of May*) it has to be the play of a playwright who has a proven track record of success. I can appreciate TNB's inclination to go with the productions that it chooses to stage for there is a very basic economic reason at work in all of that. A smaller space is the answer.

At the same time initiatives that lead to the introduction of new playwrights can only enhance the theatre scene in this community. There have been a few initiatives recently. Last year TNB spearheaded a program of playwrights' workshops which saw the workshoping of several plays by local playwrights. These plays were then read to the public at the Playhouse. There are plans afoot to hold these workshops this year as well and this is a promising sign.

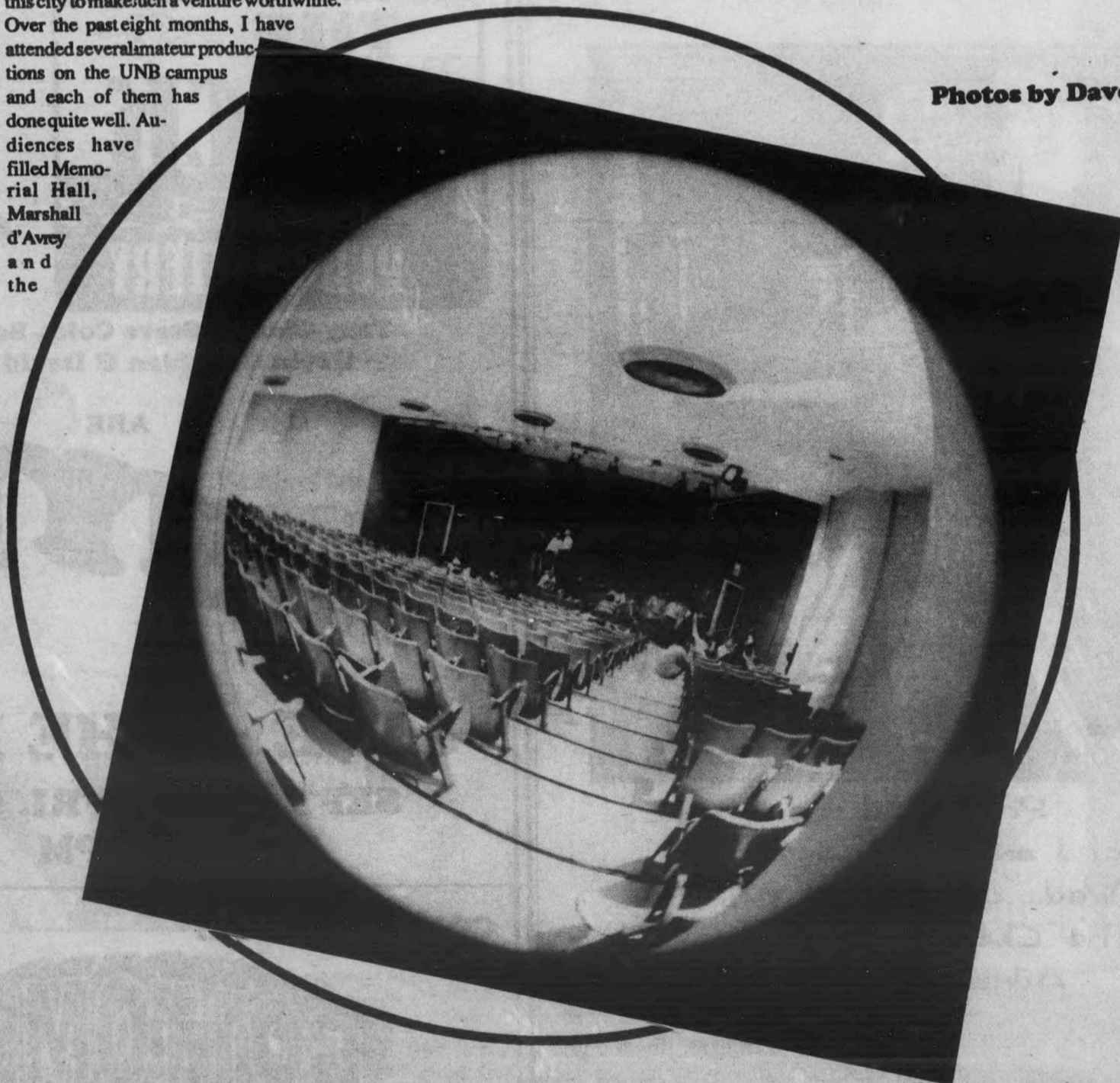
Playwrights Explosion

At UNB a writing course exploded into a playwrights' gathering at which writer's who were working on material could get a chance to share their work. The result was the staged reading of a number of original pieces as well as minimalist-type productions of some of these works. In Halifax, Wanda Graham has managed to lead Maritime playwrights into a venture that will eventually ensure that there is a playwrights' centre in the province. She has encouraged networking among playwrights in the region and this should lead to at least the dispelling of any sense of isolation that such playwrights must feel working in the region. One hopes that adventurous theatre companies will take the initiative and encourage playwrights by daring to do some of the work that is produced. It is one thing to have writers pumping out material and it is another to see them reach the stage of full blown productions - which is where they should end up if they are any good.

In the mean time; while we wait for the new theatre, we should continue to encourage those directors who are trying to ensure that there is a lively theatre scene in the city. This means, of course, that we try and attend the shows and tell our friends about them. Reviews cannot be expected to tailor their criticism to simply pamper these companies into continued existence, but there needs to be some sensitivity to the constraints of working in this environment.

Kwame Dawes

Photos by Dave Smith



Edmund Casey Auditorium at St Thomas University has been used to great effect as a staging area for a wide variety of productions. For a few years it was the second stage of Theatre New Brunswick. The thriving St Thomas Drama Society continues to produce material in that space.