

Real oilmen flattened under "Rig"

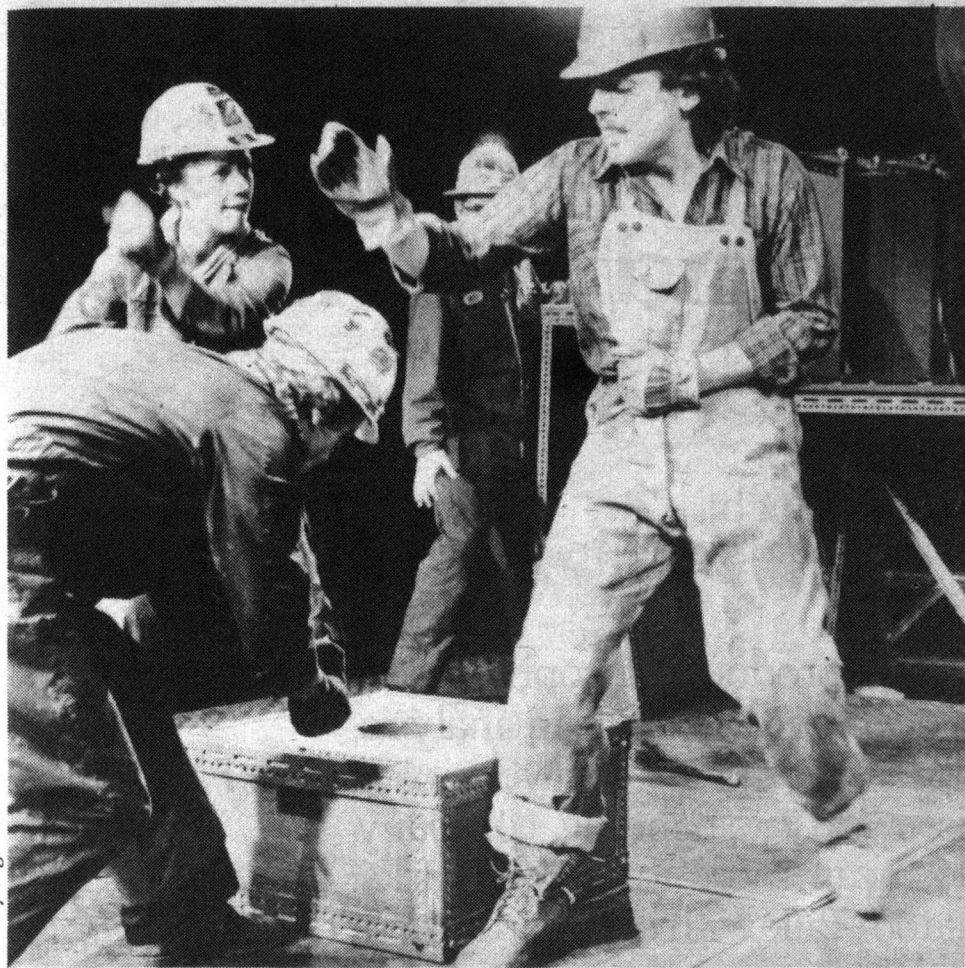


Photo Ray Giguere

Invisible rig equipment gives a clearer view of the rig crew, who suffered severe injuries from a faulty script

Rig
Theatre Network
until Nov. 22

review by Jens Andersen

The communiques which preceded this show led me to expect a pile of socially-conscious tripe about life on the oil rigs ("Rig is a humanistic look at the microcosm of the oilrig camp."), and the fact that the play is being sponsored by the Alberta Government Occupational Health and Safety office raised the spectre of a play

with an indigestible core of "Safety First" sermons.

As it turned out, *Rig* is hardly preachy at all, and I didn't hate it one-tenth as much as I anticipated.

However, unlike the Saturday night audience who loudly applauded the show, I couldn't raise much enthusiasm for it. It wasn't that the technical details of life on a rig were unconvincing, for I know next to nothing about tongs, mud, etc., and could probably be convinced that a 'monkey-board is a drill bit. Besides, David Yager,

Editor of *The Roughneck*, says "99% of the movements, expressions, and terminology are letter-perfect," and who am I to argue with *him*?

Nor was I overly perturbed about minor flaws in the set, like grime on coveralls that wasn't nearly as grimy or greasy as it should be, or that most of the rig equipment was non-existent, and the rig crew performed its labors by wrestling with thin air. My imagination, after all, is perfectly capable of compensating for such things, which are secondary to the play anyway.

What spoiled the play was that the characters were rendered unbelievable by constantly having to do contradictory or unrealistic things. Take, for instance, the case of Carl the derrick man, who is very concerned about the safety hazards being created because Pete the driller is having personal problems. Carl is acutely aware that he can't complain about Pete because he (Carl) is next in line to be driller, and ousting Pete would be seen as a self-serving move.

However, at a crucial moment, when he manages to cajole Newf the roughneck to lay the complaint, Carl acts much too cheerful. The result, of course, is that the other rig members see his cajolery as self-serving. Coming after his initial sensitivity to his dilemma, Carl's exuberance is clearly out of character. One suspects the exuberance is introduced so clumsily by the playwright because he can see no other way to generate the needed tension between Carl and the rest of the crew.

Or take Pete, our driller with the personal problems. His wife, it seems, has left him, and this is why he is so nasty and has such a high turnover of righands, who he drives to the limits of endurance and safety. Pete also belches fire and brimstone, Archie Bunker style, at frogs, Newfies and 'skirts" (he viciously chews out Annie the new roughneck - and then forces a kiss on her! - for no other reason than that she is female - this being the way that MCP's operate, at least in playwright's minds).

However in the bar scene towards the

end of the show Pete collapses drunkenly and starts sobbing pathetically about his long-lost wife, apparently to demonstrate that he is really human under that gruff exterior (i.e. that he is the stereotyped loveable old curmudgeon). But as any taxi-driver, bartender, cop, or other psychological expert will tell you, curmudgeons like Pete, when turned down by women, almost invariably turn mean, or at the very least, bitter, and when this happens, snarls about "that dirty rotten bitch" are among the mildest things that they say.

Pete's "miserable old bastard" character is only script-deep, it seems. Ultimately he is so warm and wonderful he makes you want to throw up.

And then there is Annie, who manages to remain cool and fairly diplomatic towards Pete (obnoxious version) one moment, then a little later snaps irritably at poor Newf, who is as sweet and well-behaved as can be. A more likely attitude would have been weariness, with perhaps a touch of the sardonic humor she shows elsewhere.

(All this, no doubt, is what Keith Ashwell referred to as "discrete (sic!) attention to characterization.")

The result of such improbabilities is that there is no illusion of being among actual rig workers, because we see the strings attached to the actors too well. This despite the actors' excellent grasp of proletarian mannerisms, and an occasional authentic touch to the script, like the joke (told by Ozzie the motorman, I think) that "there are only two things that smell like fish, and one is fish," an honest-to-Christ specimen of smutty working-class humor.

Which finally raises the question: when, oh when will the playwrights of the world (and the Keith Ashwells) switch off their boob tubes, abandon their movie houses and theatres, and go out and discover how real people behave? Theatre Network alleges that the author of *Rig* did do some on-site research, but he must have missed the humans.

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