



# ARTS & CULTURE

FOCUS ON HALIFAX

## Local busker makes ends meet

BY AVI LAMBERT

Wherever you go in downtown Halifax, it is hard not to notice the buskers and homeless by your sides.

Some are more aggressive than others; they have their routines — like the guy in front of the liquor store, while others choose to entertain.

We can depend on these people for a good time, a laugh and sometimes a pain in the ass.

Sean Meisner is the long haired busker who plays guitar at the edge of the Halifax Regional Library grounds. All of us who have been down to pizza corner enough know his face, but most of us don't know his name.

Meisner has been playing guitar since he was six years old and has been busking since he graduated from Dalhousie in 1990 with a BA in English.

"It's not an easy way to make a living...but it's enough to pay the rent, eat, and keep the student loan people at bay," says Meisner.

"[My lifestyle] isn't much different, it's just the means," says Meisner of busking. However, during the eight years he's been busking in Halifax, he has had to be an entertainer, social worker, tour guide, information center and babysitter. The *Gage Canadian Dictionary* defines a Busker as "a strolling entertainer of passers-by". Go figure.

Meisner told me he has seen "every

possibility of human behaviour."

He reported that 80 per cent of the people that walk by ignore him completely. The remaining 20 per cent give him money because he's either

**"The city doesn't treat the homeless well...they don't want to deal with the problem, they just want to get them out of sight."**

there, they want to have fun, or in Dylan-esque reflection, "they just wanna abuse you."

"It's a hard way to make a living," says Meisner. He's been beaten up twice for the change in his guitar case.

"You have to be prepared for any possibility."

Despite the odd problem, Meisner says he is happy.

When asked if competition from other buskers is a problem, he proudly replied that Halifax buskers don't see their profession as a contest.

"We support each other...we don't look at it as a real competitive thing. We're all trying to pull money out of people's pockets."

Busking has come to be a globally renowned profession. You would think

that the organizers of the Halifax International Busker's Festival, which takes place on the waterfront every August, would include locals. But according to Meisner, locals are no longer allowed in the festival.

"It's a shame that the festival is closed to local artists...we could do with the exposure. [The local presence] could add an air of simplicity [to the festival]," he notes. "The performers [at the busker festival] simply aren't busking. They're too aggressive. You shouldn't ever ask for money."

Meisner has given money back when it was given for the wrong reasons. Among other things that have ended up in his guitar case, he has received cigarettes, candy, joints, condoms, buttons, and hubcaps.

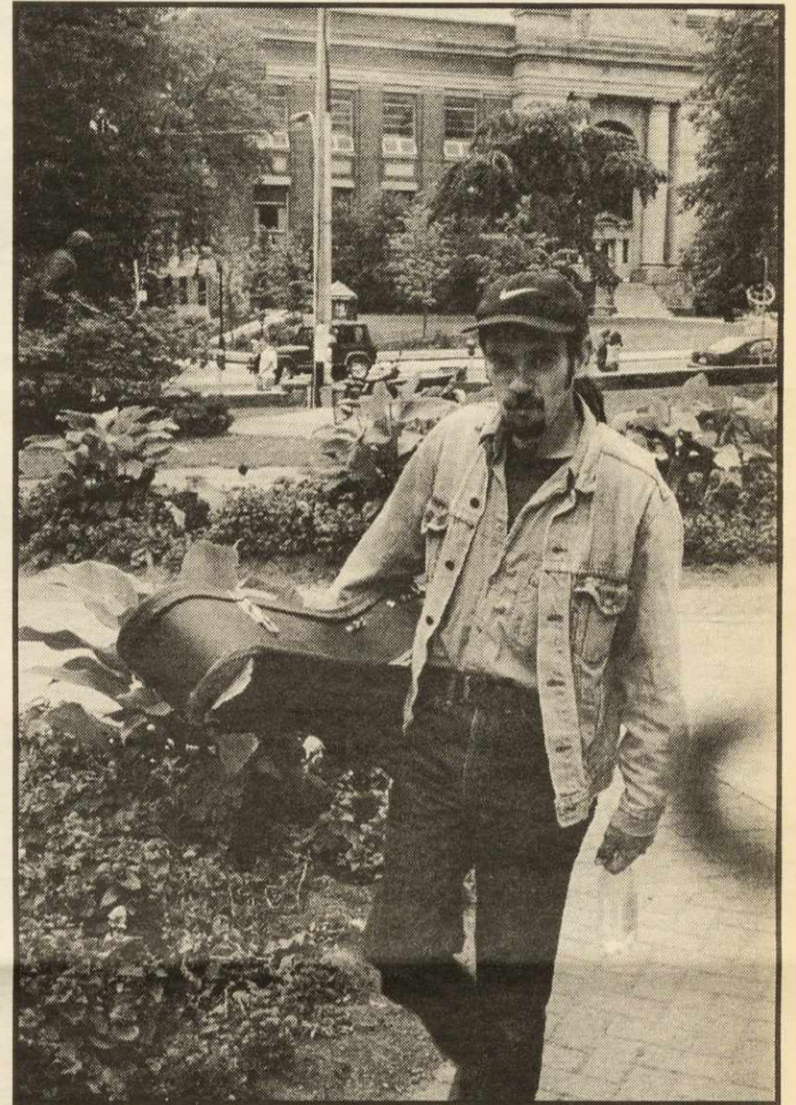
Meisner's job has seen him befriend many of the homeless in Halifax. He openly criticizes Halifax's treatment of the less fortunate.

"The city doesn't treat the homeless very well...they don't want to deal with the problem, they just want to get them out of sight," says Meisner.

To those people who look at Meisner and think or say to him "cut your hair and get a real job," he offers, "do my job and I'll do yours. We'll see who's singing at the end of the day."

I asked him if there was anything he'd like to say to Halifax. With a grin he finished the interview.

"Champagne for my real friends, and real pain for my sham friends."



Sean Meisner carries his guitar to his regular spot at the Spring Garden Road Public Library grounds.

## Aristophanes' *Clouds* captures student life

BY GREG MCFARLANE

Despite the daunting task of muddling through Greek plays and philosophy, Greg Robic is convinced that there is something for everyone in his adaptation of Aristophanes' *Clouds*.

The former University of Toronto student wrote the musical as an anticlerical for high school students to study classics in university. And from the moment of the play's inception, Robic has kept the world of students and academia at the

heart of the comedy's story.

"I wrote the play as a student at U of T. They have these days where they invite high school students to the university in order to show them that classics is a viable subject to study. I wrote it for one of those days," said Robic.

"I'm hoping that students will laugh, particularly at themselves."

As a student of classical Greek comedy, Robic spent a lot

of time in a university environment, surrounded by professors, administrators and



worrisome students. He found particular inspiration in this setting.

"[The main message to people is] not to take oneself and one's pursuits too seriously," said Robic.

Despite the fact that Robic is making fun of student life and university in *Clouds*, he makes it clear that he loves the student lifestyle. He notes that good humour is not overly aggressive; yet there are no sacred cows.

With that in mind, viewers should expect the play to

parody many modern cultural phenomena, from Gilbert and Sullivan mega-musicals to operas, and material geared towards satisfying the less culturally adept.

"There is plenty [of material] in the play for complete morons, which I am myself," Robic said, "but there are levels to the humour; it is very unlinear. There is a lot going on at once, and in that sense, it is in the style of Monty Python."

The show is about a father and son who attend university in order to acquire knowledge that will help them make money to alleviate their debts. The father fails to succeed, but the son does, and ends up swindling his way out of debt. From there, the play takes a skewed look at society, post-secondary education, and father-son relationships.

Set to the tunes of Handel and Verdi, as well as others, *Clouds* offers viewers excellent singing and comedic lyrics in what promises to be a timely and accessible musical play.

*Clouds* will be showing at the Dalhousie Arts Centre on Saturday, March 14 at 8:00pm.

## Never too much to swallow

BY DAVE MACDONALD

Stevie Starr put a load of dry sugar into his belly, drank a glass of water, did some stomach exercises, then brought the sugar back up — totally dry.

How does his job grab you? You put crazy things into your stomach: light bulbs, billiard balls and the like, then bring them up again. I don't think you need to pay \$10,000 a year for a university education to get this job.

Starr hails from across the Atlantic — Glasgow, Scotland to be exact. He tours the world with his amazing

show and claims that there is no trickery. Starr combines quick one-liners and the ability to regurgitate everyday objects to keep the crowd laughing.

The stuff he crams down his throat is downright weird. Among other things, half a can of butane, ten loonies, a rubix cube and two goldfish, got to see his insides.

When the butane was brought back up, he made a fireball that burned the hair off his arm, as well as the poor audience member who had to hold the lighter.

He then swallowed the ten loonies one by one. You could hear them

click as they hit each other in his gut. When it was time to bring them back up, he brought up six at once, then the next three one at a time. But the last one was stuck. So down went the pool ball. It knocked the dollar loose, Starr coughed it up, and then produced the newly cleaned ball.

But Starr wouldn't stop there. He swallowed a solved rubix cube, jiggled his belly, then squeezed out the cube with two sides turned. *What the fuck was this?*

For his grand finale, he used the two goldfish. He called his fish by name and slid them down into his food pit. He asked the crowd how

they wanted them regurgitated: tail first, head first, dead, alive? And, if dead, in halves or whole?

The sadistic audience wanted one dead, but Starr wouldn't do it. After all, these were his babies. He brought them up, put them back into their tank, and they started to swim around as if nothing had happened.

There was only one thing wrong with the whole evening (if you don't consider a guy stuffing things down his throat for money wrong). It cost \$6 to see him perform for 45 minutes. But then again, how much shit can you cram down your throat?