



Entertainment

Bracewell is a theatrical valentine

The Return of Herbert Bracewell
Citadel Theatre
Run ends April 5

review by John Charles

The Return Of Herbert Bracewell is not really a play, it's a theatrical valentine.

Playwright Andrew Johns vividly evokes the world of Victorian American theatre through the eyes of septuagenarian actor Herbert Bracewell (James Whitmore), who fumbles about his attic filled with memorabilia, talking to us as he assembles a one-man show on New Year's Eve, 1899.

"An Evening of Theatrical Reminiscence," Bracewell calls his show, and that's what Citadel audiences are given too. Johns is interested in anecdotes: actors who got locked off-stage, a Caliban who performed *The Tempest* with a fish in his mouth, the night Bracewell fell 30 feet through a trap-door and landed on the back of an elephant. All the anecdotes are true, as Johns is a theatre historian. What he's not is a playwright interested in creating characters, and Bracewell, though delightful, remains simply the sum of his stories.

"The only time I felt happy and of use in my life was in the theatre," Bracewell says. "I could never get the hang of it elsewhere."

A supporting actor all his career, Bracewell played Iago in Toledo, Ohio, and was stuck with the role of Marley's ghost for 27 years because he had the right wig. And he didn't like playing Caesar because: "I hate people poking at me."

Nearly the whole first act is Whitmore's alone, and he has a wonderful time cackling, picking up props and commenting on their origins, looking everywhere for the script of *The Lady of Leon*, and singing a busker's song from *A Yank In Soho*.

Whitmore himself became a hot Broadway actor in his first show in 1947, then got sidetracked for a decade or two at MGM as a key supporting actor and occasional star. But

his heart always belonged to the theatre, and this superb, generous, lovable performance is surely among the best work he's ever done. The script suggests Bracewell is a somewhat fragile creature, but Whitmore ignores that, providing a robust, vivacious quality that's amusing and charming.

When his wife Florence (Audra Lindley) suddenly sweeps in, a few minutes before Act I curtain, the play's problems begin. "If you have two people on stage, the audience will want a plot," Bracewell says, which is both correct and the playwright's dilemma.

Johns simply wants to continue his anecdotes, but now from a grand actress' perspective — one who always entered stage centre and wouldn't come on until a door was placed there. Florence sweeps about the stage, tossing off would-be bon mots about Shaw, and playwrights who "get annoyed when you make a simple improvement," while Bracewell chuckles.

If you overlook the fact that their interaction is a clumsy contrivance, not a real plot, and concentrate on the performers and the colorful times of which they speak, you'll remain entertained, although the material is clearly stretched.

Lindley (best-known for TV's *Three's Company*) was exceptional in Stage West's *Morning's At Seven* several years ago, as well as the Citadel's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and she's an instinctive, honest sort of actress. Playing a manipulative woman who flies into scenes — pouts and tears — to get her way is really not Lindley's cup of tea because she makes each pose seem real, rather than relishing the play-acting.

But Lindley takes Florence's feelings for Herbert very believable, and she does a beautiful bit with a recitation from a dreadful, high-falutin' melodrama in which an about-to-be-ravished princess tells her barbarian ravisher what love really is.

So ignore the plot, when it attempts to



Whitmore as Bracewell recounting ole theatre tales photo Ron Checora

emerge. Johns' goal is to re-create an old-fashioned theatrical evening, and provide his two actors with every opportunity. From the play's first moments, when Whitmore lights the gas-lit footlights, which make the set glow with gentle radiance, this play is an entrancing escape from the modern world

into a magical realm that is gone forever.

Terry Gunvordahl's attic set is exquisite, filled with the props, costumes and photos that make this theatre world palpable.

Tony Giordano's direction is superbly tactful, and manages to cover up many of the playwright's quandaries — though not all.

'87 Fine Arts Graduates Bank on Artwork

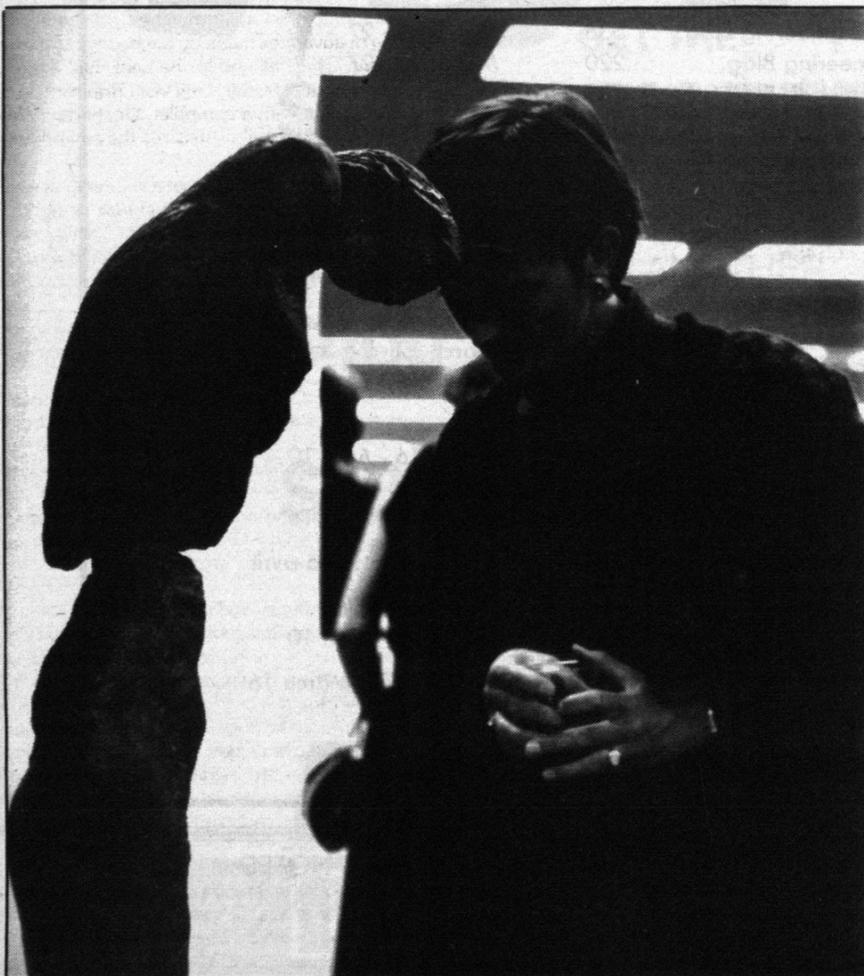


photo Bruce Gardave

BFA Grad exhibition
Bank of Montreal building
Ends March 28

Review by Tina Cristini

The location was fantastic, the artwork outstanding, the music soothing, and the fashions interesting. It was an altogether perfect opening for the 1987 BFA Grad exhibition at the Bank of Montreal building just south of Edmonton Centre.

This year's show, which opened Saturday, March 14 and runs for two weeks, features 57 student artists. Each was allotted a 13-foot area in which to show works chosen by the artist.

Rey Ledda, publicity committee chairman, explained, "The show traditionally is not curated by any professors at all. It shows what the students themselves think their best works are."

"There's a huge contingent of paintings; that's obvious. But what is different about this year's show is that the paintings seem to have been much more colourful than previously when dark colours were more popular. This show seems to be a real burst of colour!"

Two small watercolors by Peter Ivens were particularly pleasing, as were many large works in acrylic and oil.

Besides the painters who make up over half the artists, the student designers are also well represented with 15 individuals, many of whom also exhibit some very interesting photographs. However, there is only one person from Industrial Design, a fact that Ledda attributes to class cancellations in that discipline, due to the general cuts in funding.

"Printmaking is one of the strongest divisions in Art and Design," Ledda stated. "Many of these students have won interna-

tional awards and have been in shows as far away as Japan and the Scandinavian countries."

Another most impressive division is that of sculpture, within which Ruby J. Mah appears to stand out in particular. As Clarence Rensaw, a fellow artist, described them, Mah's crouching nude figures "seem to have a living quality about them. The clay pulsates even though it is only clay. If you look on the side where there is no real form discernible, there is still a life feeling about it."

Most comments about this year's grad show were extremely positive. Certainly, there were a few pieces which were not as impressive as the majority, but that is to be expected in a show of this type. In particular, some of the abstract metal sculptures left me unmoved, whereas the figurative sculptures were for the most part quite exciting.

The student artists, who all worked very hard last week to set up this exhibition, are very grateful to the Bank of Montreal for providing them with this ideal space, the entire fourth floor of the Bank.

From the comments I overheard, I understand that this appeared to be one of the best grad shows ever, and the fabulous venue played a great role in its success, as did the excellent organizational skills of the various student committees.

Many of the key workers were just too tired to enjoy the "apres-show" party at the Edmonton Ski Club. It was also a huge success, packing the guests in like sardines, and helping the budget to come out of the red.

As many other art lovers mentioned, I hope that this location will again be available for future shows. The fantastic layout and artworks are certainly worth braving downtown traffic.