

I'll be back before midnight a melodrama

A crash of thunder; the lights in a remote farmhouse flicker out, and in the silence that follows, we hear HIM returning with HIS blood drenched knife; the lone woman in the house screams, and the audience screams along with her.

On at least two separate occasions during Halifax Independent Theatre's production of *I'll Be Back Before Midnight*, the audience was swept away by the

mass of "B" horror movie clichés that playwright Peter Colley had somehow managed to cram into a single script. They were all there: a lonely old house with a blood-stained past, a neurotic heroine, thunderstorms that happen on cue, and enough red herrings to stock an ocean of Agatha Christie mysteries. However, what began as a parody of tales in the *PSYCHO* vein often ended up working much more effectively as the real thing.

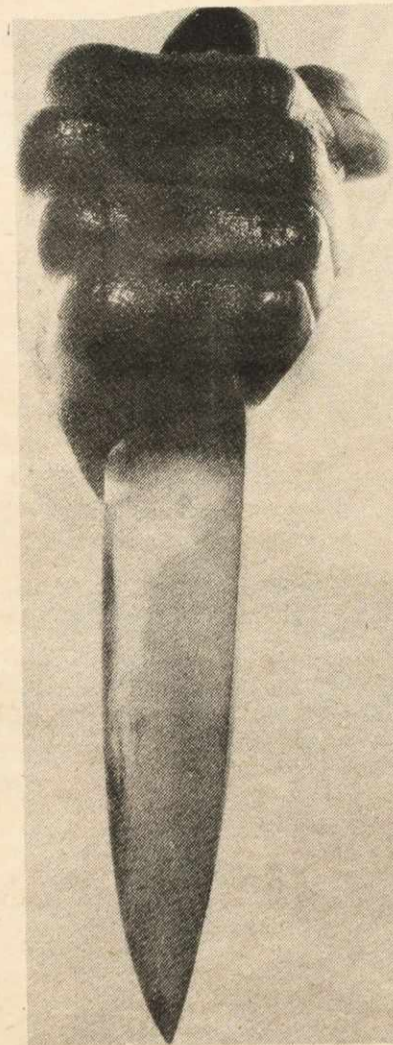
This might not have been a problem had director Linda Moore made a more definite decision as to whether she was going to play Colley's script for its fear value, or try to make it work as a spoof. One senses that she judged the script not to be strong enough to stand as true horror nor as true parody. Consequently, the scenes in which she decided to go for the throat (describing them would be giving too much away) are as terrifying as any I'd want to encounter, but far too many potentially frightening scenes left the audience giggling nervously, wondering whether or not to take what was happening on the stage seriously.

The result of this indecision is best illustrated by a comparison of the best (the use of sound) and the worst (the script) aspects of *I'll Be Back Before Midnight*. Sandy Moore's interlude music is truly masterful, delicately capturing a mood of melancholic paranoia with a hauntingly sparse composition for piano and violin, suggesting to the audience that the tale to follow would be a genuine study in fear.

Colley's plot, however, could be more aptly described as a study in confusion, with so many false leads that one eventually despairs of a real solution ever presenting itself—a despair almost borne out by the unsatisfying ending that has two major characters change so radically as to make their transformation unbelievable, and is so far-fetched that one can only think of it as parody.

Apart from this one major consideration, Linda Moore has put together a pretty tight show from a cumbersome script; the play clips along at a good pace, bogging down only a few times, and generally giving the actors room for some fine performances.

Trisha Lamie as Jan Sanderson, the young wife trying to recuperate from a nervous breakdown, gives us the same dynamic energy that we saw last spring when she played the part of Shelly in Sam Shepard's *Buried*



Child. This time, however, that energy is turned inward, so that

from the moment she steps on stage Lamie radiates pure nervous tension; consequently, her hysteric outbursts are believable and we begin to share in her anxieties.

Lamie taps an elemental fear—the fear that in a chaotic situation it is oneself and not the world around that is breaking down, and she plays that fear with a conviction that gives the play an atmosphere charged with nervous electricity.

Fortunately we could count on the character of George Willowby, played by Sudsy Clark, to ease this tension from time to time with some good comic

lines. In fact, one of the few strong points of Colley's script is its use of the strange relationship between fear and laughter.

The same cannot be said of Simon Guthrie's Greg Sanderson, a stereotypical ineffectual academic with a fascination for stones. Guthrie seems to lack the other actors' sincerity, and suffers by comparison; he alone seems to have decided that this play is a parody. His clipped, over clear enunciation, while perhaps appropriate to the character's scientifically precise mind, becomes annoying after about ten minutes, so that one gets the impression that he is talking ... to ... a ... group ... of ... inattentive ... and ... slightly ... deaf ... children.

Paddy Muir's portrayal of Laura Sanderson, the haughty sister of Greg Sanderson, on the other hand, is effective since we never really get to know this character as closely as the others. From her

first icily contemptuous assessment of Greg and Jan's farmhouse, Muir plays Laura with the distance the character deserves, effectively making her another puzzle in the series of enigmas.

Technically speaking, *I'll Be Back Before Midnight* is a very professional-looking show. Its subtle use of sound is especially noteworthy; wind, car engines and amplified heartbeats all give a sense of space to a stage that is so small as to make illusions of size difficult. David Ingraham's lighting, while appropriately melodramatic in spots, is generally effective, as is Mike Young's realistically detailed set.

In the final analysis, *I'll Be Back Before Midnight*, running from Sept. 16-24 at the Neptune Theatre, makes an enjoyable evening's entertainment; it is funny, and it is frightening. Now if only the playwright knew what he was trying to do ...

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