

The Motor Trade by Norm Foster.

Director: Michael Shamata

Lighting: Harry Frehner

Designer: Patrick Clark

Cast: Lee J. Campbell, John Dolan,
Catherine Barroll, Laurie Paton.

Produced in association with Theatre
Calgary.

Reviewed by Kwame Dawes.

A grittier Norm Foster

Norm Foster's new play *Motor Trade* is as loaded with slick one-liners and witty banter as are any of his earlier plays however in this piece he has created two characters that are striking and believable. Phil Moss is a fast-talking car sales man who celebrates the power of a good sale throughout the piece. His life is breaking-apart and Doral Valley Dealership is the only thing that is keeping him alive. He relies on the tried and true, the self-deception that he has a close friend in Dan Torelli and that their business is doing exceptionally well.

It is a false premise for Dan is seriously thinking of leaving the business. A college drop-out with a philosophical streak, Dan is soft-spoken but intense. His good naturedness is a facade concealing the capacity to cheat with Phil's wife and orchestrate a black mailing scheme which secured the two the business in the first place. The dialogue between the two is believable. They indulge in expletives and crude humour, hold facile debates about their childhood, and manage to sustain a strained relationship through the pressing of old good-feeling buttons. Ultimately, the buttons don't work and the friendship is exposed for the false relationship that it is. Dan declares "I don't even know if I like you."

These are strong characters played with appropriate control and empathy by John Dolan (Dan) and Lee J. Campbell (Phil). Where Campbell may have failed to temper the development of his character in the earlier scenes so as to allow the dramatic confrontation at the end to have some climactic weight, John Dolan's Dan is a careful study of character development by an actor. Dan opens up like a flower slowly revealing more and more about himself as the play progresses.

If the male characters were well developed the two women who make an appearance in the piece could have been left out. Foster in this play does not show

himself to be a great writer of women's parts. Gail Pierce (Catherine Barroll) the "tax lady" is merely a replica of the hysterical and gutless May in *The Affections of May*. Her actions are cliched and her attempt to assert herself as a woman fall flat for she has been written as a victim - a woman whose business-like demeanour is merely a facade for a broken heart. Her identity remains inscribed in male domination. Laurie Paton's Darlene Moss adds little to the plot. She is a blond who virtually confirms the stereotype of the "dumb-blond". Her sexual promiscuity, expressed so clearly by the two men as evidence of her shallowness as a woman is never challenged when her character comes on stage. As characters these two women add little to the plot and essentially become unfortunate additions to a play that lays bare - without overt criticism - the sexism found in men like Phil and Dan.

The play suffers from a few structural flaws. Foster relies on the device of discovery to propel his plot forward, but the revelations soon become almost farcical. The play begins to parody itself when Dan and Phil, in the climactic moment in the play go through at least six different revelations about the past. Dan is planning to quite the business, Phil did see Dan having sex with his wife, Dan knows about Phil's little scheme to steal money from Dan, Phil of course reveals that he did this when he saw Dan with his wife, Dan then reveals that the business was secured because he blackmailed their former boss to give them the business, the Phil reveals that he has always felt responsible for the death of Dan's wife in a car accident. All this and more in the space of a few minutes. Foster leaves a trail of hints throughout the first act of the play which at the time make no sense - and then in the end: Bang! he reveals all and everything adds up. While this may make for great soap entertain-

ment, it is somewhat clumsy on stage because we become overwhelmed and consequently quite unimpressed with the series of revelations.

But there are some fine moments in this play and the performances of these two actors, their timing and control is impressive. Foster plays is a Maritime version of Mamet's *Glengarry Ross* or *Speed-the-Plow*. The connection between these works must not be understated. In these works capitalism and big business are celebrated as a way of life, as powerful determining factors in the shaping of an identity. The salesman becomes a tragic hero, a figure caught in the rush of making a deal - of fulfilling the "American Dream." Add the slick, risqué dialogue filled with sexual innuendo and explicit reference to sexuality, and then add the masculine focus of the works and the connection between these two writers becomes clear. Of course, Foster romantic bent deprives him of some of the grit

and muscle that we see in Mamet's work.

Directed by Michael Shamata with the assistance of Linda McNutt, *The Motor Trade* is TNB's fifth Norm Foster premiere. It is hard to say whether it will do as well as *The Affections of May* across Canada, but to my mind it is a better play. With some more work on the first act which takes a long time to start happening, and with some work on the revelations of the second act, this play could do quite well. By co-producing the play with Theatre Calgary the play is guaranteed a staging in the West in February. In it TNB appears to have symbolized its tone for this year. The play is a comedy with a toughness that we do not normally associate with Foster. It is clear that TNB is being very careful about not offending their audience from the multiple warnings about the language of the play in advertisement, brochures and interviews. From the reaction of the audience on the opening night it

seems that there is nothing to worry about in Fredericton. People laughed on cue and appeared to be having a good time. Comments from a sample of people after the show assured me that while the play is not regarded as earth-shattering in its revelations, **it is entertaining**

Norm Foster's
The Motor Trade
is the first play of
TNB's 24th Season.

This production
will continue
playing at the
Play House
in
Fredericton



Lee Campbell (Dan Torelli) and Laurie Paton (Darlene Moss) in Norm Foster's new play *The Motor Trade*. Too many revelations in too short a time, but entertaining. The play continues to run at the Playhouse.