

# Rhubarb! festival showcases up and coming Toronto playwrights

By HEATHER SANGSTER

The tenth annual *Rhubarb! Festival*, presented by the Buddies in Bad Times Theatre until Feb. 28, promises a little something in experimental theatre for everyone. The festival, founded in 1978 by Matthew Walsh, Fabian Boutilier, Jerry Cicoretti, and Sky Gilbert, provides a stage for innovative artists where they can present their works as they desire. The Festival is based on the premise that changes made in the traditional "workshop" process of play production are often more harmful than beneficial to the original work.

According to Sky Gilbert, the artistic director, the festival focuses on "opportunity not interference" when presenting an artist's work. According to Gilbert, the actual performance of a work, and not the endless workshop discussions and re-writes, is the key to its development as an effective play.

Gilbert's criteria for choosing plays for the festival is simple. They must be a half hour or less in length and they must be theatrically experimental. And that can mean almost anything. Approximately 15 to 20 plays are chosen each year and are scheduled to run over a short, three week period, with 4 or 5 plays performed each night for a week. Each play is dramatically distinct from the others, providing an interesting grab bag of entertainment for the audience.

This year's *Rhubarb! Festival* is no exception. The second week of the festival, from Feb. 17-21, seemed promising, with such works as *Onion* and *Couch Enigma*. The first two pieces of the festival dealt with life in the technologically complex world of the eighties, with the action in both pieces centering on two of our favourite machines, the TV and the answering machine.

*Couch Enigma* by Robin Fulford, deals with a family's obsession with the television. The mother and the father sit on their couch in their "wreck room," watching endless hours of television. The mother has adopted the values of today's more popular commercials and shows more concern over her deodorant than her deteriorating family. The daughter (a ghost) mimics the feminine television image and spends her days pouting, posing, and prancing in front of the TV. The father sits silently behind his *Toronto Sun*,

opening his mouth and lowering his paper only once, in testimony that his family does not love him like he loved his father. The son is the only character that is apparently unaffected by the television (probably because he is chained to the staircase) and he attempts to break his family away from the TV's hypnotic lure. Unfortunately, his chain does not permit him to reach the couch and the TV's voice is much more powerful than his own. Eventually, he does break down and (ironically) he delivers a very "Oral Roberts" testimony against his parent's obsession (something that he could only have learned from Sunday TV evangelism). In a final attempt to break them away from the TV, he raises an axe over their heads.

The second piece *Curved Horizons* by Joan Egilson, focuses on the sad portrayal of a woman coming to terms with her life after the death of her husband. Her often sarcastic monologue not only reveals her life as daughter, lover, and wife, but also as the betrayed woman. Through gossip, she learns that her husband had cheated on her repeatedly, but she chooses to remain with him because he tells her that he loves her.

The only other voice on stage is that of her husband's recorded messages on the answering machine. Egilson's ending is very powerful. As the woman reveals how her husband died (in a plane crash with his 19 year old, pregnant mistress), she repeatedly plays his last message to her, which is "love you."

On a brighter note, the third piece, aptly titled *The Terrible False Deception* by Rafe Macpherson, takes the audience through a lively, humorous parody of acting and the theatrical style. This piece consists of four very uniquely dialogued, yet similarly choreographed, acts. The first act is the "Theatre of the Self Aware" where the actors go through the prescribed motions of the characters that they are portraying while actually speaking what they are really thinking. The actors joke with the audience, criticize their director about their movements and voice projection, and complain about their parts, while physically acting out their roles.

The second act has the actors in character, actually doing the specific scene (Chekhov, I think). Of course, humour for the audience comes from the fact that they supposedly know what's going on in the actors' heads

while they are acting. It's an interesting technique and it received a lot of laughs from the audience. However, the concept is carried further into a third act, "The Theatre of the Tupperware," where the theatrical style is taken to absurdist limits. The actors take on unconventional traits for their characters. They go through the same motions as in Act one, but they now play such characters as an extremely horny maid and a transvestite.

Finally, the fourth act, titled "Author's Message," promises to give the audience some enlightenment. The actors are still going through their original motions but are speaking as their supposed true selves, openly criticizing how they were forced to act in Acts 1 through 3. Criticism turns into bickering and disputes between the non-unionized and unionized actors and director until, finally, the heroine drops to her knees and asks, "What if I'm just a dramaturgic device?"

Unfortunately, every festival must have its low moments and it is in the fourth piece, "A Question of Balance" by Scott Marsden, that brought down what—until this point was an exciting momentum. Although the piece addressed important questions about the relationship between the artist and the businessman (read: Corporate sponsor of the arts), it was presented in a rather cliché manner. The artist and the businessman stood on opposite ends of a seesaw (with projected images of a chess game on a screen behind them), and battled it out (in time with the movements of the chess game) until the triumphant artist crushed the businessman under his perfectly balanced seesaw.

The action of the piece was slow, because the actors gestured awkwardly to a monotonous voice-over rather than carrying on a dialogue themselves. Put simply, the production was obvious, and lacked energy.

The *Rhubarb! Festival* continues to run until the 28 at the Annex Theatre (730 Bathurst). From Feb. 24 to 28, one can see *The World We Live on Turns so that the Sun Appears to Rise* by David Demchuk, *Classics of Literature* by Robin Marie Butt, *Killer Dogs* by Pat Langner, *Depression* by Jim Mc Swain, *Body Positive* by Jeff Kirby, and an added feature on Saturday at 11 pm, *Magic Shorts* by Sky Gilbert. Showtime is at 8 pm and tickets are \$9 per evening.

## York and OCA 'trade' visual art

By BLAKE EVANS

This week, and until March 5, a group exchange of visual art from York University and the Ontario College of Art (OCA) is taking place. This is the first time an exchange of this nature has been undertaken and it provides a unique opportunity for student artists to exhibit and learn about another school's ideas and techniques.

The curator of the exchange, Marie Burnett, is a fourth-year visual arts student at York. She has previously studied at OCA and her exposure to both schools certainly qualifies her for the role. Burnett says that the works produced in the experimental department at OCA and the interdisciplinary department at York are similar. She also stresses that the exchange is predominantly multi-media works because it is within this area that comparisons between the two programs are most evident.

Many of York's Fine Arts faculty have taught or presented to OCA students and the same is true of OCA's faculty. However, little dialogue has gone on between the students of both schools. Burnett hopes that the exchange will help fill this vacuum.

Ten York artists are presenting their work at Gallery 76 (an artist-run, parallel gallery affiliated and next door to OCA) located at 76 McCaul

St. and 12 OCA artists are exhibiting their creations in the IDA gallery in the Fine Arts Building on York's main campus.



**BOXING DAY:** A collection of multi-media works by Ontario College of Art students are featured in the IDA gallery as part of an exchange with York.

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