

Entertainment

At Burton last Thursday

Sun Ra Arkestra: from dazzling to cornball

By STUART SHEPHERD

I left Chicago when a friend of mine said he felt I should because the people weren't listening. So he sent me up to Montreal to play. But I had trouble up there too, because the people said I was playing God's music. So then I got on the television and said that Canada was supposed to be God's country. And even if it's God's music why couldn't I play it?

(Jazz Forum, Dec. 1974)

So said Sun Ra after his last excursion to our country. After a long absence, he was back last Thursday, this time at Burton Auditorium, for a Toronto stab at making the word blossom in the northern wilderness.

The multi-media presentation in which he attempted this was a curious study of contrasts, one of those events which leaves the onlooker with simultaneous extremely definite but conflicting reactions to what he has seen.

Time and time again the performance of Sun Ra and his Cosmo World Approach Arkestra would in some way deeply impress or enthrall the listener, but in doing so outline in sharp contrast some other aspect of the total presentation which was failing dismally.

Sun Ra himself has been around for a long time; he's over sixty years old and has worked for or been an influence on some of jazz's most illustrious musicians, including Fletcher Henderson, Coleman Hawkins and John Coltrane. He has also developed a reputation for innovation; he began to use electric piano in the mid-fifties, and used many "free" playing techniques years ago which have only very recently approached a commercially respectable status.

Thursday's concert demonstrated the wide experience the

man has had; at various points in the evening he was able to draw from diverse stylistic resources sounding something like Duke Ellington, Shurely Scott, Groove Holmes, or Cecil Taylor when the musical context called for it.

His performing style was often vital and dazzling; the stage acrobatics, involving attacks on his organ from almost all conceivable angles, and hand dispositions, which occurred in the solo prior to "Lights on a Satellite", were incredible for a man of his years. He also displayed a good knowledge of the timbral possibilities of his instruments, especially organ and synthesizer; outer space effects in "We'll Take a Trip to Space, the Next Stop Mars" come immediately to mind.

However, especially in consideration of the above, Sun Ra committed an incredible number of errors of taste and lapses in even basic musicianship. He played constantly at an irritating, almost unbearable volume level, oblivious to the musical context or the fact that other soloing instruments might be inaudible.

His playing was often simply sloppy, and his interpretation of free playing often degenerated into a clumsy approximation at the most superficial level. For a man who obviously knows what his electronic instruments can do, he chose an enormous number of simply unpleasant sounds, especially on electric piano.

The Arkestra made up to a great extent for the shortcomings of its leader. The ensemble contains many really fine players who are comfortable in all the styles of their tradition.

The opening of the concert, involving a tall drum, conga drums, a chime tree and a strange electric guitar-kalimba-like instrument,



Sun Ra musicians doing their thing.

was a beautiful example of textural music making at its best. In a similar vein, the band members performed a brilliant succession of solos just before the conclusion of the opening number, those on bass clarinet, French horn, and baritone sax being especially outstanding. Solo work in more traditional styles was also present in Duke Ellington and Fletcher Henderson imitations in the first set, and a Brazilian carnival type election in the second.

Unfortunately, the more traditional elements of the performance were such as to imply an attitude of "See, we can really play" which detracted from the effect of the more up to date sonic experiments which occurred from time to time. Probably at the leader's instructions, these and other grooves invariably lasted much too long.

the Sun Ra's Egyptoid prance which were humorous at first became simply cornball and boring. Dance and film accompaniments often struck one as purposeless or out of place, the film often completely unsynchronized with live stage events. Film technique itself was often painfully amateurish; a home movie of the Arkestra at the Sphinx was particularly ridiculous.

In short, while the galactic humour and much of the musical content of this concert were appealing, God (in contradistinction to the experience in Montreal) failed to put in an appearance. Much of the Space Mythology of Sun Ra is a highly personal tongue-in-cheek expression of a unique sense of humour. However, perhaps the man does get carried away at times and actually believes that "The world is waiting for the sunrise."

It's hard to separate the jokes from the jive, and it seems Sun Ra himself has trouble with the distinction. For however much Sun Ra and his sidemen have together, and that's quite a lot, Thursday's concert demonstrated quite clearly they're in serious need of a sense of proportion.

As for God's music, we'll have to look elsewhere.

The Far Shore brings good news to the Canadian film industry

By DOUG TINDAL

There is a scene in *The Far Shore* in which Eulalie accidentally knocks some sheet music from the piano-top and Tom her lover-to-be, comes to help her pick it up.

They kneel, side by side, and their eyes meet. The scene is trite, one might say amateurish. It is mentioned here to discharge the reviewer's obligation to find fault. From here on in there's only good news.

The film, directed by Canadian artist Joyce Wieland and adapted from her original story, is a fictional account of the life of painter Tom Thomson.

Wieland is no newcomer to film, though she is better known for her work in the visual arts. (York veterans may recall that her quilted mosaic, 109 Views, once hung in the Founders Dining Hall before the Great Art Theft of 1974 forced it into the vault.)

The film begins as Eulalie, played by Céline Lomez, leaves her Quebec home to marry Ross (Lawrence Benedict), an Ontario engineer and rising politician.

While Eulalie is quiet, cultured, and deeply in love with music, Ross can best be summed up by his response when Eulalie asks how he evaluates a painting is worth.

"That's easy," he says. "By the size."

Not surprisingly, the marriage is singularly unsuccessful, and when Eulalie meets Tom, love



blossoms almost instantaneously.

The intense character of Tom is well portrayed by Frank Moore, who starred in *Leaving Home* and *Face-Off*. Moore, incidentally, looks so much like Oscar Werner that it almost hurts when he speaks without a German accent.

The cinematography of *The Far Shore* is magnificent, though admittedly the rugged scenery of northern Ontario, in which much of the film is set, is a cameraman's dream.

The cinematography is by Richard Leiterman, whose work has graced *A Married Couple, Goin'*

work based on the unionization of the York University Staff

The Far Shore was co-produced by Wieland with Judy Steed; Steed's credits include the writing and production of *Operation Finger Pinkie*, the Theatre Passe Muraille work based on the unionization of the York University Staff Association.

Steed and Wieland are currently at work on a film adaptation of Margaret Lawrence's *The Diviners*.

The Far Shore is playing at the Towne Cinema, Bloor just east of Yonge, until October 24.

Death of a Salesman

By MICHAEL HOLLETT

The Toronto Truck Theatre's revival of Arthur Miller's 1949 play, *Death of a Salesman* is a surprisingly relevant look at the failure of American society to fulfill the promise of the American Dream.

Willy Loman is the salesman who, after 36 years at the same job, feels he has nothing more to give his wife and sons than the benefits on his life insurance policy.

The American Dream has failed Willy Loman. He has spent his life chasing it but hasn't been able to place in the race.

Willy's counterpart is his older brother who appears on stage in flashbacks. Ben Loman made his fortune in Africa, he entered the jungle at seventeen and walked about three years later, rich in diamonds.

Willy, on the other hand, is caught up in the American treadmill of buying on time and living beyond his means. At one point he says, "just once I'd like to own something outright before it's broken."

Loman is excellently played by Ken LeMaire. His ability to portray Loman's manic character changes

— sometimes in mid-sentence — from extreme optimism to pessimism and anger is devastating.

Loman's wife is played by Jacqueline Tarne who gives an inconsistent performance. While at times Tarne is very good, she has difficulty portraying a credible older woman.

The character of older son Biff Loman demands changes in age from a 17 year-old to a 35 year-old. Dan Chapman as Biff was able to strongly play him as a teenager, but he fell short in depicting him as a 35 year old man.

Brian Kaulback as hapless Happy Loman, the younger son, was able to make the necessary age transitions. Hap provides the play's black comic relief.

As an historical look at the fears and problems of 1950's America, the play is interesting. But as a portrayal of the failings and cruelty of North America today the play is painfully excellent.

Death of a Salesman plays Wednesday to Sunday at 94 Belmont St., two stoplights north of Yonge and Bloor, until November 13.