

# Happy Birthday America!

The Gateway is thorough, but not so thorough as to publish two reviews of the same play, usually. What happened here is that the controversial *Happy Birthday America* caused Mr. Tanner to phone us and ask if he could write an 'alternate' review of the play, since he felt quite strongly about it. Since the Americanization of Canada is a current and controversial subject of discussion everywhere in this country, we thought it would be appropriate to publish Mr. Tanner's views in connection with this play, which was written by Canadians as a comment on America.

## Red, white and blew it!

The Statue of Liberty, with tourists in her nose, has always faced out to sea, unable to see America. One day she was permitted to turn and view what Americans had done with the liberty she had guarded for so many years. She is dumfounded and hides her face, gasping in horror.

This is one of the finer scenes from *Happy Birthday America*, a musical revue of the USA from pilgrims to parking meters. The revue takes you on a sometimes funny, sometimes serious voyage through everyman's America.

The play, which is a combined effort of Theatre 3 and Northern Light Theatre, played last week at the Art Gallery Theatre for a series of evening performances, and will run until April 16 with a series of condensed noon-hour shows.

See *Happy Birthday America* by all means, but don't expect too much stimulation; it's more 'entertainment.'

Originally the play was described to me as an attempt at congratulations (or condolences) from a Canadian theatre group to the bicentennial celebrations of the USA. It seems, however, that the play has nothing to say about America that any American theatre group couldn't have said better.

American culture has saturated every Canadian's world. There isn't a Canadian alive who doesn't feel strongly about American effects upon this country, one way or another. So where is this play's Canadian perspective? Where is a representation of Canadian emotional attitudes towards America and her bicentennial? You won't find them in *Happy Birthday America*.

What the play did say, it said with some success. There were glimpses of genius from Sheelah Megill (The Statue of Liberty), who captured the audience with her lisping French accent as she turned to look at the horrendous city behind her. This was something many Canadians could relate to.

Over-all, the play lacked continuity or a consistent direction. But there was a near-brilliant interpretation of the American television game show, where the 'friendly' moderator nauseatingly drags us through the greedy, silly game. Actor Scott Swannis so skillful at this, he should be asked to host a new Canadian game show. It could be called the "Canadian Resources Giveaway Show", and marketed in the U.S. How's that for Canadian content?

Speaking of Canadian content, what an opportunity this could have been to revive the rapidly-fading "alternate theatre" character of Theatre 3. Too bad they missed the chance.

The American trash we watch on our media is wide open to satirical attack. *Police Woman*, *The Brady Bunch*, *The Rookies* and even MacDonald's commercials are satire in themselves, and any attempts to explore these themes must bite very hard to be effective.

How do Canadians feel about these shows on their television? This question was conspicuously absent from *Happy Birthday America*. If I'd wanted to see a play that was an American satire on America, I'd rather see it in New York, done by top-notch American theatre.

At least as Canadians we could respond with something we know about, something that comes from inside us. Two common scenes come to mind: how do you feel when you see an American (likely a Texan) get off an airplane here in July wearing a bulky fur coat? Or how do you feel when an American calls your province just another state and asks your kids if they want to be President? How do you feel when your kids say they do want to be President?

How do Canadians feel when they look at America? Mostly they feel good ... that they're Canadian.

When I came out of *Happy Birthday America*, I felt the same way I felt when I first saw Wayne and Shuster advertising for Gulf Oil - sad that the best Canadian comedians would sell themselves to American corporate interests.

Surely Canadian culture is not Canadian authors writing mediocre American plays. One wondered if *Happy Birthday America* was seriously trying to satirize that big game show down South or trying to play it.

by Jim Tanner

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## Red, white and redo it

Don't you wish some shows would stop after the first act? Everything is going nicely - there's the tempo, the complementary sections blending well into one another, the acting, the stage presence and then flop. It fails - all in the second act.

That's how it is with the latest offering from Theatre 3 and Northern Light Theatre - a musical revue called *Happy Birthday America!* The initial comic sequences show flashes of brilliance, but when these are juxtaposed with the attempted-serious skits of the second, the production falters badly.

The show is a collection of comic and serious skits, interposed with songs and choreographed sequences. It is written in basically light-satire form, taking an amused swipe at American history from its beginnings in 1776 up until the today of Bicentennial celebrations.

Of course, as a Canadian stab at bicentennial offerings, it offers up one or two comments of its own about the social life of America through the ages. In the comic skits, the "social commentary" works well with such things as Paul Revere and his redundant reverie, a Statue of Liberty - actually a *petite belle* who comes to life and discovers she has held the torch in vain, various views of the American fascination with game shows, etcetera.

But when the inevitable

skits about the American draft and the American preoccupation with American military power come up, the "social commentary" is just another repetition in an endless line of repetitions - comment that has been made many times before, and often with much greater skill.

For instance, when the father, who has cajoled and outfitted his boy for war, reads out the telegram from that son camped in Valley Forge - it is just too much. "The sun is rising, papa, and I see a bird flying in the distance. They've taken away my lovely outfit that you got me, etc." This sort of thing is a painful experience for the audience. But not painful in the way the writer intended. That's why the second act doesn't work.

Even as it is, it's an entertaining production. The musical score is excellent - written by fourth-year B.Mus. student Larry Reese, who is already something of a musical name around the city at the age of 21. Some excellent, modern innovations in staging the production have been introduced by Director Mark Schoenberg.

There is strong acting from the group of four - Kathie Ball, Allan Lysell, Sheelah Megill and Scott Swann - but the male leads suffer from weak voices during the songs.

Kevin Gillese

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