

Arts & Entertainment



Playwright Arthur Milner will be in town to see his *Learning to Live With Personal Growth* performed at Workshop West Theatre.

Milner's political plays generate controversy

interview by Kevin Law

At home in Ottawa, Arthur Milner has gained quite a reputation as a producer of politically engaging plays that challenge audiences with evocative and complex issues, often leaving audiences arguing as they leave the theatre.

Now Milner's reputation is rapidly becoming recognized within the theatre community across the country, and his first western production is about to unfold at Workshop West Theatre.

Learning to Live with Personal Growth is a play much acclaimed in Ottawa where it was produced last year by the Great Canadian Theatre Company.

Milner concedes from his home in the nation's capital that this play, too, is no stranger to debate. "There was controversy in Ottawa about the character, where he went wrong and why," he says matter-of-factly. The play tells the story of a dissatisfied but idealistic social worker who finds his life changing dramatically when he starts making big money in an investment scheme.

While Milner rubs together such serious themes as personal needs versus social responsibility, it's not all academic polemics, as the play is full of ironic witticisms and some odd twists that are bound to help one reflect on the drama. However, he's quick to agree he offers no easy answers to the play's queries. Part of his intent is to

"get the audience to think and question values," he says. "People should be doing that all the time. Hopefully, (his plays) contribute to the process."

Milner's socio-political concern does not arise out of a need to expound a message; it's more personal. "What I do is I write plays that interest me, and they tend to be political subjects," Milner states, adding, "I have certain opinions and I research and learn about ideas I want to write about. I'm looking at more of an investigation on stage for myself."

Living in Ottawa, where politics are the lifeblood, is also not an element in Milner's playwriting. "I haven't written anything of political emphasis on Ottawa. It's not a factor," he said, going on to declare his neutral theatrical philosophy. "I have no formal beliefs about theatre. I don't talk about it in formal terms."

What is important to Milner, a man who admits to passion for intellectual theatre, is to "absorb what you write about; not develop a theory to justify playwriting." Milner most of all wants audiences to enjoy his play, which shouldn't be too hard, given that his politically engaged writing is also said to be complex, funny and entertaining.

For those who wish to meet Milner and continue the argument presented in *Learning to Live with Personal Growth*, he will be in Edmonton for Meet The Artist Night after the performance on Tuesday, January 17.

Hoffman shines in Rain Man

Rain Man ★★★½
Famous Players Garneau

review by Mike Spindloe

Rain Man has all the right brand names for success: Dustin Hoffman, Tom Cruise, director Barry Levinson and producer Mark Johnson. Add to this a good, old-fashioned heartwarming story and you've got a surefire recipe for a hit movie. Thus, *Rain Man* is, predictably enough, one of the best mainstream movies of the last year.

There are flaws in the plot to be sure. These mostly have to do with Tom Cruise's character, Charlie Babbitt, a wheeler and dealer who talks big but can't seem to deliver whatever merchandise it is he's

Tom Cruise ...the
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promising (in this case, four Lamborghinis). Charlie has a big problem. He needs to come up with \$80,000 immediately when his deal falls through. He could have been saved by an inheritance from his father, \$3 million to be exact, but because he hasn't contacted his father for years, the old man goes and leaves the whole bundle to his autistic savant brother, Raymond Babbitt (Dustin Hoffman).

Raymond has been institutionalized for most of his life; in fact, Charlie is unaware that Raymond is alive until his father's death brings Raymond's existence to light. Charlie feels that half of the inheritance belongs to him, so he hijacks Raymond from the care facility and heads for L.A. in their father's 1949 Buick, fully expecting the head of the institution, who is also the trustee of the estate, to knuckle under and

hand over what Charlie thinks is his share. Ironically, Charlie's share of the inheritance consists primarily of the car, which he once stole, resulting in the rift between him and his father.

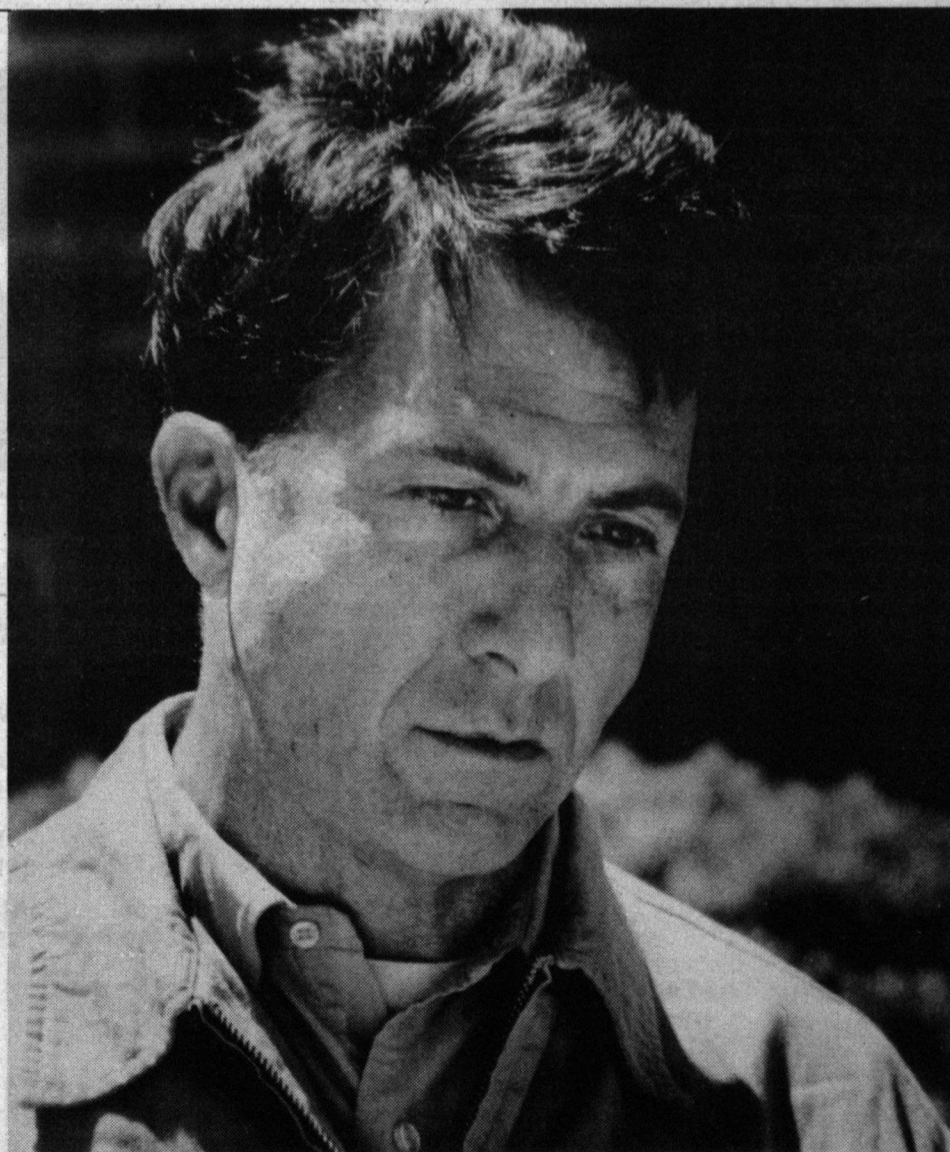
Charlie, we are shown, is not a nice person. In fact, his self-centredness is awesome in its intensity, and yet he is blissfully unaware of it. Raymond is high functional and yet still requires constant care and supervision. He also has an extraordinary ability to perform fast mental arithmetic and an uncanny memory for dates and events.

Tom Cruise, as Charlie, turns in a career performance as the scheming slime turned compassionate brother. It is easy to hate him at the beginning of the movie; by the end, you've forgiven everything. Well, almost. He first attempts to control Raymond by yelling at him, but soon discovers that patience and understanding are the only things that will work.

The real star, however, is Dustin Hoffman, who takes on perhaps the most challenging role of his long career and wins our hearts as Charlie. It is an unusual role because Hoffman has a limited range of speaking parts and so instead must convey Charlie through a complicated repertoire of gestures and mannerisms.

Most of the action takes place on Charlie and Raymond's six day cross-country odyssey. In that short time, Charlie seems to learn all there is to know about caring for someone with autism, while Raymond seems remarkably adaptable for someone who has spent 25 years or so in an institution. These two things, especially, stretch the believability of the plot, but not too much.

Perhaps the best scenes of the movie occur during the stopover in Las Vegas. Charlie realizes that Raymond's mathematical prowess will give him an edge at the blackjack tables; they end up winning so much money that they're asked to leave



Dustin Hoffman as the autistic savant Raymond Babbitt in *Rain Man*. He's so good that you forget it's really him.

town.

The only other character worth mentioning is Charlie's girlfriend, Susanna, played by Valeria Golino. She is absent from the journey, and thus from much of the movie, but she comes across well as the admirer of Charlie's bravado who is actually much more perceptive than he is.

Rain Man, in addition to being well

worth seeing for its characterizations and story, also has educational potential for those of us who have no contact with or knowledge of autistics. Hoffman's character is, admittedly, extremely high functional, with few if any disturbing physical quirks, but he comes across as a *person*, which is most important. Look for *Rain Man* to do well at the Oscars this year.