

Derek Mohamed orchestrates visions of urban chaos

arts
excilbur march 18, 1992

by Scott Duchesne

The warning reads like a promise: *extremely loud music, potentially disturbing themes, coarse language, smoking and strobe lights...* I was tempted, but sceptical. Would it deliver? Were we warned well enough?

The answer to both is a resounding yes. Derek Mohamed's *The Monster*, or *how to commute through the looking glass never world* is easily the most challenging and provocative student production of the 91/92 York theatre season.

You buy your ticket. A pushy usher herds you through a hall of mirrors. At the end of the tunnel, you are offered candy. As you find a seat, the smell of incense and cigarette smoke fills the space. You notice day-glo paintings lining the walls, illuminated by ultraviolet light, giving them a strange, hovering quality.

To one side is Random Killing, a rock band, the lead singer sitting in a contraption that might've come straight out of *The Road Warrior*. On the other side another musician (Bruce Russell) sits, surrounded by keyboards. He plays the ambient pre-show music.

THEATRE

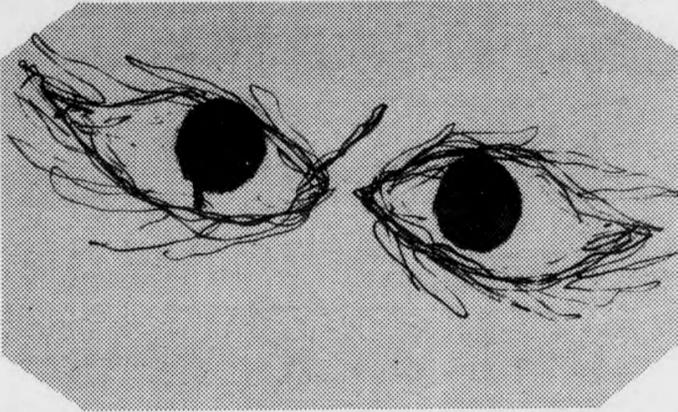
The Monster
written and directed by Derek Mohamed
starring John Ball and Krista Ellis
Centre for Film and Theatre
March 10

In the centre, two people stand on triangular blocks of wood slapping each other in slow motion. Russell's music is at first simple, low in the background. But with time it becomes increasingly complex and louder, an air raid siren blasts, the band begins and the show starts.

There can be no doubt. This is the never-world.

The Monster is a patchwork of monologues, scenes and songs which explores the decay of human interaction in the urban environment. In one section we follow Rob (Josh Ball) and Lynn (Jane Thompson), the couple who were slapping each other, from their first meeting to their relationship's eventual breakup after Rob admits to an affair.

Rob talks as well about his fear of the poles in subway cars (who touches them? Are they ever cleaned?). Lynn tells us about one wonderful rainstorm



she experienced as a child, although she is not able to describe it properly.

A particular highlight of this section is a scene where Rob and Lynn clasp arms and circle around a spotlight, arguing. As the discussion becomes increasingly heated, they circle faster, making less and less sense until they forget the point of the argument. This is a powerful symbol of what tears them apart.

Thompson's performance was enjoyable; Ball's work was not as satisfying. This section of the show was the least compelling and insightful.

The other sections, however, proved intriguing. The usher became the character X (Krista Ellis), a quasi-fascistic manifestation of the super-ego in leather knee-high pumps, who marched about and lectured us on the importance of rules and rule-following.

Ellis gave a remarkable performance as the symbol of a governing body's last-ditch effort to maintain order among the growing urban chaos; a chaos they more than likely had a hand in creating. Ellis showed depth by taking on the additional character of the Monster, a reluctant, red-nosed nervous version of Alice who forgets her cues and is expected to make the chess moves which moves the show as a whole along.

Peter Rintoul's performance was the highlight of the show. Rintoul is not only a superb poet with a sense of wordplay which defies description, but an actor with a tremendous grasp of the comic and the horrifying. His monologues left me breathless with laughter and awe.

One section had him playing a frustrated yuppie banker; another had him reading a poem like he was reading the riot act — moving slowly in a circle and tossing off pieces of paper a la Bob Dylan.

Random Killing kicked. Their brand of thrash/funk and blunt political lyrics provided a perfect bridge between scenes, reflecting the play's anger. Lead singer Drew played the narrator; his deep growling voice added an evil feel to the show (not to mention his face, covered in day-glo paint).

Bruce Russell's jazz piano and Philip Glass-like meditations proved a welcome contrast to Random Killing. Allison Watson, who carried a light and followed characters onstage, was an interesting addition. Her presence and occasional comments as a technician of the play to the characters, gave a subtle complexity to the show.

At the center of it all was Mohamed. His influences are eclectic, including Robert Lepage, Antonin Artaud and Richard Schechner, but he managed to mold them together, creating something entirely his own. His role in the show as "the Playwright" and his work with a slide projector made him a constant presence. His one monologue was sensitive and moving.

When the show ended, the lights up and the band playing, I wanted to dance. After a bellyful of "official" shows from the Theatre Department made up mainly of Brecht and Shakespeare, there was finally a show that spoke of the here-and-now, that presented events and ideas we might care about.

DancEast Young Company is special

by Ira Nayman

When I think of dance, I think of women destroying their feet bouncing around on their toes in tight, constricting slippers. A dance company has to be pretty darned special to make me forget that the beauty of the movement can have a crippling cost.

Atlantic Canada's DancEast Young Company is that special. And then some.

Primal Dance, the program DancEast brought to the Burton Auditorium on Friday, March 6, was made up primarily of modern dance works. It was a joyous celebration of the grace of the human form in motion.

Choreographer Daniel Albert's "Flipside," the opening number, started with four dancers in white and four dancers in black mingling. As dancers moved on and off the stage (the number eventually used the talents of the entire 13-member company), patterns of black and white were created with geometric precision.

An excerpt from renowned Toronto choreographer Danny Grossman's *Ecce Homo* followed. (The company had actually worked with Grossman earlier in its week-long stay in Toronto.) The three featured dancers (Stefanie and Rebecca Mendoza and Manon Boudreau) alternated between graceful movements and humorous body-building poses. As with most of the pieces, the company made full use of Burton Auditorium's large thrust stage.

The highlight of the first act was "Celebration:" eight dancers in black twirled blue and green coloured tubes on a dark stage. The effect, not unlike

DANCE

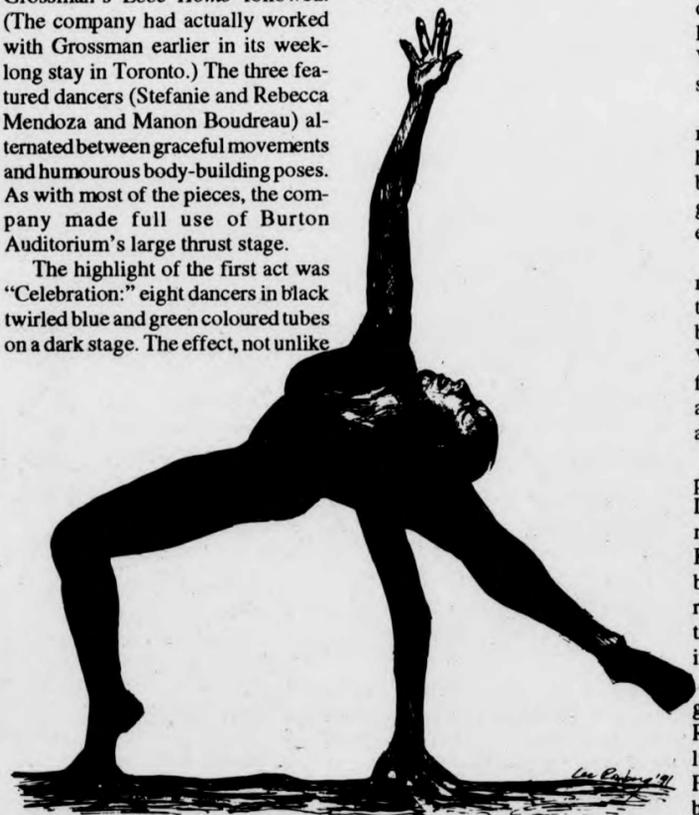
Primal Dance
DancEast Young Company
Burton Auditorium
Friday, March 6

a laser show, was the impression that the light itself was dancing. "Celebration" was an excellent reminder that modern dance encompasses a wide variety of styles.

The pieces after the intermission were more traditional, including the blue skirts and slippers of Robert McCollum's classical "Chaconne." A potentially embarrassing moment when a dancer lost one of her shoes during this piece was expertly handled by the performers, who didn't miss a beat.

The show ended with a series of dances set to gospel tunes, which featured a lot of high-stepping, head-turning and skirt-twirling. As with the music, the dancing was by turns reverential and sensuous.

I found the scene changes took too long, allowing the audience's attention to wander slightly. But that is a minor quibble.



DancEast is a non-profit organization. Tax-deductible contributions can be sent to: DancEast Foundation Incorporated, 8 Broadview Avenue, Moncton, New Brunswick, E1C 8P9. Based on the Young Company's wonderful performance at York, they deserve our support.

Total Eclipse creates magic on the stage

by Josh Marans

Magic is rarely created on stage. Magic is that intangible ability of a play to both touch and affect its audience on some emotional level (without multi-million dollar sets, I might add). Karimal productions' presentation of *Total Eclipse* has this magic.

The play is about the historic love affair between nineteenth-century French poets Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine, and their destructive dependency on each other.

Andrew Brinks is fantastic as Verlaine. His character's evolution is beautifully handled; we see him change from an old man to a young lover as he remembers his life. Verlaine becomes the object of our sympathy as he loses everything.

Theo Ward is magnetic, commanding attention while on stage. He has the power to make the audience believe he is this young and arrogant genius, Arthur Rimbaud, who can easily control Verlaine.

It is hard to tell who is using whom more — if Verlaine is using Rimbaud to recapture his youth and become a better poet, or if Rimbaud is using Verlaine for attention, sex and money for alcohol. Whatever the case, these actors have excellent chemistry, creating a believable gay relationship.

Heli Kivilaht gave another notable performance. She played both Maute De Fleurville, a submissive wife, ideal mother and aristocrat, and Eugenie Krantz, best described as a common, bawdy wench, something I didn't realize until I read the program after the show. She was totally believable in both parts.

The rest of the company was also good, with the notable exception of Richard Baccari, who was so unbelievable as Monsieur Maute De Fleurville that I doubt he himself believed he was that character. He

THEATRE

Total Eclipse
directed by Stafford Arima
written by Christopher Hampton
TSP Studio Theatre

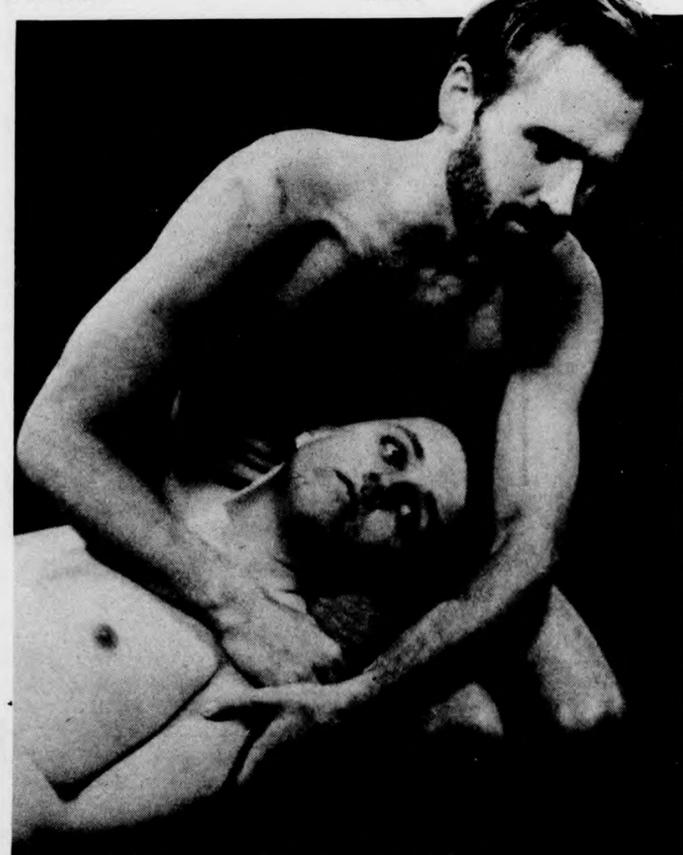
carried so much padding that, in the first few scenes, he looked more pregnant than his daughter.

The set was remarkable, changing dramatically under the lights. It lent itself well to Verlaine's shifting memories.

Stephen Dirkes' original score for the play was highly effective. When Verlaine stabbed him, the music made the scene all the more twisted and dramatic.

Christopher Hampton, best known for his Oscar-winning screenplay for *Dangerous Liaisons*, has woven a great story. This is an excellent production of the kind of play you should see once in your life.

Total Eclipse may be extended a week; contact the theatre for confirmation.



Andrew Brinks (right) plays Paul Verlaine and Theo Ward plays Arthur Rimbaud in Christopher Hampton's *Total Eclipse*, directed by Stafford Arima. The acting is superb, and the production works well — it's magic on stage. • photo by Richard Ambrose