

this week at 8:30

Studio Theatre's latest offering, *Tonight at 8:30*, is a diverting exercise in nostalgia. It should have been more than merely nostalgic. Coward's work still retains a kind of crispness and an eye for the absurd. In the three short plays director Tarver has chosen to make up the evening's entertainment, Noel Coward casts his jaundiced eye on three institutional bastions of the Empire. They are the hen-pecked British husband with dreams of the South Seas, the colonial country club, and the English Music Hall.

In *Fumed Oak* it is Glenn Roddie as Henry Gow who is chaffing at the bit. In two scenes Coward gives us first the quintessence of Henry Gow's fifteen years in his own particular hell. A domineering wife, a witless child, and the calamitous presence of a mother-in-law are the ties that bind Henry to hearth and home. In the second act Henry Gow performs his rite of passage in announcing his imminent desertion. He tells them all off and then, his courage bolstered from having placed his foot firmly over the threshold of his dream, marches off into oblivious freedom.

This play is simply an elaborate variation on a small joke. There is a risk that such material can be reduced to the trivial level unless the director finds the tiny moments of laughter that exist within the script. To this end, director Ben Tarver was a flat failure. Seemingly panicked by a lack of "funny" lines, he has relied greatly on a visual gag structure to keep the play bubbling. Consequently, there is a frenzy about the pace and a jack-in-the-box quality about the manner in which the cast is constantly bobbing up and down at the slightest cue. What has been lost is Coward's wit. There is a way of turning a line, of dropping it, of understating it, that lets loose the hidden implications that lie beneath the facile structure of words. Wit depends greatly on the manner in which it is spoken, certainly much more so than it does on what is actually being said in the words themselves.

A lack of relish for the wittiness of Coward's urbane tale and an overfondness for compositional manipulation reduced *Fumed Oak* to little more than a pleasant grouping of characterizations. Glenn Roddie was a reasonably splendid personification of a middle-aged hosiery store salesman striking out on his own at last. A greater range of elation might have been hoped for, but a slave can't be expected to grab at vengeance with draconian flair; immediately he tastes of freedom. Dene Bristol was a good foil as Doris, the wife. She lost her conviction only when faced with a rebellious husband. Flabbergasted, she was reduced to popping her mouth like a feeding goldfish. Ironically, such a gesture is not ridiculous nor is such a gesture more caricature than in character. By this time, however, Miss Bristol seemed to be going through the motions. There was a certain lack of seriousness about her character that dissipated the comic premise of the scene. Lorraine Behnan, as the daughter, made it easy to understand how a father can hate his child for being a snivelling brat. Suzannah Urban was captivating as mother-in-law

Rockett. There were fine characterizations all around, it just seemed that they were all in the wrong play.

The second play, *We Were Dancing*, was even more dedicated to wit. Setting his cast in the sophisticated and refined air of the Country Club at Somolo, Coward plays off the idea of English Gentlemen calmly discussing their affairs of adultery and desertion. There are lovers and beloveds, cuckolds and adulteresses, all in proportion and they all get along just splendidly thank yew. Paul Kelman handles his lines well and has some measure of Coward's kind of humour. Jean-Pierre Fournier has wit and splendid witlessness as the spiffy British officer, cuckold Major Blake. Steve Walsh, as Charteris, handles himself with a deceptive understatement which causes him to fade out of the scene. He manages his timing quite well and as the catalytic agent to the scene he gives it backbone with a

stiff grace. Debbie Skelton sparkles as Louise Charteris, the other half of the inciting romantic moment. Lorraine Behnan is quite brisk as the intrusive Clara Bethal.

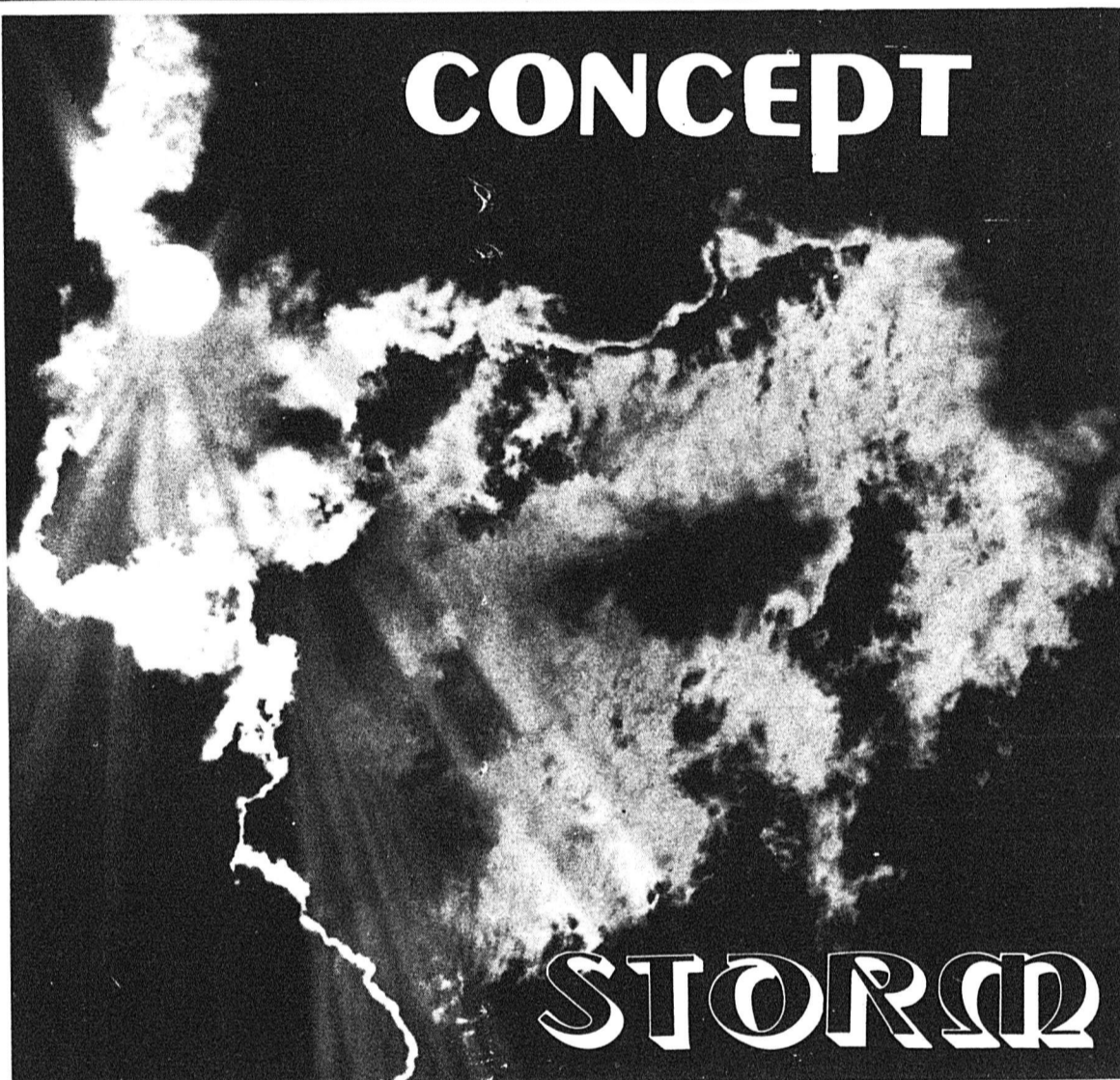
In *We Were Dancing*, Ben Tarver has once again relied on moving people about to carry his material. He does this with a lesser inclination towards unseemly haste; he is admirably helped by the choreography of Wallace Seibert. I really don't like dance numbers but there was little doubt that Seibert's work has flair and effective charm.

Red Peppers concentrated on the lowly life of the English Music Hall performer. Brian Webb and Debbie Skelton did the honours as the dance- and -joke act of The Red Peppers.

Their scene in the backstage dressing room of the Palace of Varieties had a better balance than their dance sequences. They're tough trouper artistes on the way down, bouncing up for another crack at fame and fortune. There was a lack of clarity in their dance numbers that was unjustifiable. True, they are *supposed* to be second-rate artistes, but one couldn't hear their jokes, however bad they may have intentionally been. Larry Zacharko wrung a good deal out of his part as bandleader Bently. It was a fine example of capitalizing on a small part. Jacque Paulin, Suzannah Urban, and Jean-Pierre Fournier all made *something* out of their parts. In this play there was a refreshing lack of the stiltedness

that stalked the first two plays: the informality seemed to have unleashed an energy more genuine than directed in the performers.

Ben Tarver's direction demonstrated a lack of real affinity for Coward. His work smacked more of American burlesque than of the English Music Hall. While the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they were simply not the right ingredients in this case. What does exist to a useful end is a case of haste which may have sped by some of the more vacant moments but at least it made the emptiness less noticeable. Tarver's faith in his actors has resulted in some rather marvellous characterizations which are a pleasure to watch in themselves.



half-breed

The Metis, halfbreeds and non-status Indians, are truly Canada's "forgotten people." Not only are they forgotten, they are ignored, ignored by the Federal Government and the Provincial Governments of this, the second richest country in the world. These outcasts of society were the voyageurs, explorers and the hunters who together with their Indian brothers, made possible the opening of the North American continent. And their reward has been to become this country's most deprived people in terms of health, education, housing, income and civil rights. From this impoverished environment comes Maria Campbell—a thirty-three year old Metis whose pride in her culture and her heritage has motivated her to write HALFBREED, the story of her life. Her purpose: to give the halfbreeds a face and a name, and to show how

important they were to Canada's history in spite of the neglect of history and of politicians today. Through her own life, Maria vividly projects a halfbreeds' social and political oppression, and yet at the same time, captures the halfbreeds' joys and contributions.

This Canadian of Scottish-Indian origin had a childhood filled with poverty and poetry, literature and love, and over all of this, the ever-present understanding of a sage great-grandmother whose spirit helped sustain Maria throughout her troubled life. A full-blooded Cree, grandmother Cheechum, niece of Gabriel Dumont, spied on her own white trade husband for Louis Riel and eventually outlived her spouse by three generations.

Protected by Cheechum's love and wisdom, Maria didn't know what shame and degradation were until her formal education began at the age of nine. Surrounded by white children who enjoyed stable, carefully prepared lunches, her fried gophers and bannock only added to the

separation of white and halfbreed society. She began to lose pride in her people. Tragic incidents led her, at fifteen, into marriage in a hopeless attempt to keep her six motherless brothers and sisters together. The welfare authorities stepped in, separated those most precious to her and it shattered her. Fleeing to Vancouver, Maria sought solace in alcohol, drugs and prostitution, and slowly her fond memories of Cheechum, Cleopatra and Shakespeare disappeared into a cruel reality.

Alcoholics Anonymous was the answer, coupled with Maria's own undaunted spirit. She picked herself up, worked at everything possible — from housemaid to hairdresser — and changed her way of life. She became a political activist in the native rights movement, only to be fired from community work for being "too radical".

HALFBREED is Maria's outlet. She wanted to scream out her frustrations and anger and has produced a story of a young halfbreed's struggle to maintain her right to life and dignity.

"I believe that one day, very soon, people will set aside their differences and come together as one. Maybe not because we love one another, but because we need each other to survive. Then, together, we will fight our common enemies."

