

omewhat slivery diet

Another play, another meal

by Alan Filewod

Prisoner of Second Avenue (playing at Stage West Feb. 6)

Critics Despondency

ere I not versed, to some in the drama and the art stage, my response to West would be more jovial.

West is a business adjunct prosperous motel. In any enterprise in the arts, economic considerations are subordinate to the more pressing needs of profit-making, and West is no exception.

is not surprising they have with generally favourable response amongst reviewers, for West knows how to

er the critic. the course of the evening, lavishly fed, entertained in an inoffensive, if mediocre introduced to the star, and with drink.

ew critics are so crass to associate with an automatic notice, but Stage West management creates such an atmosphere of comfort and good

g, that the critic leaves with a quieting sense of obligation. The play in this case was *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, and the celebrity was Shelly Berman.

uch could be said about the star and vehicle, but the use would be pointless. No one is overly concerned

the dramatic faults of Neil's pretentious comedy, Berman's considerable shortcomings as an actor.

Stage West is more of a club than a theatre. The audience, predominant-ly middle-aged and affluent, expecting to laugh, and by time they have wallowed in Stage West's plentiful

h that expectation has

become crystallized into resolve. The audience's reaction to Berman's performance invites comment on the alienation of art in our society.

There was no surprise or astonishment in that performance. The audience paid for an after-dinner amusement, and they wanted laughs, and they got them.

The play concerns a middle-aged New York executive, who suffers from male menopause. Into this melodramatic situation, Simon introduced farcical elements: the man loses his job, his analyst dies, and his apartment is burglarized.

The first line of the play is "Christ Almighty."

Berman delivered that one line (no real comic value), after an extended pause full of gag gestures and silent groans.

Now, Berman may not be an actor, but he is a disciplined comedian, and the line was delivered with restraint. Later, in a gratuitous monologue, Berman made a few routine jokes about Edmonton, snow, critics, (he isn't fond of us), and his family.

He went on to compare the actor-audience relationship to a love affair, and assured the audience that they had been "very good lovers." (The obvious comment about the actor's status in that affair is best left unsaid.)

Caveat Emptor:

For \$13.50, the price of admission to Stage West, the consumer can eat and drink to his heart's content and be a star's distant lover.

On the face of it, the price is reasonable enough, but in real terms, what does the price buy? For a similar amount one can enjoy a modest meal and catch the latest show at the Citadel, right?

Ah, but that overlooks Stage

Love Affair, continued from page 12

acceptable to a large audience. This may be regarded as a narrow view when it is considered to the divergent musical of the seventies. Yet these highly subjective products, seem almost inexplicable to the artist.

is difficult to compare the two distinct approaches of performers. He has almost the sophistication and awareness of Brian Ferry, lacks the dramatic grace and intensity of the latter. One must be in mind that few can warble as sweetly as the gentleman of Roxy Music. Furey attempts to reach the higher end, but his voice is defined by a mess. It scrapes like the sound of dry toast.

Perhaps for simple idiosyncrasies Furey may be placed in a league with Lou Reed. Both seem to hopelessly entangle the banal and mundane, the vile and malevolent with naive conceptions of ideal love and affection. The odd juxtaposition of overt sentimentality and profane never fail to amuse. Two seem to dwell on a

complex hatred of each other complicated by illusions they might reach a peaceful state. Indeed there is something wrong with happiness, for it should not easily be had. Lewis Furey's *Poetic Young Man* is a song with a strong tone of self-inflicted scorn.

The world vision of Furey and Reed is often a grave and cynical one, yet never lacking in a speck of hope. Both enjoy gossip and unfair references to others in their songs. Reed especially is fond of a slanderous tone. Often a direct message addressed to each other is present and this appears in *Romance* in letter form.

The Humours of Lewis Furey is an album which hopes to offer the impression of a developing character, a cosmopolitan artist with a learned conception of life. At times this expectation detracts from the work. When one reads advertisement hype one can't help but be influenced by it. To appreciate the album one must overcome the initial blatancy of the first play and discover more with later listenings.

West's second major attraction, the buffet. I counted less than the advertised twenty-one seafood dishes, and the table relied too much on salads. Buffets are deceptive arrangements, often disguising lack of quality behind plentiful and decorative fillers, and this seemed to be true of Stage West's meal. But the food can be justified by its portion of the ticket price. As it is with the stage, so it is with the table, and another art becomes reduced to commodity economics: it's all you can eat for seven bucks.

Obviously, this system has enough appeal to keep Stage West in the black. Everything can be rationalized by the luxury of experience.

There is strong temptation to dismiss Stage West as harmless; indeed, some might say, it serves a useful purpose by supplying work to local actors, and attracting new audiences to the theatre.

These facts are often presented as apologies. While it

is true that Stage West draws its supporting cast from local talent, and pays union wages, it does not provide good working conditions.

A good production requires a well-rehearsed cast, if not a gifted ensemble, but the economics of Stage West preclude intensive rehearsal. Like a 19th century romantic lead, the star descends upon the locals with his performance fixed in mind, and the supporting cast does little more than fill in the blanks. In Berman's case, he rehearsed less than a week with this cast.

As to the second point, there is cause to argue that instead of developing audiences, Stage West performs for a social group which sees little other theatre. In fact, Stage West unconsciously promotes a sterile concept of what should be a fine art.

Stage West is a unique phenomenon in Canada, a similar offshoot folded in Vancouver. The idea is popular in the

United States, especially in the south-west, where a franchised chain of dinner-theatres has met with great financial success.

There are two questions which must be asked about the dinner-theatre business: why is it more popular in regional centres, as opposed to the major cultural centres and what function does it perform in a community that has no real alternative to middle-of-the-road theatre?

One Last Vignette

At the press reception, which attracted a large number of hangers-on and very few reporters, Berman was mobbed by wave upon wave of well-wishers, who introduced themselves and their respective charms in odd accents. Across the room, bodies shrouded in mink attacked deep-fried shrimp with toothpicks. Above the clamour, Berman's guffaw rang clear. He had a reprieve for every occasion, and as the evening wore on, he was still on stage.



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