

Comedy reinterpreted

by Harbinger Bliss

It seems the precedent has been set. Again a touring drama company has given an interpretation of Shakespeare unlike any this city has ever seen.

Last year it was the NDWT Co. with their version of *Hamlet* — featuring a Prince of Denmark who spoke his crucial line as though it were: "To be or not to be — what a jilly question!" For all its inanity, it was a brilliant starting, if not one in line with the standard interpretation of Shakespeare. Innovation of the kind brought here by the NDWT Co. easily is rewarding enough to offset the shock accompanying it.

Shock and innovation were paramount last Friday in the National Shakespeare Company's performance of *The Comedy of Errors*. Rather than turning the interpretation on its head the way the NDWT Co. did a year ago, the National Company took lines of the play, and, by applying a marvellous ductility of directing and acting, spun them into an absurdity and hilarity far beyond the obvious.

In the National Company's production, the lines weren't read straight. For instance, in reply to "Perhaps she's a shrew," the lines "She doesn't look shrewish," was delivered to imply "She doesn't look Jewish." Quite irrelevant — but very funny.

Another one: a man is called a donkey — how does he reply? By reciting a poem to the effect that yes, he is a donkey and longs for grass — which is followed by a leering cigarette suck of the kind often heard at pot parties. These asides are weeds in the action, but quite in keeping with a play whose only purpose is to entertain mightily.

The play was set in the 1920's, rather than Elizabethan times, which afforded even more latitude for the Company's antics. They did, however, violate their obligation to the author by injecting two lines not to be found by the closest perusal of the text: "Drop it sweetheart, or I'll make your sister an only child! (as a gangster-style escape is made with machine-gun in hand) "Keep 'em cover-ed!"

Occasionally this sort of licence degenerated into slapstick, with altogether too many bodies flying and rolling across the stage, but there's no doubt it was the vaudeville aura which made the play such a crazy success.



Mad antics are the rule in vaudeville Shakespeare production.

photo Grant W...

Superstars attack apartheid

by Shirley Glew

The Tanzania Superstars Theatre Ensemble presented *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, a play depicting the life of black South Africans under apartheid, Saturday and Sunday at the Centennial Library Theatre. The ensemble consists of two actors, Franklin Mziray and Emmanuel Mkusa, Theatre Arts Students at the University of Dar-es-Salaam and Saad Sulemani an Electrical Engineering student, the lighting and set engineer.

The group has made a whirlwind tour playing Toronto, Winnipeg, Calgary and two runs in Edmonton, in the past two weeks. Franklin Mziray explained the main purpose of the tour is to use the dramatic medium to increase awareness in this country of the reality of the black situation in South Africa. In an informal discussion after the presentation, members of the audience, white South Africans who have since left that country, corroborated as to the accuracy of the scenes depicted.

The play was written by Athol Fugard, a white South African, with two co-creators, John Kani and Winston Ntshonea. The latter are native South Africans who have only recently been released from prison after being detained by South African police "because of alleged satirical allusions in the script of *Sizwe Bansi* to independence for the homeland." This original cast toured South Africa and played an extended run in London and on Broadway.

The play is presented with minimal sets and only two actors one of whom depicts two characters. Sizwe Bansi is a young man who comes from Bantustan, a South African equivalent of a Canadian Indian Reserve, to an industrial city to look for work to support his wife and four children. The plot revolves around the "reference book" which all black South Africans must carry at all times and produce upon demand. Due to a trifling offence, Sizwe's reference book is stamped that he must return to his homeland — a virtual sentence to unemployment. The mood of the play is very intimate and immediate as Sizwe and his friend agonize over

their lack of control over their lives in the face of racist white bureaucrats. The two characters in the play are very convincingly developed and the almost constant use of humor throughout tends to accentuate the seriousness of the theme. It underlines the basic humanity of Sizwe and his friend, as the victims of depersonalized authority which they will never get power to sway.

The dilemma is resolved when the two discover the murdered body and transfer Sizwe's picture to the man's reference book, thus allowing him to remain in the city and work, at least as long as he can remain clear of the authorities. A very tenuous victory won at the expense of renouncing his personal identity.

The whole play underlines the humanity of Sizwe's character and is a potent, effective argument against racial prejudice of any kind, not only the particularly harsh, restrictive version of apartheid practised in South Africa.



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