

Theatre

Lots of fun and games in *Bartholomew Fair*

Bartholomew Fair
Studio Theatre
Run ends April 9

review by Elaine Ostry

Studio Theatre offers the audience a varied fare of fun in *Bartholomew Fair*. The production really has the air of a rollicking fair, where anything goes.

The plot is too complicated to explain, but not difficult to follow. Basically, two upper class families go to the fair, which is a profane place full of cut purses, whores and peddlars. It is Bartholomew Cokes who leads the two families to the fair, because it carries his name.

What is wonderful about this play is that although it lasts about three and a half hours, it is not boring. Most plays, at about the halfway mark, reach a point when you feel you can safely fall asleep for a while and not miss anything. This was not the case with *Bartholomew Fair*.

Jonson's dialogue is sprinkled with witty one-liners, and the situations are funny because very different people are constantly brought together. This play requires a huge cast of strong character actors, and this production met this demand with great ensemble acting.

Some performances in particular stand out. Stephen Sparks' John Littlewit is sweetly prim and unwittingly charming. Bartholomew Cokes (Glen Wallis) has the same unconscious wit as the beautiful but stupid man. He buys up the fair, hobbyhorses and all, and gets everything stolen from him, even his hat and cloak.

John Hudson is hilarious as the Puritan, Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, who hates the fair. But he goes to it to eat pork, in order to show his "hate for Judaism." He looks like a grey and black duck, waving his arms wrapped in oversized sleeves in righteous fury. The Puritan is particularly funny when he argues with a puppet on the morality of the puppet show.

The characters at the fair are as slimy as Bartholomew Cokes is naive. Jordan Knockem (Shaun Johnston) has a dangerous charm, especially when he seduces the innocent Win Littlewit. Darren O'Donnell plays the cutpurse Edgeworth with a flourish and a sly wink.

Edgeworth's counterpart in crime, Nightingale, sings songs while Edgeworth cuts purses. Simon Lacey gives this character the air of a hippy, cool and amused. Karen Cogan is good as Ursula the Pig Woman, who looks and acts like a pig. Her booth at the fair is the centre of crime.

Lantern Leatherhead, a hobby horse seller, is played with energy by Kevin Hare. "What is' ye lack?" he calls to passersby, fighting with Joan Trash the gingerbread seller for customers. He learns his puppets through an obscene puppet show of the story of Hero and Leander with impish wit.

There are lots of other players who lend the play interest: the strongman, the fortune-teller, the belly dancer, the jugglers...

The whole cast builds up the big scenes, such as the puppet show, with finesse. The direction is skillful, keeping the pace at a quick clip and eliciting strong performances



Battles galore in *Bartholomew Fair*.

Photo Paul Menzies

even from the most minor characters.

The costuming and the music add colour to the bare-bones set. Modern elements are mixed into the play. Dan Knockem wears an Iron Maiden shirt, and Nightingale wears orange-flair pants from the 70's while singing to electronic music. But these details compliment rather than distract from the play.

The actors give *Bartholomew Fair* a great

perfect. He laments the Canadian tendency to fractionalize theatre. Boretski feels there is too much centralism within regions so that "Vancouver theatre, Edmonton theatre, Toronto theatre" become microcosms, more concerned with themselves than the arts as a national whole.

"Why hire a good actor from Edmonton and pay airfare when you can hire someone from Toronto, even if he's not the best for the role there?" Boretski asks. Boretski admits regional distance is part of the problem, yet he is concerned about the loss of cohesion in theatre. "Awards too, seem to pit professional people against each other," he says.

Boretski's severest criticism was aimed at theatre administration, which he feels should stick to the fund-raising capacity they were meant for and remain separate from the creative side of theatre. "It's unfortunate," he says, "that they bring their corporate attitude with them. They're not humanistic toward the profession. There is very little relevance from Boards of Governors for the actors and the people behind the scenes of a play." "They're not in awe of the profession," Boretski claims. "I think they should bring a real and genuine respect for the people the audience will ultimately come to see." To him, the business mentality has no place in Canadian theatre. "We're not Broadway and I don't think we need to be Broadway in a business sense where a million dollars can be spent on one production. It somehow makes the theatre less important."

Boretski returns to problems at the professional level by drawing comparisons to European theatre where "great theatre companies are companies. This seems to be missing in Canadian theatre in the strangest way." Here, he feels, everybody specializes and puts up barriers.

"This doesn't happen in Europe," he says, remembering his time spent there. "There is more input between the lowest and the highest. Actors, directors, designers, they all have input; they all make a contribution." For them, contribution becomes more important than money, and Boretski found this was especially true in socialist countries.

For Boretski, nobility in theatre arts is synonymous with idealism. "I think that idealism gets bruised and beaten to a pulp in this country in our profession. It's hard to try to maintain and preserve ideals with all the crassness in administration and having to do commercials to pay the rent and whatnot. And yet I don't see why anyone would want to come into the profession without the ideals that surround it."

It is not only hard to maintain ideals in the face of professional and administrative pol-

deal of energy that is contagious. They have a lot of fun, and so does the audience. The care-free atmosphere of the fair is carried into the lobby, in which popcorn and cotton candy is served.

The entire experience of *Bartholomew Fair* features great acting, interesting situations and a humorous script. Best of all, it lends the mood of a fair to end all fairs.

But public criticism of subsidized arts does not help either. "Tax payers don't seem to realize their taxes preserve the arts," Boretski says, "they seem to resent it."

When speaking of Olivier and Leigh, his fellow actors in *Titus Andronicus*, Boretski's eyes light up. "I've had many a dinner out on the numerous stories I can tell," he claims. His praise for them is high. "They were giants in the theatre, yet as such they were human. I've never known two stars who were more compassionate, generous, thoughtful, and kind in my entire life. I remember their wonderful treatment of everyone around them." Boretski considered them able to cope with the discord of theatrical politics. "They somehow managed to avoid getting into that realm and lived a richer life for it," he says.

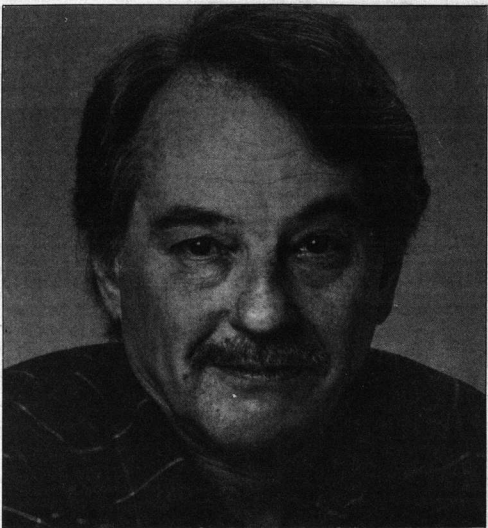
Says Boretski about Hollywood: "I could never assimilate the idea I was working in an industry. I learned you don't go to Hollywood without being invited, so I returned with my tail between my legs." That said, Boretski applauded the CBC for their superb ability. "I have nothing but the highest praise for CBC. To inform, to entertain — in this they have done a much better job than anyone else."

Boretski's present project is *The Road to Mecca* to be performed at Citadel's Rice Theatre, a play by South African playwright Athol Fugard. Boretski considers it "an enormous challenge for the people involved. It is a most important play and certainly a definitive one in universality. There is no direct condemnation of South African politics."

The play revolves around Frugard's central character Helen Niemand, an eccentric widow who creates original sculptures, and her friendship with a young female social worker. Boretski plays a Dutch Reform minister, a "Dominee," the Afrikaaner word for a pastor.

The character "is a diehard through his upbringing and in his belief in faith," Boretski says. He sees his character as a fascist on the defensive. "But I try not to make him one-dimensional," he declares. Such characterizations are hard for him however. "I'm humanistic," he asserts, "so when I encounter a hardened, narrow character I find it difficult to form because I'm open to life and experience."

But difficult roles do not deter him, and his personal philosophy reflects integrity in his approach to acting. For Boretski, one's professional intention should be to "get on with creating roles, satisfying needs; to be as honest and truthful with playwrights as you can and reach a plateau where you feel satisfied as an actor."



Peter Boretski has acted with the likes of Olivier.

Boretski on money and art

interview by Kevin Law

To Peter Boretski, acting is an emotive process involving both the actor and the audience. "To be an entertainer; to make them laugh and make them cry — that's where satisfaction comes from," he says with a warm smile.

Considered one of Canada's finest character actors, Peter Boretski's credits are prolific. He recently completed a Canadian tour of the one-man show, *Einstein*, which he performed over 200 times to much critical acclaim. Beginning his career with the Stratford Festival, Boretski appeared in such Shakespearean fare as *Henry V* and *Merry Wives of Windsor*. He toured Europe with Sir

Laurence Olivier and Vivian Leigh in *Titus Andronicus* and he has appeared in London's West End in *A View From The Bridge*.

Boretski has done much work in Canadian television as well, producing and directing *Quentin Durgins, M.P.*, *Mary of Scotland* and other projects for CBC television drama. He was also a regular in CBC's sitcom *King of Kensington* and was nominated for an ACTRA award for his role as Treflus, the diamond merchant in CBC's *Charlie Grant's War*. His most recent work for CBC was in *Chasing Rainbows*, a 14-hour miniseries set in Montreal during the Roaring Twenties.

Our small talk turned to theatre, of which Peter Boretski has many strong opinions. For him, the state of Canadian theatre is less than