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Scholarship Application Seminar

Wednesday October 4th

Myer Horowitz Theatre

3:00 to 5:00 p.m.



Shakespeare Doggishly Delightful

interview by Kevin Law

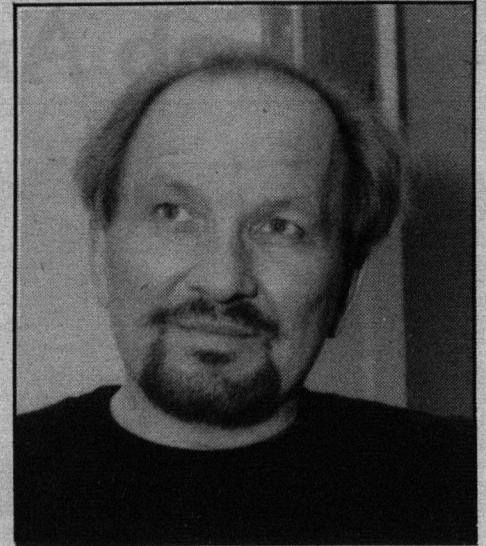
Workshop West Theatre opens its season this week with a doggish fantasy adopted from Leon Rooke's award winning novel *Shakespeare's Dog*, and according to Michael Murdock, who plays Hooker, William Shakespeare's canine companion, the play promises to be a rolling, rollicking good time.

At the rehearsal facility, Murdock is relaxed, perchance tired from a long day's rehearsal. He is reticent to speak on certain subjects, mainly his fifteen years' involvement at the University as an instructor in the drama department. When talk turns to the present play he is engaged in, his eyes light up, and he speaks more readily of what is involved in the production and what it means to him.

Rooke's novel humourously speculates on Shakespeare's less than idyllic life before he went to London to write his plays. "He had this marriage with Anne Hathaway, and it was a stagnant situation," Murdock explains. "So he had this wonderful relationship with his dog, Hooker, the part I play. He's a dog to beat all dogs, and he gets Will (Shakespeare) to be true to his conscience, to be honest with himself, and he ultimately helps Will to have the courage to leave Stratford and go to London and be a big success, because he's kind of stagnating and suffocating in Stratford."

Murdock promises the play will be very bawdy and earthy with much high level poetry in it, a lot like Shakespeare's plays. In fact, Murdock says, "without being cutesy or satirical, you see all kinds of wonderful glimpses of the great parts of Shakespeare's plays in this." Not only will there be poetic dialogue, but much action too. "The play's spirited action will be bountiful, including dog fights, love-making, and familial crises.

One suspects that such physical animation is more than nominally grinding for the characters that play dogs. Many of the characters in the play are dogs, says Murdock, and it's a real athletic challenge. "I jog seven miles a day, but that's a piece of cake compared to this." Instead of crawling around on all



Shakespeare's Dog, Michael Murdock

fours, Murdock explains that the actors who portray dogs in the play wear polio crutches for the front legs so that their canine stature will be equal. He also describes the costumes as "elaborate and beautifully built; they're not masks."

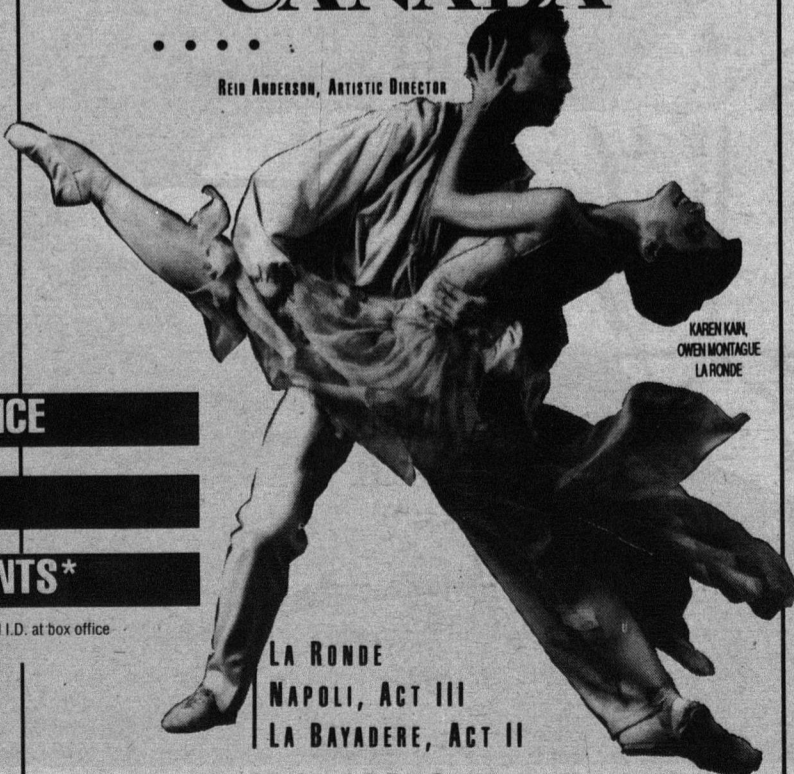
One also wonders how dog and master communicate. The dogs speak amongst themselves, says Murdock, and there is apparently much head nodding toward master Will on Hooker's part. But make no mistake, Hooker is no dumb dog, for it is Hooker who finally persuades Will to go to Holinshed chronicles (a history of England that had been compiled by Elizabethan printer Raphael Holinshed), for that's where all the material was for Shakespeare's history plays.

"So Hooker," Murdock emphasizes with a chuckle, "is a very erudite, educated dog. There's wonderful humor in the play; it's whimsical, it's a lark, but there's some very serious, wonderful insights by having fun this way. You end up with a whole new perspective on what a miracle it was that Shakespeare did in such a short time, and it also helps you consider the human side of the man."

"I love theatre that lifts people, that is fun and an escape, but makes people think," Murdock says in a final offering on theatre in general. If that perspective applies to *Shakespeare's Dog*, and it would seem to apply according to this inside actor's viewpoint, then this new Workshop West offering should prove to be doggishly delightful.

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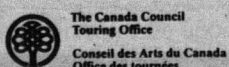
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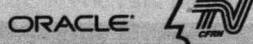
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Crucible Critiqued

continued from p 8

aching pathos to the exchange between herself and her husband. Mitchell lifts Hughes to the level of performance he should have presented from the dimming of the house-lights.

The most exceptional performance is given by William Webster who treads the stage with such authority and confidence that he saves the play in Act III. His Deputy Governor

...there should certainly be a crackling sensual tension in the air...

is a compelling presence, fairly screaming with hypocrisy and the egomaniacal self-importance of the opportunistic politician/interpreter of law. Webster's characterization serves as a direct and unimpeachable challenge to the other actors to match and maintain his intensity.

Other fine performances are delivered by Susan Coyne, as Mary Warren, and Albert Schultz, as Reverend Hale. Hale's horror as he realizes he has, in fact, been an accessory to murder instead of a delivering minister of justice is well portrayed by Schultz, and Warren's dull naivete is clearly depicted by Coyne.

There are some very peculiar directorial choices in this production. Within the context of this play, the explicit sexual suggestiveness between Proctor and Abigail Williams, played

by Liz Brown, seems oddly incongruous. Though there should certainly be a crackling sensual tension in the air whenever the two are confined together, I cannot accept that Proctor would allow himself to be pawed, as he does in Act I, or that he would thrust his hand up Abigail's skirt to prove she is a harlot, as he does in Act III. In this case, Phillips seems to have abdicated his duty or misunderstood his period. Also, the sporadic use of electronically amplified dialogue serves only to confuse the audience and detract from the presentation.

Elis Y. Lam's set designs are brilliant. Used for both productions, Lam has devised a multi-layered, minimalist evocation of an old sailing ship, complete with rigging and without rudder, reinforcing the metaphor of the foundering ship of state in *The Crucible*, which is righted and restored to its intended course in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Added to this wonderfully angular playground are long sheets of reflective mylar suspended in the spaces leading offstage so that whenever the characters cannot face one another they are forced, in the act of turning away, to confront themselves. The effect of this wonderfully theatrical contrivance serves to underscore the levels of duplicity and deception which drive the tragedy.

The set and lighting design and the performances especially of Mitchell and Webster justify the price of admission, at student prices, to see one of the better American plays of this, or any, century. But this production is, unfortunately, flawed. Though this *Crucible* is good, it is nowhere near the scorching it could have been.