

Unabashed political Queen screams for heads; women execs ignore outcry

By J. MARK SPROUL

Like the Red Queen of *Alice in Wonderland* who eliminates dissenters with choruses of "Off, off with his head," Mary Mitchell's *The Red Queen* explores the problems of political power and propaganda. Billed as "a drama of violence and intrigue in power politics," Mitchell's script and video follow the traditions of Brecht and Shaw in political satire. Yet Mitchell's presentation is unique, if not questionable; why is a video like this being shown in a single exclusive engagement at Twenty One McGill?

Mitchell's original stageplay of *The Red Queen* was presented in a workshop format in New York City at the Irish Arts Centre. It was then videotaped and remains in an unfinished state. Mitchell previewed the video at Twenty One McGill in an effort to obtain feedback from viewers as well as donations to fund the film. Response from club members was poor, in both respects. Although the exact reasons for this remain unclear, it helps to examine the video itself.

Strongly reminiscent of the FLQ October Crisis and with overtones of Trudeaumania, *The Red Queen* nevertheless comments on universal political surges and struggles for power. It includes references to Reaganism, Thatcherism, and all other political "isms" capable of inciting an entire population to election fever.

The plot centres upon a corrupt

and ambitious leader, "Janis," who uses his own propaganda machine (as well as his 'brains behind the man'—Andre'), to become the supreme power of Canada. Cover-ups, payoffs, and the loss of individual freedom when martial law is instated to prevent riots, show the author's belief in the vulnerability of the democratic system. Mitchell strips political leaders of glamor and charisma in attempt to show the political animal for what it is—claws and all. "Andre," perhaps the only honorable political figure in the video, becomes kidnapped and eventually is murdered.

Mitchell's statement is anything but subtle. She implies that society freely imparts power to political leaders like an obliging housewife who in turn accepts hollow promises to "a true voice in the government," and "freedom from oppression for us all." In the end, *The Red Queen* (which coincides with the 15th anniversary of the FLQ crisis) shows democracy as a sexist, opportunistic, and power-mongering society.

Almost two months ago, the exclusive women's club Twenty One McGill began its own film society. The club aims to fulfill primarily social, rather than business functions. At first, this seems to be an unlikely forum to screen a film against powerful figures. The members of Twenty One McGill are clearly an elite group of women.

Mitchell, however, believed enough in the club's receptiveness to shell out a few hundred dollars of her

own money to rent the video equipment and screen. She is both on a fund-raising and response evaluating drive. Mitchell was hoping to receive feedback on *The Red Queen* in order to edit the video and further develop the script. Twenty One McGill was a logical place to at least fish for large monetary contributions.

Unfortunately, the film society of Twenty One McGill has been slow to

get off the ground and recruit supporters. Mitchell was consequently left with only a small audience and a handful of contributions of \$4.50 each. This was hardly enough to pay rentals, let alone finance her aspirations of a feature film or a full stage production.

Mary Mitchell is not discouraged by this attempt to raise social consciousness. Having worked in New York producing off-Broadway productions she has gained enough experience to be able to face minor setbacks. She has recently begun her own company in Toronto called "Tracks Creative Inc.," and has

settled here for the time being.

One reason for the low turn-out for *The Red Queen* may have been its subject matter in the context of Twenty One McGill. Perhaps well-to-do women would rather not think about "conflicts of power and principle at the top levels of government," as the video describes it.

The poster for *The Red Queen* clearly illustrated and explained its subject matter—political corruption. For those who did see the video, they received exactly what they had bargained for. Mary Mitchell delivers her material up-front and unabashed.

Island's intention lost at sea

By JANICE GOLDBERG

What is the relationship between text and images in a work of visual art? There is a considerable grey area between the use of text as an imaginative, thought-provoking element of the work, and its use as a didactic tool. Last week's show at the IDA Gallery *On the Island, Along the Coast, and in the Interior*—the MFA thesis presentation of Kathleen West—combined text and visuals to discuss two unique political situations. The brutal history of Nicaragua and the contemporary struggles of the Sandinistas are juxtaposed to the history of Canada's own Vancouver, BC and its current economic woes.

West's impetus for the show was derived from a six week visit to Nicaragua during April and May of 1984. West was involved in a project run by members of York Fine Arts to deliver art supplies to the Association of Sandinista Cultural workers and various art colleges in the country. The juxtaposing of the Nicaraguan situation to that of Vancouver, West said, was subjective. Having grown up in Vancouver, she is sensitive to its economic problems, particularly the alarmingly high rate of unemployment. West said her intention is not to parallel the evolution of the two locations; rather, the show is

a statement about two different places that exist on the west coast.

The physical set-up of the various pieces in the gallery, however, leads the viewer to believe there is a thematic connection. West has displayed her text in a series of typed index cards chronologically exploring the respective histories of Nicaragua and Vancouver. A red line—the time line according to West—separates the two. The physical paralleling of the two texts leads the viewer to assume a parallel of the political and historical aspects of the two places.

The same difficulty arises in the similarity of the forms and execution of the two focal elements of the show. Both pieces are constructed with silhouettes of the human figure. The Nicaraguan piece is comprised of a number of white, life-sized, individualized silhouette figures. On each is written a quotation describing the struggles and trials of Nicaraguans in their move towards self-development. West attributes each statement to people she encountered during her travels in Nicaragua; and they clearly reflect the inseparability of politics from the daily existence of the common Nicaraguan.

West's treatment of the Vancouver piece consists of a series of brown paper silhouettes of uniform size and gesture, overlapping one another. This line of de-

individualized automatons ends at two large metal plates (forming a diptych) on which is etched an image of the geodesic dome of the Canadian pavilion at Vancouver's Expo '86. To West, Expo '86 (already fated as a financial fiasco) represents a short-term solution to BC's economic woes—an indulgence on the part of the government in the name of the people.

Each of the two silhouette images is a pertinent political comment on its own but there is no purpose in the juxtaposition of the two. Although this was consciously intended by the artist the result is indifference on the part of the viewer to both political situations.

It is encouraging to see a contemporary artist infusing her work with political content. However, when political sentiments overpower the visual elements, the viewer loses the ability to develop a subjective interpretation. West's show was informative, and some of the textual elements are indeed compelling, yet the artist's reliance on text as the primary response inducing element of the show narrowed the emotional scope of possible viewer reaction. Moreover, although both the Nicaraguan and Vancouver political statements are provocative issues in themselves, their seemingly arbitrary juxtaposition is ineffective.

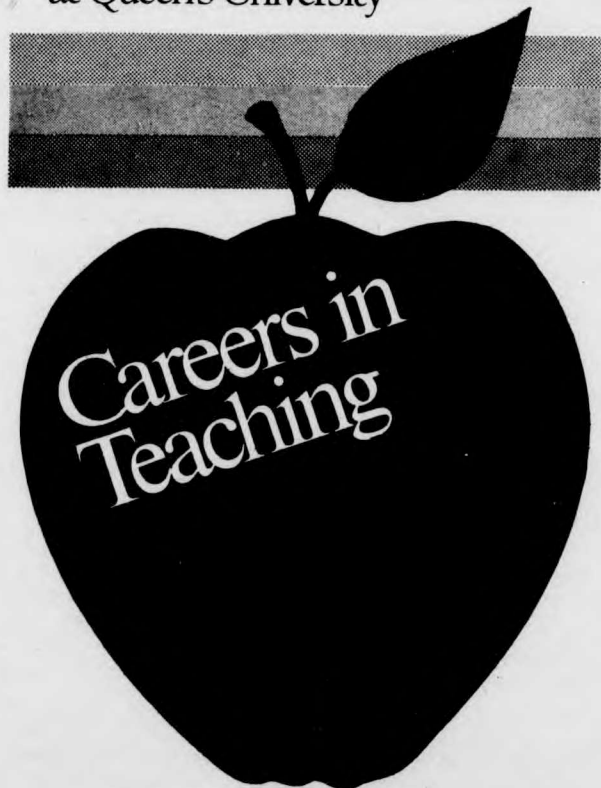
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