

By REBECCA CANN

Mediocrity onstage is not immediately enticing. People with middling talent in their field of work do not strike one as food for dramatic conflict. But York theatre student David Burgess has realized the potential in just such subject matter. In his play *The Great One* Burgess deals with people who find themselves trapped beneath the limelight of a genius, forced to confront their own mediocrity.

Last week *The Great One* was presented in a reading at Samuel Beckett Theatre as part of the theatre department's Soundstage series. Despite the lack of production values and the actors' eternal presence onstage with scripts in hand, the play and the performances were powerful enough to lose sight of the roughness of the presentation.

The Great One takes place on the evening of star hockey player Bobby



Ryan's funeral. One by one Bobby's friend, brother, wife and sister-in-law step out to the driveway, attempting to escape the looming shadow of Bobby's ghost. The four characters, played by Jonathon Potts, Kevin Prentice, Jill Johnston and Anne-Marie Hurlie expose varying levels of internal workings, gradually moving towards a state of pain and frustration that leads one to wonder if there is any value in being related to an NHLer. But ultimately the one-time existence of Bobby is irrelevant. Frustration belongs to the individuals and nary a bad word is said about the absent star of the show.

The two most interesting

characters are McClain, Bobby's brother and Jane, Bobby's wife. Both fit within the world of mediocrity. McClain's suffering under Bobby's life shadow is blatant as he, too, was an NHL player, but maintained the status of a third-rate player on a last place team. Even after Bobby's death, however, McClain's anger is self-focussed; he understood the genius of his brother's playing and while he resented his own position of brute hockey player, his resentment is not directed towards his brother until the end of the play.

Jane's relationship with Bobby is distinctly opposed to McClain's experience with his brother. During the play she admits her limited talent as a TV personality yet in her description of 'life with Bobby' lies the only sense of self-worth and general satisfaction in her life. She is not the grieving widow but her life rings hollow without her husband. While this interpretation remains open, so does the character of Jane. *The Great One* seems to start itself off by focusing on her and ends with attention on McClain. Jane is left in the lurch.

All four personalities onstage are distinct, as is the structure of the play, moving through inner conflict towards self-realization. What is exceedingly powerful (and gratifying) in the play is its strikingly Canadian setting. And it is not contrived. The names of cities and towns in Ontario and references to Molson Golden slide neatly and unpolitically by, setting, not slugging. Burgess' dialogue is a delight, at its best in his joyfully witty wordplay on 'self-deprecating,' one of the play's highlights. And as a Canadian play and one of substance, *The Great One* refuses to do just that, self-deprecate.

Arts, Sports unite in The Great One

Excilibur's Arts and Sports editors visit Samuel Beckett Theatre to review a reading of theatre student David Burgess' *The Great One*.

By EDO VAN BELKOM

Although sports and theatre appear to be situated in opposing endzones, they have one very significant thing in common: both are forms of entertainment. It's not surprising then that the two have been combined in recent years in productions like *Les Canadiennes* and *I am not a Hero* (the play based on the legendary Green Bay Packer coach Vince Lombardi). Here at York we have *The Great One*, written and directed by theatre student David Burgess, which takes a close look at people whose lives have been

touched by an athlete's almost super-human ability to excel in the sporting arena.

Despite the obvious reference to Wayne Gretzky in the title, the play revolves around a fictional hockey player named Bobby Ryan who played for the New York Rangers in the 1970's. Setting the play in 1975

S P O R T S

was a way of distancing the sport of hockey to a time, according to Burgess, when hockey players were looked up to and the NHL represented the hopes and dreams of all young Canadian boys.

In its dealing with the sport of hockey *The Great One* is successful, despite the flaw of the original premise. Bobby Ryan (the 'Great One') dies in a stick swinging incident on the ice, deciding to stick up for himself after walking away from pugilistic confrontations throughout his hockey career. There has been a recent rise in high sticking incidents, especially eye injuries in the NHL, but this is due to the increased use of helmets. In the seventies, when players went on the ice with their hair flying in the breeze, they were aware of the danger of high sticks and as a result kept them down.

Incidents of players dying on the ice are very rare. A recent example is that of St. Louis defenceman Ed Kea who was put in a coma after receiving a perfectly legal body check that sent his unhelmeted head crashing into the boards, but to the best of my recollection no NHLer has died at the end of a stick.

Another problem with this is that hockey players with truly exceptional talent are never condemned because of their walking away from physical confrontations. They simply do not have to prove themselves with their fists. No one questions Wayne Gretzky about his shying away from the rough stuff; in fact no one wants to see him smash

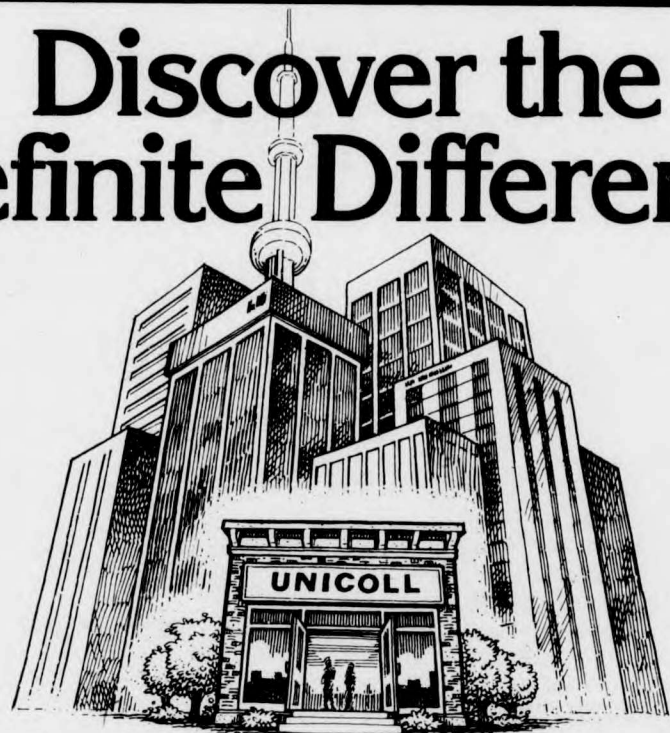
someone's head. As long as he scores goals there are hundreds of players willing to fight on his behalf.

With this point out of the way, Burgess displays a real grasp for the game. Many of his interpretations of the game are precise. One example occurs when another character, McClain, gives an account of when he first realized that Ryan was the 'Great One.' It was in the very first game the two played together at the age of six. "He foresaw the play at six years old," McClain says, "he saw the play in slow motion, just as if it was a replay." The ability to anticipate a play as it unfolds on the ice is one of the things that makes a player great, whether it be in hockey, basketball, football or baseball. Burgess explains this as being "the difference that sets athletes of peculiar genius apart, the ability to perceive time differently."

Another strong point in the play's sports perspective is the humiliation the player of limited ability, as portrayed in McClain, feels at being a fringe player with a last place team. At the end of his emotional outburst McClain, who played with the California Golden Seals, puts all his bitterness in a nutshell by shouting, "I had to wear Yellow skates." I remember those skates and even though I couldn't have been 12 or 13 at the time I remember them as being the stupidest thing in the game. Even though it's 11 years after the fact, it's about time someone said something about those skates.

On the whole Burgess has a grasp on the inner struggle of the player who lacks in ability but has a tremendous desire to compete in the highest levels of the game. His analogies are great, giving the play a real feeling for the game. The only point that needs revision is the premise for the death of the 'Great One.' If in successive rewrites the death is made more plausible, *The Great One* could be the definitive Canadian hockey play, something this country has yet to produce.

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