

arts

York Grad
At Tarragon

By CHRIS WARREN

Playwright Lawrence Jeffery graduated from York in 1975 with a degree in Art History. Ironically, he wasn't interested in studying writing.

Ironically, because Jeffery's second play, *Tower*, is the opening production at the Tarragon Theatre this season. And before *Tower*, Jeffery's first play, *Clay*, was nominated for a Governor General's award, after having successful runs in Toronto and Vancouver in 1981.

"I think it's very important to be studying something outside your own discipline," says Jeffery. Jeffery came to York originally to study painting and switched after his first-year into Art History. Obviously, the changeover has been helpful. "When you're studying painting or sculpture, you're studying visual dynamics—compositions, color, form—and all these things are very important for the theater."

After his years at York, Jeffery spent a year in France "learning the language." After returning, he decided that he "had no choice but to become a playwright." Several unproduced scripts later came the success of *Clay*.

In reference to that first production, Jeffery says, "Often, writers go through such a depressing first production that they can't continue. It's very disappointing and I think that sometimes the critical community forgets that a little bit of encouragement can be a lot better than hard-nosed analysis," he says.

"But the second production is an exhausting, horrifying thing to go through," he says. "Everyone is out there, and they're not going to let you get by this time."

Tower is a brief play segmented into rapid episodes in a near-cinematic style. It deals with the inexorable passing of the torch of cold-blooded business to a young man, despite the fact that the financial world has put the young man's father through the paper shredder.

"The characters are based on different kinds of individuals that make up this group of financiers," says Jeffery. "I understand these people, know their language. I know what they want, what they care about, because that's what my father does."

Jeffery's intent is to portray the people in their world the way he perceives them to be, and to avoid romanticizing them, as he feels Canadians have done too often.

"We do talk about tycoons more than we talk about artists or intellectuals—I mean, they



get their pictures on the cover of *Maclean's* all the time," he says.

In *Tower*, Donald Davis (a well-known Beckettian actor fresh from the production of two new Beckett works) plays Richard, the hollow-eyed leader of a three-man business partnership. Richard's evil is somewhat ameliorated in the end when the audience sees that he simply cannot understand the human element, which is affected by his love of the "business game." Davis is an excellent choice for the lead with his conniving look of a man who gets his way, and he plays the "villain" with more gusto than shown by the other players in the production.

Jeffery's style is emphatically visual. A recurring setting in *Tower* is the suburban living room of Alex, a partner who suffers a heart attack when he is "squeezed out" of the business group by the other two. Otherwise, the setting changes from backlawn to boardroom, and the screen at the rear of the stage displays blurry suggestions of trees or of downtown buildings seen from above.

Jeffery has no immediate plans to take his work to New York, though he admits that "one still has to go and get the stamp of approval elsewhere."

While successful now, and hoping for more productions of his plays, Jeffery remains fascinated by the unpredictability of theater.

"You can bring a new production by Edward Albee up here, with Elizabeth Taylor playing the lead, and it can still flop. It's not like the movies. Theater really is written in water."

God plays Beckett Theatre

By HELEN HINKLE

I saw *God* last week at Stong College. Woody Allen's *God*, that is. The play was mounted with all the anarchic energy it deserved and Charlatan's production was equally rewarded with a large turnout last week at Samuel Beckett Theatre.

Directed by the green (but well cultivated) David Cauthery, *God's* simple set, but not so simple script, was a flowering bed for the cast's imagination.

The small theatre was a plus for the play because it encouraged audience participation. Several characters, Doris Levine—the spacey and sexually-frustrated philosophy student played by Catherine Mary Sypnowich, emerged from the audience as if her participation was pure chance.

This notion that *God* is a play within a play (it is a rehearsal for the Athenian Drama Festival) worked well. By adapting topical references to Toronto and York University, the audience was further involved.

One man from the audience, revealed to be an author, claimed to have created all of the people watching the play. Interaction between several choice viewers almost convinced viewers that we're all just "fictional characters" and our fate is prematurely ordained by the author, or God.

Diabetes, a Greek actor played by David Richards and the Greek writer (Tim Post) can't figure out an ending for their play—which is to

be presented that night. "Is freedom chaos?" they wonder. This is where Doris makes her debut.

In answer to this philosophical query, a salesman arrives to introduce the perfect ending for their play. His *deus ex Machine* is a skateboard which is to carry Zeus. His pitch is that God "comes in at the end of the play and saves everything." Though the two Greeks buy this ending, and use it, even more complications arise.

The cast performed well. Dave Richards, playing the Greek actor, has a wonderful way of projecting a constant smile—even when his life is threatened. In any other play this may not have worked but the farcical nature of *God* allows and demands it.

Doris Levine was all too spacey and the American couple (the Fates) were perfect—the wife chewing gum, wearing red lipstick, and tacky sunglasses.

David Cauthery's direction was at its best when the chorus came on stage in mask and toga and then stripped down to reveal three girls in go-go type outfits who sang and did a sexy, spunky dance to "The mid-night Hour."

Timing and delivery of jokes could have been improved but Woody Allen's humor presents a challenge—quite often requiring perfection (consistent with his personality).

At any rate, if *God* is an example of what Charlatan productions will be putting on, future performances look (not to be left to fate) promising.

York Graduate Theatre Co.



The York Graduate Theatre Company presents *White Devil*. The renaissance play opens at the Adelaide Court opens tonight and plays to the 29th.

Sexism and violence pervade music business

By PAULETTE PEIROL

In the language of popular music, a lady is a status object, a girl is ignorant and dependent, a baby is helpless, and a woman is wild and slightly dangerous. Singer/composer Alix Dobkin says these stereotypical terms promote low-level infantile relationships and characterize women in a very negative, damaging way.

Dobkin discussed the influence of popular music on women at York last week in a presentation titled *Woman-Hating, Racism, and Violence in the Top 40*. She stressed that she does not advocate censorship, but rather offers tools for analyzing music objectively.

Dobkin has a degree in fine arts and has produced three of her own albums on the Waxworks label—she is no stranger to the music business. The *Top 40*, she said, reflects the mass culture of society. This mass culture is revealed in all aspects of music, from the album cover to the lyrics, to the singer in performance.

"This may sound like feminism 101, but it is necessary," said Dobkin. "Like dealing with racism, feminism is a skill. It's the silence that's dangerous. We must confront the issues" cautioned Dobkin.

The issue, according to Dobkin, is that rock-and-roll is used as a tool to promote sexuality in women. She said popular music "promotes competition in women by telling them what they should be. Rock-and-roll promoted the sexual revolution, which resulted in more pressure for women to put out sexually."

"If performers wish to be assertive," said Dobkin, "they know they must act competent and desirable." Even if the performer rejects this image, the executives who control packaging and production will impose it upon them. Whether we like it or not, packaging sells. And what lies beneath the package? Usually men. Most rock-and-roll has, until recently, been produced and performed by men for men.

"What and who are you being asked to identify with? Put yourself in the picture," said Dobkin.

Dobkin acknowledges that much of the hostility towards women is unconscious. However, even if it is unintentional, she feels that critical passivity is also to blame. Dobkin cites herself as an example. "I'm a songwriter. I used to write songs using 'baby'... until I had one. And I certainly don't want a sexual

relationship with a baby."

Women have become more active in writing, production, and performing. For instance, in the past, the rock-and-roll woman seemed forever relegated to the role of "chick singer." Today, women can be seen playing every conceivable instrument. "This is an important development which is irreversible," said Dobkin. "You won't dare tell a girl that she can't play drums anymore."

What sort of images have been promoted by popular music? Dobkin said that the typical "good female" is available, dependent, and forgiving (or more commonly, "understanding"), while the "bad female" is usually independent, has "options," and deserves appropriately "bad treatment." The passive woman is reduced to an object, while the follower becomes defined.

There are also, adds Dobkin, male stereotypes which are equally harmful. The typical male promoted by rock-and-roll is an aggressor, initiator, and definer. His character traits include violence, power-tripping, guilt, and deceit. According to Dobkin, these images of male and female stereotypes promote rape, incest, and runaways.

One wonders how directly "woman-hating, racism, and violence" are linked with popular music. The music and its packaging affect everyone, both directly and indirectly. Even if you don't listen to pop music, its message is reflected in mass culture and its influence is felt in all levels of society. And if you do listen to it, listen again, well.

"Flip, flop, fly, I think I'm going to die.

Baby don't leave me, don't say goodbye."

This is a typical example of what Dobkin calls "lyric vs. lyric confusing stereotypes." The male is torn and desperate, ready to die, and yet he tells his "baby" not to leave him. A progressive mutual relationship? Hardly. You wonder who the "baby" is in those lines. "Women are harassed all the time in the name of love," said Dobkin.

A dangerous sort of ambiguity lies in the "melody vs. melody" contradiction. We hear "Baby you're beautiful" with a cutthroat sound, or worse, a cute tune (the kind that everyone hums in the bathroom) with dangerous, violent lyrics. For an arbitrary example, listen to the Rolling Stones' "Little T & A."

Other things to beware of are songwriting conventions which use clichéd terms like "baby," or present relationships as simplistic games. Billy Joel sings that he likes you "just the way you are." Innocent enough. But then he warns "don't go changing..." and adds that doesn't want "clever conversation" (just "someone (he) can talk to").

Dobkin said that these harmful lyrics are not necessarily deliberate, but still must be acknowledged. Only awareness can induce change.

If you don't buy an album for the music, you buy it for the cover, often impulsively. The covers speak for themselves. The typical album cover portrays a woman with an open throat, sultry or gaping mouth, head thrown back, and often naked or scantily dressed, (either that, or "dressed to kill"). While the front of the albums show provoking women, often the backs show only males. This adds up to a voyeuristic image of rape or even gang rape. The male is usually clothed and in a position of power while the woman is naked or half-naked and exposed. The ultimate example of this, I think, is Robert Palmer's *Pressure Drop*.

Interestingly, even the photographic effects are important. Women are usually softly focused and subtle, while men are photographed in clear-cut, strong colors.

Three stereotypical covers are the destructive woman (or shown as the cause of destruction), the S & M cover, and the female child at the mercy of "big boys." Dobkin showed one cover of a five-year old girl in full makeup with a deep red background. She cited The Ohio Players as one of the worst album cover offenders.

In the past few years, there have been fewer of these offensive album covers. Coincidentally, there are also fewer covers showing females. Dobkin said that "videos have picked up where the album covers have left off."

Dobkin was primarily discussing rock-and-roll. She noted that new wave is different and is starting to portray strong, independent women. And there are simply female performers.

Dobkin holds Donna Summer, the Parachute Club, and Joe Jackson in high esteem. She said "the '80s is a time of polarization; music is getting more extreme in all directions. It is getting both better and worse in ways."