

Play's message forced Vega defines new brand of folk

By TERRY WOROBETZ

Theatre workshop productions give a playwright a chance to make any last-minute visual decisions about their play and, at the same time, allow the audience to participate in the discussion period that follows. *Chakyak* is one of the two plays being workshoped by the University College Playhouse (U of T) this month. Written by Canadian Ernie Carefoot, *Chakyak* was given a test-run on Oct. 16 under the direction of York graduate theatre professor Michelle George.

In the play, *Chakyak* is the name of a rock-and-roll singer who quits university to become a star. The problem is that Chakyak, born and raised a native eskimo, believes his ancestral gods condemn his way of life because they won't contact him in person. Early in the play Chakyak says, "Something has to be done to link up with these beings." Longing to speak to the gods face to face he satisfies himself by orchestrating the northern lights in a concert on top of the world.

Chakyak travels with his driver and agent "Montreal," a hard-nosed business manager who tries to keep Chakyak's mind on his music. Montreal is not interested in his singer's illusory ambitions and tolerates his excessive drinking and pill-popping as long as it doesn't interfere with success.

In most ways Chakyak is the stereotypical self-destructive rock star, living life for the moment, cynical and embittered by his talent, unable to find pleasure in his highly charged life and unattainable dreams. His true goal is to be recognized and accepted as equal before his gods.

To amuse himself, Chakyak marries a road singer named Regina, a strong woman and defiant of his authority. But in her heart Regina admires Chakyak's free spirit and

ability to voice his spiritual beliefs.

Because the production is in workshop, director George placed only one prop on the stage's background, a rack of hanging mirror fragments that reflect onto a white backdrop, which produces a neat and simple image of the northern lights.

Interestingly, George decided to double-cast each character (except for Kim Symes who plays Regina) having the performers take turns acting and speaking a character's lines and sometimes speaking simultaneously. Here the absence of stage action is compensated for as the audience, watching "two" plays at once, enjoyed deciding who is better for the part.

The performance came off well probably because of Carefoot's smooth writing and well-defined characters. Carefoot's wit is subtle and he whisks the dialogue along neatly, occasionally stopping to shock with one of Chakyak's cynical insights on human ambition and knowledge.

But Carefoot's script bogs down and becomes too concerned with the story's meaning. Chakyak's insights become blatant moral messages as he condemns the "fast life" in his pursuit of "ultimate knowledge." This is also true of the finale in which Carefoot has the characters chanting: we are all "individual nations of light."

Carefoot's play is much more interesting and thought-provoking when the insights of human nature come indirectly through the characters. The sudden explanation that "God is the self" seems forced and out of place with the story's original subtlety. It almost makes you wish Carefoot had taken a more ambiguous direction with *Chakyak* so that the viewers could make up their own minds.



By HOWARD KAMAN

"Some people would like me to be the new Dylan, or the new Joni Mitchell. I would prefer to be myself."

These are the words of Suzanne Vega, the performer who, with just two albums under her belt, has redefined folk music and gathered an enormous worldwide following. The 27-year-old, New York-born troubadour was in Toronto last week to hold the latest concert in a tour that is taking her around the globe to promote her new album, *Solitude Standing*.

In discussing "Luka," the record's first single and a number-three hit on the American pop charts, Vega described her desire to "write from a point of view that (she felt) hasn't been heard from before. I'd had it in mind that I would like to write a song from the point of view of a child who's been abused, because it seemed to me that people in that situation have a double problem in that they can't talk about what it is they're experiencing," Vega explained.

She said she writes for those "left

behind, not included" in the audience addressed by artists "who write anthemic types of songs, like Bruce Springsteen, or Dylan." Her views on these mass audience political writers are strong. "I don't believe that real change happens through politics," she said. "I believe, for myself, that real change happens through social issues and religion. For me, I've found answers in religion and I believe that's the way I've changed myself."

By not addressing political issues, Suzanne Vega sets her brand of music apart from traditional folk. But there are other differences: while the '60s brand of folk had a tendency to be about brotherhood and togetherness, Vega's music tends to emphasize isolation and loneliness. For instance, in her two favourite songs, "Cracking" (from her first album) and "Wooden Horse (Casper Hauser's Song)," she sings about people in desperate, lonely situations.

She describes the writing process in two ways. "Sometimes I'm sitting with a guitar and I'll sing sort of nonsense things until something starts to make sense . . . (For) other songs, I need to have a blueprint. I need to have a concept that I work towards."

"I used to think that it (writing) was real easy," Vega explained. "I used to feel very cocky, and feel that I had a real knack for it. Writing a song used to take a few hours, when I was 15 or 16. These days I find it a lot harder; (it) takes me a lot longer to get little things down. It comes and it goes. As I get older it gets harder."

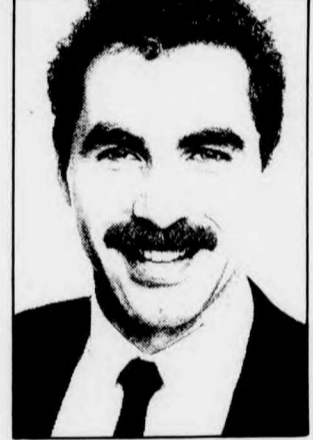
She also finds recording hard. "Recording is frustrating because there's no audience to give you feedback." Comparing recording to concert performance, Vega said, "I like the live aspect better. It's exciting,

but it's exciting in the way that climbing a mountain is exciting if you're afraid of heights. I feel like for some reason I've made that my job: to climb this mountain every day just to get over this fear of heights. It's scary being on stage, and it makes me nervous, but it's thrilling. It's the best thing about the whole process; writing a song, finishing it, going on stage and seeing what the audience thinks."

Although her concert environment has changed, Massey Hall being miles away from the Northwinds Folk Festival, she "still talks to the audience" and "gets that intimate quality. I don't think I carry myself as a celebrity," Vega noted. "I think that when I come into a place most people are going, 'Is that her? That's not her. She wouldn't be here.' I don't think it would be a problem."

Suzanne Vega is an oddity; a singer who has popularized her own style of folk music, harking back to the '60s, but still looking to the future. She plays intimate music about individual situations, involving sharp emotions that we all experience: anger, fear and sadness to a name a few. Because of this, she has struck a chord in all of us. There is a little piece of each song's character in every one of us. "I feel that the response that I've gotten from the audience is genuine, that it's not because I'm marketed. I believe that people respond to the songs for the best of reasons."

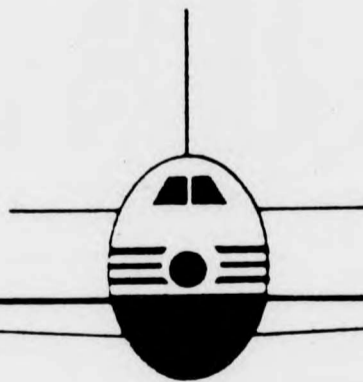
The emphasis on the individual that runs through her songs also runs through herself. She tries to avoid the inevitable comparisons to the likes of Joan Baez and Joni Mitchell. "I don't feel as if I'm the new Joan Baez, and when people come with that expectation, I try to get rid of it, because I prefer to be myself."



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