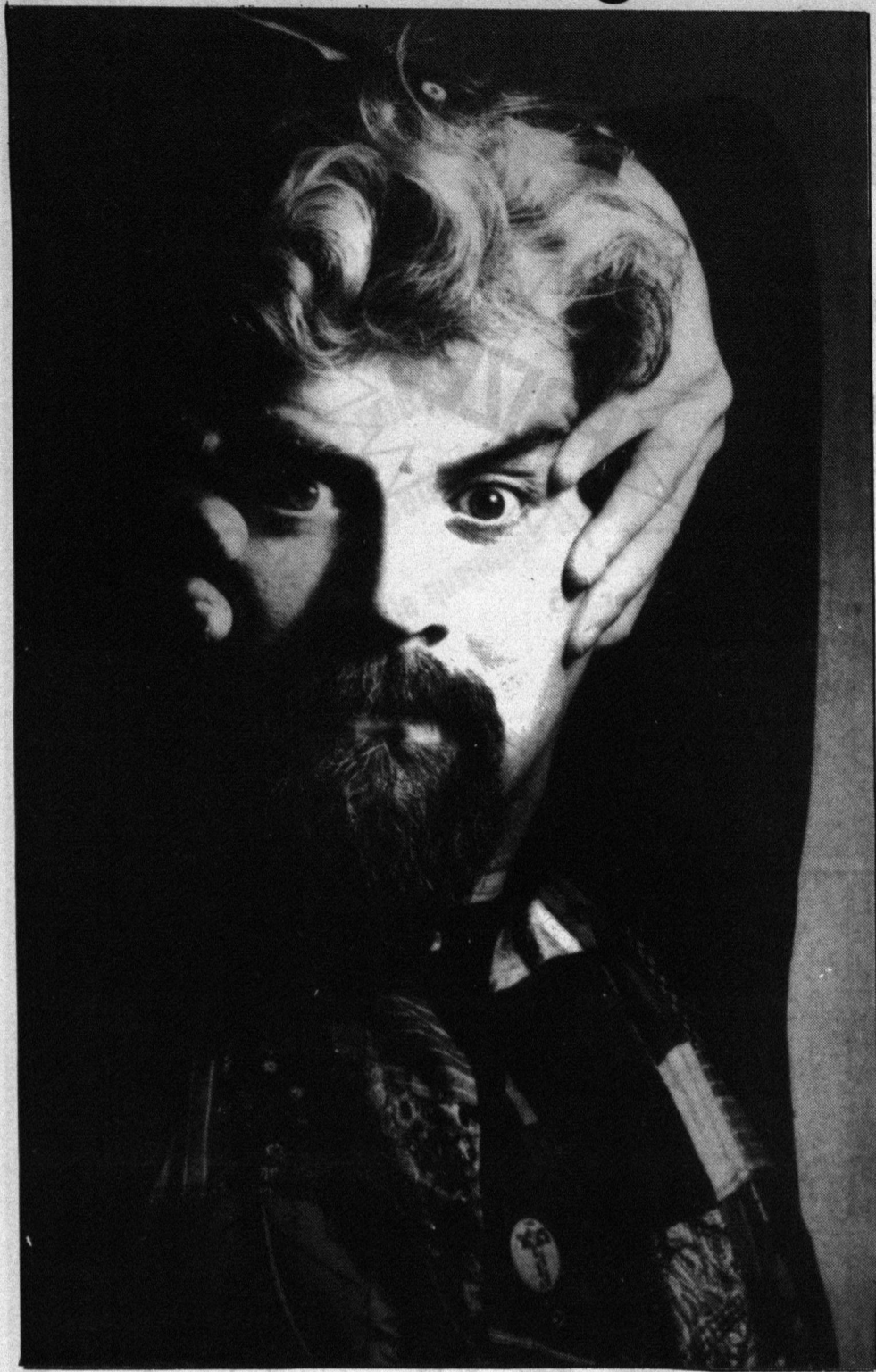


Chaos reigns! Connolly's on stage!



Billy Connolly: Taught by master comedians in the shipyards.

by Rod Campbell

How can I but be fearful,
Who know not what I do
More than I did they whose labours
We owe this chaos to?

— Hugh MacDiarmid — "In Glasgow"

Scottish comedian Billy Connolly's press release makes Lee Iococca sound like an underachiever. With a dozen albums, four plays, two books, a column with the prestigious *Sunday Times*, and numerous acting engagements for both film and television to his credit, one wonders what the lad does with his spare time.

Of all his talents Connolly receives the most pleasure from being a comedian. "I like being funny, ever since I was a boy," said Connolly, Friday, from his hotel room in Toronto. To say that he's succeeded would be a gross understatement.

Leaving school at 15, Connolly went to work in the Clyde shipyards as an apprentice welder. At night he picked Hank William's tunes on the guitar and banjo. His love for country music, he says, was nurtured at an early age after hearing a Slim Whitman record his father bought.

His first venture as a professional entertainer was with a folk group called The Humblebums, who by 1968 consisted of Connolly and Gerry Rafferty. Rafferty would later achieve worldwide recognition for his album *City to City*. The Humblebums became, in Connolly's words, "quite an extraordinary outfit." However, after two well-received albums they split up in 1970.

Going solo had its drawbacks for Connolly. "It was difficult because the band had such a reputation. Everybody automatically assumed that Rafferty was going to zoom to fame and I was going to disappear into well-deserved obscurity. The folk scene's a lot like that with its assumptions. In that way it was quite difficult to convince people that I was worthwhile."

As a solo act, Connolly began polishing his hilarious stories which were mainly limited to song introductions while working with Rafferty.

In those early days Connolly drew a lot of inspiration from his background, especially his experiences as a welder.

"Och, ah was taught by masters in the shipyards," Connolly proudly boasts. "Guys used to make me howl and laugh just talking about the (soccer) match on Saturday or life

in general. They were very, very funny men. I would go home and watch comedians on television and I remember very clearly saying 'my God, he hasn't a patch on the guys in the yard!'"

Connolly released a double album in 1974, filled predominantly with humorous monologues. The album's highlight is a track called "The Crucifixion"; it tells how Christ was actually crucified in Glasgow rather than in Galilee. The tale is a brilliant piece of humour, wrapped in the vernacular tongue of contemporary Glasgow. The album sold over 100,000 copies in Britain, earning gold status.

'You should be in jail talking about homosexuality on stage.'

The same year Connolly appeared on Michael Parkinson's talk show — the British equivalent of Ed Sullivan — and became a national celebrity almost overnight. "That was my single biggest break of all," says Connolly. "After that, I never did less than full house."

Connolly never pulls any punches in his live shows. His language is not for sensitive ears.

"I've had criticism since the outset of my career. There seems to be a breed of people who do nothing else but point out what they see as failings. They used to say you're singing in an American accent. 'That's not what you should be doing. That's terrible. You're in groups that don't wear uniforms. Look at your hair! You're a disgrace!' Everything I did they didn't like. 'You shouldn't be talking about sex or masturbation. You should be in jail talking about homosexuality on stage.' So I don't let criticism guide me in what I should be doing."

Despite having made several hit albums, the prospect of making records still scares Connolly. "It's a kick in the backside, it makes you work. You have to find other stuff; it makes you very creative. It still frightens the life out of me; I've just made an album and I think 'oh God, not again, another 45 minutes away.' Which is an awful lot, and of course if you're making the album right, it's 45 good minutes you've put on it. You lie in bed and think I'm never going to be funny again. Maybe that's the last of it."

Billy Connolly appears at the Jubilee Auditorium Wednesday night at 8:00 p.m.

Comedy and the Khmer Rouge don't mix in film

review by Elaine Ostry

How exciting can it be to watch a movie that features nothing but a man talking from behind a desk, occasionally sipping water and pointing to a couple of maps?

Well, to my surprise, *Swimming to Cambodia* was a very interesting film, and the man behind the desk, Spalding Gray, caught my attention from his first words and held it until the end. Gray is a specialist in monologues, and in this movie he strung together several anecdotes, most of which originate from his experiences in Thailand, where he played a minor role in *The Killing Fields*.

Director Jonathan Demme, whose previous works include *Harold and Maude*, *Stop Making Sense*, and *Something Wild*, met this unique challenge with characteristic style. He employed a number of directing techniques to make the minimalist production as interesting as possible.

For example, the camera panned slowly back and forth during the scene in which Gray described swimming in the Indian Ocean, to evoke the rhythm of waves. Anecdotes were often separated by fade-outs, which were irritatingly frequent. Spalding Gray was shot at from every angle. Short clips from *The Killing Fields* were also shown throughout the film featuring Gray as the ambassador's aide. These scenes were often included just after Gray had recounted the story behind the scene, or what had happened to him the night before the shoot, and

this juxtaposition is hilarious.

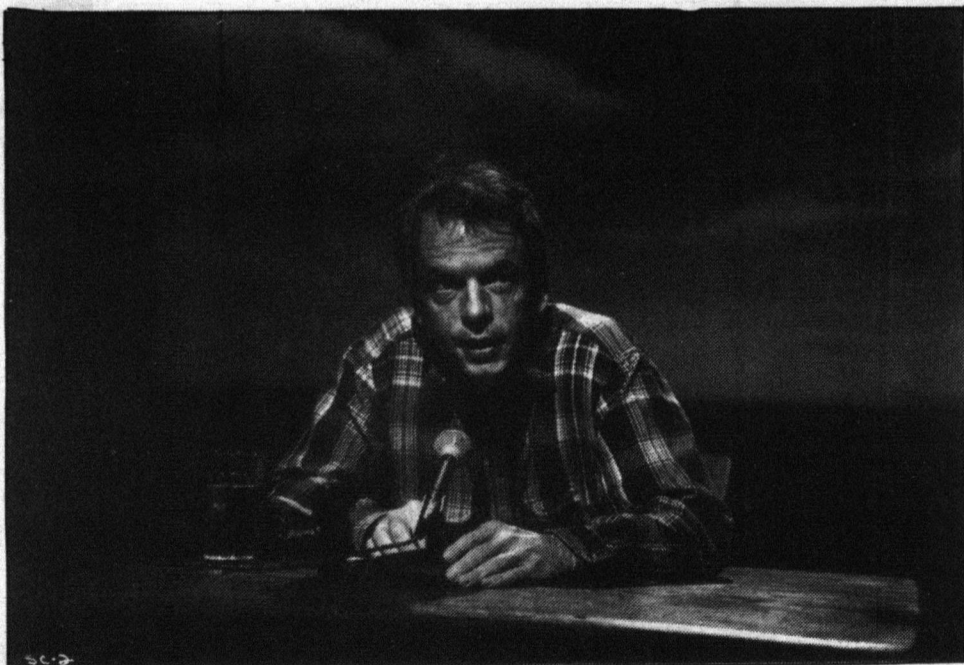
Demme succeeded with this film because he recognized Gray's natural storytelling ability, and let the actor tell his stories without much distraction. The direction therefore enhanced the acting.

The music score by Laurie Anderson was too loud and periodically distracted this viewer from Gray's talk; but in all, the production of *Swimming to Cambodia* was very smooth, skillful, and stylish.

However, the very slickness of *Swimming to Cambodia* undermined its effect. Gray is a good storyteller, yet you could see the narrative techniques behind his words and actions, especially at the beginning when he was positively manic.

Gray's stories alternated very quickly — too quickly — between comedy and tragedy. One minute he would be talking about smoking marijuana on the Gulf of Siam, the next minute he'd be describing the more gruesome aspects of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. This juxtaposition has its merits, since Gray describes himself as an observer of life, which is made up of good and evil.

Yet it is hard for the audience to laugh about Gray's quest for The Perfect Moment and then learn about how children were forced to kill their parents, and then be expected to laugh again. The ease in which Gray shifted from the hilarious to the horri-



All Spalding Gray needs is a glass of water and a microphone to tell it like it is.

ble made him seem somewhat flippant.

Gray has presented himself in the film as a man coming to terms with his political ignorance and naivety. Somehow, he lived for the last fifteen years in the States without learning about the American secret bombings in Cambodia until his work in *The Killing Fields*. In *Swimming to Cambodia*, he attempted to show how America has lost her innocence.

For the most part, the film did not mesh because the elements of comedy and social conscience were too distinct. He did succeed in mixing these two aspects in his best story, the one about the U.S. marine-in-a-missile, "Jack Daniels". In this story, his comedy took on the sharper edge of satire,

which was missing in the more trivial comic anecdotes.

The conclusion of the film however, failed to bring all of these disparate aspects of comedy, tragedy and social conscience together. In the final scene, Gray described the luxuries of his plane as he left Thailand, while a clip from *The Killing Fields* showed American helicopters leaving behind Cambodian children. Gray's last words, "I think I know now what killed Marilyn Monroe" were, upon reflection, a comment on America's loss of innocence during the sixties. However, this viewer expected the actor to finally come to terms with the Pol Pot regime as a Cambodian rather than an American tragedy.