

Drama on video

Festival videos of plays not like the movies

By JASON SHERMAN

Movie reviewers are quick to distinguish between plays that have been given filmic treatment—turned into screenplays—and those which have been merely recorded for the sake of posterity. Naturally the reviewers are in favor of the former, since the latter are not movies at all (in the sense that they don't require the intense planning of a motion picture).

For anyone who has seen Laurence Olivier "classic" version of *Othello* — a filmed play — the seeming lack of awareness of the camera's presence is hysterically obvious. Olivier plays the Moor in greasepaint and when he holds the dead Desdemona to his face, the black make-up smears the face of the actress playing Desdemona. In a theatre only a few keen-eyed people might have noticed this. On film, where the theatrical experience is greatly magnified, it's unavoidable.

Fortunately, we are not about to begin a major discussion of the differences between stage and screen. But some mention is of course due when the subject at hand is the Festival of Video-drama Series, which played at the Royal Ontario Museum last week.

Of the three films I viewed only one came close to gaining anything by being videotaped. From an aesthetic viewpoint, the transitions were all but disastrous: picture distortion, sound and color distortion (blue lips and green faces tend to be distracting) and, most of all, the fact that we were watching theatrical productions on a small screen.

David Fennario's *Balconville* deals with the plight of the poor in the white Anglo-French slum of Montreal's Point St. Charles. This is a play that has only one purpose: to make the audience aware that there are such slums in Canada. It raises many questions. It answers none of them. Perhaps this reflects Fennario's desire to make his audience think about what they are seeing. Perhaps this means there are no answers.

Of the three dramas, *Balconville* least demands to be seen in the theatre. Its naturalistic dialogue easily translates to any of the dramatic mediums.

Quite a different story is John Gray and Eric Peterson's *Billy Bishop Goes to War*. From the title to the final piano note, it is a neatly constructed satire on the way Canadians perceive and are perceived abroad. It attempts to deal with that greatest of Canadian myths: our identity.



World War I seems as good a starting point as any to notice the metamorphosis of Canada from a colonial dependent to a distinct national force, and Billy Bishop as good a figure as any to represent this change. Bishop begins as a naughty school boy and ends up as a blood-thirsty fighter pilot. The metaphor is not to be found in the facts of Bishop's life but rather in the emergence of one man from Com-

monwealth soldier to Canadian pilot extraordinaire.

Now, *Billy Bishop* is a play designed for the theatre. In its original form it depended upon the audience's imagination as Eric Peterson jumped from role to role in the same costume, in the same setting. The video has certain ambitions. It is aware of itself and of what it might do. Unfortunately it goes a little overboard: set straight out of Mister Rogers and screen effects that take away from rather than enhance the play make one wonder if, again, a straight filming would not have been better.

Peterson is so good at switching roles that he doesn't need costumes; indeed, it might almost be thought of as cheating the video audience of Peterson's chameleon-like changes.

As for Tom Stoppard's *On the Razzle* the kindest thing that may be said is that it managed to squeeze out laughs out of an audience which surely found most of the dialogue incomprehensible. The videotape of the London West End production is fraught with miscues, misdirection and miserable sound recording. Example: Melchior, a servant, gets trapped in a chinese screen and is — literally — unfolded. Stoppard's directions call for Melchior to appear looking as bent as possible so that his master's admonishing "When we get home I'll have to straighten you out" makes comic sense. But Melchior appears perfectly straight and the line is lost.

The play is pure farce and was, at least, played that way. But because farce has its roots deeply entrenched in the theatre, almost seeming to belong there, the production doesn't make what is left all that worthwhile.

In a theatre one simply can't escape the energy and exuberance of such a production. In a movie house one might easily fall asleep, being so removed from the actual experience. Now if the same holds true for all filmed plays, as I suspect it does, the future of drama on video is, on the whole, doubtful.



PHOTO: MARIO SCATTOLONI

Canadian artist John MacGregor with one of his abstract paintings.

AGYU show

By MARILYN LITWACK

John MacGregor is one of the leading figures in contemporary Canadian abstraction. The power and directness of his colors, lines, and rhythms bring forth positive and lively thoughts to the viewer.

You can catch his work in a show, "John MacGregor: A Survey," at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU) until 14 October.

The exhibit displays some of MacGregor's latest paintings, from 1975 to 1982. Prior to 1975, his work consisted mostly of abstract three-dimensional sculptures of a rather sexual nature. A pivotal year, 1975 signified his change to paintings which are expressionist abstracts that illustrate his state of consciousness at the time. His paintings are electric action which come alive.

Also in 1975, MacGregor's interest appeared to be music — as illustrated by: *Religious Piano*, *Liszt at the Piano*, and *Large Pink Piano*. Each one of these are somewhat reminiscent of the animation in Norman McLaren's National Film Board of *FIDDLE DE DEE DEE*. The pianos in MacGregor's paintings are alive — they seem to be caught up in their music. With *Duet* you can almost hear the melody — *The Vienna Waltz*, perhaps.

Primordial Master 1981, a personal favorite, mixes color and textures to give the feeling of actual renaissance; it is texturally so explosive you can almost smell the sulphur.

John MacGregor was born in England in 1944 and moved to Canada in 1949. He studied in Toronto and taught at York from 1971 to 1973.

The exhibit at York is well worth looking into.



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