

Wacky characters in Beth Henley play

Firecracker sparkles

The Miss Firecracker Contest
Phoenix Theatre
Runs to Jan. 31

review by June Chua

"I'm afraid I'm missing out on things," claims the aptly named Elaine (Marianne Capithorne) in this delightfully eccentric play by Beth Henley (noted for her most recent success, *Crimes of the Heart*.) This statement by Elaine can be related to all the wacky characters in the play.

The story, set in the southern U.S., concerns Carnelle's (Michele Muzzi) efforts to win The Miss Firecracker crown and hence go out in a "blaze of glory." The gawky Popeye Jackson, played by the wonderfully-cast Leona Brausen, is her seamstress friend and daffy cousin, Elaine and Delmout (Larry Yachimec), drop in unexpectedly.

Michele Muzzi's portrayal of Carnelle, as someone who wants to right her wrongs and to find her place in the sun, lends the right amount of uncertain hope and elevated idealism. The not-so-pretty Carnelle enters the contest to compensate for her low self-esteem, which has led her to lead a promiscuous lifestyle. Thus, the nickname "Miss Hot Tamale," something she desires to live down.

All the performances were memorable; however, the most notable was Marianne Capithorne's portrayal of the fading beauty Elaine, reminiscent of *Blanche* on the TV sitcom *Golden Girls*. Elaine has looks, a rich husband, two children and a large mansion for a home. Yet all her cultivated sophistication and narcissism can not hide her hunger to be adored and loved. Capithorne gives "hissy-fits," and makes melodramatic comments and condescending nuances with a worldly, if somewhat fluttery, air of a southern belle.

Similarly, Larry Yachimec makes Delmout endearingly nutty in a hare-brained kind of way. The wild-haired Delmout

looks like some crazed genius who is temperamental and reactive in strange ways. For it is Delmout, returning from an insane asylum, who used to have dreams about "women's parts" and once tried to choke his uncle because "he was so damn boring!"

Leona Brausen brings a wealth of talent to the role of Popeye, the quintessential dowdy, bespectacled, female wimp. Popeye is insecure, apologetic, she can barely see through her thick glasses and is simplistic in her view of things. The audience sympathizes with Popeye and admires her uncomplicated nature. Rounding off this stellar cast are Wendell Smith as the boozing, diseased Mac Sam and Nola Augustusan as the loud, garish Tessy Mahoney.

The cast plays off each other superbly and smoothly. One scene of collective female angst between Popeye, Carnelle and Elaine was particularly humorous. Also, the dialogues between the awkward, love-struck Popeye and the unbalanced Delmout are laughable. The fluid interaction between the characters has a consistent rhythm to it, paramount to the art of comedy. This can partly be attributed to Henley's fine writing which has mixed each character's fears, dreams and faults in between comical remarks and hilarious incidents.

Eventually, all the main characters end up finding what each has wanted all his or her life. Elaine decides to do something "reckless," while Delmout resolves to pursue philosophical questions, and Popeye finds acceptance and love. For Carnelle, Mac Sam's esauygoing theory of life begins to take important meaning to her life. She wants to go forward in life, not in a "blaze of glory" but perhaps in the continual glow of self-pride, dignity and contentment.

Beth Henley makes these characters true human caricatures, which the audience affectionately embraces because they represent our own failings and aspirations; exaggerated and parodied. *The Miss Firecracker Contest* is a winner.



Marianne Copithorne and Leona Brausen in Phoenix play.

La La La's Lock talks

interview by Elaine Ostry

"People need to sense that the body is more than something to carry around the mind and the stomach," claims Edouard Lock, creator and choreographer of the Canadian dance company, La La La Human Steps.

To Lock, the purpose of dance is to "evoke passion." His company performs only original works, and only one work at a time. Each work is, he says, "a reflection of what we perceive society to be at that time."

La La La Human Steps is a "listening company," which Lock believes is very important because "dance is a very intuitive form of communication." He and his dancers listen to "what is in the air" and because the message of their dance is "not translated in a word, it keeps its visceral strength."

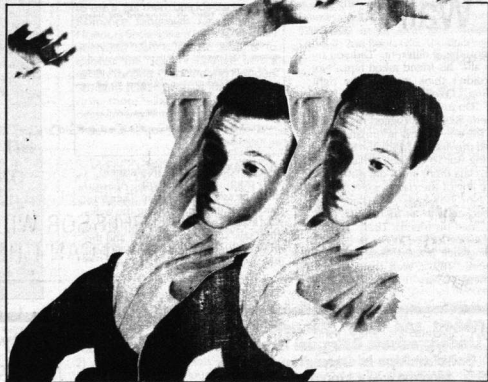
Lock's newest show, presently touring Canada, is called "New Demons." "It is oriented around a sense of legend," says Lock. "It is contradicting the present scientific notion of an uncaring universe." The show explores the ancient view of the universe to which, despite modern scientific knowledge, Lock claims we still adhere. "We still feel a very emotional relationship to the universe."

Certainly "New Demons" has an interesting set. For the production, SUB Theatre's stage must be extended to accommodate not only the dancers but a half-ton sculpture of a lion, an "electrode machine, a barn, and a bed of nails."

But Lock states that the technical aspects of "New Demons" are "less obtrusive" than those of his previous work, "Human Sex." For instance, the lion (which doubles as a drum) "is sculpture work — not high tech... it has an aesthetic shape independent of its function."

The bed of nails is for Lock, who lies on it and sings every once in a while throughout the performance to give his dancers a rest. Does it hurt? "No," says Lock, "the nails are blunted... I'm not masochistic in the slightest."

"New Demons" also showcases London's troupe, The West End Company (formally Blanc Mange). This group concentrates



Edouard Lock: flying high

graphic: Jerome Ryckboert

on "westernizing Hindu influences" in its music.

The show features multi-media: film, readings, live music, dance. Is not this kind of production distracting to the audience? "Crossing the street is a distraction," answers Lock. "We (the company) use distractions... the environment is full of distractions, (so) when you get into a theatre, does it really matter?"

"Your neighbour might see a show different from you," continues Lock. "It's nice for the audience to have choices... Multi-media is a more mature way of theatre production."

Of course, there are difficulties in choreographing a multi-media production. "A jumble of things doesn't work," Lock says. "You must think of how it looks from the outside."

Which countries are most receptive to La La La Human Steps' unique style? "Oh, the Netherlands, Germany, Canada... the Anglo-Saxon cultures, less so the French cultures." Is not their home base, Montreal, part of the French culture? "No," says Lock. "Montreal speaks French, but is American."

The company's style is very physically demanding, and one recurring remark by press reviews is that the dancers "defy gravity." Does their dancing resemble gymnastics at all? "No, not at all," says Lock. "Gymnastics is a very right wing political statement." This is because of the emphasis on "trying to remain very straight. It is a militaristic type of perception."

Lock, however, likes "a body not to be linear, but a complex, layered thing." The dancer is "someone who has a will, and is encouraging the audience to think."

Lock's choreography concentrates on the individual. "We don't have ensemble work." Why not? "Because I don't see it happening in the universe... I don't see four birds flying in time." The rigid harmony of the ensemble, according to Lock, is only found in the army and dictatorships.

The choreographer obviously respects his four dancers as dedicated and aesthetic people. "It takes a lot of love to do what they're doing," comments Lock. "They've got to like what they do because there's no other reason to do it." Lock looks for "precision" in a dancer, and the ability "to know when (a dance move) is extraordinary and when it's just all right."

Lock founded La La La Human Steps in 1980. "I wanted to work in a style that was more mine... as opposed to a compromise." He has won the Jean A. Chalmers Award in 1982 for "Oranges" and New York's Bessie Schonberg award in 1986 for "Human Sex." "New Demons" premiered at a work-in-progress for the opening of Montreal's Festival International de Nouvelle Danse and at the Los Angeles Festival in September.

La La La Human Steps will perform "New Demons" in two European tours in the summer and fall.

"The whole point is to be different," concludes Lock, "...to live a new experience."

La La La Human Steps will perform "New Demons" in the SUB Theatre, January 21-23.