

## Ben Wicks: cartoonist with a conscience

Interview by Don Trembath

When Ben Wicks finally arrived (he was late), I was ready for him. I had prepared a long list of very interesting questions, like: How long have you been drawing cartoons? When did you start? Why? What is a political cartoonist's life like? and more. Some of my questions were even more interesting, if you can believe it. So when he finally arrived, well... I was obviously very ready.

He has covered world events as a journalist for the *Toronto Star*...

But then I asked my first question, one which had not even been among my list, which was, "So, did you get caught up in the traffic?" I asked the question in a friendly way. I didn't want him to think that I was mad at him for being late or anything. I mean, really, who am I to give Ben Wicks hell for being late for an interview? I had smiled when I asked him and he smiled back when he said, "Well, sort of, this is my tenth interview today and we started to run behind after about the fifth."

His tenth! This little man with his chocolate brown suit, rolling gait, carpenter's hands, warm smile (incredibly warm smile), friendly eyes, and a gift for making millions of people laugh, was going to be the first in front of someone who has never before for the tenth time today to answer a battery of questions that he has heard many times before?

We sat down in a nearby coffee shop. I asked him if I could buy him a coffee. He said, "No thanks. I'm a little tired of coffee," and laughed. I'll bet he's tired of coffee. I flipped through my pad of questions, trying

to find one that I thought may be original. None. He sat across from me, waiting patiently for me to begin, so I did: "Well, ah, I can't find anything original in here so..." "Oh, that's okay," he said, adding, "I don't mind talking to people."

And he didn't mind, either. Every question I asked him he answered politely; refreshingly, as if they were the first questions directed to him all day, or all week.

Wicks began his career with the *Saturday*

*Evening Post* in 1963. He had approached one of the editors with some unpublished cartoons with hopes of being hired as a political cartoonist. The editor had said fine, they look just great. Now give us three letters of references and you have yourself a job. So Wicks had ran home, wrote the letters, in about five minutes, ran back, and was hired. He has covered world events as a journalist for papers such as the *Toronto Star*; he is also a professional musician, and absolutely loves

life. Wicks has been married for thirty-one years. His wife, Doreen, works with G.E.M.S. (Global Ed-Med Supplies), a non-profit organization which handles and delivers drugs and medicine to countries in need all over the world.

Wicks has visited many countries also, and it was during his stays in countries like Sudan and Haiti that he became interested, horrified, and angered at the plight of millions of men, women, and children in such countries. In one of the camps he and his wife were at in Sudan, "there were 84,000 people who required medical help — and eleven nurses."

The smile disappeared when Wicks discussed the sights that he saw, the helplessness etched in the eyes of starving people, and the general unawareness of Canadians regarding the third world. Anger vented towards refugees by Canadians also annoyed him. He sympathizes with the people in the underdeveloped countries and applauds their determination to seek a better life.

...he is also a professional musician, and absolutely loves life.

Concerning other questions that I asked him, he loves Gary Larson ("The Far Side has affected us all"); respects all Canadian cartoonists ("They are all very good. I don't know why."); thinks the world of Graham Greene; has no time for any real hobbies; loves what he does; and sees no reason to retire. His game "Quick Pics with Ben Wicks" is "like charades except you draw," his latest book — funny, straight-forward, just like him — is as funny as his interviews; and saying "Yes, I have one more interview," off he went, smiling again.



Wicks takes a look at the world

## Festival of variety

One Act Play Festival  
Chinook Theatre  
March 4 and 5

review by June Chua

A night of amateur performances were held at the Chinook Theatre on Friday night. None of the three productions, as a whole, were especially stellar, although *Cut!* came close to being a runaway hit.

The first production was *The Lover*, by Harold Pinter. It is about the double lives that a husband and wife lead as spouses and lovers to each other. The play explores the overlapping of the two worlds as the reality and fantasy begin to merge. The husband and wife, played by Robin Bovey and Laura Brenner, are seemingly caught up by their own fantasies.

The actors did well to contrast the calm, almost indifferent mood of being spouses with the emotional rollercoaster of playing lovers. Both actors possessed a rhythm in their interaction, crucial to Pinter plays which have many pauses and innuendos. However, the actors did not delve into the full emotional range of their characters, who walk a thin line between placid domesticity and violent passion. The performers failed to create an atmosphere of underlying cruelty, lust, and anger between the characters.

The character that literally stole this show was the milkman, played by Gerry Streader, whose sense of comic timing is impeccable. His role was a very minor one but left a lasting image. The play itself is cloaked in mysterious, humorous situations and memorable lines, such as when the husband denies he has a mistress but is "very well acquainted with a whore, not a mistress!"

Next on the bill was *The Woman and The Wrong Man* by Iakovos Kambanellis, a Greek playwright. The play is set in the turmoil of 1973 Athens, where an old woman — and the police — await for her son in her home. The plot centres around the interplay between the talkative mother (Jo-Anne Sutherland) and the brutal, self-deluded police

sergeant (John Miller).

The kind-hearted woman is not fazed by the menacing police, who are continually aggravated by her kindness. She never directly answers their question, therefore evoking laughter from the audience, and reminisces constantly about the past, threading her experiences together until the very end. Her remembrances are crucial to the understanding of the Greek experience during the military dictatorship. However, due to the nature of the script, her stories were hard to follow.

Because of the many interruptions, the audience could not follow or connect her stories. As a result, the audience was unable to sympathize with the old woman, and the performance seemed to drag on. Also, the possibility of violence could not be sensed. Nevertheless, Jo-Anne Sutherland as the mother gave a strong performance: her facial movements, body gestures and voice reminds one of the quintessential peasant Greek mother.

Lyle Victor Albert's *Cut!* was clearly an audience delight. It featured characters who have been 'cut' by playwrights. There is Clyde (James Vosper), the Prince of Denmark, Fiddleditch (Dan Chamero) who has been cut from every Oscar Wilde work, lusty Nipplettius (Debbie Boodram), who was slated to be Oedipus' sister and the pushy Mrs. Kowalski (Anita Marie Ref), who was superseded by Blanche du Bois.

This ingenious parody 'plays' upon the characteristics of the different genres represented by the characters. For instance, Clyde is always brooding, Nipplettius leaves everything to the gods, while Fiddleditch makes cucumber sandwiches and Mrs. Kowalski is a loud, garish American mom. Albert has imbedded all kinds of literary jokes and has twisted famous phrases in his script. For example, Mrs. Kowalski accuses Clyde, a creation of Shakespeare, of never meaning what he says, and Clyde constantly inverts phrases, such as "there are more things dreamt of in heaven and earth... than in your theatre."

The order of their "celestial waiting place" is disturbed by Joey (Timothy Hawryluk), who was booted out of a Broadway musical. Unfortunately, Hawryluk gives a flat performance because he does not project the humour and enthusiasm of his Broadway character. At times, the actors seemed to throw out their lines which were meant to make the audience react. So the flow of the play appeared to hit a brick wall due to the silence of the audience. A solid performance was by Ref as the sneering, husky-voiced Mrs. Kowalski, her delivery was perfect.

The sets did well to accentuate the mood of the piece or helped to de-emphasize

surroundings, as was necessary in *Cut! The Lover* had a broken set to symbolize the fluidity between fantasy and reality with hot pinks and purples where most of the 'action' took place and cool blues in the bedroom. *The Woman and the Wrong Man* had spartan furniture to stress the old woman's simple existence and *Cut!* had just three pieces of furniture because the focus was on the characters.

Audience members were invited to listen to the adjudication, held after all plays were performed. Dorothy Ann Hagg, a free-lance director, and Alex Hawkins, U of A drama professor, were adjudicating on Friday.

## Woman Upstairs worth a visit

The Woman Upstairs  
Mary Walters Riskin  
NewWest Publishers Limited 1987

review by Peter J. Cole

Riskin's first novel is a meticulous amalgam of revenge and forgiveness, held together by careful writing, superb characterization and pithy dialogue.

Diana Guthrie, twenty year resident of Edmonton, returns to smalltown (Donellon) Ontario to confront her dying mother and the painful memories of youth: lost love and opportunity, hypocrisy, and a broken home.

From the first sentence of the prologue where she lands in Toronto until the novel's end, we are caught inside Diana's mind. Sometimes it's a nice place to be and sometimes it is a torture-chamber from which we cannot escape even by closing the book. After leading us into her most intimate memories and hopes, Diana captures us: the reader becomes the first-person narrator. Although there are many very natural attributes in her personality, there are some which are very unsettling.

Until very late in the story, we think that Diana hates her mother for general flaws in her personality — true. But she hates her especially because of one incident and she cannot be objective about that particular situation. It has stewed in her unconscious for two decades and it has coloured every

relationship she has had since.

Diana is grown-up in years and in terms of her general outlook on life; but in regard to her family and to this one harrowing occurrence, she is very immature emotionally.

Diana was in love and her lover died. She blamed her mother for his death and she fled — to Edmonton, where she knew no one, where she could become someone else, where her past made of her a martyr in her own eyes. She went to the U of A, she worked, had lovers (sort of), friends (for lack of a better word); she got by, coped, thrived, passed through life. Then her mother got cancer.

By the time Diana learned of her mother's illness, her mother was almost dead. Diana's brother (who is a jerk, a lawyer, and another emotional cripple), didn't want Diana to see his (their) mother — not now, not after so many years of rejection. Something from her intuitive depths drew Diana back home and here we glimpse snippets and shards of her past life and her present existence.

Even for an established novelist, the writing would be considered more than competent. If you're looking for levels of reality, layers of meaning, they're here for the finding. If it's a good story you're after, you won't be disappointed. Though there are a few vague references and some overworking of thematic details, *The Woman Upstairs* is sensitively and intelligently written.