

Keeping step at Theatre Network

by Beno John

Since 1975, Theatre Network has been offering local audiences works which, for the most part, have blossomed into artistic and commercial success after opening in Edmonton.

But success isn't exactly the word to describe Theatre Network's first production as a theatre company finally established in a permanent space.

"We took a loss in this play," says Dennis Robinson, one of the company's members.

Theatre Network has been forced to shorten the run of its first play in its new location because there just weren't enough people showing up to make the entire run worthwhile.

"The reviews hurt us," explains Brenda Doner, Theatre Network's General Manager. This surprises me. As a part-time reviewer I had become convinced that nobody reads reviews. "The *Sun* reviewer said I should be publicly flogged," says Dennis Robinson, the lone star of the one man, opening production *20th Century Jig*. And Keith Ashwell of the *Edmonton Journal*, spoiled by the wider selection of gastronomical goodies offered at the Shoctor's opening nights had little better to say. Mr. Ashwell excused himself politely from speaking about what *20th Century Jig* was all about by claiming the play was above his head. Having been a faithful reader of Mr. Ashwell's reviews I believe Mr. Ashwell's comment can be taken as his general approach to most - if not all - of the things the man reviews. The unfortunate thing is that Mr. Ashwell's comment about *20th Century Jig* was meant to be considered in jest.

In all fairness to Mr. Ashwell and that critic - from the *Sun* - who shall remain nameless because he probably has a difficult enough time explaining himself as a theatre reviewer in his present condition. I saw the play on its last night before anyone knew it was the last night. (Because the play was cancelled a week before it was to end.)

Surely when an actor takes the trouble of playing four major voices and five minor ones in front of you for two hours there must be a reason for it. What does Dennis Robinson do in *20th Century Jig* and what is it all about? When you ask yourself that question you begin to approach the play as something that can actually mean something.

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The way I saw it, *20th Century Jig* definitely had something to say. Yes, Mr. Ashwell and that nameless fellow from the *Sun*, plays can actually say something about something.

The opening scene is set in a fire lookout tower. Robinson comes to the tower on what is obviously the first day of a long period of isolation. Without a doubt, this is the 'present tense' of the play; what follows are repeated flashbacks into the life of John Bronsky, the man in the tower. Going as far back as John's childhood, the flashbacks and scenes from the past are revealed through Lubor Bronsky, John's grandfather. In the familiar setting of a hockey rink, Grandpa Lubor alienates John's coach and everyone else by urging his grandson to play Lubor's own, individualistic style of hockey. Lubor wants John to hog the puck.

A clear pattern emerges within the play: John is someone special, he is singled out by his grandfather as someone who will go a long way, and, in a sense he

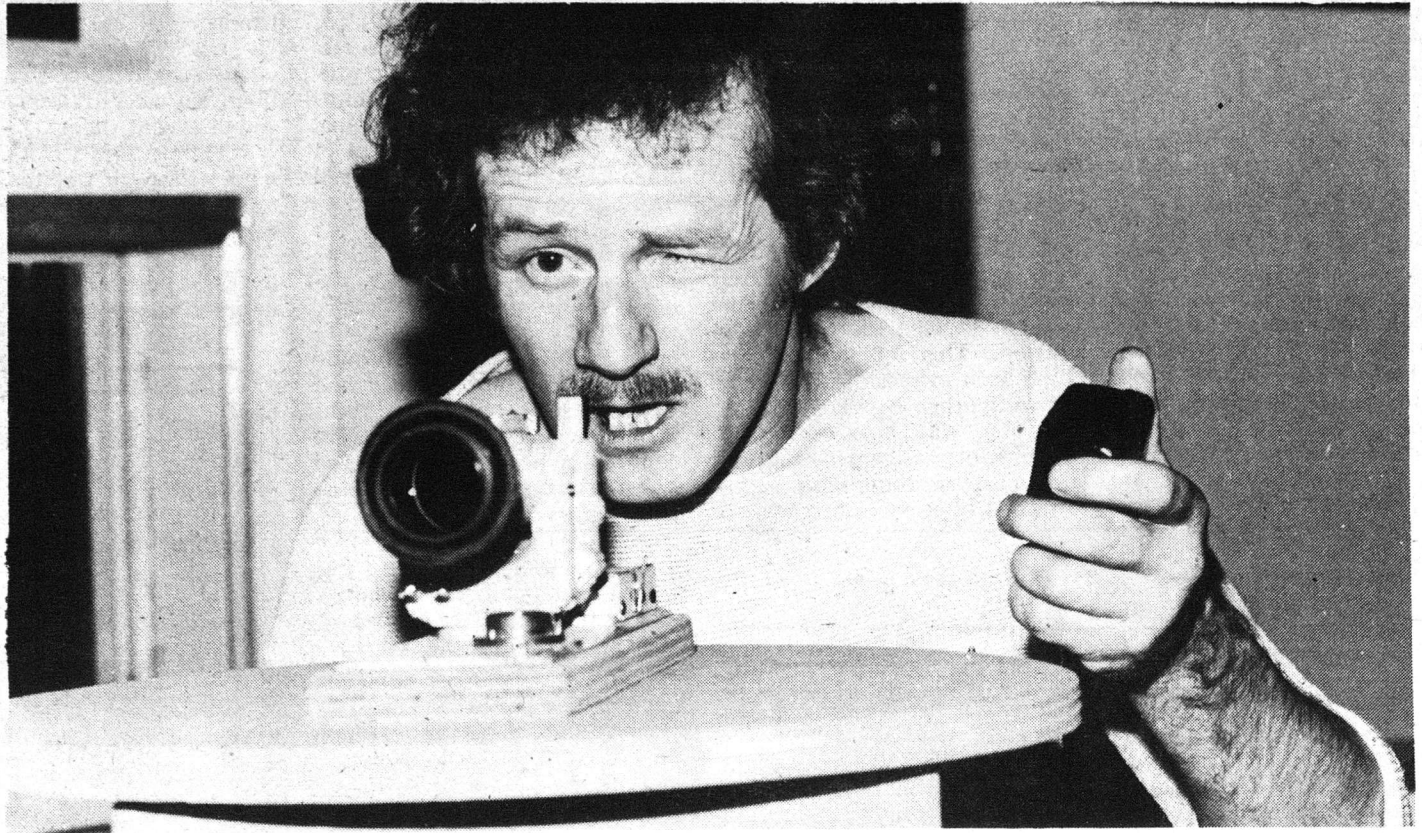


photo Bill McKewen

Dennis Robinson as he appeared in the late-great *20th Century Jig*.

does. John doesn't make the big leagues, but he does make it into show business, which is just as glamorous.

The showbusiness John Bronsky is the successful, mature adult and his scenes are conveyed in the form of a stand-up comic's routine. This device works nicely; the stand-up comic persona of John is John's soul. And by playing to the audience with the sharpness and wit of the comic, Robinson is allowed to put John before the audience with a kind of intimacy that is not possible with any of the other roles.

So what's a stand-up comic doing in a fire lookout tower? Well, success - at least the twentieth century kind of success - has its drawbacks. Success on the stage is not accompanied with success at home. John loves his career; his wife gets bored. She begins to see other men. And so on. Personal relationships begin to sour, then they vanish altogether. John, we discover, is in the lookout tower to get away from it all; the tower lets him escape from the world. John, the one who once had possibilities in the world leaves it after being defeated in the "great battle between the sheets."

But defeat is not an easy thing to achieve; John, in the solitude of the mountains is visited by the ghost of a coward from the past. Le Malice, who describes himself as a voyageur in Simon Fraser's expedition, the Simon Fraser who Le Malice contemptuously refers to as "the man that named the river after himself." Le Malice's soul is doomed to wander the Rockies for his act of cowardice; he, it turns out, ran away from the Battle of Seven Oaks. There is no redemption until he helps a mortal defeat his cowardice.

The scenario is complete. John finds cutting himself off from the world is not as easy as he thought it would be. On Le Malice's heels comes another figure from the past. Grandpa Lubor searches out his grandson because he cannot die and enter heaven without straightening out his grandson's life which, in effect, blemishes the family name. In a beautiful, delicate vignette, Grandpa Lubor tries to join his wife in heaven. But his wife tells him that he has come before his time; Lubor cannot enter heaven until he has "cleaned the mud from his boots".

Following on Lubor's footsteps in Oscar, one of Lubor's old rivals who also had a grandson that played hockey. While Lubor urged his grandson to hog the puck, Oscar - whose soul is of pure gold in this play - urges his son to pass the puck, to play team hockey.

Le Malice, Lubor and Oscar become benevolent influences on John's determined solitude and this is preceded by the pivotal scene in which John, the

standup comic, breaks down in front of his audience and delivers a splendid routine about love and hate, the paradox of the twentieth century man who loves to hate, who laughs at pain.

And this is just the barebones of *20th Century Jig*, its simple structure which holds the play together. But despite its simple structure, there is great depth and complexity to this piece. You are watching a talented, seasoned actor juggle voices and personalities which have come out of his own head and occupy a coherent, rather well defined world which is bigger than this production's spartan set and is much bigger than even Dennis Robinson's imagination and Andras Tahn's direction.

The vignettes which make up the entire play can stand on their own; together they create a powerful whole; it gives you the illusion of one man, one actor re-inventing the world before you and that Mr. Ashwell and that nameless critic from the *Sun* is what true theatre should be.

The pacing of the vignettes is assured as well as Robinson's sense of rhythm. Only the final scene of the play fails to work and seriously threatened what Robinson so carefully built. Most of the time Robinson succeeds in challenging the audience's imagination but the final scene, John Bronsky's redemption is ludicrous and can do nothing but destroy the integrity of the play.

20th Century Jig once again affirms Theatre Network's commitment to theatre which is nurtured from the soil. And it must be understood that this particular production is simply the beginning of Theatre Network's usual process with new plays. Like its previous productions *Two Miles Off*, *Hard Hats and Stolen Hearts*, *Tracings Kicker*, *Sara and Gabrielle*, *20th Century Jig* will become a touring show and given the quality and intelligence of this piece, it is probable that it will go a long way.

Because of its devotion to touring it is no small wonder that Theatre Network enjoys a far better reputation nationally than it does locally. This falls in line with the immutable Canadian principle of deriding anything which you can call your own.

20th Century Jig is a case in point. *Macleans* and the *Toronto Globe and Mail* had more favorable reactions to the play than any of the local media. So it goes.

Aside from the fact that Theatre Network produces more indigenous theatre than any other theatre in town, it also makes more immediate theatre. The political and social commentary contained within *20th Century Jig* like most

other Theatre Network productions is far more acute and relevant than anything else in this town.

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Sitting in the *Fireside*, Dennis Robinson, Tanya Ryga and Brenda Doner - despite the wine and the beer - soberly consider the future. "Now that we have a space and a complete season, we have more financial troubles," says Ryga, "but Andy Tahn feels it's really important for us to establish a place in this town." Even though *20th Century Jig* was a loser financially, everyone thinks the future looks bright.

"We're the only kind of theatre doing our kind of thing," says Ryga. None of them feel that establishing Theatre Network as a permanent theatre in any way affects the aims or objectives of the theatre.

"I had all the characters in mind before we started the play," says Robinson, "then it was just a matter of improvising them in front of Tahn and Carefoot." Following the direction of Tahn and Carefoot, (who helped with the writing), or what Ryga calls "editing", the roles achieved more focus, and as a result of that more direction and motivation.

The purpose of the play as Robinson sees it was to talk about "the war between the sheets", the aggressiveness between male and female which Robinson sees as the most divisive thing between individuals in contemporary society. "It's related to what I have seen travelling across Canada."

Theatre is alive and well for Theatre Network; it is obvious in the work it produces. "I love this kind of stuff, fighting for your own right to survive," bubbles Robinson. It is refreshing to see that making theatre is foremost in the minds of the individuals behind Theatre Network. Money, box office sales, even bad reviews seem pretty insignificant compared to the excited conversation of where and how *20th Century Jig* should go next. Compared to the complacency of the other professional theatres, at first glance one would think Theatre Network had its priorities backwards. But then, really, it's the other way around. Lucky for Edmonton, even though it doesn't know it. Yet