

arts

Sister Mary Ignatius not an Actor's Nightmare



Review by Chris Morash

It's been a hard day at the office; accounting is rough work, but someone's got to do it. A good, safe, evening at the theatre is just what you need to unwind. You make your way to your seat, ready to be told a story, when suddenly you—Goerge Spelvin—are thrust onstage, and expected to act in a play that keeps switching from Noel Coward to Shakespeare to Samuel Beckett to *A Man For All Seasons*. Terrifying.

But hilarious too. *The Actor's Nightmare*, put on last week with *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You* by Another Theatre Company, was a very, very funny show.

While a large measure of this comedy is inherent in playwright Christopher Durang's brilliant, maniac script, there is no denying the contribution of Mark Latter's tight, high-energy performance in the role of George Spelvin. With his comic timing down to a science, Latter brought out Spelvin's endearing confusion so clearly that one could believe that the hapless accountant really had been plucked out of the audience and stuck onstage.

Of course, Latter's fine performance would have been in vain if the rest of the company had not been just as solid. John Jefferson, playing actor Henry Irving, delivered a wonderfully wicked Shakespeare parody, although his performance grew less fluid as the evening went on.

Both Janet MacEwen and Susan Stackhouse turned in highly polished performances, shifting with ease from a parody of *Private Lives* that would have Noel Coward chuckling in his grave to a bizarrely funny *Man For All Seasons*. Kate Rose's line-whispering Stage Manager had fascinating intensity.

Director David Renton kept this strong supporting cast in balance, so that the focus fell where it should—on Latter's Spelvin. In fact, the breakneck pacing, use of space—both onstage and in the audience—and minute attention to detail all fit together so well that *The Actor's Nightmare* didn't look like it was directed at all. It just looked like it happened. What more can I say?

The Actor's Nightmare works on a number of levels. Apart from the comic strangeness of the situation around which the play is built, the parodies of Shakespeare, Coward, Beckett, and Bolt all held little gems for anyone familiar with those playwrights.

The Beckett segment, for instance, captured in all its wide-eyed absurd silliness by Janet MacEwen, combined bits of *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Happy Days*, and a wonderfully subtle nod to *Krapp's Last Tape* in a concoction called "Checkmate" (the logical successor to *Endgame*?). Wonderful stuff.

But *Actor's Nightmare* has a mind behind its laughing face. By making the audience the agent of George Spelvin's embarrassment, staring at him, expecting him to perform, Durang uses the actor as a metaphor for that great 20th century obsession—the individual alienated from society. Tom Paisley's claustrophobic stage design, squashed in the corner of the room enhanced this feeling. And who hasn't felt like George Spelvin, as if they were in a play without the script? That's life.

More than a little under the influence of Pirandello, Durang deals with the problems of alienation and identity in the individual and the fine line between reality and illusion. Fortunately, director David Renton chose to focus on the script's comic potential, letting these nightmare-black undercurrents drift in on their own.

Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You, also by Durang, was as much of a treat as *Nightmare*. Ostensibly a lecture given by a nun, Sister Mary (played by Susan Stackhouse), the play is a devastatingly funny look at the consequences of taking Christianity—and Catholicism in particular—too literally or too simplistically.

Once again, in *Sister Mary's* direct address to the audience, Durang uses the audience as an element in the play; instead of denying the reality of a performance situation, he incorporates it into the play.

Stackhouse's portrayal of Sister Mary had depth and force, developing the nun's kind exterior, which hides a harsh authoritarian interior, which hides a kind interior, which hides ... you get the picture; she's a complex character. And Stackhouse, through fabulous eye contact with the audience, forced us to confront her, so that even bluntly stated bits of orthodox Catholic doctrine sounded outrageously laughable.

Perhaps the best testimony to Stackhouse's strength as an actress was that she was able to hold her own with Robbie Thompson, who played Thomas. There's a saying in theatre that you should never act opposite a child or an animal, because they'll upstage you every time. While Robbie, who is the 1984 Cystic Fibrosis Poster Child, didn't upstage Stackhouse, he had more than enough charisma and talent to make the role of Thomas a delight.

The same company who made *The Actor's Nightmare* so wonderful—Latter, MacEwen, Jefferson and Rose—gave *Sister Mary* the same feeling of professional depth as the earlier show.

Of this group, Kate Rose delivered the evening's most poignant speech. When Rose, in the character of Diane, began to tell of being raped the day her mother died of cancer, one realized that *Sister Mary* is more than a simple case of nun-bashing-for-the-fun-of-it; it asks as question as old as religion itself—how can a benevolent God allow pain to exist? Only darkly absurd comic style like Durang's could deal with this sort of subject matter and still recapture a comic tone.

By coincidence, Neptune's *Mass Appeal* was running the same nights as *Sister Mary*; con-



trasting these two shows tells us why Halifax needs Another Theatre Company. Both deal with similar material—the Catholic Church; while the Neptune show is polished and worthwhile, it's pretty tame, guaranteed not to offend the blue-haired old ladies holding season tickets.

Sister Mary took more chances, tackling its subject head-on, and consequently was much funnier, more moving, and generally better theatre. It will be Halifax's gain if ATC succeed in establishing themselves as a permanent company. Let's pray that they will.



by Robert Morell

Essays in Collective Bargaining and Industrial Democracy is a collection of scholarly papers presented at a conference on collective bargaining held at the University of Lethbridge in September of 1982.

Essays in Collective Bargaining and Industrial Democracy CCH Canadian Limited, Don Mills, Ont., 179 pages (softcover), 1983.

The contributors come from across Canada, and from Britain as well. The papers, which average 10 to 20 pages in length, deal with subjects as diverse as freedom of association in employment, restrictions on public sector bargaining, secondary picketing, industrial democracy and quality of working life.

Dean Frease, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Lethbridge, summarizes the benefits of worker participation in management very well:

"The chief advantages which stem from a participatory style of management are as follows. First, a higher rate of output and increased quality ... a reduction in turnover, absenteeism and late arrivals to work. Third, a reduction in grievances ... a greater willingness to accept change ... Fifth, the psychological atmosphere of work is changed in a situation of participation and the authority of supervisors becomes more 'legitimate' ... (Finally) The quality of management decisions seems to be improved on average."

Another high point for the non-specialist is an article entitled "A Critical View of Industrial Democracy Schemes," written by Richard Hyman, Reader in Industrial Relations, Warwick University.

Dr. Hyman argues, first, that the term "democracy" has been redefined to such an extent that even though it was once consi-

dered "extremism" (i.e., "rule by all of the people"), it has now lost all but its rhetorical meaning.

Throughout his article, Hyman goes right to the heart of modern industrial organization by dissecting the present systems of the market economy, division of labour, hierarchy and technology, all of which in his view are fundamentally dehumanizing.

From his radical perspective, Hyman argues that movements towards industrial democracy in Europe thus far have served only to "co-optate" workers while little decision-making power has been transferred in reality.

In his conclusion, Hyman suggests that the reality of power "lies at the heart of industrial relations and industrial conflict," and that it is utopian to expect management and labour to cooperate as long as power lies in "undemocratic hands."

Like many of the other papers here, Hyman's is effectively provocative. Remember, however, that most of the essays presume some previous knowledge of industrial relations theory and labour law.