

**Energies sapped**

# Toronto's alternate theatre wants recharge



A Studio Lab Theatre production of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1974.

By RISHA GOTLIBOWICZ

Alternate theatre in Toronto has undoubtedly come a long way. Ten years ago, it hardly existed, and now, it is almost becoming fashionable. In one decade, theatres such as Theatre Passe Muraille, Factory Theatre Lab, Toronto Free Theatre, Tarragon, Global Village, etc. have arisen as a reaction to the larger corporate-styled theatres.

In the 1960's there was a limited number of theatres in Toronto. Within ten years, over 300 original plays were produced in English-speaking Canada, half of them in Toronto. Moreover, in two years, 1972 and 1973, 105 plays were performed in the smaller theatres, compared to 110 the following year.

The 1960's reflected a timid hope, bordering on em-

barrassment about the work that had been done. Very few plays ever made it. The biggest survivors were George Ryga's *Ecstasy*, Rita Joe, James Reaney's *Colors in the Dark*, and John Herbert's *Fortune and Men's Eyes*. This last play is now in 75 languages; ten years ago no one would touch it.

In 1963, the Canadian playwright needed encouragement from audiences and critics, and more important, he needed a laboratory or workshop. In this sense, he has come a long way.

Alternate theatre is essentially experimental; it is always seeking new challenges. One thing it is not is a business enterprise. Once it lapses into a commercial entity, it becomes status-seeking and loses its artistic commitment.

In this country, alternate theatre arose as a commitment to something Canadian. Undoubtedly our centennial year gave off sparks of cultural awareness.

The beginning of the seventies ushered in a peak of theatrical activity in Toronto. Critics were hailing new Canadian plays left and right. The 1971-1972 season signalled an unprecedented number of original Canadian works.

To mention just a few from the list: David Freeman's *Creeps*, David French's *Leaving Home*, John Palmer's *A Touch of God in the Golden Age*, Hrant Alianak's *Tantrums*, George Walker's *Sacktown Rag*, Louis Capson's *The True North Blueprint*, Larry Fineberg's *Stonehenge Trilogy*, Larry Kardish's *Brussels Sprouts*, Bill Fruet's *Wedding in White*, Carol Bolt's *Buffalo Jump*.

There was something in the air that triggered off this enormous activity. It is unquestionably an important turning point in Canadian theatre.

### LEVELLING OFF

The past two years, however, has witnessed a levelling off of this modest explosion. There is mention, on the one hand, of an exhaustion of vitality, and, on the other, of the need for new directions.

Certainly, many of these theatres are worn out by the bureaucratic aspects of running a

theatre.

It has been a struggle just to keep alive half the time, even with more subsidies. The only glamor of these wooden structures was that something worthwhile was being done. In a way, it's been a romantic ordeal.

### IN A RUT

Many of the alternate theatres have fallen into a rut. Energies need to be recharged. Ken Gass, head of Factory Theatre Lab, speculates on this development. He feels that the most dangerous phase in Toronto's "alternate theatres" paradoxically grew out of their success; audiences became fixed in their expectations, contrary to the intense need for more and more experimentation.

Gass is also currently taking time off. Having founded the Factory in 1970, he committed himself to doing only Canadian plays. This, he says, coincided with the wave of nationalism just about to break.

"My feeling is that our alternate theatres survived largely through ingenuity and faith. The failures were as necessary, perhaps more so than the success. There is, at least, a growing interest in Canadian plays. Educational institutions now study Canadian works; magazines and journals are proliferating; symposiums, seminars, and conventions are organized; CBC and St. Lawrence

Centre are recruiting directors from alternate theatres; and Canada Council (National Touring Office) has seen to it that major original works are taken across the country. More specifically, in Toronto, the famed Rosedale circuit is now visiting our alternate theatres.

The unique thing about alternate theatres is their size; being small they create a sense of intimacy and "at-homeness". This is definitely a plus in their favour, for a certain amount of closeness is generated between the theatre and its audience; the latter too feels a sense of commitment.

### STAYING ALTERNATE

The interesting question at this point, of course, is how "alternate" these theatres have remained. For example, Toronto Free Theatre no longer has a free admission policy. And coupled with Theatre Passe Muraille, both have run into censorship battles. Factory Theatre Lab has lost its original experimental flavour. Creation 2's central pivot, Louis Capson, is absent this year, as well as Tarragon's Bill Glassco. The Phoenix Theatre tends to be semi-professional and fairly dull. Global Village has fallen through for lack of funds. In general, the new season has not brought forth anything of significance.

Perhaps The Theatre Second Floor, which opened last year, deserves mention for remaining "alternate", and retaining a sense of artistic commitment. Still, it is difficult to judge from such new beginnings, and they still have money problems which sap some of the troupe's energies.

The Actors Repertory Theatre, though alive, is not well at the Colonnade Theatre. It tends towards alternate productions, and has received favourable attention during its brief existence. Unfortunately it has run into serious financial difficulties and has recently been involved in strenuous fund-raising campaigns.

### SLOW DOWN

In general, things have slowed down. The so-called New Wave has become the Old Wave. What this signifies is still hard to tell.

It has been suggested that a more critical stance be adopted. Connie Brissendon, who handles theatre liaison and marketing for the Playwrights' Co-Op, wants to see a firmer aesthetic of selecting plays coupled with less back-patting. She regrets that too much mediocrity was embraced for the sake of aiding theatrical growth; many of the plays wouldn't be accepted now.

Disillusionment has crept in. To quote Ken Gass: "For me, running the Factory has been one of the most loathsome, irritating, mind-destroying jobs imaginable, something I'm only beginning to recover from". He still feels it has all been worthwhile in spite of this.

Are the alternate theatres at their tether's end? If they had to do it all over again, would they? Is that "indigenous something" just around the corner? Or is it just a dirty joke?

## Records

By EVAN LEIBOVITCH  
**Undisputed Truth - Higher Than High (Motown G-972G1)**

Rhythm & Blues albums are starting to become a dime a dozen; there are too few R&B albums around that don't suck up to the disco sound. Many of the non-disco R&B records either end up repetitive or caught in the habit of pushing a good theme so long that everyone starts to get tired of it. From among this mass of mediocrity a new album by the Undisputed Truth, the kind of group you know you've heard of, but can't remember where. Actually, this one does stand out from the rest a bit, thanks to some electronic gimmicks and a little imaginative writing. It's a little on the gospel side of R&B, but there are a couple of dancable disco cuts. Still, it'll probably be a while before we hear anything really different from R&B. I just hope it hasn't exhausted itself.

John Fogerty (Asylum 7ES-1046)  
Here comes John Fogerty,

almost three years after his Blue Ridge Rangers project, launching a new album on Asylum after a \$1 million contract was worked out. Naturally, one would expect Fogerty's genius to come out with something new and dynamic. Not this time. It's much of the same stuff you've heard from him before-good, but nothing new. Ahh, the disappointment.

**Dan Fogelberg Captured Angel (Epik KE 33499)**

First things first, that painting of the bra-less sleazy angel on the cover is bound to sell some copies of this, regardless. Fogelberg plays almost all the instruments on this album that's incredibly easy to listen to, like Ian Thomas stuff with a little more polish to it. The idea has its drawbacks, and though the melodies are nice and easy, using good lyrics, it sounds like hundreds you've heard before a background music at parties you've gone to. It's well put together, and nobody will find this album irritating, but it doesn't have anything new to say.




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