

arts

Say Goodnight Michael; Lowry play is Mercer's disgrace

Goodnight Disgrace
by Michael Mercer
Toronto Free Theatre

By KEVIN CONNOLLY

Talking about this play without descending into a diatribe is rather difficult. What begins as a situation with great potential—the story of the relationship between the young Malcolm Lowry and his mentor Conrad Aiken—descends into a confused collection of images and issues, none of which is properly developed or even attached to a coherent center.

Playwright Michael Mercer, after an interview with the aged poet Aiken, said that he wrote the play in an effort to “discover what transpired between Aiken and the obsessive alcoholic writer Lowry.” Unfortunately, Mercer seems to have completely ignored the rather obvious bias of his source or, at least, he has not worked a consciousness of that bias into his script. As a result the play seems little more than a highly tainted set of personal recollections, all of which revolve around Aiken's jealousy for Lowry's superior potential, and his youth.

Though some of the issues raised are potentially fascinating (the problem of artistic theft, and the sometimes ruthless devouring of the old generation by the new) they are given no credible basis in fact.

The play's structural frame, which begins and ends with brief scenes depicting Aiken in an old age home, does little but confuse the issues. If these are supposed to be Aiken's recollections, then why is the audience given scenes where Aiken himself is not present. When combined with actor Matthew Walker's pseudo-farical impression of an old man, the play's structural basis is doomed from the start; little more than a contrived and illogical stab at structural consistency.

There are a few points in act one where the dialogue actually holds up for several minutes, but in all cases it is not long before the absurdity of what is superficially presented as a historical situation undermines Mercer's good intentions.

His attempts at comic relief are clumsy and obvious, particularly when they are presented by David Schurrmann, who plays Aiken's artist friend Ed Burra. Even the overt reference to Burra as a Wildean cynic does little to redeem a slew of pat stage convention.

Act IV should be seen, too

By ZEZA MARQUES

“The potential for Toronto being a major theater center in the world is constantly growing, and I want to be a part of that,” says Larry Lewis, a member of the theatrical ensemble *Act IV*. The new theater collective was formed in November 1984, audaciously so, in the face of government cultural cutbacks.

Its four artistic directors—Lewis, Anthony Dunn, Sally Singal, and Eugene Stickland—are graduates of York's Master of Fine Arts degree program in Theater.

Lewis is confident that *Act IV* affords him, as a director, the opportunity to make a significant contribution to national theater, not just in terms of Canadian content, but in terms of a dedication to taking risks—“to do the sort of thing that is usually left in the non-commercial hands of universities and amateur groups who've got guts.” The theater he envisions has no limitations.

“The human being exists,” Lewis said, “as an instrument for communicating to another human being and for self-discovering. That's where the limits of the theater lie.” Of primary concern to Lewis is that the audience is challenged, that people are genuinely affected. “People have to expose themselves.” Lewis said, “in order to be constantly alive inside. We'd like to make people alive to the theater. We believe it's one of the most exciting things around.”

The company is rehearsing its musical cabaret *sweet/MEAT: the romance show* which premieres April 2 at Adelaide Court Theater.

Act IV's four principals take turns initiating projects: *sweet/MEAT* grew out of Lewis' interest in working collectively with actors and a playwright. In this case the playwright is Stickland, who Lewis refers to as “one of the great talents emerging . . . his writing possesses genius.”



UNDER THE INFLUENCE: “If we can jump over that balcony, we can make it to the exit before they start throwing things.” Matthew Walker (left) and Gerant Wyn-Davis in Free Theatre's *Goodnight Disgrace*.

Though their characters' lines occasionally display the same stiffness, actresses Wendy Thatcher (as Aiken's wife Clarissa) and Caroline Yeager (who plays Lowry's lover Jan Gabriel) must take most of the responsibility for their disastrous presentation on stage. To call their performances wooden would be a gross understatement, when set against the uneven but legitimate efforts of Walker and Gerant Wyn-Davis they look like rank amateurs.

Unfortunately, the occasional good moments in act one give way to a general wretchedness in the last act. Situations that are already absurd at the opening of the play provide the basis for a series of even more ridiculous developments in the second act; virtually nothing is salvaged from the play's original promise.

Perhaps some of the play might have been endurable had Mercer troubled to get even the

most basic facts straight. In one scene the envious Aiken is seen reading a copy of *Under the Volcano*, and by reading three pages, somehow manages to use it as the basis for an accusation of plagiarism. Needless to say, the scene fails miserably.

Suffice it to say that Free Theatre's *Goodnight Disgrace* is one of the weakest stage efforts in recent memory, while the script itself is an unforgivable waste of what could have been excellent dramatic material.

Atkinson's New Play Festival offers original student works

By HELEN HINKLE

If Canadian theater is going to keep pace with the rapid growth of the past two decades, it is going to need a continuing influx of talented new writers, directors, and actors. One of the aims of the Theater department's New Play Festival, which takes place next Wednesday and Thursday at Atkinson Studio, is to assist student writers and performers in developing their talents; writing, directing, producing, and acting in original student works.

This year's festival includes four new student plays. *The Space Between*, by Roberta Belfry, explores the intense and bitter relationship between a woman and her mother, who suddenly reappears after having abandoned her family years before. Laurie Kruk's *White Rose is Holding its Own*, deals with a woman's struggle with agoraphobia (fear of the world) and her attempts to overcome her family and her fears, while *Initiation Rites*, by Colleen Subasic, is a brutal, stylized play exploring the thought memories of two people who meet in a night club, with explosive results. Jason Sherman's *Pamela*, winner of the 1985 President's Prize for Drama, is a language-conscious play focusing on the strange relationship between four university students, and their odd search for innocence.

The New Play Festival was founded five years ago, and was designed to bring young playwrights together with actors and directors in developing original works. As Professor Tony Stephenson points out, “Playwrights do not work in a vacuum,”

and the festival gives the writers essential experience in the production side of the theater business.

Stephenson, who is responsible for choosing plays for the festival, described lack of space, directors, and actors as this year's major problems. In the past, readings of plays were held along with numerous stage productions to give more playwrights an opportunity to gain response from both actors and audiences. This year the festival has been streamlined to just four plays.

Ron Richard, the coordinator of this year's festival, described the production values of the plays as “Unelaborate. The festival is primarily for the benefit of the playwright, to show the problems involved in the transfer from page to stage.”

Though Richard speaks positively about the four plays in production, he has been somewhat disappointed in what he feels was apathy on the part of the Theater Department. The department was helpful in offering the use of set and prop pieces, but professors in the department seem unwilling to encourage student actors and directors to participate in the festival: “Students are told (by their professors) to get experience, but not if it interferes with their classes,” says Richard.

Still, all involved are confident that the festival will overcome its difficulties and that this year's efforts will provide audiences with an interesting look at four new student plays. The festival takes place on April 3 and 4, at Atkinson Studio. Admission is free. Support living artists.

“Half the time you're not quite sure what you're getting,” Lewis said. “You start off with a title, (and) find every nuance of that subject that you can. From that a story begins to emerge—not necessarily a linear story, but that ‘through line’ has to be there for me.”

Through intensive improvisation, four actors have evolved four distinct characters that Lewis sees as prototypes that exist in everyone's consciousness. The work is based very much on imagination (on such aspects as the romance with the supernatural, the nature of obsessive love) as well as desire.

“Certainly our show is not without sexuality,” says Lewis. “Although no one takes their clothes off, the sexual energy between the four performers is going to be very apparent.”

The apparent incongruity of the cabaret approach and the daring new company doesn't daunt Lewis. “The commercial dinner theater circuit really makes me sick,” Lewis says. “I don't understand why something has to be so trivialized, so cute. I don't think the businessmen on Bay Street enjoy it any more than I do. I don't understand why they put up with it except that it's non-threatening.”

Lewis says Toronto audiences have yet to see a professional show that maximizes the potential of the cabaret format and that looks beyond the perimeters of established theater. He describes this tameness not only as a great mistake, but the artistic and financial “assassination of the theater.”

“The way to bring people back into the audience is to do more risk taking,” Lewis says. “The only way to keep from starving is to get people interested in your creativity.”

“Theater artists can go further. Toronto theater isn't daring enough, it isn't original enough. There's a lot of dead stuff in this city.” With their intelligence, drive, and audacity, *Act IV* may go a long way toward changing all that.