

# New theatre 'tongues' tackle the absurd in captivating production

By REBECCA CANN

The absurdity of didacticism, the didactic within the absurd. The relationship of the two within realms of formal education and religion were explored in "touch tongues" debut production of *Parables and Lessons*. The performance, which ended February 9 at the Pauline McGibbon Cultural Centre, was a concoction of music, poetry, original text and script material drawn from various sources, and the result was a multiple-layered theatre experience from which one could leave chuckling, thinking, or both.

"touch tongues" was created in the fall of 1985 with three founding members. David Cameron, who graduated from York's theatre department two years ago, and Michael Harms, a graduate of the film department, have known each other since 1977. The two met Jackie Minns at His Majesty's Feast where all three worked. The trio banded together to design, direct, produce and act in *Parables and Lessons*.

The performance was divided into two segments, the first being a collage of scenes, monologues and images that flowed into and through one another. The second half of the production was a performance of

Eugene Ionesco's *The Lesson*. The program listed the sequences of the production as parables, the first half comprising of 20 in all. This surface representation of the didactic was undermined by the performances and/or actual printed sayings to reveal a sense of the absurd. The Parable of the Proverbs helped sum it up: "There is nothing so useless as a general maxim."

The characters of the evening represented the main thematic elements; Cameron was the Professor Man, Harms the Servant of Chaos and Minns the Pupil of Light. The relationships between the three were approached from varying perspectives but nothing was highlighted as significant. What was revealed was a structure of surface absurdity disguising striking "truths" which were themselves the surface of a deeper absurdity. Every aspect of presentation maintained this structure.

Prior to the performance Harms sold refreshments from a window, Minns took down the names of audience members at the door to the theatre and Cameron floated around the lobby. All were in complete costume and makeup; Minns in a frilly white dress and rosy cheeks, Cameron in a greenly-checked sports jacket with gray hair sticking out of the sides of his head and



Harms in a black taffeta dress, pieces of tulle floating around his head, which sported skullcap and demonic/clown makeup.

Inside the blackness of the theatre large pieces of finger-painting paper, reminiscent of kindergarten, were strung across the ceiling in twisted disorder. Each piece was lightly painted and bore a specific saying. Statements such as "He that lies on the ground cannot fall," "Nobody ever forgets where he buried the hatchet" and "Know thyself? If I knew myself I'd run away" prepared the audience for the absurdities of the performance.

Whether the choice of the theatre was intentional or not, the space bore a powerful resemblance to a church. The aisles formed the images of a cross, the stage could be seen as the chancel, the tall roof with a highly decorated ceiling, even the two stately wooden doors at the entrance of the theatre enhanced this image of a religious structure. There were, however, white cut-out win-

dow and wall-frames on the stage, along with a solidarity door and empty fireplace; a meathook dangling from the ceiling; two metal ladders, one in front of the stage and one in an aisle. The audience was provided with tables on which to rest beer, programs or arms. The strangeness of the setup immediately amused, but once recognized, the deeper, underlying sense of the absurd which this juxtaposition of elements created, was striking.

The entire production of *Parables and Lessons* maintained this triple layer of absurdity, meaning and meaningfulness. So many levels of both intellectual and emotional experience were played upon in an almost frivolous manner as to make the performance an event worthy of participation. In fact, one had little choice in the matter. At one point Cameron stenorously climbed up a ladder and proceeded with The Parable of the Roll Call ("All are named and included in the book of life and death."). Every member of the audience found themselves calling out "here!" and raising their hands as they heard their names. How else to recall that twinge of fear and nervousness in the first class of the year, surrounded by strangers? When finished, Cameron rolled up the list and handed it to Harms who crushed it onto the meathook. The Parable of the Meathook? "If others have control of you, life is chiefly suffering."

Raising questions on education and learning, religion and sex, light and dark, good and evil, the first half of *Parables and Lessons* frolicked by, filled with inanities, contradictions and a suggestiveness in imagery and action that, while laughably ridiculous, sometimes had one wondering if writing an essay on the presentation wouldn't be more appropriate.

Then came The Parable of Intermission—"Even the greatest seers and sages must attend to bodily needs."

The performance of Ionesco's *The Lesson* marked a distinct change in mood. Humorous to start, but lacking the ridiculousness of the first half of the performance, the absurdities of the play rapidly took on an obsessive quality, moving into morbidity and destruction. *The Lesson* involves

an unbalanced professor (Cameron) giving a new pupil (Minns) tutoring in math and linguistics. Halfway through the lesson the student desires escape, but the professor refuses to let her leave, despite her toothache, and consequently straps her to a chair, tortures her and eventually kills her.

Ionesco's absurdist play contains the same three-tiered structure as the first half of *Parables and Lessons*. While the student is unable to understand the concept of subtraction, she has memorized all possible products



**THEATRE BEWARE:** "touch tongues" is aware of the evils of the universe in their comicbook *Theatre Critics From Outer Space*. Their production of *Parables and Lessons*, however, is chock full with enough fun and substance for the meanest of Martians.

of all numbers. Stupidity is overtaken by a talent which is recognizably the result of incomprehension. In the professor's rantings about linguistics he points out that the French, Spanish, Neo-Spanish, Italian, etc. for "my grandmother's roses are as yellow as my grandfather is Asiatic" is "my grandmother's roses are as yellow as my grandfather is Asiatic." Ridiculous surface surmise is in fact theoretically true—technically the words change but the meaning does not. But the lengthy and harrowing lecture on the subject recognizes the absurdity of such technicality.

*Parables and Lessons* reverberates with meaning and absurdity. Again and again one discovers yet something else to stew over or laugh at. The performances of the three members of "touch tongues" were filled with energy and a powerful sense of fun. Occasionally humor was over-stretched, and *The Lesson* tended towards monotony after the unpredictability of the first half of the evening. But the simply presented complexities of the production made for a rich and overflowing theatrical experience from which one could choose what to appreciate. "touch tongues" has proved itself capable of touching an audience in captivating and imaginative style.

# Spotlight on Irish

## AGYU, Winters Gallery host Irish art exhibit

By DEBRA MONDROW

*Divisions, Crossroads, Turns of Mind: Some New Irish Art*, an exhibit organized by the Ireland/American Arts Exchange Inc. will be on display at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU) and Winter's Gallery from Feb. 10 to March 23.

Lucy Lippard, guest curator for the show, has selected more than 100 works by 30 Irish artists and has written the exhibit's catalogue. In it she explains: "the title is metaphorical, but it also reflects the process of selection . . . getting lost in Ireland, driving country lanes, and getting lost in Dublin's amazing one way streets." Her unique writing style gives the show's literate audience a strong sense of the country as well as its art and artists.

"We usually think of Ireland as affecting our North American culture linguistically and literally yet it is also necessary to consider its impact on the visual arts," says Elizabeth McLuhan, director/curator of the AGYU. This is virtually the first show of modern Irish art that has come to Canada, and is the first in 15 years to come to the United States. Irish art is rarely seen.

McLuhan explains, "Ireland is a country in turmoil and this affects us all. We all feel surrounded by violence. These Irish artists have a high political awareness but are non-partisan. They do not take sides of right or wrong but simply show that we must continue, despite impending disaster."

Three elements made this exhibition irresistible for Elizabeth McLuhan. The first was the chance to bring to York a show with an international focus. Secondly, the dates of the exhibit coincide with the Irish conference being held at York during Reading Week. Most exciting, however, was the opportunity to work with Lucy Lippard, a very well known and well respected colleague of McLuhan. "Lucy is a socially conscious and politically astute writer,



who has the ability to always make sense of it all. There is no one else like her," says McLuhan.

*Divisions, Crossroads, Turns of Mind* is being divided between Winter's Gallery and the AGYU: Winters is displaying strictly photographs, while the AGYU is showing the mixed media work, including paintings, prints, drawing, sculpture, video, performance, and artist's books. On Friday, Feb. 21, there will be a panel discussion presented by the AGYU in conjunction with the 19th Annual Conference of the Canadian Association of Irish Studies, "Forty Shades of Green: Contemporary Issues in Irish Art." A reception and a performance by artist Alanna O'Kelly will follow this event.

What is most interesting about this art is that it is politically conscious yet not excessively so. However, while the images themselves are recognizable without any political undertones, it is necessary to under-

stand Ireland's political situation in order to obtain the artist's intentions. For example, the image in Dermot Seymour's *View from a Helicopter Using Sophisticated Surveillance Equipment* is that of a woman's legs in grass, magnified against an aerial view of the fields she is lying in. As Lucy Lippard explains in the catalogue, "the woman might be dead or making love. Either way, it is an ominous reference to the voyeuristic abuses of military surveillance by British helicopters, so common that Belfast schoolchildren include them in the skies of their drawings as automatically as they include the sun."

As Lippard also states in the catalogue, and what can be clearly seen from this exhibition, "contemporary Irish art is pulsating with an energy that reflects the social and economic changes that have swept over Ireland during the past two decades."

*Divisions, Crossroads, Turns of Mind: Some New Irish Art* is a major exhibition exploring the Irish mind. Left: John Kindness' *Gambler With Wolves*. Below: Julie Stephenson's *She on the Mountain* from the videotape *I, We, They, Were Marooned*.

