

Thompson's White Biting Dog barks more than it bites

By JASON SHERMAN

Judith Thompson's much-hyped *White Biting Dog* is a good example of a play that tries to do too much.

Thompson's own summation of the script—"A nightmare love story that's a comedy and a tragedy about getting grace"—is indicative of the overkill. Dreams are told with such frequency and with such little analysis that the audience is left trying to sort out the images and symbols each character brings forth.

Fire, water, air, and earth all figure prominently, but connections are few and far between. If the figurative language went over most people's heads while retaining some literal meaning, there would be no problem. But the difficulty is precisely this: the symbols work *only* on the symbolic level and that level has no direction.

Thompson has chosen to write the play this way is particularly difficult to gage given her admission that she doesn't like plays which require a lot of research. "Anytime I hear a playwright has done a lot of research," she said, "I just don't want to see it. I fear information on the stage." Perhaps she has imbued her play with Freudian overtones subconsciously—she has read the psychoanalyst's collected works. When one character tells us about her dream of flying, it is doubtful that Thompson meant to amaze us with her knowledge of dreamwork; but then, how are we to know that flying dreams are about sex.

"I want to present this reality as I see it."

The disparity may arise out of Thompson's aims as a playwright: "I want to present this reality as I see it and yet I know it's important to keep (the audience hooked in) even if it's just mentioning Kellogg's corn flakes." In other words, Thompson wants to evoke both the sensory and the dream world.

In *White Biting Dog* the difficulty of the task is clearly evident. We have an easily recognizable living room set, naturalistic dialogue, three-dimensional characters, and a common dramatic storyline: a dying man is separated from his wife, and their son is trying to bring them back together. Where Thompson adds her "own" reality is in what is said (as opposed to how) and how the characters deal with the traditional dramatic device.

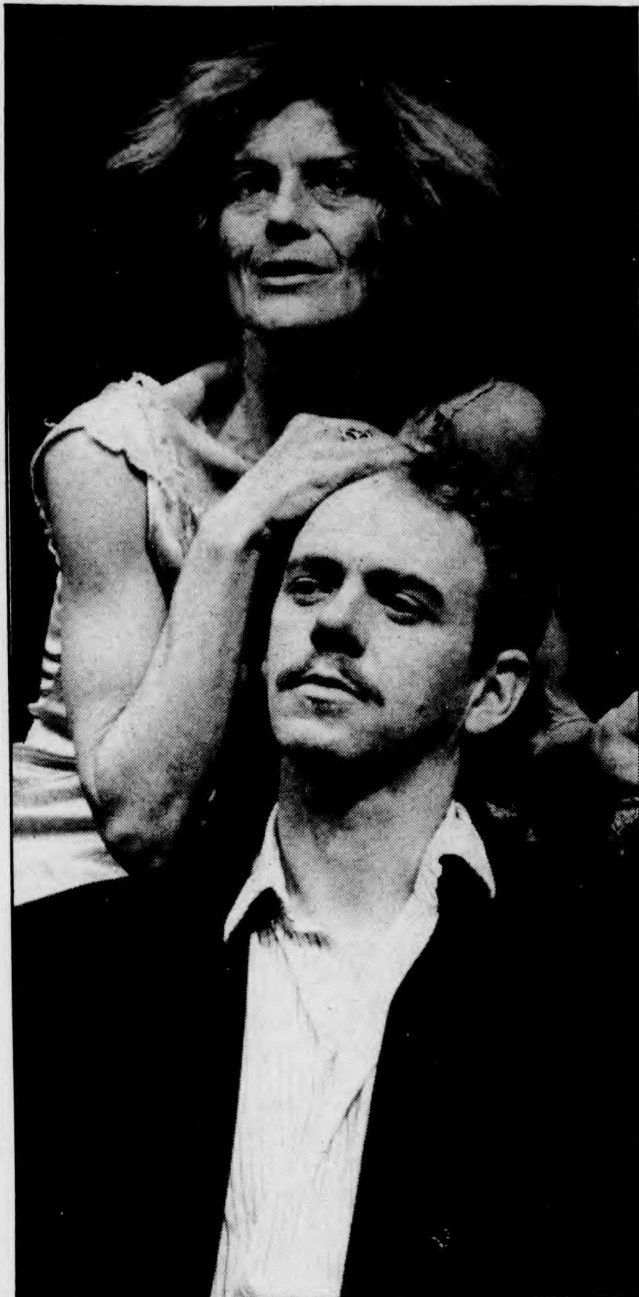
The son is summoned to his father's aid by a white dog. He meets a psychic girl on the street who helps him. The mother has moved in with a punk, who is sodomized by the son to destroy his mother's relationship. These are all used in an original way, but in a jumbled way, too. Everyone is concerned with "knowing" each other and each character is quick to point out to their analysts "you don't know me."

The best evidence that Thompson has too much is that she doesn't know when to end the play. When a writer is trying to maintain control, false endings become parodic. What's more, the black humor of the first act gives way to mawkishness and clichéd dialogue in the second: "You're the only husband I ever had." It becomes painfully clear that the play's symbolism is being shoved down our throats when the mother is made to assume a pose holding a piece of toast—the effect is ludicrous.

At least it is played straight. The cast is generally faultless, each member exploring the limits of their stage personas. Director Bill Glassco has given them ample time and space to do this; even the miscast Clare Coulter handles her character's incongruities well. Glassco takes full advantage of the two-tiered stage, moving his actors around with the ease and grace the script requires. The play is, after all, supposed to be about the getting of grace—at least Glassco hints at this in the final scene.

Aside from the toast incident and the trendy though tiresome habit of having off-stage characters gazing on the scene from the distance, Glassco has tried to interpret Thompson's work as a realistic study of people trying to reconcile their dreams with their realities, their unknowns with their knowns.

White Biting Dog plays until February 19 at the Tarragon Theatre.



Is that a dog I hear? Jackie Burroughs consoles Hardee T. Linehan in tense moment from Tarragon Theatre's *White Biting Dog*.



Playwright Judith Thompson

Otway's Toronto concert showcases his musical humor

British musician swoops into town and achieves impossible killer shoulder rolls

By CYNTHIA MACDONALD

Toronto has once again been transfixed by the totality of John Otway. The British comedian/musician managed to achieve the impossible at Larry's Hideaway on Saturday night: he had a sizeable crowd of lipsticked and leather-jacketed cynics clutching their guts in helpless laughter.

Gamboling onstage like a retarded break-dancer—executing some killer shoulder rolls and repeatedly bashing his forehead against his microphone—Otway amazed his adoring flock with a remarkable display of his pain threshold. His selection of facial gestures was also worthy of note; whether sneering like a malevolent schoolboy or pouting like a homeless orphan, he was always compelling.

Otway is renowned for making maximum use of his equipment, much to its detriment. At Larry's he came near to swallowing his microphone, played tennis with his guitar, and stuffed his pockets with electrified drum pads, bouncing around on his bottom and pounding furiously on his groin in an attempt to sound like "one whole drummer." He doesn't have an actual drummer—in fact the only support he had behind his limited guitarwork was another guitarist, an expressionless waif named Robin.

Clad in basketball shoes and Sting-like raiment, Robin provided an ultra-straight new wave foil to Otway's demented personage.

The Otway musical compendium is a curious mixture of wicked parodies, pretty love songs, and silly ditties. Most of Saturday's material was original—from the soft "Josephine" to the manic "Louisa"—with some borrowed classics culled from bad music's finest moments:

"Green Green Grass of Home," "To Love Somebody," and, with a polite nod to the host country's "culture," the Bachman-Turner Overdrive wonder "You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet." After Otway succeeded in putting all available instruments out of commission he was forced to warble several numbers *a cappella*; and although his voice doesn't have much range, his charisma more than makes up for it.

Opening for Otway were The Sidewinders, an edgy Toronto rockabilly outfit who managed to capture (like no other Toronto



British musical comedian John Otway

band of their kind) the chainsaw spirit of original rockabilly artists such as Gene Vincent and Eddie Cochran. With a frenzied lead singer and three competent supporting musicians, The Sidewinders presented a set of punky, dark songs like "Tryin' to Get My Baby Out of Jail" and the classic "Ain't Nothin' Shakin' But the Leaves on the Trees." Eschewing the smoothness of The Bopcats and the niceness of The Paladins, The Sidewinders are fun in a mean kind of way and very likely the best rockabilly band in the city.

York artist shows spirit

By LORRAINE WHELAN

Nature and reality were two terms the artist/sage Hans Hoffman discussed at length in his teachings. Hoffman stated that "whether the artist works from nature, from memory, or from fantasy, nature is always the source of his creative impulses" and that "there are two kinds of reality: physical reality, apprehended by the senses, and spiritual reality, created emotionally and intellectually by the conscious or subconscious powers of the mind."

In her show *Reality Consults Fantasy* at the Founders College Art Gallery, Rebecca Bainbridge tries to deal with these issues which umbrella the seven canvases in her show. All the pieces are object-oriented, yet stylistically they diverge into two distinct and visually opposite paths.

Veering steadily away from physical reality to a naturalistic fantasy, "Swinging Bridge," "Tub," and "Kensington Market," the three weakest canvases in the gallery, begin with pleasant imagery which mysteriously dissolves into something else: the bridge which semi-spans an impressionistic forest ends in a ghostly snow cloud, the "figure" in the tub becomes broken pieces of shape, and the market's division into three parts is enigmatic. Although the dissolution of form reoccurs in other pieces, in these three works, despite nice areas of painting and sound subject matter, it remains unresolved. The weaknesses are stressed more clearly while viewed in relation to the rest of the show.

The four other paintings are visually vibrant with strong contrasts and, except for "Moving Bus," simplified but monumental images in which black plays a major role. These pieces exemplify the other direction of Bainbridge's work: they are concerned with realities both apparent in the conscious world and rooted in the subconscious mind (things which cannot escape from reality in the form of fantasy, such as fear, death, and the notion of apocalypse).

"Broken Bridge" is an understated triptych which seems to be a metaphor for a broken spirit. Bainbridge, indeed, has admitted to feeling a bit hopeless when dwelling on the world situation of 1984, and yet it is impossible for her not to sneak in a glimmer of hope. In

this painting the three pieces are not spaced to be separate; they speak of breaking but show continuity.

A similar glimmer is visible in the two otherwise stark and possibly depressing images. "You Really Are" and "Strip" both use a partial figure which is engulfed by a liquid darkness. The head and its shoulders have no identity, yet they contain elements of color which are also speckled throughout the heavy, waxed black. The ambiguity here (whether the head is emerging from, sinking into, or simply floating on the dark waters) leaves the figure/ground relationship open to possibility. In "Strip" there is a time element in the form, deliberately reminiscent of film, which, one hopes, Bainbridge will continue to explore.

Though the slightly oppressive awareness of reality makes the dreaminess less plausible, the escapism involved cannot carry equal weight in *Reality Consults Fantasy*. Bainbridge's show owes its sensitive quality not only to the interesting images and areas of painting which are well-handled, but also to the sections that are more vulnerable and need improvement. More important than the snags are the refreshing honesty and humanity.

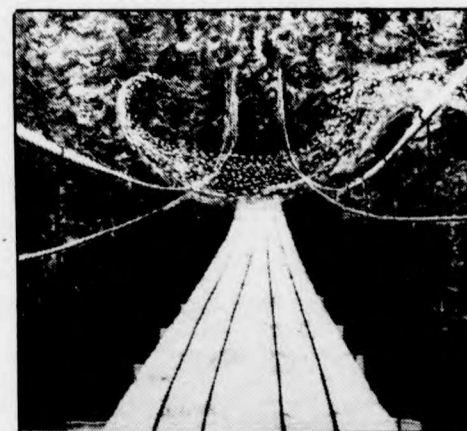


Photo: STUART MOSCOE

"Swinging Bridge," one of seven paintings on exhibit at Founders Art Gallery by York artist Becky Bainbridge.