

Quartet of new plays by Braithwaite is wonderful

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by Michael Hussey

Martha and Elvira and *Do Not Adjust Your Set* are half of Diana Braithwaite's *The Wonder Quartet*, a series of four plays produced for Black History Month.

Both plays delivered!

Martha and Elvira is a fascinating portrait of freedom and bondage. The play is about two elderly Black women who have escaped through the underground railway to freedom in Canada.

The play starts slowly; in fact, the characters verge on stereotypes in the beginning. But Martha and Elvira quickly develop depth and begin to live and breath on stage. At this point, the play becomes moving.

Who can relate to the repression and oppression of slavery? Who can relate to the brutality of being hunted by dogs, like wild animals? Who can relate to having to give up your baby in the hope that one day that child may be free?

Not many people. I certainly cannot.

Yet the beauty of this production



What's wrong with this picture? Could it be that Black actors are playing roles we traditionally associate with Whites? Do not adjust your set; you're watching *Do Not Adjust Your Set*, Diana Braithwaite's satire of television's skewed vision of race. *Do Not Adjust Your Set* is one of four plays in Braithwaite's *Wonder Quartet*, which includes *Martha and Elvira*, performed on the same bill. *The Wonder Quartet* continues to play at the Poor Alex Theatre until March 1.

lies not in the words that are spoken, but in the emotions they conjure up. *Martha and Elvira* transcends its specific subject to reveal a humanity

that cannot be lost. The play reminds us of what we are: not just the bad; not just the hated; but the loved as well. The play speaks to us about a race of

people who fought against all that is vile in humanity and won.

Who cannot help but be touched by a woman who gives up a life-long pursuit of freedom to go back to the uncertain, unknown world of the South, to rescue her child, giving her the maternal nurturing that she lost?

At the end of the play, when Elvira picks up her basket and begins her march back south, we can feel — if only for a brief moment — all the pain and joy of that proud women.

Martha and Elvira is not solely about Blacks or women. It is about the anguish of humanity, and the solace it sometimes finds. Director Alison Sealy-Smith should be very proud of her production.

The second play, *Do Not Adjust Your Set*, is a hilarious satire of twisted perspectives and tangled stereotypes.

The play, set in a black box with trees from the previous show, takes the form of a television world where Blacks take the roles traditionally taken by Whites, and vice versa. The result is tremendous.

The play is set in an imaginary land called Television C.O.O.L., a wondrous place where the programming is geared to the Black sensitiv-

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The Wonder Quartet
written by Diana Braithwaite
The Poor Alex Theatre
until March 1

ity. Instead of White-dominated advertising, for instance, there are commercials for products like a Malcolm X doll that recites "Anything for the cause." There are also a comical benefit, hosted by Lena Horn (Jean Small), to help starving children in the Swiss Alps and soap operas with Blacks in starring roles and Whites in the common lackey jobs.

Dealing with the subject matter this way really drives home how Blacks are portrayed on television — the perverse message that White people are better.

And what better way to deal with a sensitive, serious issue than with comedy? *Do Not Adjust Your Set* is funny, the lines fresh and crisp. In fact, the play, running somewhere around an hour, seemed to be over in minutes.

The result is powerful, depicting the absolute saturation of the White influence in the media. The constant underlying false dogma is that being White is somehow more desirable, and that Blacks should be thankful to the Whites for what they've got. Since we know this is not true, we are left, thinking about the kind of people who live in those ivory towers, and what they really think. Hmmm.

The cast, wearing all black with reversible velcro signs — saying Black person on one side and White person on the other — gave solid, effortless performances. Dawn Roach's animated characters were especially vibrant and exhilarating. The other cast members include Michael Malcolm, Luther Hansraj and Jean Small.

Do Not Adjust Your Set, directed by Ahndri Zhina Mandiela, is excellent theatre, relying on the actors' ability to make the invisible visible.

The Wonder Quartet continues at the Poor Alex Theatre, 296 Brunswick Avenue, until March 1. For more information, call 927-8998.

A strange mix, powerful theatre

by Ira Nayman

Although the focus of Native representation in the arts has frequently been on whether or not Whites have the right to write about Canada's indigenous culture, I have felt that the solution to the dilemma was for Natives to become more involved in telling their own stories. A small, but flourishing, Native artistic community has proven that, given the opportunity, Natives can produce vital, alive works that reflect their own history while making it accessible to non-Natives.

Almighty Voice and His Wife, written by Daniel David Moses (*Coyote City, Big Buck City*), is a worthy addition to the growing body of modern Native art. The play is by turns tragic, bawdy, hilarious, touching, sad and hopeful.

The play is divided into two acts so different in character that you can be forgiven for thinking that you've walked into the wrong theatre by accident. The first act is a relatively straightforward telling of the true story of Almighty Voice (Jonathan Fisher), a Cree, who steals a cow for his wedding feast to White Girl (Pamela Matthews).

Almighty Voice is hunted by Mounties, one of whom he kills. He and two of his male friends are then shot down by a force of over a hundred Whites whose arms include two cannons.

The first act was sombre, full of portents of impending doom. Matthews' portrayal of White Girl was shrill, although the character was only 13 when she married Almighty

THEATRE

Almighty Voice and His Wife
written by Daniel David Moses
directed by Marie Mumford
Native Canadian Centre
until March 8

Voice. This had the unfortunate effect of overpowering Fisher's performance, which was much more understated.

The second act was a parody of a vaudeville show of the time (the play is set in the late 1800s). Matthew donned white makeup, a red Mountie jacket and a moustache to play Mr. Interlocutor, the fast-talking host of the show. Fisher, also white, played Mr. Ghost (possibly the dead Almighty Voice), pressed into performance when the other members of the troupe fail to show up.

Under the humour, the performers engaged in a struggle for control of the show, a metaphor for control of the historical image of indigenous peoples; although the White man started off setting the terms, the power slowly shifted over the course of the act. By the end, Mr. Ghost had turned Mr. Interlocutor's arguments back on him.

Native stereotypes were mocked by making them the butt of the humour, which has a bitter edge to it (at one point, the Interlocutor tells Mr. Ghost to do his "Incredible Disappearing Indian" magic trick). Old songs of Empire were appropriated with lyrics specific to the Native struggle.

The set was simple canvas, stretched over the back and above the

stage in the form of a Maple Leaf (perhaps symbolic of White culture smothering Natives). In the centre of the Maple Leaf was a circle on which were projected backgrounds (woods, for example) and historical photographs relevant to the story (the man who led the charge against Almighty Voice, for instance, or Natives sitting in a Residential school).

For the second act, a tattered Union Jack bisected the stage. Again, it became a symbol when Matthews, playing a White politician, wrapped herself in it and gave a speech about "civilizing the Natives."

Which act you prefer is a matter of personal taste: the first act, although subtle, has emotional depth; the second act, although broad, has fine psychological and political nuances. *Almighty Voice and His Wife* is a strange mix of elements, but it is undeniably powerful.

York plays for people who love to laugh

by Chris Mills

If you love to laugh, see *Don't Fall For Your Crew Chief*.

According to playwright Seth Ball, the story has two plots. The first involves Gethryn, who is working on the crew for a fourth-year theatre production at York. Gethryn, whose crew period is almost up, suffers indecision when he confronts his crew chief, with whom he has fallen in love, for the last time.

The second, main plot shows the many humorous situations that arise during the fourth-year theatre production. I won't tell you what these problems are, but I can assure you that the two plots are elegantly interwoven. The result is very humorous theatre.

Ball explained Gethryn as a character who "won't play the rules about dating." Rosco, another character, "knows the rules, but doesn't mind playing by them." In essence, "For Gethryn, every romance is life at its barest, for Rosco, it's buying a pack of gum." This stark contrast between the two friends is one of the many vehicles for laughter.

Another character who provides a source of laughter is Wanda. Ball says: "Wanda is a very radical feminist, a stock character played for fun." Ball, who considers himself a feminist, explained that when he created Wanda

PREVIEW

Don't Fall For Your Crew Chief
directed by Sue Edworthy
written by Seth Ball
St. Clair West
directed by Gail Packwood
written by Mark Lonergan
Samuel Beckett Theatre
February 26 to 29, 8 pm

he disregarded his "serious thoughts about feminism," although he added "the character doesn't refute or negate my serious honest views of feminism."

One of the basic comedic elements is the language. Ball says he "takes a chance on the beauty of language". It works like a charm.

Although *Don't Fall For Your Crew Chief* provides a comedic look at the crew experience at York it will appeal to anyone who enjoys laughing.

To sweeten the deal, Mark Lonergan's *St. Clair West* will also be performed. Both plays are presented by Beyond The Yellow Brick Road Productions. Soraya Perrybe, the production manager of this company, told me the new group will also be producing *The Search For Signs Of Intelligent Life In The Universe* and *Saltwater Moon* in the near future.

Craig Thompson, who acts in *St.*

Clair West, explained that the play is "a comedy about how two teenagers talk and discuss things." Specifically "two male teenagers are at the St. Clair West bus stop trying to figure out what they are going to do that evening."

Of particular interest to Thompson was the process of creating the play. He said the other actor and himself hung out at the bus stop acting like their characters. The strange experience gave him excellent insight into how his character would act. Thompson described how director Gail Packwood has taken the usable elements of the actors' improvisational work at the bus stop and moulded them into the play's presentable form.

Thompson also commented that both plays have a similar eavesdropping feel, making the intimate space of the Sam Beckett should be very appropriate.

See you there, giggle guts!

Tickets for *Don't Fall For Your Crew Chief* and *St. Clair West*, playing at the Samuel Beckett Theatre (112 Stong College) until February 29, are three dollars in advance and four dollars at the door. February the 26 is a Pay What You Can. For more information, call extension 77326.



Jonathan Fisher plays Almighty Voice in Daniel David Moses' new play *Almighty Voice and His Wife*. The two acts of the play are as different as they can be, but they come together to make a powerful statement on Canada's treatment of its aboriginal peoples.