

## Theatre's Renaissance man

interview by Ron Kuipers

"If you can't get it in front of an audience, it ain't art." These words of wisdom come from local Edmonton actor and playwright Michael Charrois. And getting his new play, *Defender of the Faith*, in front of an audience is exactly what he will soon have succeeded in doing. His play will run at the Phoenix Downtown from March 9-12.

Charrois, who formerly attended the University of Alberta, is now working for Stage Polaris as a resident actor and publicist. He has been involved in theatre production since 1980, and has collaborated with Nebulous Rebel's artistic director, David Cassel.

After being rejected by the U of A Department of Drama because "my upper body was not wholistically connected to his lower," he struck out on his own, and is finding steady work. As for the obscure reasons behind the Drama Department's rejection of him, Charrois jokingly admits, "I learned a lot about physical theatre from David Cassel. I think I have that problem worked out now."

The fact that he writes and directs his own plays, in addition to his work as an actor and publicist, makes Charrois a theatrical Renaissance man of sorts. This diverse background in theatre helps him approach his work. Charrois claims that in all areas of artistic endeavour, "one must not only interpret the medium, but create it."

Charrois' background helps him in this creative process. In addition, as a publicist, he knows what it takes to get an audience to go to a play, not just how to get a play in front of an audience. Getting people to see his work is of paramount importance. In fact, Charrois claims that "that's what art is: communication."

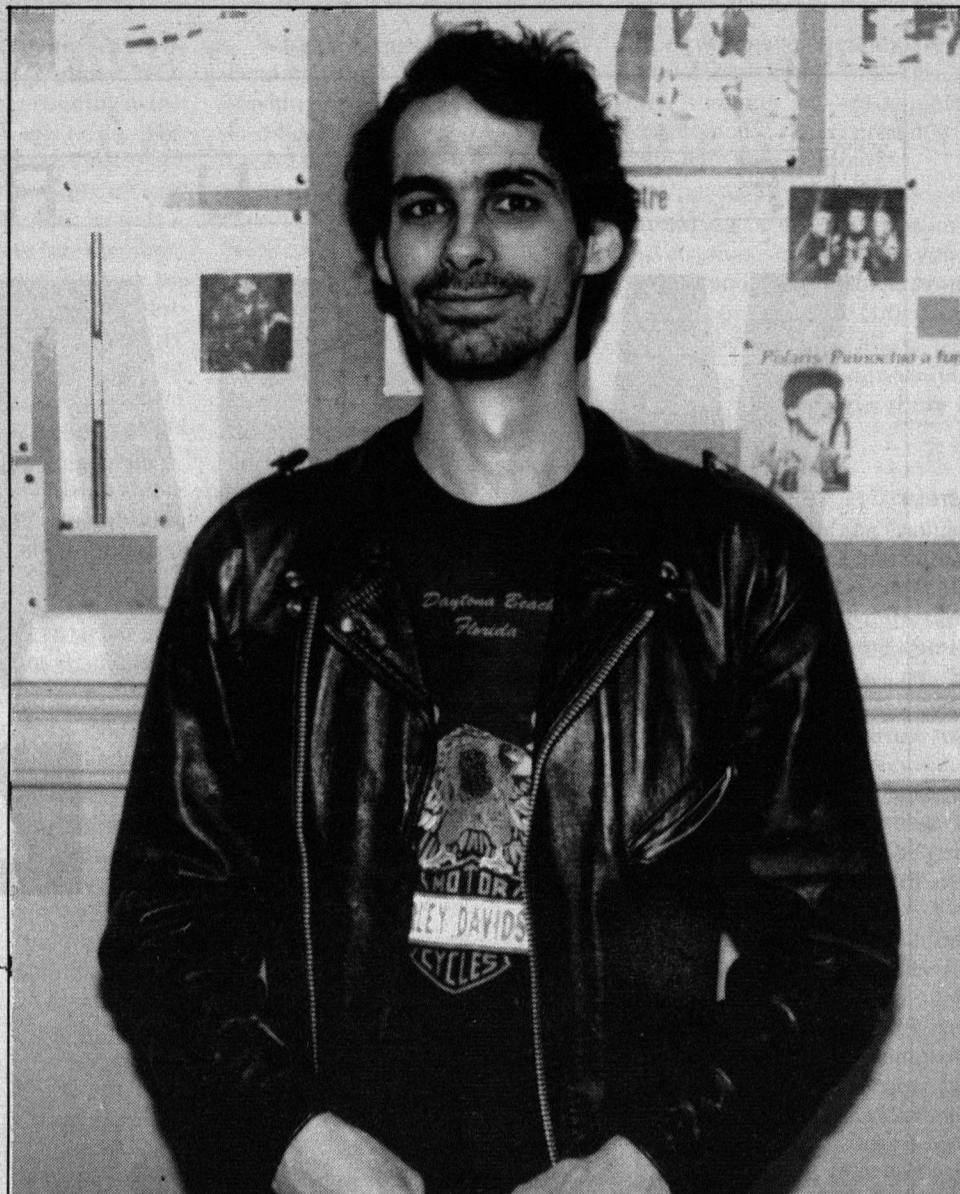
Charrois also has specific ideas about drama as a particular art form. He asserts that, as opposed to other mediums, drama is "much more language oriented. One can explore more philosophical issues and metaphysical questions of reality." He feels that drama is more language oriented because, unlike a medium such as film, a play is restricted to the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action. He says that a play can only jump from act to act, whereas a film can cut to another time or

place at will.

Charrois' ideas about the theatre are also reflected in his current production. He describes the play as "a metaphysical journey through life, love, death, and resurrection." This description sounds quite heavy and serious, but he maintains that the play is very light-hearted. "It's about partying as a way of life," he explains. As to the deeper metaphysical questions, he just "slips them by" the audience, who will merely scan them within the context of a much lighter play.

But, ironically, Charrois insists that these philosophical issues are still a central part of his play. He is fascinated by the increased role that quantum mechanics plays in questions of philosophical importance. Charrois uses this theory in his play to examine the bonds of friendship. "Much like quantum mechanics, you are nothing unless you are relating to someone else," he says. His characters are always changing in relationship to each other in what he describes as "a bizarre, twisted love-triangle." Interaction between the characters is central to his play's message.

It appears that not much is sacred for Charrois, and that he also wants to tackle a fair amount within the confines of one play. But he insists that the play is "a real yuk-yuk," and that it's refreshing as well. He says that the play doesn't dwell on the philosophical topics, but rather it uses them as imagery. It will be interesting to see whether or not Charrois can accomplish such a light-hearted examination. At any rate, the dramatic expression of such strange and wide-ranging ideas is always welcome.



Michael Charrois, local playwright, actor and publicist has a new play called *Defender of the Faith* at the Phoenix downtown this weekend.

Mike Spindloe

## Mixed Chorus director deFrece mixes new and old

interview by Mike Spindloe

As the director of a choir that is gearing up for its annual tour and has a pair of concerts coming up at SUB Theatre this weekend, Bob deFrece should probably be insanely busy making the many plans which are part and parcel of these endeavours. In any other choir, that is. However, the U of A Mixed Chorus is administered by an executive drawn from the ranks of the 120-odd singers who comprise the chorus.

Thanks to this, deFrece can concentrate

on rehearsing the Chorus, which is 45 years old this year. It is the oldest non-athletic club on campus, with its first concerts taking place in 1945. The members, who join for the choral experience and the active social aspects of the Chorus, come from every walk of university life.

They are also alumni. Many people stick around for a few years after graduation, notes deFrece. "There are also literally thousands of people who are alumni of the Mixed Chorus," he adds.

The traditional aspect of the Mixed Chorus is evident in their concert-ending song, the U of A cheer song. "We're the only group who do that song these days," says deFrece. "For our traditional ending we invite alumni onto the stage to sing it with us, and everywhere we go there is always at least one person who comes up and sings it with us." Everywhere but Idaho, at least. "That was the only time there was no alumni there," laughs deFrece.

For many people, this feature of Mixed Chorus concerts is the one that makes the evening. DeFrece puts it more philosophically: "It unites us even though we could be generations apart." This year, as usual, the Saturday night concert is designated as Alumni Night.

This year's concert will also feature the Faculty of Education Handbell Ringers, who will perform with the Chorus on J.S. Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring." The Chorus will also be augmented by accompaniment on piano, guitar, banjo and string bass at various times in its concerts. DeFrece describes the program as containing "everything from Renaissance and Baroque music to folk spirituals and sacred and secular choral music. There's something for everybody."

As for the upcoming tour, this year the Chorus heads north for Grande Prairie, Dawson Creek, Fort St. John, MacLennan and Hinton. Last year it was Calgary, Red Deer, Castlegar, Coaldale and Bonner's Ferry, Idaho. The group travels by bus, billets and sleeps in school gyms, and takes

as much of their own food along as possible. This austere method of touring is necessary for financial reasons, says deFrece, noting that the Chorus "is responsible for its own destiny financially. We have received some grants but we do a lot of fundraising. Our concert fee doesn't even cover the bus."

The choir has also been immortalized in a promotional video which was made for the U of A in 1987. The Chorus sings the Cheer song in a concert segment on the video. They also participate in a variety of regular concerts throughout the season, including the Festival of Lessons and Carols, the CNIB Christmas banquet and various church services.

For deFrece, the Chorus is one of many

deFrece: "There are... literally thousands of people who are alumni of the Mixed Chorus."

musical activities. He teaches elementary teacher training and class methodology in the Faculty of Education. He also directs the Handbell Ringers, a group which he started recently. The traditional bronze bells employed by the group are also used in many Alberta schools.

His involvement with the Mixed Chorus is a longstanding one. DeFrece joined as a child ("I think I was 10 years old") and met his wife there. He has been director since 1986.

For now, deFrece and the rest of the Chorus are looking forward to this weekend's concerts. "On Saturday night, there will probably be another 120 people getting up on stage with us," he says. "It could get pretty crowded up there."



U of A Mixed Chorus director Bob deFrece. The Chorus is holding concerts in SUB Theater this Friday and Saturday night.

Mike Spindloe