

# Brecht's *A Man well received*

By JENNIFER PARSONS

The performance of Bertolt Brecht's *A Man's A Man* last week in the Samuel Beckett Theatre was an example of what theatre can be when all the pieces fit together. A pertinent premise, energetic actors, imaginative direction all combined with innovative live music made the play a rare and enjoyable experience.

Thematically *A Man's A Man* is an anti-war play. Written by Brecht more than 50 years ago, it explores the conversion of a naive citizen into a soldier and the brainwashing effects war can have on innocent people.

This theme is explored through the ventures of a man called Galy Gay who is transformed from being a good natured porter into a human killing machine. The manipulation is aided by Gay himself, as he is "a man who can never say no."

Although he never volunteers to fight, Galy Gay is persuaded to dress up like a soldier so that a squadron will not be punished for being a man short at role call. But when the missing soldier does not return, the squadron tries to transform Gay into that soldier . . . forever.

This is affected by arranging Gay's corruption, and his death through mock execution. Unaware of the set-up, Gay is pushed further into psychological redefinition when he is made a witness to his own "funeral." By this time he has lost his

identity and had been transformed into the soldier he never was, proving that a man is just a man and can be easily changed.

Despite this theme, the play is filled with comic relief and the production is enhanced by fifteen actors whose characters verge on the absurd. Each of the second year theatre students go as far as possible with their characters, avoiding surface characterization through conviction and concentration both inside and outside the main action.

Gay, played by Peter Farbridge, is an open-mouthed, wide-eyes character complete with wildly waving arms and bent legs. As a result of Farbridge's complete focus and consistency, the character remains amusing and believable.

This is part of the reason the theatre in the round stage design, a potentially dangerous choice, was successful. Because the actors' styles afforded them the biggest gestures and character traits, they could be read from any angle.

In this respect, the performances of Ann-Marie as Widow Begrick, Walter Rinaldi as Bloody Five and Farbridge as Galy Gay, were the most successful. Their performances stand out because of the energy and enthusiasm they brought to the production.

The other outstanding performance in the production was that of Soheil Parsa as an East-Indian monk

who bribes the missing soldier and indirectly causes all of Galy Gay's hardships. Parsa carefully sidestepped the obvious "holy" aspects of the character and used a lounging glibness in his portrayal of the man.

Parsa, a second year theatre student, directed *A Man's A Man* in a somewhat unconventional manner. His decision to present the play in the round was a choice that was well conceived.

The musical talents of Andy Stochansky (percussion) and Colin Campbell (guitar) of Partical Zoo also contributed to the production's uniqueness. Their revision of the play's original jazz score resulted in exceptional songs that accented the mood of each scene so well that one wondered if they weren't the originals of the play.

Parsa concluded, in light of his experiences from having lived in Iran, that the play is an important look at how people can change. In the context of the nuclear age, he said, the play is as pertinent today as it was 50 years ago.

Topical and entertaining, *A Man's A Man* was an excellent production and was received well by the audiences that attended the six sold-out performances. Hopefully, we can look forward to much of the same from Parsa, who says he will be working on another production next year.

# Documentary of one-woman show leaves audience searching for signs

By KEVIN PASQUINO

A documentary enlightens and offers new information about its subject and, if we're lucky, it also entertains. The documentary *Lily Tomlin* succeeds at being informative and entertaining, but with all of this going for it the movie still remains dissatisfying.

The film follows comedienne Lily Tomlin as she tours the country with her one woman show *The Search for Signs Intelligent Life in the Universe*. The documentary examines the hard work that goes into producing the show during its two year long tour and also offers proof that *The Search for Signs Intelligent Life in the Universe* was far from being the result of one individual.

At one point, Tomlin says, "My partner writes my material and it's so much better than I am." While this may be an example of Tomlin simply being humble, *Lily Tomlin* does spend a lot of time looking at the other people who make up the Tomlin production team and who help bring the talented comedienne's work to life.

The predominant member of the Tomlin troupe is writer Jane Wagner. Together Tomlin and Wagner created the skits that make up the stage show and the film captures the fact that nothing was created with the help of divine inspiration. Each idea was talked out, rehearsed, and polished until a satisfactory product was produced. Onstage, it looks easy, but the film shows the hard work behind the scenes that is usually left unnoticed.

Interviews with Tomlin at home and before performances show the comedienne as introspective and uncertain about how she is perceived by the public. Tomlin reveals her insecurity before her premiere Broadway show: "Look at those people getting tickets. I wonder if they're getting any of mine." Such a reaction seems strange coming from a "Big Star," yet it reveals the surprisingly human side of Tomlin.

*Lily Tomlin* shatters the myth of the egotistical star who demands perfection from the people around her. Instead, the movie shows how it



**TOMLIN SINGS GABRIEL:** Lily Tomlin does her impersonation of Peter Gabriel singing "Lay Your Hands On Me." (Well, not really, but it sounded funny at the time.)

is not the star, but her employees who expect perfection from everyone. In the movie there is a subplot illustrating how the show's advertising uses this theme of perfection.

Cheryl Swannack, Tomlin's right-hand woman, is shown on the phone talking about a publicity poster, and as she speaks she uses Tomlin's name as one would invoke the name of a minor deity. "Lily does not want" and "Lily would like," punctuate the entire conversation, but it remains unseen as to whether Tomlin ever sees the poster. No one questions Tomlin's decisions or her words when conveyed through one of "her people," but the movie implies that Tomlin may be easy to work with, and her employees are impossible.

Using footage from various Lily Tomlin specials and a clip from her first appearance on *The Merv Griffin Show*, the movie shows how the comedienne has grown as an artist. However, it seems that Tomlin is being protected from the outside world. She is brilliant, but her employees are there to make sure

that no one touches her. Fortunately, the movie is able to avoid these protectors and get close to Tomlin.

The low point of the film occurs at the very end. The movie follows *The Search for Signs Intelligent Life in the Universe* from its first in-production rehearsals to its premiere night, but just as the curtain on Broadway goes up, the movie concludes.

Perhaps it was the legal hassles that producers/directors Nicholas Broomfield and Joan Churchill had with Tomlin over the film's contents that forced performance footage to be trimmed (Tomlin was concerned that the documentary would hurt the sale of her show to television), but the lack of Broadway footage leaves the film hanging and incomplete.

While *Lily Tomlin* successfully illustrates how a one-woman show is put together, it fails to reveal the final product, which is much like ripping out the last pages of a mystery novel. Although one can admire the film's style and technique, it would be more satisfying to see what the finished product looks like.

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