

Groucho At Large: Lots of Laughs



Heather Ramsay play straight-woman to Jon Rumney as Groucho in the Rice Theatre's current production *Groucho at Large*.

by Candy Fertile

Groucho At Large has its moments but not in the first 20 minutes.

For the play, the Rice is set up as "theatre in the square," with a single swivel chair in the middle. The three characters, Groucho (Jon Rumney), the man (James House), and the girl (Heather Ramsay) don't so much act in a play as in a collection of short skits. As Groucho, Jon Rumney has all of the mannerisms down pat: the cigar, the eyebrows, the funny walk. Ramsay and House race through a variety of characters that allow Groucho to banter with various types of people. Some of it works; some doesn't.

Alec Baron formulated the play from Groucho's writings. Ramsay's characters have to make sure to stay out of arm's reach of Groucho. Initially the lechery is funny but ultimately it gets tiresome. I guess that's the basic problem with the play. The jokes aren't new and it's hard to maintain interest in what is more or less a collection of one liners and short skits.

The two most successful parts of the play are a quiz show and a scene with an aging Groucho.

The first is good because it manages to sustain humour without losing focus; the second shows the serious personal

side of a very public man.

House and Rumney give fine performances. Ramsay tends to over act but as most of her characters are so shallow she's probably trying to compensate. Seeing this play is like going to see a competent impersonator; he imitation is successful but there is little interpretation. The jokes are well done and, yes, the audience does laugh. But there's no intermission: it's an hour and a half of gags.

Because of its serious premise (humour ever present, of course), the last scene captivates the audience. If the play had incorporated more of Groucho the person with Groucho the comic it would have been a much more interesting and enjoyable evening. As it was it was a giggle.

The program quoted Groucho as once saying: "I find television very educating. Every time somebody turns on the set, I go in the other room and read a book." His humour is so far-reaching that no one is safe. If you aren't familiar with Groucho (is there anyone?) this will give you a good idea of his wit and sense of humour. If you are familiar with Groucho you're guaranteed some laughs and, unfortunately, a slight feeling of wanting more.

Newspapers fun

Canadian Newspapers The Inside Story
Walter Stewart (Ed.)
Hurtig, \$14.95

by Peter Michalyshyn

From among criticism, lamentation, reminiscence, and no small amount of introverted autobiography comes the conclusion that Canada's newspapers are defiantly mediocre.

They're not bad, says fifteen-odd journalists and former journalists in Walter Stewart's new book *Canadian Newspapers: The Inside Story*. But they're not good either.

Oh, one or two exceptions — the Toronto Globe and Mail, for example — may stand out, the rest are "but part of the homogeneous pap that North Americans are fed..." says contributor Harold Horwood, sometime employee of the St. John's Evening Telegram.

Only one, the Halifax morning Chronicle-Herald and afternoon Mail-Star (one because the same company owns both) is decidedly bad.

But why this mediocrity? It can't be the mediocrity of Canadians themselves that allow newspapers' dullness to look exciting. No, its those corporate giants Southam and the more insidious Thomson, the writers unanimously agree, who use their papers as "licenses to print money" and steer away from enterprising journalism which either costs too much or offends too many advertisers.

But I won't dwell on that; the book

doesn't. In fact, aside from the infrequent pokes at the chains, *Canadian Newspapers* is indeed an inside view, often funny, but too often dull and introspective.

Or apologetic: Harry Midgley writing on the *Edmonton Journal* says, "If the foregoing remarks sounded negative and critical, I hope I may be excused." Sure, Harry. You only wrote the most uninspired and incoherent chapter in the book, managing to offend no one, not even the often-offensive *Journal*.

(Harry Midgley writes a daily column in the *Edmonton Sun*.)

Canadian Newspapers is often funny: Tom Ardies on the *Vancouver Sun* and Heather Robertson on the *Winnipeg Free Press* immortalize the Underwood typewriter, behind which sits the typically half-pissed, hard-nosed, but underneath-it-all-warm-hearted, journalist.

And then there was the one about the hard-hearted editor who enrolled blind men into the Book-of-the-Month Club.

And practical jokes: wet your fingertips with water, then walk up behind someone and flick water onto his neck, at the same time pretending to sneeze.

But by far the best passage in the book describes the demise of the *Winnipeg Free Press*: "...by the time the *Free Press* discovered a creepo fag in its own publisher's office (Richard C. Malone), the greatest newspaper in Canada was little more than a sleazy small-time rag."

There are a hundred more quips, jokes, and anecdotes that by themselves make *Canadian Newspapers* worth reading.

The point they all make however, is that in addition to churning out homogeneous pap, brown-nosing to advertisers, and inspiring only mediocre performances, the big daily newspapers in Canada are painfully dull.

In this sense the book isn't even a text for journalism students. It's more like a call for journalists to start having fun again, the reminiscences and accounts of shoddiness today serving, perhaps, to inspire some to the trade's former notoriety.

As Heather Robertson says, "Some are still out there, scattered across the country, ornery as ever, noses twitching at the scent of bullshit, stubborn, smart, rude, still fighting after all these years. Here's to them."

Dreams of Love

by Candy Fertile

Director Henry Woolf's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is broad to say the least. The mechanicals are in danger of stealing the show and making it into slapstick. They establish a contrast to the major roles of Titania and Oberon who, while wonderfully costumed, seem to have a bit of difficulty injecting life into their long speeches. Opening night jitters, I suspect.

The lovers are the most successful characters in the play: Hermia (Ellen Kennedy), Lysander (Dugald Nasmyth), Helena (Kathy Neilsen), and Demetrius (Daniel Libman). Ellen Kennedy is outstanding but all four must be complimented on their abilities to work together to bring their scenes alive.

Juliet Brown, who also plays Hippolyta, is a delight as the fat fairy. She comes across as a goofy Brownie leader. Michael Van Der Lee (Puck) is also terrific. His magic is aided by a hidden trampoline on stage which enables him to do marvelous leaps and flips. He seems to have found the right amount of leering insincerity. The other fairies have to contend with a lot of running around and a

small stage. At the beginning the audience is subjected to five minutes of fairy dancing accompanied by Stockhausen. Unfortunately, the music proves far too sinister for these ethereal beings.

Some of the costumes are a bit odd; for example, Egeus (Hermia's father) wears a less than lordly cap or hat. The fairies have a variety of costumes befitting their airy beings. Helena and Hermia are in dainty pink and white gowns, while Lysander and Demetrius are also suitably attired in non-flashy costumes.

Robin Starveling as the tailor, is clearly underplayed by Bill Meilen, wearing a cleverly over-played, very detailed costume.

As mentioned previously, the mechanicals are played very broadly, never missing an opportunity to exaggerate a line or an action. The play within a play is virtually slapstick and is funny but one wonders if subjects playing for their king would not be more timid and less familiar. But as a whole, the piece is successful and above the cut for student productions.

The play at Studio Theatre runs until Oct. 25.

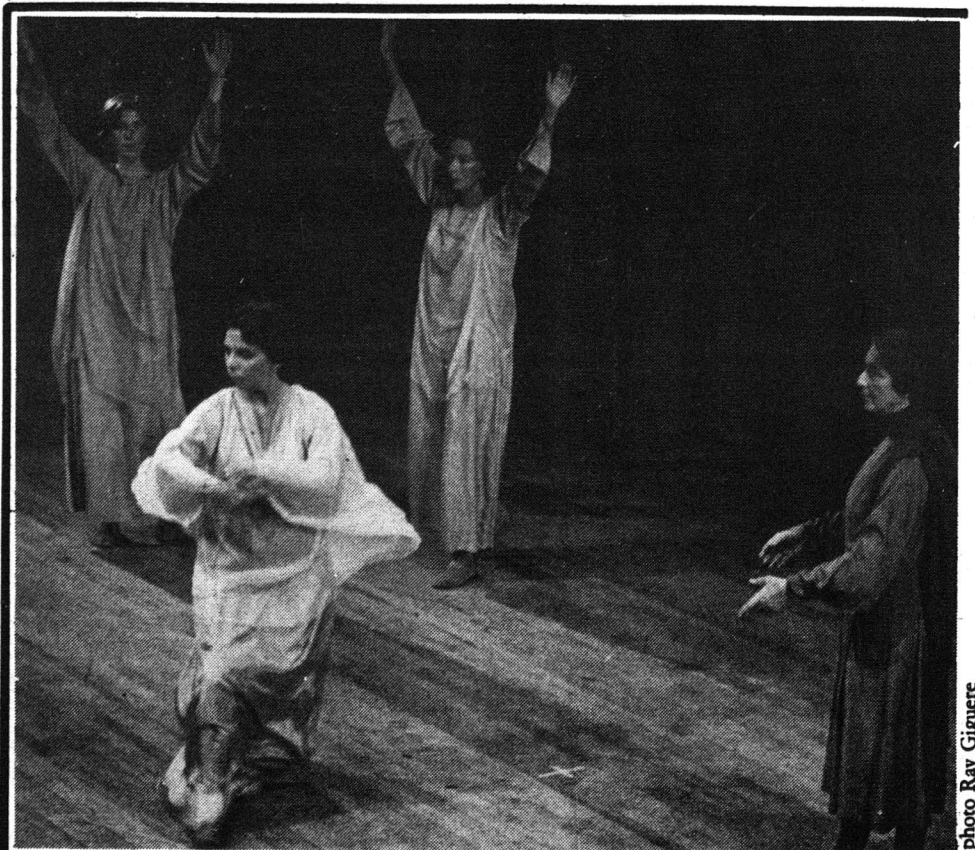


photo Ray Giguere

CANADIAN NEWSPAPERS
The Inside Story

Globe and Mail
Toronto Star
Vancouver Sun
LE DEVOIR
Citizen
Edmonton Journal
Ottawa Journal
MAIL STAR
StarPhoenix
Gazette

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