

arts



Norman Browning, Lisa Howard, and Dana Still in *Talking Dirty*, currently playing at the Bathurst Street Theatre.

Talking Dirty lives up to name

By KEVIN CONNOLLY

While in Vancouver, *Talking Dirty* established an all-time Canadian record for the continuous run of a non-musical play, selling over 100,000 seats in 15 months. The play, written by Sherman Snukal, and directed by Mario Crudo, opened last week at the Bathurst Street Theatre. Naturally the people involved with this production hope for similar success in the Toronto production, which retains Norman Browning and Dana Still from the original cast.

In an interview after the premier performance Browning, who plays the male lead, admitted to some opening night nervousness. He said the cast felt a little pressure opening in a new venue with a play that had been so popular in Vancouver. "Part of it has to be the desire to show Toronto Audiences that we know what we're doing on the coast," said Browning, who is a native of British Columbia himself—he began his acting career at Simon Fraser University in 1965.

Talking Dirty was slated to run only six weeks when it first opened in 1981 but its popularity spread, mostly by word of mouth, and it continued to run for well over a year. "What made it popular was the average Joe on the street," Browning said. "Many of the people who made it work in Vancouver had never seen a play before."

It is not hard to explain *Talking Dirty's* popular appeal. The set is reminiscent of a television sit-com, and the dialogue is witty and light. Coupled with the relationships in the play it is very effective in exposing the hypocrisies and inconsistencies of contemporary morality.

The lead characters, Michael and Beth, are estranged lovers who remain emotionally tied while they pursue other sex partners. Despite the fact that Michael's feelings of restriction that initiated the separation complications arise with the arrival of Dave, Michael's lifelong friend, who is on a business trip from Toronto and has a bad case of the seven-year itch. Michael must convince Dave to stay loyal to his wife, a task which proves difficult in the

context of Michael's own problems.

When Dave finally does find a partner, it turns out to be Karen, a mutual friend of Michael and Beth, who has just finished an ill-conceived and short-lived affair with Michael. What follows is an endless chain of deceit and hypocrisy among the four characters, which becomes more and more humorous as the plot unfolds.

The serious side of the play, only hinted at in the early going, really comes into the foreground with the arrival of Jackie, a beautiful young airhead from Burnaby, who walks in on Michael uninvited, and proves singularly difficult to get rid of. Her childish banter, while amusing in the context of the other characters, has an engaging innocence about it, and it is this innocence that ultimately exposes the lies and hypocrisy among the others. The part is played delightfully by Lisa Howard, and adds the touch of sexuality that transforms much of the second act into bedroom farce.

The title of the play is quite misleading, as *Talking Dirty* is more a conservative reaction to the sexual liberation than an avant-garde sex comedy. The characters are brought to life sympathetically by an excellent cast, though it is the stage presence of Norman Browning around which the play revolves. He is the centre of much of the comedy and tragedy, and it soon becomes clear that the play has become principally an emotional study of Michael. In many ways the play is deceptive, for amidst all the jokes and wordplay the character of Michael is slowly developing. At the end the audience understands the character on a level that is unusually deep for a comic work, and much of the credit for this must go to Browning.

"The play is highly interpretive," Browning says. "I was able to add a lot of my own ideas to the script before it was first performed."

Browning is the only actor to have played the role, and he plans to keep it that way as long as the play remains successful. "It has taught me a lot about acting, particularly about acting consistently." Everyone concerned was pleased with the reaction so far, and Browning feels there is little difference between the Toronto and Vancouver audiences.

If this is the case, *Talking Dirty* seems likely to repeat its west coast success and become a fixture in Toronto.

Faculty show at IDA gallery

By PAULETTE PEIROL

York Visual Arts Faculty meet the challenge of exposure until tomorrow at the IDA Gallery in the Fine Arts Building. This is an exhibit worth seeing, if for no other reason than to chart the inevitable progression of these artists' skills. But more than that, most of the works in the IDA Faculty show are both original and effective.

George Manupelli's work "Gee Ain't It Funny How Time Just Slips Away" is a progressive work with a strongly political statement. His 3-D tableau is an imagistic representation of nuclear holocaust. The viewer must participate in the work by pressing a button ("The Button") to light the exhibit and to call forth the sound of chirping birds.

Also of particular interest is Michael Davey's photographic composition. In black and white, Davey uses the shadows of two figures and five balls to portray various connective elements in the shadows' relationships with one another. Introducing the 12 configurations are three photos of a hand guiding the balls, in effect shaping the postures of the figures.

The paintings of Janet Jones stand out in kinetic lines of color. The bodies in the paintings portray an exuberance in both motion and emotion. Jones achieves a fine balance between movement and a central focus.

The work of the three sculptors in the exhibit, Hugh Leroy, Cynthia Short, and Tim Whiten, are all unique, though they all use plaster or cement. Leroy's white on white rough plaster face, deeply etched into the wall that it possessed, was striking. Whiten's sculpture—a fire pit of sorts, made of cement and containing bones, dry leaves, earth, and ashes—conveyed a sense of earthiness bordering on the sacrificial. Meanwhile, Short's cement flower box with cement flowers represented the other extreme—the urban garden. Walking from her sculpture to Whiten's is like walking through a cultural time warp.

Burroughs celebrates '70th birthday'

By ADRIAN IWACHIW

"I awoke from The Sickness at the age of 45, calm and sane, and in reasonably good health except for a weakened liver and the look of borrowed flesh common to all who survive The Sickness..." So begins William Seward Burroughs' introduction to *The Naked Lunch*, a book that caused an uproar after its publication in 1959. The "sickness" Burroughs refers to is heroin addiction, which he endured for 15 years, and which has made its presence felt in all his writings since.

Burroughs was in town on Tuesday night reading from his latest works at a "seventieth birthday celebration" (his birthday is actually next February), which also featured fellow New York poets John Giorno and Jim Carroll, and the musical duo of David J and Alex Greene. The whole show was brought to the Music Hall by former *Excalibur* editor Elliott Lefko, and emceed by ex-*X-cal* theatre critic Robyn Butt.

Carroll, some forty years Burroughs' junior, created an appropriate atmosphere with a passionately sincere reading of his latest diaries (sequels to his *Basketball Diaries*), which reflect his bohemian-junkie street life—drugs and relationships, Andy Warhol and Brigit the Fattest Speed Freak.

Next, Giorno, Italian-body-language-and-all, gave a forceful, tongue-in-cheek delivery of some of his street-level-banalities-raised-to-cosmic-truths ("I don't want anybody telling me about solutions, I don't want anybody . . . repeated three times, "they don't work," or "when you die, you gonna die with a hard-on").

Finally, Burroughs strode out to his table at center-stage where he sat hunched over for forty-five minutes reading from his latest writings in a dry, hoarse drawl. Between sips of coffee, he read about themes and heroes familiar to his readers—Kim Carson, the archetypal average-American Johnson family, Space Travel and Immortality, and the Egyptian Book of the Dead. He even began to re-do the Ten Commandments in a contemporary light. "Thou shalt not blow pot smoke into the face of thy pet," "Thou shalt not be such a shit you don't know you are one," and so on. His cynical, worldly wisdom coupled with his witty sarcastic prose elicited an enthusiastic and deservedly respectful applause from the youthful audience.

Burroughs was born in St. Louis in 1914, into a middle-class industrial-machine-corporation family. He attended Harvard in the 1930s, was rejected from the army as a "schizophrenic-paranoid type," and has since then lived and written in New York, New Orleans, Mexico (where he accidentally shot and killed his wife), Tangier, Paris and London. During the 1950s,

Burroughs established himself as a hero and mentor of the Beat Generation writers, notably Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. In 1966, *The Naked Lunch* was declared "not obscene," and after a long and arduous trial, a ban on its sale was lifted. Since then, Burroughs' systematic contempt and cynicism towards the trappings of authoritarianism has irreversibly affected the American psyche.

Burroughs' vision, portrayed in novels like *Naked Lunch*, *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket that Exploded*, *Nova Express* and *The Wild Boys*, is of a world gone mad, a diseased society caught in a state of "total emergency," a hierarchical web of predatory dependence, sexual and narcotic helplessness and a continuous condition of unconsummated desire. Burroughs' own heroin addiction becomes a metaphor for all the addictions that plague humanity—to drugs, power, violence and warfare, to bureaucracies and governments, to fixed identity structures and externally-imposed beliefs and roles. His aim is to wake us up to this reality around us. The title of *Naked Lunch* refers to "the frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork."

According to Burroughs, there is a chance to break out of this seemingly hopeless human situation depicted in his novels. He explains that, "Heaven and Hell exist in my mythology. Hell consists of falling into enemy hands, into the hands of the virus power, and heaven consists of freeing oneself from this power, of achieving inner freedom, freedom from conditioning."

Back in the sixties, together with Brion Gysin, Burroughs pioneered the use of the "cut-up" technique in literature, a technique that parallels surrealist and cubist collage and editing and montage in film.

By 1968, however, Burroughs had grown weary of endless writing without action. *The Job* (a book of interviews and written responses with Daniel Odier) reflects this change; in it Burroughs offers a more straightforward presentation of his social and political ideas. The book exposes some of the many explorations Burroughs has conducted into fields like Wilhelm Reich's orgone physics, Alfred Korzybski's "General Semantics," hieroglyphics and symbolic language forms, Hassan-i-Sabbah's secretive Order of Assassins (of medieval Arab history), the use of tape recorders to break down verbal association lines, and psychological techniques like alpha brain wave monitoring and sensory deprivation.

Since his return to the United States from London in 1974, Burroughs has continued writing, somewhat more conventionally than before in novels like *Port of Saints*, and the 1981 *Cities of the Red Night*, and has periodically toured North America giving performances like the one on Tuesday night.



William Burroughs

His latest novel *The Place of Dead Roads*, from which he read excerpts, is slated to come out in February on Holt, Rinehart & Winston (a sure sign of "Establishment" acceptance) and he is currently at work on another novel, *The West at Last*. These works (and Tuesday's readings) reflect his decision to return to a more conventional narrative form, so as to reach a wider audience.

At 70, Burroughs is still as active and serious about his work as ever. For all its wit and biting sarcasm, Burroughs describes his writing as "poetic messages, the still sad music of humanity." On the state of America today Burroughs is surprisingly optimistic: "I'd say it's a hell of a lot better than I expected." (from a 1980 interview with Victor Bockris, in *With William Burroughs*).

Allen Ginsberg, in the same book, sums up Burroughs' role as "catalyzing . . . the change of consciousness that overcame the United States in the last two decades which resulted in disillusionment on the part of the general public with self-mystifying government." But that task is not quite finished yet, and Burroughs carries on with his work.