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Buddies in Bad Times celebrates ninth annual theatre festival

Rhubarb! revels in risk-taking and suspense

By PAULETTE PEIROL

"Breaking down the barriers of artistic disciplines," is the self-proclaimed mandate of the ninth annual *Rhubarb!* festival, presented by Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, along with Danceworks.

In organizing the festival, Buddies' artistic director Sky Gilbert (a York alumnus), is providing an open forum for new works of experimental theatre, including performance art. This allows for a broad range of risk-taking. But artistic integrity cannot be sacrificed for the sake of haphazard innovation.

To combine various art forms with the aim of conveying an idea or feeling more fully, is a noble and indeed rigorous task which demands that the artist be well versed in each medium he or she employs. The danger of such multi-media work is that the very message the artist wishes to convey may become obscured by the forms themselves.

Such was the case in two of the six pieces presented in last week's segment of the three week festival; B.J. Castleman's *Bread and Soft Clocks*, an expressionist work about Salvador Dali and Andrew Paterson's *The Butler Did It*, a solo monologue/voice over using slides.

Rhubarb's media release billed Paterson as an "established artist who's (sic) participation will make *Rhubarb!* an exciting festival." Yet after opening night February 4 during which many audience members left after Paterson's self-indulgent performance organizers were quick to take advantage of the "Program subject to change" clause. *Bread and Soft Clocks* and *The Butler Did It*, originally scheduled to run third and fourth respectively, were promptly changed to fifth and sixth on the program.

The two pieces did, however, serve one important purpose; as exemplary models of theatrical pretention they both formed a qualitative backdrop by which to judge the four previous pieces.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Nigel Hunt's *She Said* and Robin Fulford's *Lovesong* were effective examples of innovative theatre. In each case, the directors chose a strong stylistic base to provide a ballast for the plays.

She Said focuses on one woman (personified by two characters) and one man, both obsessed with Phaedra, "an outside force which acts upon characters on stage without being present," according to Hunt. The plot itself is obscure, but director Peter Hinton surmounts this by focusing on the play's theme

of romantic love in all its variations. To this end, he exploits the French "buffoon style" of acting, which he describes as "grotesque and absurd."

The play, set as a Restoration Drama with all its artifice and romance, easily lends itself to satire, Hinton noted. From its harpsichord-tuned, synthesized Baroque music to its ornate clear plastic period costumes, *She Said* free-falls into the realm of the absurd and delightful.

Lovesong, on the other hand, is neither lavish nor humorous, but rather frightening in its stark minimalism. Fulford's play is based on court transcriptions from the trial of Sheryl Gardner's murderer in Toronto, 1981. *Lovesong* is the unapologetic confession of that murder.

Pastko, trapped between the character's "mental" and "criminal" sides, is utterly convincing as a murderer with the naivety of a child, but without the innocence to match it. It is the character's amorality which is most disconcerting to the audience. Fulford forces the viewer to see beyond the eyes of the judge and jury, into the mind of the criminal himself.

Director Ken McDougall has set the court-room scene by using only a single prop; the defense stand. Actor Earl Pastko's actions on stage are equally minimal, however his mannerisms alone lend essential power to the monologue (*Lovesong* would not work well as a radio play).

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The Right One, a "lyrical piece" by Michele M. Jelley and Daniel MacIvor, was perhaps the most commercially successful play of the series. Jelley and MacIvor have written a

tightly scripted work about three distinct characters all obsessed with one man—a streetcar driver. Both the characters and plot are well developed, and most of the humour works.

Director Eddie Roy manages to keep the play fast-paced and juxtaposes the characters effectively through the use of props and positioning. In one scene in particular, where Manny nurses a crumpled coat, Carol caresses herself with a dull butcher's knife and Fern passionately chastizes the memory of her ex-husband, Roy's direction is superb.

All three actors (Lisa Lelliot, Cathie McNalley and Daniel MacIvor) give strong performances in roles which often threaten to become caricatures. Overall, *The Right One* is a well-made play which is not terribly challenging, but enjoyable to watch.

Our Parents, by York MFA student Ken Keobke, features two incestuous siblings who have killed their parents, and co-stars two life-sized, styrofoam-chip filled dummies. With such a cast, one wonders if the piece is meant to be pathological or humorous. Yet due to the directing of Michael Caruana, combined with the over-acting of Patricia Medwig and Brian Young, the play is neither.

Because of this ambivalence, Keobke's intent is lost. The play becomes, in effect, a parody of itself; the audience is left with the conclusion (as expressed in Eugene Ionesco's *Exit the King*) "Laugh or cry, that's all you can do."

With *Bread and Soft Clocks*, the audience is left feeling emotionally seasick on a wave of superfluous motion. The piece's only consolation is the exaggerated, yet controlled acting of York graduate Steven Hill, playing Dali. Hill's fluid movements are captivating, and his voice resonant, especially in his sharply choreographed Dadaist solo. Yet the power and angst of this central character is obscured by the aimless movements of the rest of the cast and the overbearing score by Nancy Rio Schroeder.

The Butler did it lies stranded on an island of subterfuge without a ship-to-shore radio. Yet one gets the distinct impression that Paterson revels in his dramatic solipsism. His performance is supercilious at best.

Week two of *Rhubarb!* features six more works playing until Sunday, and in week three (February 18-22), seven new plays will be performed for five days running. *Rhubarb!* is risk-taking, as much for the audience as the performers. This, no doubt, is the basis of its wide annual appeal.

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