

Existential baseball in *The Invention of Poetry*

The Invention of Poetry
Citadel, Rice Theatre
17 September - 15 October

review by Mike Evans

See this play.

The world premiere of a new Canadian play, *The Invention of Poetry* by Paul Quarrington, has taken the stage at the Rice in a co-production with The Canadian Stage Company of Toronto.

The play, Quarrington's first, is the story of two exhausted souls struggling to find some reason in one another to continue in a purgatorial existence. The first is Moon, played by David Fox, a dissipated, drunken poet, clinging desperately to his self-proclaimed designation as the "last of the great Celtic bards." He appears to revel in his shattered reputation, self-indulgently mourning his wasted promise. The other is Gary Kennelly, played by Michael Hogan, a laconic, slyly wise Southern baseball player, an alcoholic whose bouts with the bottle straightened his curve and transformed his career from long relief to long retired. Yet he still champions the positive attitude approach to life drilled into him by his former manager, the "finest baseball mind he ever knew."

Quarrington's script is a marvel in that it works these two stereotypes in close proximity into a moving and absorbing examination of the magic of words. Kennelly, the graduate of secretarial science — ninety words per minute — enlists himself in Moon's service to transcribe the old man's last kick at the poetic can, perhaps his last attempt to regain his faded glory. In the process both men painfully disclose the accidents and capitulations which have driven them both to this point, a

tawdry room in the New World Hotel, poised on the abyss over a lake of hellfire and brimstone, surrounded by suicides and whores.

Moon, fishing for his reflection in the lake with a rake, incapable of penetrating his illusion of himself, simultaneously draws out of Kennelly his secret pain and teaches him the therapeutic property of poetry. In the end, both men ally themselves to a single purpose, the necessary invocation of God through art to cleanse their souls. And yet, though they are redeemed by the discovery of human compassion in one another, their redemption is still overshadowed by the spectre of pickled promise in the bottom of a bottle of spirits. Neither will recapture his youth, talent or reputation, but both have in some way recaptured their lives.

The performances of both actors are magnificent. David Fox's Moon, a histrionic, bellowing and ultimately pathetic figure, is a star turn on the tradition of Dylan Thomas, Brendan Behan, or in the theatrical world, Peter O'Toole, which evolves into a subtle and intense portrait of a man desperately afraid of his own death. Michael Hogan's Gary Kennelly is a wonderfully loveable pop-philosopher, a sage for the ordinary existentialist, concealing a festering cancer of broken dreams and lost family. The two together create a wonderfully inspired dialogue, at moments wildly funny, blackly ironic and deeply touching. I am not ashamed to admit they brought a tear to my eye and a stone to my throat.

The local design team employed by the Citadel in this production did an excellent job.

David Skelton's stage design is an innova-



David Fox and Michael Hogan tete a tete in the Citadel's production of *The Invention of Poetry*.

tive pastiche of styles including the German expressionism of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, French symbolism of the 1920s and a kind of Van Gogh simplicity. The action takes place in a single cheap hotel room, literally a stone precipice suspended over a lake of fire. The plateau, illuminated from within, glows redly in the dark and suggests a quiet, omnipresent menace. While the lake and two-dimensional flames were a little heavy-handed, the set remains marvelously evoca-

tive. Douglas Paraschuk's lighting underscores the dramatic tension of the play, isolating the lyrical passages and capturing the griminess of life inside the four walls of Moon's room.

Michael Becker's soundscape, chosen to reflect the neighbourhood and circumstances of the play, is appropriate and well-conceived but is also unfortunately undermined by the quality of reproduction.

See this play. See this play. See this play.

Backstage with Johnny Diesel at Bear Country

Bear Country
Featuring: The Upangybottoms, Johnny Diesel and the Injectors, and T'Pau
The Butterdome
Saturday September 23

interview by and story by Ron Kuipers

Bear Country. The mere words evoke images of post-pubescent collegiate debauchery — a collective of frat boys, girls and a lot of other people trying to get, well, you know. I mean, I can't figure out why the Dekes even bothered to bring in any bands at all. Barely anyone paid attention to them. But you know what they say — It's a scene to be seen. I guess it is, but that's a different story.

Anyhow, in the middle of this jungled mess of security guards, ten-mile-long beer-ticket lineups, one-way stairways, and crowded, androgenous bathrooms I tried to find a story. Well, amazingly enough, I did find a story. And no, it has nothing to do with all the beer that was getting spilled all over everyone, or getting hassled by power-tripping security guards "just doing their job," or the basic disorganization of the event.

Never mind, back to the story. For about two weeks now, publicists and record company reps have been bugging me to interview some hot, new act — Johnny Diesel and The Injectors. I even got a copy of the album. I gave it a few spins and wondered what all the hype was about. It wasn't bad. It wasn't good. Just some blues based rock and roll of a very American variety. It's frenetic in some places and plods in others. I didn't find anything original, but I didn't find anything to hate the album either. I had the worst reaction you can have to an album — indifference. I mean, from all the promo hype surrounding this guy, I started to think that maybe he was just some sort of idea cooked up in some record executive's head — and that now they were just shopping him around like a new brand of toothpaste. But the story didn't end here.

OK. So I covered the album. Next step — see what he's like live. Well, I did that too.

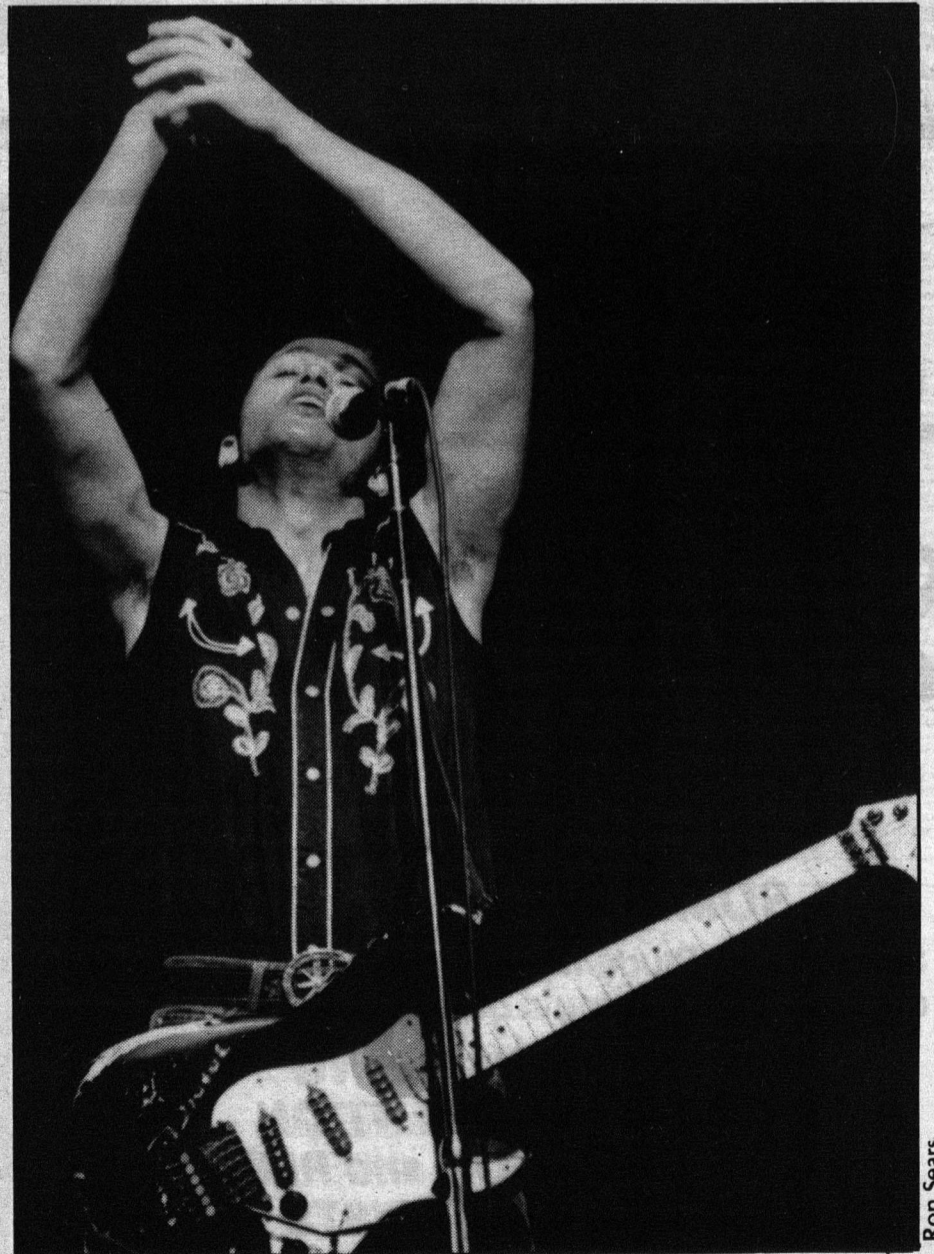
Seeing Diesel live, I admit, was an improvement. He managed to be pretty energetic despite playing on the deck of a semi trailer, on the other side of a twenty foot barrier, before a distant and very disinterested audience. "It reminded me of a crowd at an airport," explained Diesel. "There's the economy class, there's the airline class." To say the least, he had difficulty connecting with this particular audience. "It's hard," he says, "You just have to get into your own little thing up there. There was such a big gap."

So before he even had a chance to perform, he was already hindered. But his performance was adequate considering the limitations placed on him. He and his band pumped out quite a furious set, playing what seemed to be non-stop for well over an hour. He only stopped once in a while to get the audience involved — a task that proved too monumental for him. But he did "get into his own little thing," and to see him enjoying his music was probably the most uplifting part of the evening.

So the last step I took on this quest for a story was to actually talk to the guy for about half an hour. This is the first time things got interesting all night. Amidst all the hype and media propaganda, there was actually a human being at the other end. I asked what he thought of the whole rock circus, seeing as he was flung right into the middle of it. "I've always been honest to myself and all the people around me, and that's the only way to be," he said, "It's all a big dirty lie anyway."

Now this guy is only 23 years old, and he exhibited a stoicism far beyond his years. He's toured all over Australia and Europe, and now he's touring North America. "God knows what I'm gonna be doing when I'm 25," he exclaimed, "But I've made the fuckin' bed, and all the other bullshit I'll tolerate."

Now maybe he was stringing me a line, but it really seemed like all this guy was interested in was playing his guitar. In an odd sort of way, he seemed pure. Sure he was cradling a beer at the interview, he was dressed in leather and all that, but I really got the



Johnny Diesel attempts to get the audience involved at Bear Country on Saturday.

impression that there was only one thing that this guy wanted to do, and now he's doing it — and all the bullshit he's "tolerating."

He wasn't exactly jacked about road life, either. "Sometimes you just have to wind down," he said, "and do anything that's normal. When I call my mom, she always asks me if I'm taking time out to think about things." But nonetheless, his travels have given him some perceptions on the globe that were refreshing for me to hear. "Canada

is so different from America. It's unbelievable," he said, "People up here realize that that there are other people in the world."

So maybe I got strung along by the "I'm just a lonely ol' guitar player" shtick. But after an evening of hassles, he said everything I wanted to hear. I had to find something positive about the evening, and he was it. All I can hope is that the money monster won't swallow him alive like it appears to be doing. I hope he doesn't believe the hype.

Ron Sears