

Toronto's theatres go commercial

When you get past the sex, little *Remains*

by Ira Nayman

Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love written by Brad Fraser performed for Crow's Theatre at Theatre Passe Muraille

Something strange is happening to theatre in Toronto. Time was when you could go for an evening's entertainment safe in the knowledge that you were doing your modest bit to promote Canadian culture, which, in any case, didn't need your help because it was heavily subsidized by the government. But, now, three separate plays which originally had non-profit runs are being remounted as commercial enterprises.

That puts a lot of pressure on an audience.

Thomson Highway's *Dry Lips Oughtta Move to kapuskasing* is wonderful, and deserves to be seen by every man, woman and child in the city. Twice. George F. Walker's *Love and Anger*, though flawed, seems to have captured the city's imagination, and I wish it well. As for Brad Fraser's *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love*, well...

Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love is a dark, challenging, disturbing play. Unfortunately, it does not live up to either its esteemed company or its own reputation.

Unidentified Human Remains focuses on seven characters who live, love, fight, complain and, possibly commit heinous mass murders. It tries to say something hip about relationships in the nineties, but it only succeeds in being remarkably cynical.

Fraser has given the play an interesting structure, with scenes starting, stopping and overlapping in various places on the almost entirely white (virginal? a kind of every-set?) stage. He uses a number of well established techniques to involve the audience, including one word lines shouted by different characters which are, well...

Annoying!

Dated!

Unnecessary!

Unfortunately, while the play is structurally interesting, Fraser doesn't seem to have put as much effort into making the characters believable. Generally, they are not very deeply drawn in the first act, being defined mostly by their sexual



David (Brent Carver) and Bernie (Henry Czerny) fight over a gun in Brad Fraser's *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love*. You could save yourself the money by slowing

down to watch an auto accident. There are some terrifically funny one-liners, though.

orientation (hetero, homo, bi or confused).

This makes much of the drama in the second act implausible, hard to believe or take seriously. Motivation seems especially hard to find; one scene, in which Candy (Lenore Zann) is slapped by her male lover, Bob (John Jarvis) is particularly poorly written, with little dramatic build-up to the confrontation.

For a play ostensibly about love, there's very little of the emotion in evidence. There is a lot of sex, though. This seems a fair comment: that many today confuse the two, or use the one to justify the other after the fact.

But, *Unidentified Human Remains* doesn't stop there. Sex is constantly being linked to violence, not only overtly in references to AIDS and mass murder, but covertly in the way relationships are played out. Moreover, the victims are all women, from the raped and mutilated human remains to Benita's kinky sex play to Candy getting slapped.

Not only is this a regressive point of view, but Fraser doesn't have much to say about it. Nonetheless, the playwright has an

obligation to the audience to offer a critical opinion, to suggest the possibility of redemption.

The final scene, in which a small reconciliation occurs, seems out

of place and insufficient. Without this, we become no better than voyeurs of the pain of others; we could slow down on a highway to see a traffic accident if that were

bohemia

by Ira Nayman

Reviewing things these days is like shooting pelicans in a barrel; it's easy, and it's not very pretty. (And it requires a big barrel.)

In television, standards is invariably followed by practices, a guarantee of poor quality. Film is quickly devolving to television's level via commercial endorsements. Jackie Collins and Harold Robbins lead the publishing industry by churning out best-sellers (literature for semi-literates).

Theodore Sturgeon was right: 90% of all art is crap.

Wading through the sewage leaves the reviewer two options, neither of which is very satisfying. The first involves lowering your critical standards and writing criticism based on its intentions (if good feelings were the basis of esthetics, *ET* would be *Citizen Kane*; if mindless violence set the standard, *Halloween III* would be *Rules of the Game*).

The problem with this approach is that it debases the whole concept of criticism, the discussion of works of art based on previously revealed theories of quality. Saying that *Hill Street Blues* was an excellent television show because it succeeded at realistically portraying the problems of a modern inner city police force, and that *Three's Company* was an excellent show because it succeeded at being mindless entertainment denies the real differences between watching the two programmes, ultimately making criticism valueless and sterile.

It also makes you look dumb.

The alternative, maintaining critical standards, while good in theory, is messy in practice. App-

all we wanted of an evening's entertainment.

There are some terrifically funny one-liners, though.

Despite the writing, some of the performances are brilliant. Brent Carver, as the emotionally isolated homosexual David, is amazing, as is Henry Czerny's Bernie. (It is one of the perverse ironies of *Unidentified Human Remains* that one of the most sympathetic, well drawn characters is likely a rapist and serial killer.)

Arlene Mazzerole, as a lesbian who, of all the characters, seems the most capable of giving and receiving love, gives a very warm, likeable performance. On the other hand, Kristina Nicoll's Benita is by turns hilarious and scary (and sometimes both at once).

The sponsors of these commercial revivals are to be commended; they could have chosen safe, commercial plays, but have backed challenging ones instead. Of them, *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love* is the most problematic, although it does boast some memorable performances.

Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love continues at Theatre Passe Muraille until May 27.

lying esthetic ideals to a film like *National Lampoon's Summer Vacation* is like wearing a tuxedo in a sauna: blatant overkill. Furthermore, constant negativity will inevitably turn readers off, no matter how justifiable (keep in mind: Sturgeon was probably an optimist).

There is another option. Rather than review individual works,

some critics like to find the trends within genres and media, or relate current works to their historical origins. Some look at the business aspects of the arts (and don't kid yourself — they're all big business). Some prefer first person accounts of their experiences within or with the media.

These are the sorts of things you'll find in Bohemia.

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4 One Blood (C)	One Blood	One Blood
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Compiled by CHRY's Music Department from programmers' playlists over a 2-week period ending May 7, 1990. Programmers choose their own material. (C) denotes Canadian material.

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