

Hosanna at Citadel Too...

Probing psychological as well as physiological

by Kevin Gillese

You take a play by one of Canada's best - and certainly its most controversial - playwrights, Michel Tremblay. You bring the play, originally written in the "Joual" dialect of the Quebecois and done with the political overtones so common to material of Quebec, and place it smack in the middle of the conservative West. You bill the play as one 'for adults only' and as 'a must' for mature audiences only. Then you bring in two young male actors and you ask them to play the parts, respectively, of a transvestite who identifies himself with Elizabeth Taylor and a macho homosexual who 'plays at exaggerated masculinity' and who has been 'married' to the transvestite for four years. What's the result?

Well, the actual result can only be evaluated after the play has begun its run. The play is *Hosanna* and will begin at Citadel Too on Monday. In trying to discover what difficulties this type of play might present to the actors involved, *The Gateway* interviewed Patrick Christopher and Jean-Paul Fournier who play the parts of *Hosanna* (the transvestite) and Cuirette (the macho), respectively.

GATEWAY: Okay, it's a Tremblay play, 'for mature audiences' and dealing with the lives of two homosexuals. What particular problems does it represent?

PATRICK: Well, I have to play a transvestite (which I am not) and Jean-Pierre has to play a macho (which he is not) ... that obviously presents a bit more of a problem than trying to play a character with an Irish accent. It means that you're more naked as an actor because you're playing something which the audience might look down on, that is, you play the transvestite, therefore you *are* a transvestite.

JEAN-PIERRE: But it's still a life situation - it's true to life. People might think that it's just being put up there for 'shock' value, or whatever, but it does exist. It just doesn't exist as much around Edmonton as it does around the bigger cities, or at least it's more visible there.

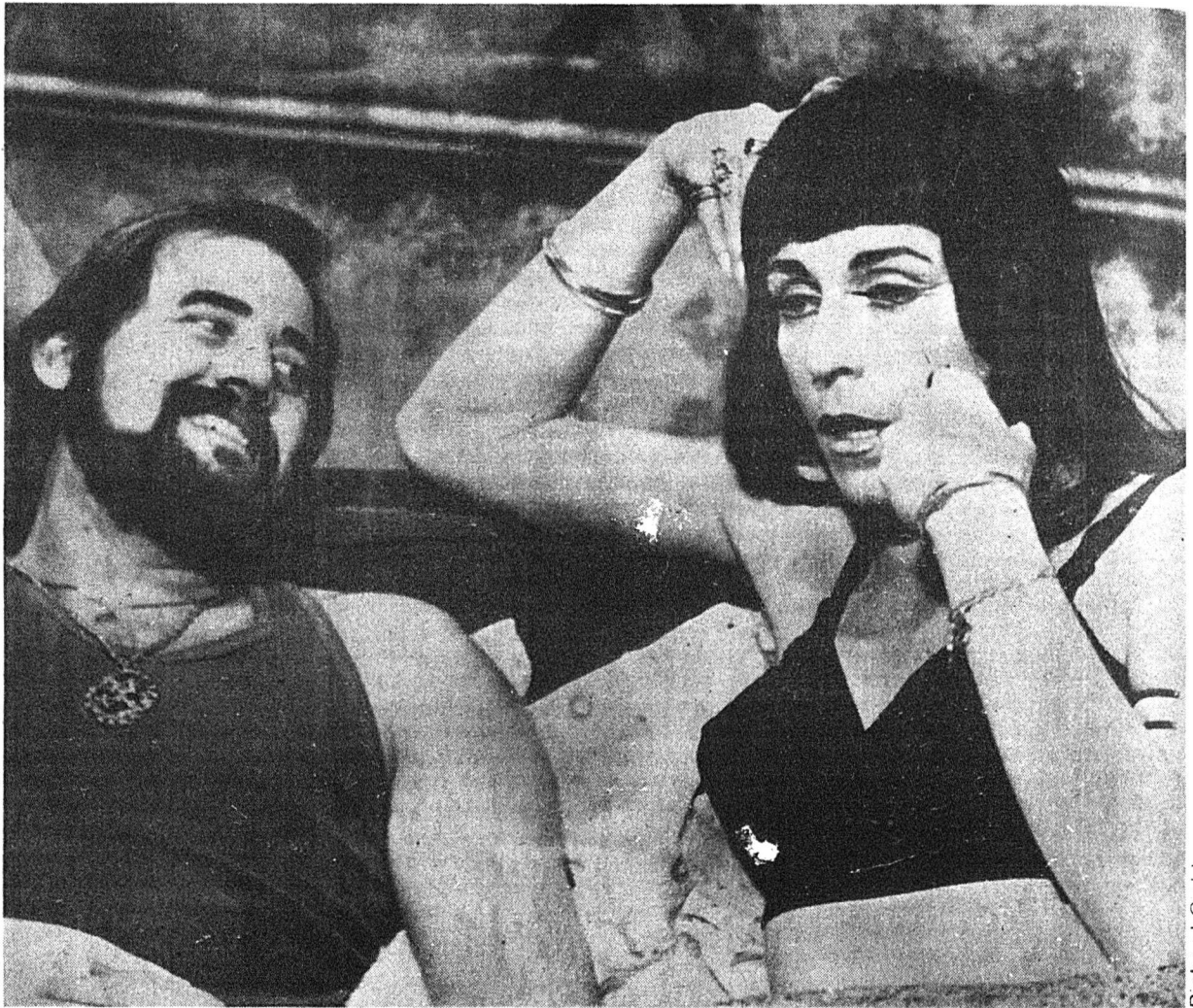
GATEWAY: Then you don't believe the play was designed or will be received as a 'shock' play?

JEAN-PIERRE: The thing I think Edmonton will find shocking is that this type of lifestyle exists.

GATEWAY: What about when you were presented with the possibility of playing in *Hosanna* - did you feel strongly one way or the other about shock value, did that enter into it at all?



Patrick Christopher as he appears in real life.



Jean-Paul Fournier (left) and Patrick Christopher portrayed in the controversial Citadel Too play, "Hosanna".

PATRICK: I accepted because it's a wonderful play. As a part for an actor, it's a tremendous challenge, firstly because of the character to be portrayed, and secondly because there are only two actors on stage for two hours and you've got to be able to carry it off. Then too, there was the chance to work with John Neville. But I was scared when I accepted. Whell, hell, I still *am* scared but it's such a terrific play.

JEAN-PIERRE: Well, I really didn't know anything about the play when I was approached, so I asked people I know and respect and they said: 'Yeah, do it! It's a great play'. But I think if people are going to become upset with the language and the *type* of characters represented, they will miss the whole point of the play.

PATRICK: This play ends up being about two real people and I think at the end of the play you have a feeling for those people and the problems which they are going through. The language is rough but after about the first ten minutes I think the people are just going to accept it and sit back and watch the play.

JEAN-PIERRE: Sure. I think the language will throw a lot of people, especially the older ones. But I also think that we can glaze it over and they'll end up watching the play, instead of being concerned that somebody is saying a four-letter word.

GATEWAY: What about your nude scene, Patrick? Is it difficult for you as an actor to do it?

PATRICK: Well, first of all it's very short and it is very important to the piece. At first I felt really strange doing it - you know, standing on the stage without clothes - but it's not like a strip-tease and it is very necessary to the play. It took me about a week, but I got used to it. I think people's reactions to things like that are always much bigger than the act itself. I don't think, after the emotional wringing the audience will go through in the play, that many of them will be shocked by the nude scene, which comes near the end.

GATEWAY: How about investigating the type of psychological things concerning the characters? Did you do any research or do you do things from personal observations you might have made?

PATRICK: Well, there's a couple of problems with that. I didn't have time really and I don't know whether the transvestite's thing is physiological or psychological - I don't know if there's anybody who does. In any case, I knew the fellow who played it in Toronto and I talked with him about technical problems. I would like to talk to some transvestites - I'm sure it would help me - but I wouldn't want them to be insulted. I wouldn't know how they would react.

JEAN-PIERRE: Strangely enough, about two years ago I was in Montreal visiting a friend and we went to some gay bars there. From what little I saw there, I would say that what Tremblay is portraying in *Hosanna* is very true. Outside of that, I have very little understanding or knowledge about it.

PATRICK: But, of course, the characters are complete individuals unto themselves. In a way, now that we've done it for two weeks, I'm beginning to like the character. I think by the time people have watched the play for two hours, they will have some understanding of the people as *human beings*, not as two homosexuals.

GATEWAY: Do the political overtones come through after the play has undergone French to English translation? Do you do anything with that?

PATRICK: No, the political implications are still there, I think, but we don't do anything with them. If we act the play as it is, the political overtones are present to be found - but they have to be found by the audience.

GATEWAY: But are there problems in translation? Do you lose a lot?

JEAN-PIERRE: This is a fine translation - Tremblay himself has said so. But it's true that in the original French the emphasis can be switched and I know that that particularly happens with French swearing. If you say "Fuck this" and "Fuck that" in English, that is very strong and comes across that way. In French, the swearing can be both violent and humorous at the same time and it has different connotations. So probably you lose something there.

PATRICK: For example, in one place I swear in French because there is simply no equivalent in English. In other parts, we lose the humour Jean-Pierre was talking of and so now we have to emphasize some things as *dramatic* moments, instead of having the humour to add to the drama in the original.

GATEWAY: What are your general feelings in working the play ... have they changed as you've worked on the characters?

JEAN-PIERRE: I find it less strange now than I did before, but it's still strange. I just hope that people don't become really concerned about this as being a 'vulgar' or 'shocking' play because it's a fine piece of writing. It's an incredible play.

PATRICK: Yeah, we're doing it because we believe in it. I've never worked this hard in my life and this play is a real classic. By the end a lot resolves itself and I think people can really get wrapped up in it, as an entire situation. It's great.

Richard Gishier