


Filling The Empty Space

Reviving A Tradition at UNB

By KWAME DAWES



There is quite a bit of theatre in Fredericton - a lot for the size and population of this miniature city. TNB has its regular season of plays and promises a very interesting summer programme which should be quite exciting. Theatre St. Thomas manages at least two productions every season; while the new Theatre Simple is offering us three major productions this season. There is a company called Theatre Fredericton which staged *The Glass Menagerie* late last year while at the play house several independent groups have staged musicals and variety shows to packed houses. TNB's "Interact programme" has brought in such sterling performers as the Visusizwe Players of South Africa with the powerful production "You Strike the Women You Strike the Rock", and at UNB John Ruganda is directing Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* with the Theatre Class Workshop - an undergraduate production course offered by the English Department. The list could go on. I saw, for instance "K.C. Superstar" a farcical satire/review on K.C. Irving at the Memorial Hall last term, and I have been involved in a couple of readings from plays organized by TNB. It is a lot and people seem to attend these productions and enjoy themselves.

While this is true, very few of the theatres in Fredericton may be described as experimental or daring in their theatrical style. Theatre Simple may be complimented on their staging "Warm Wind in China", a play about AIDS, but the theatrical style employed was quite conventional. Maybe Fredericton is not ready for that except that Sharon Pollock's fairly experimental one-hander (Sharon Pollock wrote, and acted in the play) "Getting It Straight" was well attended. Unfortunately, the proscenium of the Play House succeeded effectively in standardizing the relationships between performer and audience. Experimentation is a luxury and presupposes a freedom from the demands made by a need for great financial returns. Most experimental groups are either grass roots theatres who have an intimate relationship with the working class people they perform for or companies that are funded by some larger organization that understands the need for freedom from financial constraints. Second stages of conventional companies tend to have this privilege as well as theatre groups on University campuses in

which the system seeks to buffer the costs of production and operation. Student run theatres can therefore be daring and pretty much in the forefront of theatre practice. Mistakes can be made; flops can be accepted, but more crucially, the leisure of trial and error is available to budding practitioners of the art.

Every University should have an active theatre company. This is a bold statement in light of the advent of film, VCR's and radio, but it is a valid statement if we accept that the theatre remains a potent means of communication - dialogue between performers and spectator. The effort and team-work that goes into a theatrical production along with the communal feeling fostered with a standing company of players makes the theatre a crucial place for "extra-study" relating which is so elemental to effective student life. I have seen student productions initiate political action on campuses with an effectiveness that very few other media could manage. I have also been involved in student productions that have led to significant emotional and psychological therapy for other students who found empathy a necessary part of their involvement as spectators. The theatre encourages thought through impactful entertainment and many promising performers, technicians and playwrights litter this campus but we don't know it simply because at UNB there is no standing Theatre Society.

There was one. I did some research going as far back as 1961. These students produced at least two productions each year, in some years three or four one actors would be staged over the space of a weekend. Memorial Hall was usually the space used and quite often UNB would enter Regional and Provincial Festivals doing quite well. The name Alvin Shaw keeps cropping up in the sketchy reviews and reports about the society. He was the staff responsible for maintaining the company and served as director for many of the productions. The last record I could find of the society was 1976. I gather it continued after that, even up to 1983. The Brunswickan review of the 1976 production was very favourable, but naturally failed to treat the fact of a student production with the kind of importance as we would now-over ten years later.

But there is good news. There is a project underway to revive the society and to reinstate the kind of infrastructure that will allow it to continue for another few decades. The society should be student run and should carefully survey what is going on in Theatre in Fredericton and then try to create an effective alternative. The society should encourage writing among students and should seek to achieve a professionalism that will make it a fitting ambassador of the University. The Theatre should be dynamic and not stuck on the substance - less farces and easy comedies of the Broadway Stage. The society should be open to inviting in international companies and New Brunswick groups as well. The company should be a community of artist bent on challenging the intellect and emotion of this University community. If these things are encouraged and treated as objectives, the UNB Drama Society could be a vibrant addition to University life on this campus.

Look at the photographs of past productions, consider the excitement of fresh ideas beginning here at UNB. If this excites you, then maybe you can be part of this revival. We hope that the New Drama Society will be a success and that there will be support for it by the campus at large.

UNB DRAMA SOCIETY REVIVED

The UNB Drama Society is seeking new members. The first general meeting will be held in Rm 139 Carleton Hall on Wednesday, January 18 at 7:30 pm. Plans for this year's production will be discussed. There will be refreshments available. If you have any interest at all in theatre please attend this very important meeting.