

Double Bass offers strange revelations about a man & his musical instrument



BASS INSTINCTS: Eric Peterson (left) embraces his "female instrument" in Patrick Suskind's *The Double Bass*. Listen carefully for Peterson's Professor Van Ludwig impersonation.

By ANGELA LAWRENCE

Although one act, one man, one room, one double bass, and two obsessions accurately describes the dramatic foundation of *The Double Bass*—a humorous play about a lonely, obsessed musician—it is too simple a description. *The Double Bass*, currently running at the Tarragon Theatre, is a complex, comic statement about life.

Written by German playwright Patrick Suskind, *The Double Bass* was first performed in Munich, Germany in 1981. The Tarragon Theatre launched its 1985-86 season in The Extra Space with the Canadian premiere of *The Double Bass*. The production quickly sold out its short run, and in response to audience demand the Tarragon has brought it back into its bigger space to launch the 1986-87 season.

Once again, well-known actor Eric Peterson, celebrated for his performance in the title role of *Billy Bishop Goes To War* and recently named the first recipient of the Toronto Arts Award for the performing arts, stars as the lonely double bass player.

The Double Bass is a comic portrait of an eccentric classical musician who babbles complaints, defenses, and desires for and against his instrument—the double bass. Peterson's German accent is much like the

accent of the Walt Disney duck character, Professor Van Ludwig. He speaks directly to the audience from his sound-proof livingroom. In their isolation, the musician and his instrument share a strange relationship as the double bass is his friend, foe, guardian and lover. He is also romantically infatuated with Sarah, a young mezzo-soprano who doesn't even know who the musician is.

As a seasoned actor, Peterson is superb at keeping the attention of the audience, not only by what he says but also by using pantomime. Peterson uses these moments of silence to his advantage. At the beginning of the play nothing is said for five minutes; the musician fiddles with his stereo, walks about the room, gets comfortable in his arm chair and sips a bottle of beer before he talks. When he finally *does* speak, the audience is ready to listen.

Patrick Suskind is adept at using humour to reinforce the self-pitying character of the musician. At the beginning of *The Double Bass*, the musician casts unfavourable judgements on various musical greats. To the double bass player, Mozart was "thoroughly insipid" and Wagner "could barely play the piano," but most unforgivable was that many great composers had little regard for the orchestral importance of the double bass. "An orchestra can get

on fine without the conductor, but not without the double basses," the musician says defensively.

Throughout *The Double Bass*, Suskind continues to play on the musician's absurd judgments and opinions to create more humour, but some of the re-emphasized jokes are not as funny the second time around.

To the musician, "An orchestra is in the image of human society," yet the musician finds himself "swallowed up in the crowd." Like the double bass, he is never in the lime-light. His lonely desperation is emphasized when he acts out sexual desires with his "female shaped instrument."

"The musician is absurdly obsessed with a woman who he doesn't know and moves from babbling complaints to romantic jealousies. At this point in the play, a little too much babbling has been done and one begins to wonder when or if something is going to happen. Yet in a sudden emotional outreach, Peterson reveals to the audience how the musician has transposed his love of the bass with his love for Sarah.

As he dresses for the orchestra's evening performance, the musician doesn't know if tonight he will indeed confront Sarah with his real feelings. The audience is left wondering. Yet when he leaves the apartment, his double bass is left behind.

Ex-Shirelle revives '60s memories

By ANDREW VANCE

Old stars don't fade away, they just make comebacks. Nostalgia notwithstanding, former Shirelle Shirley Alston revived her polished act at Toronto's Network Club for a series of concerts last week.

The Shirelles spearheaded the wave of "girl groups" which appeared on the musical scene in the early '60s and included The Crystals, The Ronettes, and The Orlons. With their cute attire and boucy rhythms, these groups epitomized the youthful innocence and naiveté of an American psyche unblemished by

political assassination and the nightmare of Vietnam. The Shirelles' tenure in the public eye was brief but fruitful, yielding such hits as "Soldier Boy" and "Met Him on a Monday" before being swept away by the onslaught of the British musical invasion and psychedelia.

Apart from the inescapable ravages of time and the addition of a few extra pounds, Alston's vigour has apparently diminished little since The Shirelles' short heyday in the entertainment spotlight. Last Sunday's show was spirited and determined, featuring original Shirelles

numbers and an assortment of rhythm and blues favourites including "Johnny B. Goode" and Bob Seger's "Old Time Rock and Roll."

The Network Club is located in the Avenue Rd.-Davenport area, offering warm ambience and pricy drinks to supplement a musical agenda of everything from reggae to adult contemporary fare. Prospective patrons had best bring along their American Express cards as the menu is not intended for the frugal or financially strapped. Yet for a nostalgic evening out it could prove a worthwhile investment.



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