

Arts

Jelly donuts, Ping Pong and prose

By CHRISTINE BOUCHARD
and ADAM KARDASH

Mark Laba approaches the stage with the intention of exploring language in a sound poetry piece called "Sounding The Donut." As he reads a narrative he wields a hammer wildly over a jelly-filled donut. The anticipation of the audience builds. Suddenly Laba takes the hammer and levels the jelly donut, sending the jelly splattering in all directions. Laba intended for the jelly to fire out of the jelly hole. It didn't matter. The audience was won over.

Laba is one of the dozen or so individuals and ensembles that will be performing during the upcoming Mini-Festival of Toronto Sound Poetry, January 21-24 at the Music Gallery.

Sound poetry is a bizarre medium, to say the least. The performer(s) transcend language's conventional rules by complementing their poetry readings with twisted para-language, scored chants and noises, and often a variety of props.

During a sound poetry reading, one may easily see grown men, such as the Four Horsemen, drooling,

screaming, groaning, and reciting poetry, all in a synchronous blabber. Or one may catch a glimpse of two young men, such as Stuart Ross and Mark Laba, place cardboard boxes with mouth- and eye-tubes over their heads and fire ping-pong balls into the audience. A seasoned sound poetry enthusiast is almost never surprised.

The upcoming festival will feature many members of the York community, such as performer/organizer bpNichol and fellow York teachers Fred Gaysek and Gerry Shikatani, bookstore manager Rafael Barreto-Rivera and *Excalibur* typesetter Stuart Ross. Besides the large York contingent, the festival will also feature some of Toronto's other top sound poets. In fact, the mini-festival is at a world-class level, as Canada has always played a significant role in the medium.

The Mini-Festival of Toronto Sound Poetry will be held at The Music Gallery, 1087 Queen St. W., on January 21-24 at 8:00 p.m. Tickets are \$6.00 per night for students and \$8.00 per night for others. Special discount rates are available for a four-night pass. For more information, call 534-6311.



Ladies and Gentlemen . . . Mark Laba (left) and Stuart Ross (right) are two of the dozen or so, sound poets that will be performing in the upcoming Mini-Festival of Toronto Sound Poetry.



Why you sleazy little =!?! Soprano Leigh Munro and Richard Stillwell are engaged in a dramatic moment of the Canadian Opera Company's production of *The Merry Widow*. The Operetta will run until February 5.

Strauss operetta still popular

By KEN KEOBKE

Richard Strauss called it "theatrical sewage." When opened in 1905, the producer, certain that it would fail, refused to have any new sets and costumes designed. Tickets had to be given away in hopes that a paper audience would give the work some respectability and attract more paying customers.

Within two years, *The Merry Widow* had made composer Franz Lehár a multimillionaire.

The success that followed the play's opening is attributable to the comfortable, waltzing melodies and beautiful love songs that became as popular offstage as on. The work was immediately translated into several languages (there are presently 25 translations) and, at one point, the Argentinian capital of Buenos Aires boasted simultaneous productions in five of them. *The Merry Widow*'s popularity continues to this day and Toronto's Canadian Opera Company produced the work as recently as 1984.

The Merry Widow is an operetta. Operettas differ from operas in that the singers seldom go mad and/or kill one another. Usually more com-

plex than the Broadway musical, they are characterized by light romance.

The Merry Widow has much to be merry about. Spurned as a young girl by a prince she loved, she married an elderly banker whose "fifty millions" became hers on his death. On vacation from her native Pontevedro, a minor Balkan state, she finds herself courted by dozens of Parisian flatterers. The only man not interested in her, in fact, is the very prince who so long ago had to break off their love affair because his family thought it was beneath him.

A complication arises when the Pontevedro's ambassador points out that she should marry a Frenchman, because the transfer of her 50 millions would leave Pontevedro bankrupt. He insists that it is the prince's duty to marry her. Refusing to marry for money, he at last concedes to scare off the other suitors and in the process he and the Merry Widow rediscover their love for one another.

The settings—the Pontevedran embassy, an elegant garden and the decadent Maxim's restaurant/nightclub—present opportunities for ethnic folkdance, ballet and stylized bal-

room dance sequences, including an impromptu cancan by the ambassador and his cronies.

The Canadian Opera Company's current production at the O'Keefe Centre includes excellent comic acting by all, although the ambassador's germanic accent is an unnecessary speech impediment that sometimes obscures his lines and which seems out of place. The singing is generally good, although at times lacking in power; part of the blame can be put on the acoustically flawed O'Keefe Centre.

A small disappointment is that this production of *Merry Widow* is not new; the set was rented after budget restrictions forced cancellation of plans for a new staging of Offenbach's seldom seen burlesque *Orpheus in the Underworld*. This is unfortunate, because although the set's soaring Corinthian columns and sweeping staircases are lovely and conducive to the action, renting sets denies Toronto designers the opportunity to practice their craft and produce stage sets (which can be sent out on tour, generating more income for the COC).

The Merry Widow continues until February 5th.

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