

US "cultural fascism" mocked

The Perfect Party
Rice Theatre, Citadel
Run ends December 27

review by June Chua

The Perfect Party is one perfect mish-mash of predictable situations, crude jokes and tiresome characters. The play focuses on a professor who gives up his job in order to become the number one host in America. The one obstacle in his way is the status-conscious New York social reviewer. Naturally, the action of the play concerns the professor's efforts to induce the critic to write a raving review of his party.

The most memorable, and binding, component of this production was the Jewish couple, Wes and Wilma (played by Blair Haynes and Linda Rabinovitch). They first appear to the audience in bathrobes, towels and sneakers claiming to be just ordinary middle-class people. Haynes and Rabinovitch present the stereotypical Jewish couple, as they have emotional fights over trivialities when they say what's on their minds and make up just as passionately. These two actors play their characters to the hilt, making the personalities of Wes and Wilma endearing to the audience.

Vince Metcalfe as Tony, the professor, gives a rather flat, cut-and-dried performance of a man in a mid-life crisis. Although his portrayal of a lusty Italian is noteworthy, his monologues tend to be long-winded compared with the dialogues between Wes and Wilma. Similarly, Judy Mahbey's performance as his wife, Sally, tends to escalate to an irritating shrill. At times, her ditziness is too forced, becoming monotonous and grating.

Conversely, Lois (Kim Culkin), the social critic, is priceless. She is ever-smiling, ever-so-sophisticated and oh so viciously ambitious. Culkin gives just the right amount of worldly melodramatism and bored urbanism, using lots of hand/body language. Moreover, the character of Lois often implies

deeper, more sexual or ambitious, meanings behind her words, and Culkin reveals these meanings with sophisticated nuances that make the audience laugh a lot.

Throughout the play, bits of philosophy surface, interspersed in the conversations between characters. For instance, when Tony begs Lois not to leave, she quite suddenly comments that the modern world has lost "the element of suspense and excitement" in human gatherings. Lois then berates the upper middle-class for "smug, self-congratulation" for its affluence. This is somewhat surprising coming from a shallow woman who wants to get away from reviewing church functions and charity events.

Also, near the end, Sally asks Tony to accept his friends as they are and himself as he is, for in this "random disorder lies the future of America." Then, she draws an analogy between Tony and the U.S., saying that "America is attempting to give the perfect party all over the world...it's cultural fascism!" These statements are hardly believable coming from a woman who's not-all-quite-there most of the time.

All in all, I spent the majority of the evening smiling and laughing here and there. In my view, A.R. Gurney's satire of "social ambition" and its underlying theme of America's need for "sexual, social, and cultural imperialism," falls short of its intent. The play seems to rely solely on the shock value of the graphic profanity and sexual connotations of its "well-bred" characters. As a result, the dirty jokes cloud what the play is suppose to be satirizing.

However, I feel that the fault lies mainly with the script and not with this particular production of it. Many of the phrases were too obviously political and seemed not to come out of the character's own revelations. Also, the situations and their consequences could be anticipated after awhile.

Despite these faults, the audience responded well to the play, reacting to its many subtleties. So if you like light-hearted plays with bawdy jokes, then *The Perfect Party* is worth a look, but don't expect much more.



Play satires "social ambition" with dirty jokes.

Photo Rob Galbraith

Food fight in play

Doris and Laura
Nexus Theatre
Run ends December 19

review by Carole Amerongen

If you think that food fights are only for the young, you are wrong. There is nothing quite so entertaining as a good floor fight between two women over sixty-five. You can see one live, right now, in the Nexus Theatre's current production of *Doris and Laura*. This is not the kind of play you will be talking about years from now, but it is well worth seeing. *Doris and Laura* is a humorous and touching story that is good Christmas entertainment. You cannot help but identify with

their longing to change the past.

Doris is not your typical grandmother. She is a frisky, fun-loving woman, always ready to recall those incriminating memories Laura would like to forget. Laura is the opposite: a conservative, reserved seventy year old, the type who wonders if she needs yet another "lovely black dress" from Sears. If Laura whimsically recalls a woman they both knew as being "so kind," Doris says: "She needed a good poke."

Doris and Laura's differences create humour but, as it turns out, their natures result from something more serious. When the women were teenagers, they lost their parents, and Laura suddenly became responsible

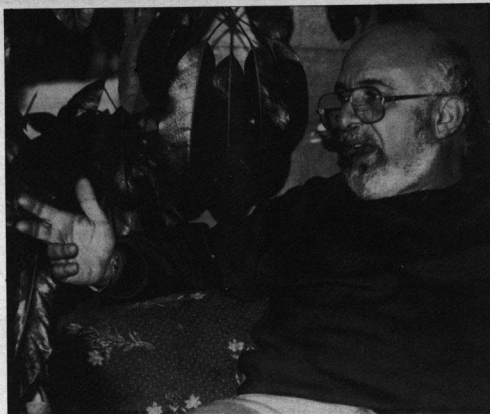


Photo Rob Galbraith

Mark Schoenberg, director: "This is one of the strangest plays I've ever come across."

Putting on *The Perfect Party*

interview by June Chua

"This is one of the strangest plays I've ever come across" says Mark Schoenberg, director of *The Perfect Party*, which is playing at the Citadel. A major problem for him with this production was to "find a way to make it consistent for the actors, since the play is a (conglomeration) of many things." Schoenberg describes it as "part-sitcom, part-farce and part political satire." This was the basis for his interest in the play, as it "marries" many styles.

In addition, the play has an underlying political statement on American cultural imperialism that has pervaded other nations. And Schoenberg agrees with this perspective. He believes that since Americans can no longer physically impose their ideals on other countries, they practise a kind of "cultural imperialism," indirectly dominating foreign cultures.

This attitude is particularly important to Canada. "Since Canada does not have a national theatre, (Canadians) tend to imitate the Americans. Americans have Broadway to measure up to, while Canada has no national standard," Schoenberg notes. "Although the Stratford Festival comes close, it obviously borrowed the idea from England."

An American himself, Schoenberg comments that there is one basic difference between Canadian and American perspectives on art forms: "the Canadian perspective is laid back, cool, while the American sensibility is hot — to borrow a phrase from Marshall McLuhan." Schoenberg stresses the importance of passion in artistic pursuits; one must totally surrender to the art, intellectually and spiritually.

"The deeper I have to go, or the more layered and convoluted a play is...the happier I am," states Schoenberg with a satisfied smile. In essence, this comment reflects his varied tastes: Chekhov, Eugene O'Neill, Shakespeare, Harold Pinter, and Tom Stoppard are favorite playwrights. He especially likes the "gentle pessimism" of Chekhov's plays, which "embrace the full range of human experience."

for the care of her younger sister, Doris. The sisters never did get along; they are both near seventy yet they still do not see eye to eye. Laura still feels weighted down and Doris feels unloved. "I spent a fortune looking after you," Laura bitterly recalls. "You mean that dime you gave me when we went to Swift Current?" asks Doris.

Since both women have lost their husbands, they decide to spend Christmas together. The grievances of their youth frequently creep into the conversation until the sisters finally face the truth underlying their jokes.

Don Lemka won the 1987 ATP Experience Speaks Playwriting Competition. His script is full of comic exchanges, but that does not take away from the story's statement. The theme is merely masked by the humour.

Bonnie Reese makes a great Doris. She

Schoenberg has his roots in the USA. He graduated from Carnegie-Mellon with an MFA in directing, and debuted with *All the King's Men* in New York. He soon returned to graduate school and came out with a PhD in theatre production from Tulane. He taught at a university of North Carolina for some time, but in 1969 he was drawn to Edmonton by the offer of a teaching job with the BFA drama program at the university, and the possibility of forming a drama company. The following year, Theatre 3 was born and was soon "regarded as the best small theatre in Canada." However, it was consumed by a scandal involving the president who was embezzling the funds (by that time Schoenberg had already left). Happily, it "arose from the ashes and was reborn as the Phoenix Theatre."

Schoenberg's past credits include many of Chekhov's plays, including *The Seagull*, and *The Three Sisters*. Also Eugene O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey into Night*. In the future, he would like to do a production of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and O'Neill's *The Icknham Cometh*.

Schoenberg most enjoys the live theatre, "because it gives me a chance to exercise my creative energies and allows me to try many of my ideas out." He divides his time well: he is a teacher at Grant MacEwan, producer and director of the stage and radio, and at one time the drama critic for CBC. He sees the role of director as "helping the actor find the extension in the character (in order) to play the role for all it's worth."

Presently, he is regional drama producer for the CBC. Consequently, he will be "producing ten live, five minute productions based on newspaper headlines of the morning, during the Winter Olympics in Calgary." This is the kind of risk, upon which excitement and energy Schoenberg thrives.

Borrowing lines from the professor in *The Perfect Party*, Schoenberg encapsulates his personality, motivation and work: "I want to be either loved or hated...least of all, I don't want to be ignored!" Adds Schoenberg, with a devilish glint in his eyes, "and I am seldom ignored."

comfortably slips into her character's "ready for anything" temperament. Doris' sense of adventure and joy in recalling embarrassing childhood memories seems natural for Reese. Doreen Ibsen, who plays Laura, also masters her role. All of her averagisms are reminiscent of a typical woman of seventy. She stiffly sits with her shawl wrapped tightly around her shoulders and works on her needlepoint.

Doris and Laura is a one act play, approximately one hour in length. Under the direction of John Milton Branton, it runs smoothly. The set average, as it is supposed to be. It looks much like the modest apartment where Laura might live.

Doris and Laura plays on Friday and Saturday nights at 7 p.m. Through the week, you can catch a midday showing but sorry, even if you bring your lunch, you cannot get in on the food fight.