

Theatre

Warm hearts in Winter

A *Prairie Boy's Winter*
Northern Light Theatre
at the Edmonton Art Gallery
Run ends March 26

review by June Chua

Try to imagine a 25-year-old playing a 12-year-old. Hard? Yes, and awkward too, but the barriers of age temporarily disintegrate in this production. The result is an engaging play about *A Prairie Boy's Winter*. The play is adapted from William Kurelek's children's book of the same name. Adults can still relate easily to the trial and tribulations of puberty whether city-bred or country-born.

William Kurelek narrates this story of his childhood. Steven Hilton is both the older and younger Kurelek, who comments on past moments, and is also part of them as the memories are played out on the stage. Hilton moves smoothly between a mature man recollecting the past and a 12-year-old boy glorifying the games and times of the winter of '34.

William is the dreamer, the creative one. His descriptions are precise and poetic. However, it is here that the adult perspective intrudes upon a child's view, using words that are too eloquent. Often, William stares out to the open country and describes the scene before him: "the grey clouds look like woollen socks hung over the tops of the trees."

The story centres around the developing relationship between the ponderous William and his competitive, hockey-crazed brother, John. The only things John is interested in is "getting a new store-bought hockey stick and beating [his friend] Jessie." The Kureleks, who are materially but not spiritually poor, can

not compete with lawyer's son Jessie. Yet in the end it is home-made things, things etched with love and care, that carry one through.

Vincent Gale is very natural in his portrayal of the determined John. His voice doesn't sound like a bad imitation of a yet-undeveloped juvenile: it projects well and gives the impression of a purposeful boy. Kevin Cogan as the sometimes arrogant Jessie does well in his interaction with other characters.

The play can seem too simplistic because the characters are fairly stereotypical. For instance, William's sister, Winnie (Maureen Rooney) is the whiney, tag-a-long little sister and her friend Hilda (Jacqueline Dandeneau) is equally petulant at times. Nevertheless, Winnie's shrill voice is laughable, especially with her obsession with those dirty, filthy, disgusting pigs. In relation to the boys, the girls are secondary characters; but they are shown to be identical to the boys in enthusiasm and energy.

The dominant role of nature, particularly the winter, is stressed in this play. One is made aware of the weather because of the vulnerability of humans in the winter and the change in attitudes. The starkness of winter is contrasted with the bright lively nature of the children.

As William says, "with a whole six months of winter ahead, you could go crazy if you couldn't think of anything to do." Games such as Fox and Geese, playing hockey, farm chores and school kept these kids busy. They have those typical childishiffs over who gets to be "it" in Fox and Geese, or who gets to direct the making of the ice rink.

Dancer Sharon McFarlane, dressed in Ukrainian costume, symbolizes the wind, the snow and other elements. Her movements



Oh, for the games of winter!

Photo Bruce Gardave

are correlated with the live music. The music gives the mood, tone of each moment, helping emphasize the ominous, random disorder of a storm or underlining the playful actions of the children with spirited bubbly music. The lighting is exceptional, making up for what can't be reproduced on the stage.

The play, presented in conjunction with the Edmonton Art Gallery's "All For All"

exhibit of Canadian art and its fund-raising drive, is fairly short — less than an hour long. Overall, the play is a short, sweet remembrance of Kurelek's uncomplicated but eventful childhood. However, like William who says, with the first snowfall "you can get the first taste of winter on your tongue", the audience is given a small, but good taste of *A Prairie Boy's Winter*.

Shakespeare stilled

Dialogue for Lovers
Nexus Theatre
Run ends April 2

review by Elaine Ostry

How do you turn the ultimate lyrical form, the sonnet series, into a work of drama? How do you turn several monologues into one dialogue?

Well, the Nexus Theatre tried to do these twists in the play *Dialogue for Lovers*, but the effort failed.

It's an interesting idea: turning Shakespeare's sonnets into a play that touches on his themes of love and time. One of the best ideas is to have "The Man" and "The Woman" age during the play from lusty youth to reflective old age.

The Nexus Theatre simply tried too hard in this production. The director, John Milton Brandon, did not seem to be convinced of the power of Shakespeare's words to keep the attention of a modern audience.

So out came all the distractions to "keep us amused" — and confused. For one, there was a sequence when the two actors talked through masks. The masks did not seem to have any purpose, or give any deeper meaning to the words. They just seemed like a fun, pseudo-symbolic thing to do.

The actors, to show their advancing age, periodically changed costumes on stage, which made their transitions to middle and old age awkward. These changes should have shown more in the actors' voices and carriage, without resorting to costume to make these transitions for them.

To be fair, the couple's move to old age was quite graceful — but marred, because during the scene they applied makeup to themselves to make them look old. This last detail was totally unnecessary.

Unfortunately, the acting was not powerful enough to transcend these failings. They did not treat the lyrical form with respect: it is contrary to the spirit of the sonnet to throw yourself on the ground while saying it. They both engaged in overacting, which is a particularly cruel interpretation to inflict

upon the sonnet. And the scene in which they did their very best to cry is a little pathetic.

Portman had a better grasp of the material than Newby, who did not seem to always be thinking about what she was saying, and as a result threw away some great lines. Portman's interpretations were more thoughtful and intense. It was disappointing, then, to hear him give the wrong lines for the ending couplet to "let me not to the marriage of true minds..." one of the most famous sonnets.

It was a tiresome to see the couple exaggerating the lusty lines of the sonnets, and finding vulgar double meanings where there were none originally intended.

The musician was an ambiguous figure, smirk-

They just seemed like a fun, pseudo-symbolic thing to do.

ing and lurking in the corner, looking like a Rocky Horror Picture Show reject. Every once in a while he would retire to the wings to sing an Elizabethan love song. He had a nice voice, but one wondered what his purpose was — certainly his constant leering was yet another distraction from the poetry.

This may seem to be a nagging point, but the last thing actors should do on stage is sip water between sonnets.

Also, the set was crude, featuring a backdrop of sheets of saran wrap with cardboard leaves tacked on them.

Altogether, the actors and the direction, in their frantic efforts to ensure the audience's attention, underestimated the quiet, reflective authority of Shakespeare's words and their ability to move our emotions without the help of gimmicks.



Kate Newby and Gordan Portman as Elizabethan lovers

photo Tony