

## Arts

# Superb staging of mediocre masterpiece

by Glenn Walton

The set was earth-brown, seemingly hewn out of a single block of wood. Two ascending ramps met and formed a back wall with gothic arches. In the middle of the stage was a revolving platform, in the middle of which stood an apparatus of steps and ladders and platforms. High above everything a huge white cloth hung like a sail, used as a curtain for the Tales to be staged.

Such was Terrence Averill's striking set for Chaucer's **Canterbury Tales**. (The Musical) produced by the Dalhousie Department of Theatre under the direction of James Colistro. Chaucer's 14th century work, the first major flowering of English literature, was a work hewn, like Averill's set, out of rougher materials, those of medieval saga, lay and legend, and was a procession of human types in all their glory, baseness and endless colour. The Dalhousie production was entirely successful in bringing to boisterous life three of Chaucer's tales, which to no one's surprise are a natural subject for the musical theatre. It is too bad that the play as written and scored is less accomplished.

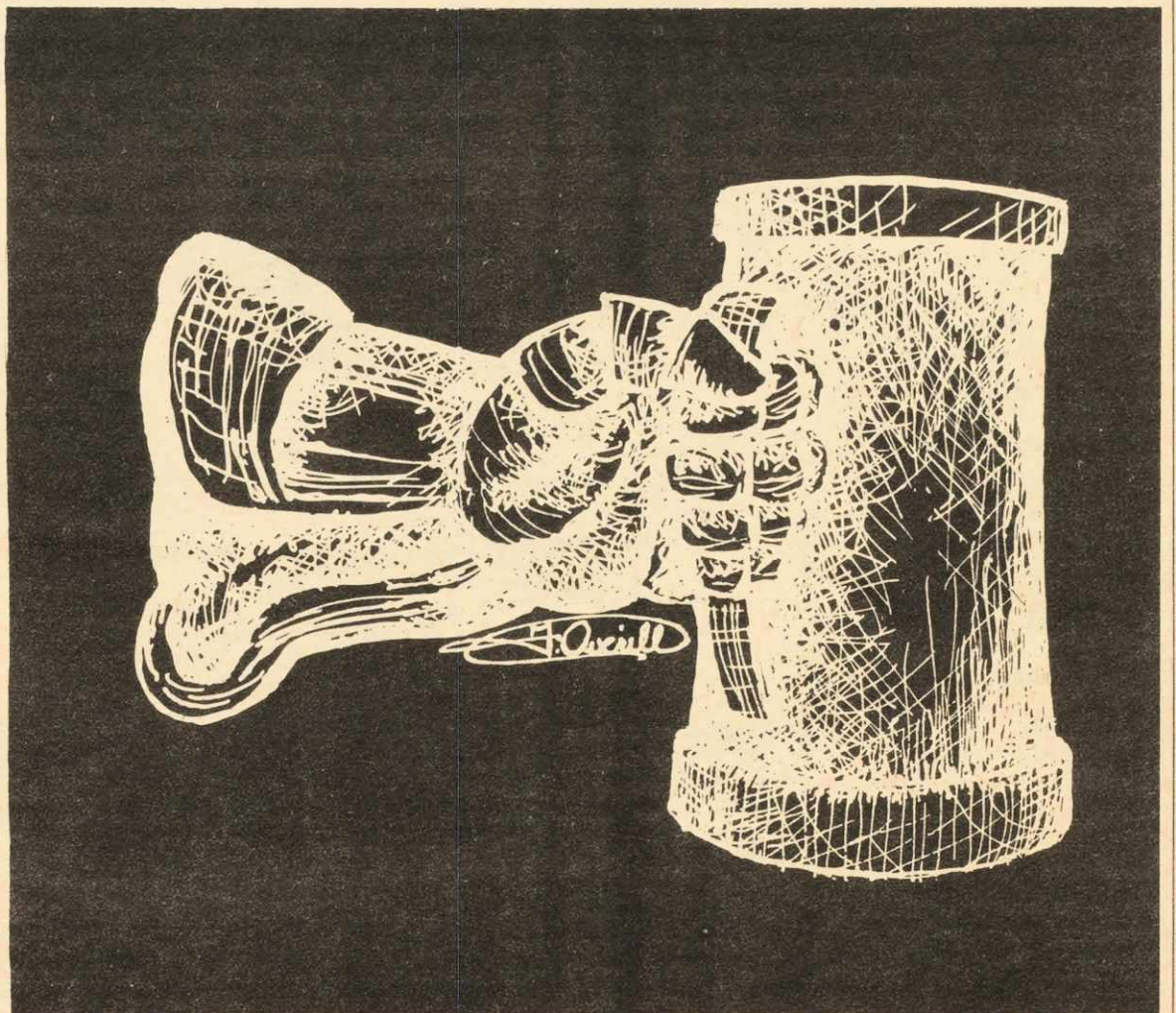
Chaucer's poetry is included, of sorts, in translation and abridgement, but because the tales depicted on the stage were chosen for their bawdiness, the balance to the debauchery, Chaucer's deep sense of spirituality, and his extensive employment of priests and nuns, is reduced to tokenism. Thus the final call to God's goodness and love as the pilgrims approach the shrine at Canterbury arrives unprepared. The Prioress, in the original tales an interesting study in fanaticism, a sort of medieval Anita Bryant, is transformed into a benevolent presence. The music and lyrics are instantly forgettable, the melodies mainly strophic monotonies in a pop vein.

So much for criticism. The actual production made the very

best of its material. We first see Chaucer dramatically lit, on top of a platform. He descends and gives us a bit of the original prologue, Lindsey Merrithew's Shakespearian training lending a debatable gravity to Chaucer's character. Then the fun starts, as the stage explodes into a Breughalian tableau of manic energy, couples dancing and copulating on tables, the Host (Glenn White) presiding over the revels and challenging the pilgrims to the sport of tale-telling as a means of passing time on the pilgrimage route. All of the tales are not given -- that would take days to stage -- but we are given the Miller's (the one ignored in high school) with its flatulent denouement, the Merchant's Tale, an almost mean-spirited treatment of a May-December marriage, and of course, the Wife of Bath's Tale and prologue, one of the first full-blooded depictions of a woman's dilemma in our literature.

The pilgrims were generally excellently cast. Jennette White, one of the few cast members with a voice strong enough to overcome the band in the pit, played the Prioress with authority and grace, and Paulina Gillis in the small role of the nun exhibited her usual mastery of character. Gillis inhabits rather than "plays" her roles, with an elegance of diction and attention to body language that augers well for her future in the theatre.

Michael Howell was a hilarious Miller, burping and swaggering in vulgar oblivion to the presence of holy women, and has the energy and timing of a fine comic actor. His tale was spiritedly acted by Mark Latter, Amy House, Michael Young, Tom Paisley, Michael Balser and Scott Burke, Latter as Nicholas exhibiting a surprisingly strong singing voice and a flair for the romantic (singing the ironic "There's the Moon" with Alison before dropping his pants to a hot poker -- kudos to



him for that act alone). Michael Young's big-voiced, small-brained carpenter was a perfect cuckold, and Michael Balser and Amy House played their roles with just the right touch of caricature.

The Merchant's Tale was dominated by Bill MacRae as the garoulous, and amorous January, who marries and beds the virginal May (Janet MacMillan) with the help of an aphrodisiac. The maid dallies with a young man pining for her love (Damian, played by Balser) and the three share a song with two gods arguing over the merits of men and women (Howell as Pluto and Suzanna Jacobs as Prosperina, who overcomes an

overwhelming costume complete with horns with her spirited performance). The tale was too long, the Pear Tree Quintet (in particular) was repetitive a la Gilbert and Sullivan without Sullivan's melodic invention. Despite this MacRae was always delightful to watch, jabbing the air in sextegenarian delight, clomping up and down stairs like a horny old goat, creating the illusion of age and debauchery, dominating the stage, creating laughter.

A highlight of the evening was the Wife of Bath's prologue, beneath the bravura is a questioning woman, not at all happy as she claims, and it was this aspect which was sacrificed to

theatricality of the event.

which in the original tales is longer than her tale and certainly the more interesting of the two. In the prologue she tells of her five husbands, here edited to the last, youngest and roughest of all, and significantly the one she loved the most. Those Victorians who maintained that women had no sexual desires hadn't read their Chaucer well. Nora Sheehan's Wife contained all the lechery and bawdiness of the character, hardly contained by the voluminous robes she drags around on her well-used body. Again, a reservation that has nothing to do with Sheehan's performance, given the concept of the Wife in the text: Doyle set a vibrant standard for the staging.

The show finished with the Prioress leading the company in an exultant hymn, "Amor Vincit Omnia" (love conquers all) wonderfully lit and concluding in another tableau. It is almost impossible to conclude a review of such an ambitious and populated a show as this without having left out someone in the credits, but that is what I will have to do, and like Chaucer apologize to those who might take exception to what I have written. **The Canterbury Tales** was not just a show, it became a campus event, and the Theatre Department is to be congratulated for attempting and pulling off such an ambitious project with the energy and technical skill it did. The show's weaknesses were not theirs (except for the general lack of strong voices for the songs). **The Canterbury Tales** will be long remembered.

## Rabid radical rock'n'roll readers

by Gisele Marie Baxter

Ah, spring. The season in which one's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love, in which April is the cruelest month, for reasons which I will no doubt one day discover. But enough of literary references! This being my final article as a **Gazette** record critic, I thought I'd put things into some sort of perspective and let you know what you can, and might, anticipate as you haunt the record shops this spring and summer.

Over the weeks since last September, I've written about twenty-five albums, roughly speaking, and while some were impressive and some proved to be fairly predictable over repeated listenings, a handful stand out as the best of the lot. U2's **October** is, of course and

without doubt, absolutely number one, but these are also on my turntable enough to risk wearing out the needle: Japan's **Tin Drum**, Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark's **Architecture and Morality**, The Teardrop Explodes' **Wilderness**, Simple Minds' **Sons and Fascination**, Adam and the Ants' **Prince Charming** and Martha and the Muffins' **This is the Ice Age**. An eclectic lot, to be sure, but nevertheless, I'm still hoping for good things from the coming season.

It would be too much to hope that Top 40 radio will provide the goods, as you'll remember that last summer's big hit was the reprehensible "Stars on 45." However, there are, and could be, some intriguing album releases coming your way, so

pray for good sales. Within the next week or so, both XTC's **English Settlement** and the Jam's **The Gift** should be in all the shops, and from what I've heard of both, these bands are still producing some of the catchiest, cleanest pop around, while keeping their lyrics sharp.

Later this month, or in May, The Clash will present us with another record, and I'm going to be optimistic about it, despite my misgivings about their rather self-indulgent EP **Radio Clash**. Dire Straits may very well release a double album in the not-too-distant future, and if it's even nearly as good as **Making Movies** (and has Roy Bittan back on keyboards), it'll be an instant contender for album of the year. However, I strongly

suspect that U2's third domestic release could arrive late this summer, and their vision is only getting stronger.

I would dearly love to see new music released by Kate Bush, Pete Townshend (whose follow-up to **Empty Glass** is long overdue), Garland Jeffreys, and The Undertones, and I wish some enterprising distributor could get some of the excellent British-based reggae bands -- such as UB40 and Steel Pulse -- releases over here. My favourite ska bands -- and I did so want that craze to last longer -- The Specials and The English Beat, have fallen to silence, but with The Specials having been reincarnated as Fun Boy Three, I would like some label to pick them up as well.