

## arts

## City of the Damned a modern echo of Sophocles



A scene from *City Of The Damned*, a work based on three plays by Sophocles, directed by York graduate Alan Orenstein. Maya Toman (l), plays Tiresias and David Ramsden (r), handles the role of Creon.

*City of the Damned* directed by Alan Orenstein at the Poor Alex Theatre closes April 8

By W.E. OVERTON

*City Of The Damned* heralds the Toronto debut of the Magic Circus Theatre Company. The group, under the artistic direction of York graduate Alan Orenstein, has been performing innovative productions of theatre classics since 1978. *City Of The Damned* is based upon Sophocles' three plays *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus At Colonus*, and *Antigone*. The plays have been abbreviated and adapted to suit a modern audience. Together they only run

three hours.

Although the text remains close to the modern translations, the performance is unique. Much of the movement is very stylized, having been influenced by Tai Chi and martial arts. This form is modern, but also suggestive of the grandeur of the ancient theatre. The production also includes a comical slapstick sequence in *Oedipus At Colonus* involving Creon, Theseus, and the blind Oedipus.

Make-up is used expressionistically—applied like war paint on those who are strong-willed, echoing the use of masks in ancient Greek theatre. The costumes are loose-fitting to facilitate the extensive movements of the actors and were styled after martial arts outfits.

The performances are all very tight but those of David Ramsden (Creon) and Maya Toman (Tiresias and Antigone) stand slightly above the rest. Ramsden's skilled delivery and movements bring a depth to the character that complements the stylized presentation. Maya Toman's carefree, childlike portrayal of Antigone in *Oedipus At Colonus* carries with it a measure of joy which proves a useful contrast to her embittered Antigone in *Antigone*. The music, performed live on stage by Tim Westbury is highly percussive. In *Antigone* he is joined by Jim Gleason (Oedipus) who plays synthesizer.

Magic Circus Theatre is committed to performing ancient Greek theatre in their own unique fashion. The company has performed various classics, trying to maintain the spirit of the work while attempting to regain the vitality it must have had when first performed. *City Of The Damned* was first staged two years ago by Magic Circus and they toured with a longer version of *Oedipus Rex* in Greece last summer, playing in amphitheatres. This summer they are scheduled to perform the full trilogy in Israel, Athens, and Paris.

Alan Orenstein, the director of the play, graduated from York in 1967 in the first graduating honors class, after first having studied philosophy. He maintains that while at York he despised literature. Later he got his doctorate in philosophy at Oxford, became a professor at Trent University, discovered literature, and began directing. Staging *City Of The Damned* is no mean feat. The acrobatics of the actors, the length of the play, and the challenge to produce an innovative approach to the classics, are all met and dealt with in a skilled, unobtrusive manner.

*City Of The Damned* is a grand experiment that provides an exciting look at the possibilities in imaginatively staging the Greek classics. It is hard to determine whether it is an ancient play in a modern guise, or a modern play with ancient echos. In any case, it is somewhat successful in giving us a glimpse of the excitement that must have accompanied those ancient performances.

## Winners named in first annual president's fiction contest

By HELEN HINKLE

The first annual President's Prizes for excellence in fiction, playwriting, screenwriting, and poetry drew some three hundred entries, over two hundred of them in the last category. The winners, who range from first-year to fourth-year students, will receive \$250 each, except in the poetry category, where judges (who are maintaining anonymity) named two winners.

Kim Kofmel's "Evening at Sedane's" won in fiction for what the judges considered its "tightly crafted" style. They found it reminiscent of *A Clockwork Orange* in its setting and milieu, although "the voice is the author's own."

Faith Roebuck took top honors for her stageplay "Inflation," which the judges called a "well-crafted play with good characterization."

John McLellan's screenplay "Summertime Blues," the story of a rock group in 1959 England, impressed the judges with its "fine dialogue, excellent sense of scene and unforced seriousness."

Lisa Wood's "Hands," is a "remarkably well-orchestrated series of stanzas offering varying perspectives on the theme the title indicates. A tour-de-force handled with great tact." It shared top honors with Stephen Renke's "Afternoon in August."

President H. Ian Macdonald has set aside prize money for the President's Prizes for the next 19 years.



York prof Chris Chahley on the horn.

## Jazz balancing act

By RICHARD UNDERHILL

Distilling jazz down to its component elements reveals two powerful forces which keep the music moving: chaos and stability. When these two variables are unbalanced, the music often verges on predictability. Either one is forced to endure long stretches of unresolved chaos as in the case of some free music, or, as was apparent at the start of Wednesday's Bethune College performance of the Chris Chahley Nonet, one longs for the musicians to let loose and improvise with spirited unpredictability.

Fortunately, after a rather bland beginning, the group came to life on the strength of an energetic arrangement of Chahley's own composition "Bill Bop." Intensity was maintained through the second set on a Monkish blues which featured a frenetic solo by David Mott and blues power from the horn of Roland Bourgeois. The afternoon ended aptly with an ambitious composition by David Mott entitled "All Rhythm." The tune was a good example of how to effectively use chaos and stability in composition, a static melody line broken up by intense rhythmic punctuations. "All Rhythm" featured exciting solos by Mott, whose intense circular breathing changed the mood of the piece and Mark Malone on trumpet, who exploited the freedom of the piece and led the rhythm section into various tight spots before rescuing the unit with some bluesy time playing.

## TFT's staging of Waiting for Godot meets expectations

*Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett at Toronto Free Theatre

By SARA MERULING

The set is monolithic, the audience dwarfed. There is a sense of expectancy. The play is *Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett, at Toronto Free Theatre (TFT). And the audience is waiting.

The play is Beckett's acknowledged masterpiece, and has become a theatrical classic. With the mythology that is built around "classics" however, comes a daunting thought: what if the production doesn't live up to the myth? With its current production of *Godot*, TFT has collected a quartet of some of Canada's finest and most accomplished actors. The problem of myth is combined with reputation, and expectations ascend to dizzying heights.

The set's huge proportions are left unobscured by extraneous detail, the only relief to the high black stage is a slender, leafless sapling—dead. When the actors appear they are as small onstage as the audience feels in relation to it. Characters Vladimir and Estragon live a seemingly meaningless existence. They merely fill time and wait for Mr. Godot.

The play is a mixture of humor, hope, pathos, and despair. When the production opens and we see Estragon (Saul Rubinek) rubbing his feet and whimpering, we laugh. Vladimir's (Neil Munro) clumsy entrance also makes us chuckle. Yet, in the midst of this slapstick and black humor, words of truth appear. We are aware of the characters' pathetic situation.

Pozzo (Donald Davis) and Lucky (Eric Peterson) play the pompous master and his apathetic slave consummately. They are travelers with no destination, or at least a destination that they will never reach. Beckett's *Godot* is a play that captures universal despair. "That's the way of it on this bitch of a world," as Pozzo puts it.

This production at TFT is successful in evoking that expectation—it does cause one to question states of being. Beckett would have been proud.

The set calls to mind the diminutive size of man in relation to the world scale, the solitary



"Ho hum. Yaawwwwn. Yeah, we're just sitting here waiting for . . . whatisname?"

tree emphasizing his loneliness. The lights are bright and unnatural, the moon a cardboard cutout. Beckett's stage directions call for an empty theatre stage, and John Ferguson's stark design effectively answers that call.

The performances (and direction) are smooth and professional. From the opening scene we can see the cast, directed by Peter Froelich, is a polished, well-knit unit. Rubinek plays his Estragon with the right mixture of abstracted fear and earthy comedy. Munro is a stubborn, surviving Vladimir. The two together make one think of old-time comic partnerships, Laurel and Hardy or Abbot and Costello. Still, the black side of the humor is dealt with as well; the fear in Estragon, the

doubt in Vladimir. Both Munro and Rubinek portray forlorn, and despairing men, and both are believable and engrossing.

Davis' Pozzo and Peterson's Lucky are wonderful examples of Canadian actors at their best. Davis is an overbearing sadist, yet funny withal. Peterson, best known for *Billy Bishop Goes To War*, is the quintessential Lucky. His glassy stare, and stumbling walk are those of the man at death's door, yet he comes alive for moments to capture the audience. Lucky's well-known monologue is a difficult one at best, and Peterson performs what at first glance appears to be a stream of nonsense with great skill.