

Audience sits on scaffolding around stage

Weird play combines rock with living theatre

By BRIAN PEARL

Theatre Passe Muraille opened up last week with the heaviest play seen in Toronto since Dionysus in '69. The subject is the Mystic Superstar, the Transcendental Cowboy, the Cell-block Zen Master, everybody's favorite Christ or Anti-Christ figure — Charlie Manson. And the play is not only living theatre, it's rock-opera, too. Sensational? Bizarre? Trippy? Downright weird? Verily!

The material of the play is drawn from testimony and statements made by Manson and his family of apostolic Bacchae — their philosophy ("The more you give, the more you get") their trips, good and bad (from transcendental ecstasy to demonic, ritualistic manslaughter) and life style in the desert (eating cream puffs and dropping Mesc, scrounging in the garbage of grocery stores for two-day-old food). The official reports are raw material for the musical drama which goes down like a hybrid of rock-opera and living theatre. The only other production like it in the world right now is Tom O'Horgan's version of Jesus Christ, Superstar on Broadway.

Charles Manson a.k.a. (also known as) Jesus Christ, takes place in a three-dimensional box. The audience sits uneasily on vertical scaffolding on three sides, above the floor and below the platforms suspended from the ceiling on wires at eye level with the crucifix behind the band on a platform next to the fourth wall. The dynamics of the play are explicitly vertical, the players ascend and descend like metaphors of apotheosis and anathema, the visions of God and the

obsession with demons and transcendentalism is the basic image of the stage and the play, both.

The play is structured like a film. Interviews between Manson and a reporter for an underground newspaper lead into flashbacks of The Family. The 'flashbacks' also included surrealistic hoedowns by the denizens of Middle America on roller skates and a satire of the 'circus' of the Tate Murders (the procession includes Annette Funicello, complete with Mickey Mouse ears, played by a man in drag, on roller skates, the figures out of Grant Woods' famous painting 'American Gothic', all capped by a grotesque tableau grouped about a macabre Statue of Liberty holding a flaming torch and out of the flag-draped coffin came the singer who played the drums in drag).

However, the bits on Amerika are only asides in the basic dialogues of the play between Manson and the Family and Manson and the reporter. The last scene is the courtroom speech by Manson to the judge (the jury was told to leave the room and never heard what he said) about what was being done to him and why. Manson told the audience that they saw a fiend in him because that's what they were. He accused them of splitting off bits of their own abhorrent psyches, denying the true owner and projecting them at Manson, the bastard child called 'Man's son' who mesmerized-mythologized-ritualized-brutalized and summarized Amerika's schizophrenic soul.

Peter Jobin played Charlie with astonishing power, projecting the depth of the Manson character with a force verging on charisma itself.

Laconic and cynical, a tough guy who taught himself to meditate in a jail cell and philosophize from the Bible and Zen and the street, Manson developed a charismatic aura of power and psychic force while caring for worshipful, lost girls with blown minds. The character of Manson is more impression than expression, more how it is said, than what is said, all technique. Playing Manson effectively is more than just a success, it is a triumph and a tour de force.

The director, John Palmer, collaborated with his actors to give the power of the play maximum effect; the production is taut when it must be and wild and flowing at the right times. This is essential in a play that is basically a hybrid of living theatre and the new genre of rock opera. The author and the

music director, Fabian Jennings and Allan Rae worked with the original material with careful attention to the mood and theme of the Manson phenomenon, so that even if they don't present everything that happened, the impression is complete. The music helps the play greatly; it would be a barren, brooding, psychodrama without it. The rock music gives Charles Manson a.k.a. Jesus Christ the outward-directed energy it needs to keep the play from collapsing under its own weight.

Last, but not most, the time has come to talk about the Theatre of Charisma of that uncommon tribal phenomenon that binds people closer than any other political force. Charisma is a dramatic effect used for political or social gain, so it is no surprise to find charisma can and is

being used for dramatic effect in the theatre, especially, it seems, in the last few years. Tommy, the Pinball Wizard, Jesus Christ, Superstar, Charlie Manson a.k.a. Jesus Christ, Arturo Ui (a.k.a. Adolph Hitler by Brecht at TWP) are all plays that have run in Toronto within the last six months. Before that we had Dionysus in '69 and '70 at Studio Lab and Tom Paine at Passe Muraille. The theatre does still talk about what we think about most as a society, just as it did in Shakespeare's day. Then the concern was the fear of renewed chaos of civil wars of succession after Elizabeth I died childless; today in the midst of the most bureaucratic, stratified and depersonalized government ever, we both fear and want the simple elegance and gut appeal of a leader with charisma.

Self educated Canadian playwright**Ryga fills Burton with emotion**

By MALCOLM SCULLY

The audience was small Wednesday evening, but the Burton auditorium was filled with the suffering of people striving to be free. George Ryga brought these people through his plays, poems and observations and the audience shared their suffering and found the sense of dignity and life through the words of a guerrilla leader who said "I had to study how to live, not how to work, how to live." Freedom and the universal dignity are themes which appeared throughout all the readings from: Grass and Wild Strawberries, Captive for a Faceless Drummer and The Ecstasy of Rita Joe.

George Ryga is a Canadian playwright, he is self-educated but he has seen much of the people of Canada who have no homes and little beyond life itself. He read a passage from the Ecstasy of Rita Joe in which an Indian man whose child had just died tried to buy Rita Joe just

to have a child. His writing is close to the land and to people trying to live. Mr. Ryga tried to give the general mood of his work and the silent audience was receptive to all his words.

Mr. Ryga also gave examples of the joy and humour of life when he told of an old man who desired that on his death he be cremated, his ashes mixed around the roots of his grape vines and wine made of the grapes. At Christmas all the beautiful girls of the town were to be given a drink of the wine because at his age, that was the only way he could get into them. If a title were to be given to George Ryga's presentation, none better could be found than that of his song, "Things I Remember, Things I have Seen", Mavor Moore said that George Ryga might be Canada's greatest playwright and having heard and seen George Ryga and felt the great feeling of his work, I might agree.



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