



# Entertainment

## Playwright Raymond Storey tells all

interview by Moreen Murray

"I wrote my first play when I was in grade seven. It was a Christmas play, but it got cancelled because I punched out the Virgin Mary in dress rehearsal," confessed playwright Raymond Storey with unabashed glee. A very energetic, almost puckish character, he admits that his first desire in life was to be an actor — from the tender age of a grade one student.

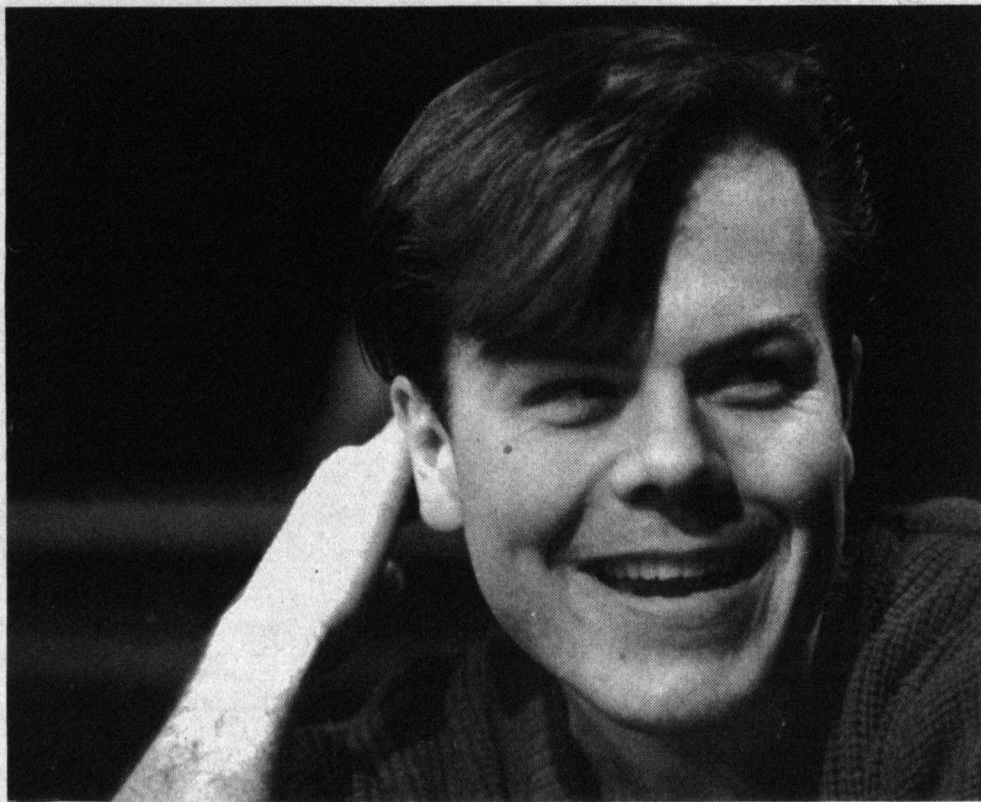
Raymond Storey was born and raised in Orillia, Ontario (the "farm belt" as he describes it), and did not see a play until he was fifteen. However, a determination to act brought him to Toronto and National Theatre School. He made his first professional appearance at age 17, and worked surprisingly regularly. He soon realized that acting could be limited, however, and at the ripe age of 22 found himself in an actor's limbo, "too old for juvenile parts, not tall and conventionally handsome enough for leading men, and not odd enough looking to do character parts." Hence, a resumption of play-writing activities.

An intelligent and articulate man, he has some strong opinions on what theatre is and should be. "There has got to be more to theatre than a good three hour uninterrupted nap," he quips. He remarks that he is annoyed when people at cocktail parties say that classical theatre or "museum theatre", as he likes to call it, is the only 'real' theatre. Raymond Storey's personal preference is for modern or "living" theatre, which has a more direct approach to the audience and more meaning than 300 year old prose. He is quick to add, however, that "you cannot deny your roots if you are going to have any sort of theatre." He pauses and grins: "But I would rather see a bad production of a new play than another bad production of Shakespeare."

Amid the constant scurrying of production people, Raymond Storey relaxed on a set couch and discussed his new play *The Last Bus*, premiering at Theatre Network on February 4.

The play deals a lot with identity and knowing who you are and what you want out of life. At the same time, it's a drama, in some respects a mystery story, and in many respects it's a love story because it talks about the need to be loved and the desperate things people do in order to be loved. It is the story of this person's journey back home and getting in touch with home base; in essence, touching bottom again before you know which way is up.

When asked about where his ideas came from and how long ago this project started, Storey elaborated at length. Basically, how-



"I am an aggressive and ambitious person."

photo Keith Zukowski

ever, he says that the material comes from his own experience: that of a small town boy coming to the big city and in the process choosing to ignore the past in order to make a future. This project first started five years ago.

Raymond Storey is visibly excited when asked about the casting of the play. He says that he sat in on a few of the readings and was pleased with the final results — three of the case members are graduates of the B.F.A. program here at U of A. He feels that their own rural backgrounds further enrich the play and their characterizations. He also feels that the central character, played by Jeff Haslam, parallels a dilemma in Haslam's own life — that of having graduated from university and now embarking on a career in the theatre. Storey adds that these actors are new to Edmonton audiences, but they are a very talented group of individuals.

*The Last Bus*, according to Storey, deals with the human dilemma of loneliness. "As a society we've come through a whole period of the 70's and early 80's where we were told to love yourself and be true to yourself and you don't need anyone else. Frankly, having gone through all of that, I think it's bullshit. We are social creatures — we do need other people, we do need the recognition of our

peers, we do need support. When we are denied those things or deny others those basic things, the consequences can be disastrous.

"The play speaks strongly in favour of tolerance, to look at people not as types or objects and instead to look at individuals as human beings who have emotional feelings and needs. That's an ancient theme, but certainly one that needs to be re-stated. More and more, through the media, we are taught to recognize types. They always behave a certain way, are predictable. I don't personally believe that's true.

"I know as an artist I am frequently pegged as being a fringe member of society, as being someone who has lost contact with reality, and does not, therefore, appreciate basic needs and urges... I resent that incredibly — being stereotyped in a way that dictates a whole pattern of thought and action — because it isn't true and from that source springs this play. It's saying let's stop looking simplistically at people's lives and offering solutions because everyone's life is as complicated as yours."

Raymond Storey enjoys working in Edmonton. He has worked and discussed his work with a circle of Edmonton playwrights. He finds it a supportive place to work in.

Storey has been connected with Theatre Network for over five years. "Theatre Network," he says, "is the only company in Alberta that is exclusively dedicated to the development of new work. I have a very good rapport with Stephen Heatley who is the artistic director, and it is very important in the creative process to be working in a supportive environment where you are not only appreciated, but respected. The care and commitment that go into each production at TN is something that no amount of money can buy. Nothing can replace having a cast, crew, and director, and even administrative staff that are dedicated to producing the best they possibly can.

"So often, in large institutions, people are there because it is a job for them, they are there because they want a secure position and a good salary. This is not true of all large institutions, but unfortunately, it is true of many. As a result, you frequently see uninspired productions that have a lot of money pumped into them. And that is why, at least for a first production, I would prefer to go this route than any other. The intimacy of this particular venue suits this play. That is not to say that this play may not find its home on a larger stage — it's always surprising to learn that. But in its infancy, it's nice to be able to have that sort of security — to work out what is right and wrong with the play without having to layer it with additional burdens of projecting that human honesty to someone who is 500 feet away.

As for acting, Storey is presently working on "those Peter Pan syndrome types, or boy-next-door roles who turn out to be psychopaths." When asked about his long range plans, he says that he prefers acting as well as writing. He can't see himself "in a log cabin by a lake banging out words on a portable typewriter, in a Lowenbrau haze."

"As an artist, I struggle for recognition, for creative expression and to be able to make a reasonable living with dignity. As a human being, I would like to be happy with all of those things and still feel that I had contributed to society in a meaningful way." He pauses and rolls his eyes. "This is starting to sound like one of those questions for the Miss Canada contestants."

"I am an aggressive and ambitious person," Storey concludes. "I would love to be on the cover of People magazine — I don't know if that's my long term goal or not. I don't believe in luck. I do believe in ambition and I do believe in hard work. I feel the harder I work, the better it gets. I hope one day to be satisfied that I am successful. If not, I expect that I will die in the attempt."

## Make sure that you catch *The Last Bus*

**The Last Bus**  
Theatre Network Run ends Feb. 22  
review by Moreen Murray

"It's kind of funny — how you can have something around for years and years and never really look at it," says one of the characters in Raymond Storey's play *The Last Bus*, which premiered at Theatre Network last Thursday.

Robert, the central character in the play, is facing the dilemma of looking at his life — of being at that all-too-familiar state of where your life is and what you had hoped it would be. Perhaps most important is accepting where you came from — this is a journey Robert must make when he is called back to his home town to attend the funeral of his childhood soulmate, Marty. Once home, he views the town with certain contempt — the point of view of an urbanized man. His mother, Eileen, is a gossiping and often judgemental woman, a naive soul who believes everything she reads in the National Enquirer. Gary is Robert's brother, the unem-

ployed "bum", who lives his life through Star Trek and video games. Then there is Blair, the deceased friend's girlfriend — a rough-edged, tough-talking woman from the "wrong side of the tracks." An underlying mystery in the play is the question: Did Marty have an accident or did he commit suicide? If so, why?

Jeff Haslam as Robert delivers a forceful and believable performance as a frustrated young high school teacher who realizes he hasn't fulfilled his dream of becoming a pop star. Haslam shows great control in his actions: he is passionate, angry, and cynical at the drop of a hat, without being overbearing or histrionic. His range demonstrates that he can also be poignant and understated at times, as he recalls his childhood first encounter with Marty. He is effective as the young man who is coming to grips not only with his feelings about his own life and future, but also the feelings he had for Marty.

The supporting characters are also convincing. Ian Ferguson as Gary conveys the

right amount of boorishness and also awkwardness as the son who doesn't quite live up to everyone's expectations. He is in character, still an adolescent who lives in a fantasy world and, as the play progresses, he releases an underlying hostility with good effect. Judy Mahbey, as Eileen, is simply wonderful — she seemingly has had her telephone receiver welded to her ear. She can deliver a million rapid fire opinions on the townsfolk and not stop for breath. Her fine comic touch and tenderness bring relief to an otherwise very serious play.

Special kudos should be given to Jane Spidell as Blair, the 'bad girl.' She paints Blair as a tough survivor who doesn't need anyone, and yet her cynical bitterness is a cover for someone who is dealing with her own demons. Her confrontation with Haslam about Marty's death is particularly good.

Storey's earthy dialogue works well in this exploration of identity, and his characters are composites rather than stereotypes — they have several sides to their personality, some

of which are surprising. The set for the play is effective minimal use of space — with a seemingly floating broken highway in the background and the foreground divided into Blair's seedy living-room and Eileen's 1950's style kitchen. Background music is a la Springsteen is a nice and appropriate touch.

Storey brings his point across very effectively, again and again. The play is about relationships — about communicating and about not making judgements about people. It is also, most importantly, about who we are and needing to be accepted for that — needing to be loved — and having a support system. Robert discovers all these things and observes at the play's end, "Sometimes you need to touch bottom before you know which way is up."

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