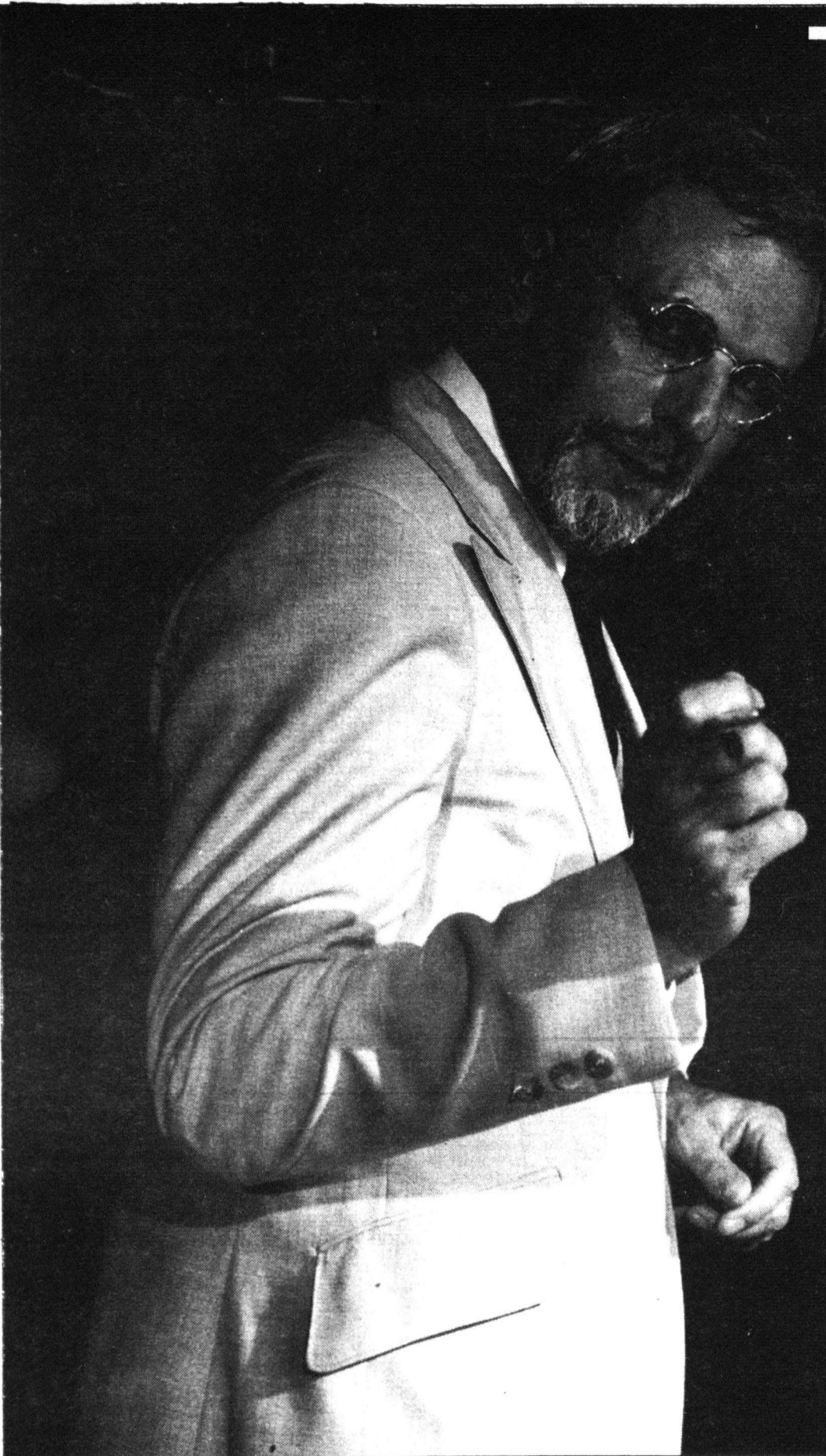


Theatre in action



photos by Ron Checora

Fascinating fascism: Jim Robertshaw in *Doppelganger*

The Fringe: the good, the bad, the ugly

by Suzette C. Chan

There are no adjectives left to describe the success of the Fringe Festival. Spectacular, festive, amazing, incredible, even remarkable, even miraculous — they've all undergone several hackneyed deaths over at Edmonton's daily papers, radio and TV commentaries and Canada's national newscasts. It's time to discuss the Fringe with adverbs.

The Fringe Festival is theatre in action, while the Citadel, handy local symbol of black-tie, stuffed shirt "theatah" is theatre on display. The difference is in the expectation.

When Michael Burrell staged *Hess* to an after-Fringe crowd last year, he found he was playing to a different set of expectations.

"The audience differed in this simple thing: they were more polite, more formal," he told me. "They were more dressed for it than at the Fringe, more respectful. There wasn't that usual first five or ten minutes of doubt, when you have to convince the audience."

This year, hundreds more Edmontonians will flock, all goosed up, the see reprise of the biggest Fringe '85 hits at venues around the city, but it just won't be the same. The plays will be there but the atmosphere won't. There won't be anyone selling t-shirts or photographs on the street, no contests for attention between street performers and the guitar-and-spatula band ensconced in the Fluffie's stand, no late scratches and mysterious adds to the master schedule. Gone, too, will be the essence of this year's festival, the infamous queues, snaking round all corners of Old Strathcona, from the renovated Yardbird Suite to the rejuvenated Old

Post Office.

Fringe guru Brian Paisley was happy with the demonstrated mass appeal of an event which is not only a grassroots event (as opposed to the city-council manufactured Klondike Days) but which is his.

"I knew it was going to double after the first weekend," said Paisley. Fringe attendance has doubled yearly since its inception in 1982. Last year, 31,000 tickets were sold. After two days of Fringe '85, 15,000 seats had been filled. To accommodate for the flood of Fringees, Paisley and his crew had to improvise new rules for ticket sales, starting with a two-ticket per person limit, ending with a poker-chip reservation scheme. It all nearly worked but these primitive albeit exciting methods were insufficient for nine days and 65,000 tickets' worth of full house activity.

"People decided to come earlier this year," Paisley hypothesized. "They aren't waiting for the reviews... in that way, the critic becomes less important."

Less important but not forgotten. This year, the difference between good plays that were reviewed in the mass media and the ones that weren't was the number of people turned away. *Life After Hockey* attracted hour-long line-ups before local scribes deemed it wonderful. Afterward, it was sold out three hours before curtain.

But shows like *Morocco* and *Pre-meditated Sister* succeeded without and despite the critics. *Morocco* was not reviewed until near the end of its nine-day run but still turned away hordes of Fringees in its first days. *Pre-meditated Sister* was proclaimed dog of the festival by both dailies but sold out

its last two performances.

The power of word of mouth. That's what fuels the Fringe phenomenon.

"The one-hit syndrome is gone," announced Paisley. "This year everyone has a favorite. Michael Burrell sold almost as many tickets for *Burrell on the Bard* as he did for *Hess* last year but somehow it was overshadowed."

Casting some of the large shadows were

many local hits, a sign to Edmonton's professional theatres that audiences are prepared for homegrown material, performers, and perspectives.

This all brings us to what makes a Fringe most: the shows. All 140 of them, the good, the bad, and the ugly. How many did you see?

Local deadpan artist Stewart Lemoine slapped together *My Miami Melody* in a month. The two-hour musical had 'em lined up four hours before curtain. The crowds were not disappointed by the delightful day-in-the-life story of a monied matriarch who runs a newspaper by day and a nightclub at night — in the same building. Staff members double as, for example, advice columnist and Vegetable Queen. Set in Florida, 1957, the doe-eyed acting owed more to Doris Day, Hayley Mills and Dean Jones than to Rob Lowe, Judd Nelson and Molly Ringwald. All this sharp, smart script needed was a second draft. The tunes were catchy but the audience was left wondering whatever happened to Frances' first husband. Or is that game for next year's annual Lemoine hit?

My Miami Melody is held over at the Horizon Stage.

Morocco and *Crime: The Stuff Dreams are Made of* are slick parodies of *Casablanca*, *The Big Sleep*, *The Maltese Falcon*, ad nauseum. *Morocco* is a local big-budget production featuring incidental stage meanderings interspersed with technically smooth video bits disguised as film.

Crime, from Winnipeg, was even less interesting. A high (Dash Hammet) styled trio read a script from behind a screen in sync with black and white film. It was as dull as witnessing audio-dub for Scooby-doo cartoons but like *Morocco*, it probably started out as a neat idea.

Play: *Life After Hockey*: Writer/player: Ken Brown. Age: over thirty. Teams played for: Team Canada, Montreal Canadiens, Strathcona Metaphysicals. Goals: greatness. Assists: in making the Fringe a transcendental experience. Points For: accurate perception of Canadian psyche, witty scripting, universal appeal of an underdog. Points Against: three-hour queues for *Hockey* tickets. (Don't worry fans! More games scheduled at Horizon and Nexus!)

Edmonton's Jim Robertshaw was inspired by Burrell's *Hess* to write *Doppelganger*. Originally a spoof *Hess* Robertshaw winds up paying homage to the play, commenting on the lure of Naziism and insulting tourists who "do" Europe in a month. This fascinating highlight of the festival is schedule for only one performance at the Son of Fringe. See *Doppelganger* above all else.

This year, Michael Burrell brought a one-person Shakespeare show to the Fringe and found company. Fellow Briton Anna Barry condensed *Twelfth Night* into a one hour long show for children called *Youth's the Stuff*. However, parents got more of a kick out of her portrayals of Viola, Feste, Sebastian and others. Held over at Horizon Stage.

Burrell on the Bard and Russ Roberts' *Wise Enough to Play the Fool* were discussions on Bill S.'s work illustrated by performances of certain characters. The actors approach the work differently. Burrell as Richard II, and Malvolio and Lear was polished although the tone of his lecture did not command respect for the playwright as much as demand God-

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Batman on a Dime's Robin (Kirk Miles) looks for direction in his life.