

M.E. Productions surfaces . . .

Survivors: Coping with the bomb

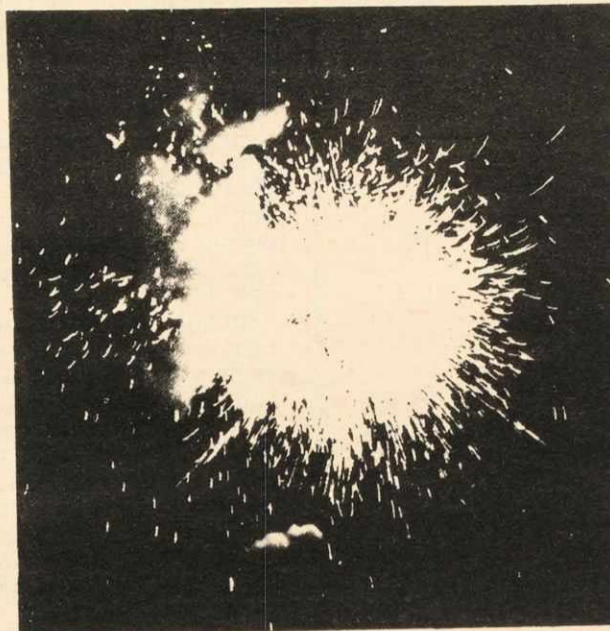
by Glenn Walton

It has been said that there are more theatre groups per capita in Nova Scotia than any place else on earth; whether or not this is strictly true, it is a truism that there is a large subculture of artists and writers, musicians and craftspeople in Halifax, presumably waiting for a Renaissance, or moving off in disgust to Toronto. There have been several recent attempts to exploit this talent, and now, after the unfortunate demise of **Theatre 1707** and **Stages**, there is a new theatre group in Halifax. It is called **M.E. Productions**, and their first production is a work by local poet, writer and free-spirit-about-town Jim MacSwain, entitled **Survivors**. Produced at the new Nova Scotia Archives on University Avenue, the play is a happy success for all concerned.

Survivors is a two-person play. Jay, a rather eccentric survivor of a nuclear war, is living in a cabin somewhere by a river or seacoast (presumably in Nova Scotia). He is discovered by Kay, a feisty former chicken farmer turned recruiting scout for a new colony that is sowing and growing down the coast. Kay implores Jay to return to what she considers civilization, but he, sick of human folly, will have none of it. Convinced that he is dying, Jay professes to prefer a fanciful isolation contemplating the masks of people he knew, which he has hung on the walls of the cabin. He is convinced that joy does not exist. "But there is joy," Kay insists. **Survivors** covers Kay and Jay's confrontation, which develops from gunpoint confrontation to domestic cooperation to love, of

sorts. When the time comes for Jay to decide whether to stay or leave, we are not given a typical Happy Ending. MacSwain's vision is not quite so optimistic. Instead, Kay leaves without Jay, but promises to visit him. We know Jay will look forward to seeing her again, but he is still unable to participate in the cycle of civilization that is starting up again, carrying the seeds of its own demise.

In the role of Jay is Simon Skey, whom I have only seen as Koko in, of all things, that turkey of Victorian high camp, Gilbert and Sullivan's **The Mikado**. As Koko, Skey was delightful; his role in **Survivors** of a jaded bisexual leftover from the chaos of human constructions could not have been different, but he handles the role equally well. His clipped British accent is strangely just right for Jay, because he, despite all of his blustering about truth and nature and aesticism, is a bit of a snob. Skey brings a quirkiness to Jay that is entirely believable, and handles the poetic language of his siloquies as if they were written for him. As Kay, Angela Jollette plays what was originally a man's role, and represents the male principle. Kay is the recruiter and hunter, concerned about the tribe's reproduction and expansion, a sort of Calamity Jane getting her consciousness raised. Again, Jollette is fine for the role, being big, blustering and incidentally in possession of a wonderful Nova Scotian accent, despite her attempts at (I presume) hillbilly jahoo speech. Her parody of Jay's Elizabethan pretensions is a delight. Both actors tended to rush their



lines, particularly in key scenes where they describe the deaths of former loved ones, but the chemistry essential to a two-person play was always present.

Much of the credit for **Survivors'** success is due to the direction of Rosemarie Gilbert, who has taken a difficult text and emphasized the humour of it and its situations. Where MacSwain's writing tends to darkness, morbidity or obscurity, Gilbert counterpoints it with light little flourishes of her director's imagination, such as dressing Jay in tails and Kay in her Calamity Jane getup, or having them sing **Aint' We Got Fun?** as they bed down. These fanciful juxtapositions work; and seem instinctively right in a post Holocaust world, but then madness has always hovered in the background of MacSwain's writings, like the dragons that fill

his room and his imagination. Most pleasing of all in the production is the writing. This is to date MacSwain's best work. **Survivors** is less obscure than much of his poetry, more dramatically unified than **The Bearded Lady's Reflection** and less unremittingly pessi-

mistic than **Depression**. His gift is poetic, and in full force here. Jay, talking of his lover William, who walked into the contaminated night and died, laments:

His skin was ribbon satin
flushed
His back a boney keel
His eye a bird out on a limb
That danced a capricious
reel

And William went to the
other side
Wearing the grey day morn
He turned the last tree root
by
The whole world was torn....

In addition to his producing gems such as this, it is pleasing to see MacSwain drawing together the other elements of drama into his work. Art, even tragedy, has the effect of rejuvenating the spirit, and that is exactly what **Survivors** succeeds in doing. It is to be hoped that MacSwain will keep writing, and that **Survivors** will be seen again soon.

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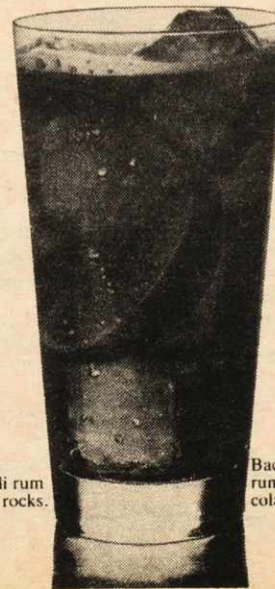
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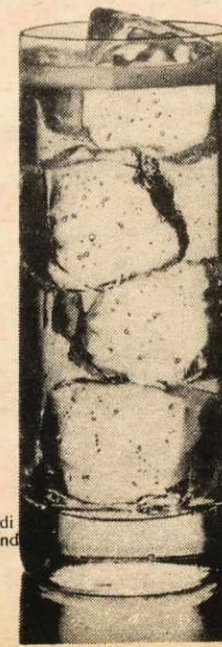
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