

Nexus' Puppet Master is hackneyed

The Puppet Master
Nexus Theatre
March 6 - March 30

review by Gilbert Bouchard

The Nexus Theatre has sacrificed the sincerity and artistic edge it has developed all season in favour of a slick and contrived play: Ben McLean's *The Puppet Master*.

The play has everything: money, illicit sex, fraud, murder, and the threat of violence. What the play doesn't have is consistent development.

The Puppet Master is about Peter, a TV puppeteer mentally torturing his wife Shona and her lover, Gerry Darling, who have just defrauded Gerry's bank out of 100 grand. Well, I think that was the story. The play, in an attempt to give the illusion of being the perfect murder mystery, has dramatic flip-flops and plot turnabouts every five minutes. The final effect is that there is no distinct climax and no sustaining of suspense. Any time tension is built, the script flip-flops the plot again. To be honest, I lost interest in the characters and the story after a while and just sat back to wait for the reversals.

Another casualty of the script were the characters. It seems so much effort went into

the script and all the clever plot twists that the author had to save time—so he stole all his characters from some soap opera.

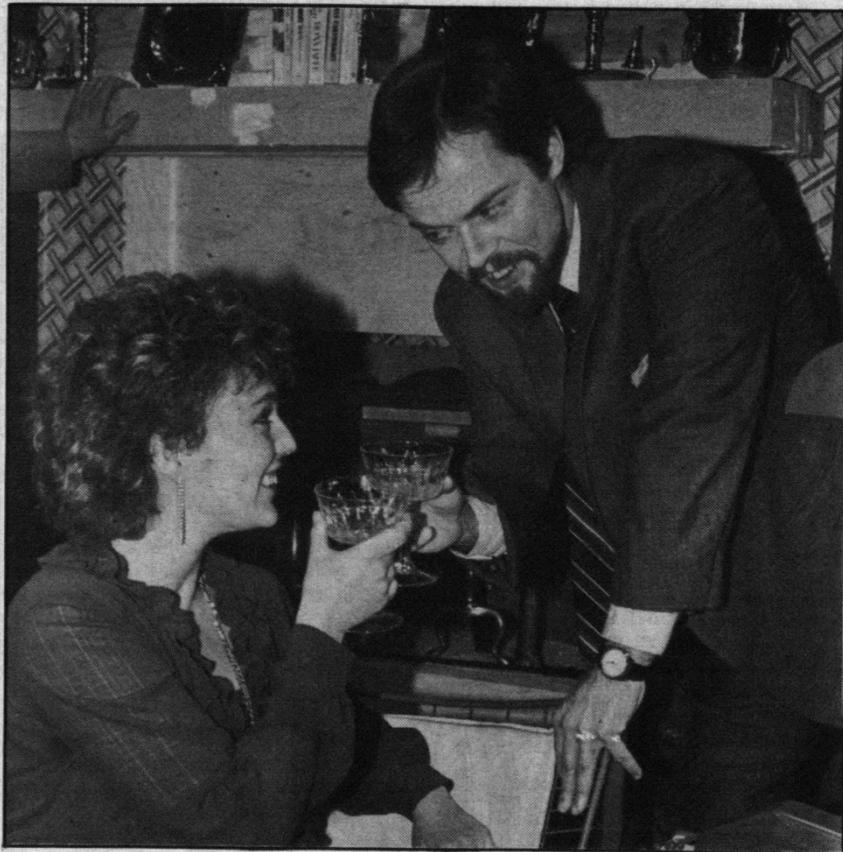
The one-dimensional characterization is aggravated by bad acting. Richard Patterson (as the evil puppet master) has a good voice and a commanding presence, but came across like he was reading all his lines. I've seen better performances in workshops. I also expected more from Murray McCune (who plays Gerry) after his memorable performance in *Gimmie That Prime Time Religion*, but in this play he faked a deep macho voice and over-reacted. Rhonda Trodd (the wife of the puppet master) comes across like a second-class vixen rather than a tempting seductress.

The Nexus did a fine job of working within their tiny space in the depths of MacCauley Plaza. It has an attractive set that is functional, sustaining the illusion of Darling's suburban house. The Nexus also pulled off a more than adequate job technically even though the music was a bit too loud and overpowering.

Unfortunately sets and loud music cannot make up for the lack of a script and good acting. Forget the *The Puppet Master*. Spend your lunch hour in the Edmonton Art Gallery instead.



The cast of *The Puppet Master* (from left to right): Rhonda Trodd, Richard Patterson, Murray McCune.



The Puppet Master: money, illicit sex, fraud and murder.

Interview: Richard Patterson

interview by Dean Bennett and Gilbert Bouchard

Richard Patterson, the Publicity and Box Office Manager of the Nexus Theatre, is currently on hiatus from his desk duties to play the role of Sgt. Fetters in the theatre's current production of *The Puppet Master*.

After last Friday's lunchtime performance Patterson sat among the empty Nexus seats and granted the *Gateway* this interview.

Gateway: Can you talk a little bit about your professional background and training.

Patterson: I spent four years at Ryerson (College in Toronto) in their theatre department. I studied acting. I've been out professionally for nine years now.

I came to the Nexus about two years ago. I started as assistant publicist and stage manager.

Gateway: What feelings do you have about *The Puppet Master* and how did you approach the role of Sgt. Fetters?

Patterson: *The Puppet Master* has a two and a half week rehearsal period. The show had only been done once before (Solar Stage in Toronto). We spent most of the rehearsal

period just figuring out the motives of each of the characters. We had to be exact as possible. When a character forces a plot reversal the audience must know right away why he or she is doing it.

The show changed about ten different ways before we settled on the final product. Opening night was quite tough. Two days into the run we started to develop. A little bit more of the characters were coming out.

Gateway: How have government funding cutbacks hurt the Nexus Theatre? Could the very future of the theatre be affected?

Patterson: We are in a situation now that if things don't improve we're gone. We're only about ninety per cent sure that we can finish this season. People must be made to realize how important theatre is to our culture. If the financial problems continue, people will begin leaving the profession—it just won't be profitable. The public won't pay money for second rate or mediocre performances. They'll go elsewhere. If the people want it they're going to have to fight for it. It's come to that.

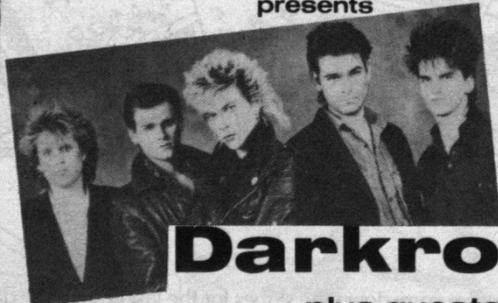
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