

## 'Lots of cheap alcohol'

## York prof gives piano improvisations at Stong

By STUART SHEPHERD

Thursday afternoon an overflow crowd of new music devotees congregated in the Stong SCR to help christen its new licenced incarnation as Sylvester's Pub by means of a combination avant-garde "cocktail party" and improvisation concert. Lots of cheap alcohol, the presence of music department notables, a lot of people who were friends of a lot of the other people, but above all to York's residential keyboard and improvisation wizard, all helped transform the occasion into a real event.

Shortly after four o'clock pianist Casey Sokol entered the room and laid down in the middle of the floor; his friend, dancer Terrill Maguire, reached with both hands inside a

grand piano. The audience ceased talking because they thought something was going to happen and the room became silent. Though not really silent for soon over the threshold level of the wind outside, nylon ski jacket noises, breathing, and quiet belches, there appeared tiny sounds from inside the piano where minimal finger movements produced a song of far off harps. After a prolonged miniature crescendo, dancer and pianist traded places. By that point the audience found its senses had become hyper alert.

Sokol then began to work his way ever so smoothly out of the insides of the piano maintaining such control that the transition was like a fast change in humidity. Maguire's activities grew in minimalist

dialectic with those of the piano, the twitches and jerks of a wakening marionette, rising higher and higher from the floor. Activity clearly and inevitably reached a maximum a piece, a concert and a new place for music had been brought into being. The piece then subsided, concluding with the sound of far off harps again.

The feedback from the audience was by this point intense. Sokol's smile flew about the room like a helium inflated cheshire cat. After a few words of thanks and introduction, he went back at it again, this time assisted by drummer Larry Dubin.

The improvisation began with a

quite extraordinary piano solo, again making use of a process of smooth transition, this time between the tapping sounds of barely pressed keys and notes which fully called upon the inside workings of the piano. The energy of audience and performer fed upon one another. Sokol became a snowball of arpeggios, clusters, dissonant chords, trills, and ornaments, it picking up drummer Larry Dubin halfway down the hill. Suddenly, the snowball exploded, leaving the audience devastated. After a series of short chords as we brushed off the snow, we found ourselves in a jazzier space, then finally in an elevated atmosphere of rich

chords.

After a brief intermission, Sokol concluded the concert in a somewhat similar space, a free and bittersweet solo performance of Miles Davis' "Blue and Green", masterfully embellished with jazz ornaments, chorales, and whatever made us feel warm and mellow. A very nice ending.

As an added bonus, Sokol invited members of the York Improvisation Agreement, a group he coaches, to improvise with him as a foretaste of the concert they are to give today, same time and location. If the sample was at all reliable, this should also be a concert you shouldn't fail to see.

## Entertainment conversation: Rebirth of Tarragon theatre

The Tarragon Theatre at 30 Bridgeman St. officially reopened its doors to the public the evening of October 9, not only to present *Artichoke*, its first play of the season, but to reveal a new Tarragon.

In order to get greater insight into the new Tarragon, Bob Pomerantz spoke with Greg Leech, head of public relations at the theatre.

**Excalibur:** Besides the fact that one no longer gets a sore ass when watching a play at Tarragon, what else has been done to make the old Tarragon the new Tarragon?

**Leech:** Firstly, as you say, we replaced the old wooden chairs with nicer, more comfortable ones. But that's not all. We dug out the stage area to lower it as well as widen it, not only to allow for greater versatility of movement but to soften the lighting. The greater distance from the lights makes possible a stage that is properly lit without harsh overtones. The audience now sits in an area which is built up over a series of ascending risers allowing greater sightline to the players. Also there are fifteen to twenty new seats. The whole works is carpeted. We put in a new lighting board and a new ventilation system. We've never really had any before. Oh, and the lobby is a lot nicer too.

**Excalibur:** In the past the Tarragon theatre has focused on presenting Canadian plays and material, nurturing Canadian talent. Also, it sponsors a writers-in-residence program to develop new material. On the list of this seasons plays, why do I see two non-Canadian plays listed?

**Leech:** We still want to develop new Canadian scripts - we are committed to new scripts, but we are also interested in developing Canadian playwrights. In adapting European plays for the Canadian stage, our Canadian writers will apply a Canadian sensibility to the older plays. The audience will be better able to identify with the classics when viewed through the eyes of a Canadian. Also, we want to test our writers, squeeze them to make them more versatile.

**Excalibur:** Have any Canadian plays or playwrights presented through the Tarragon achieved international fame? I know that *Hossana*, by Tremblay played on Broadway for three weeks.

**Leech:** Some of our plays have achieved national and even international acclaim. However, once the play leaves here, it's really out of our hands, belonging to the playwright. As far as working tour companies through Tarragon, I know that *Hossana* for instance was a tremendous physical strain. Our aim is to develop plays and we really haven't got the facilities for many tours at this point.

**Excalibur:** Bill Glassco, artistic director of Tarragon, stated that the audience must come first. What does this mean in terms of the type of plays chosen - what for example if everybody wanted to see pornography or cowboys plays?

**Leech:** Pleasing the audience does not affect our choice of works. Besides, remember there is not that great a pool of Canadian plays to choose from. Increasing that number is our purpose. What we do is, choose the plays and then do our utmost to make them enjoyable for the audience. The renovation program allows for greater technical prowess and greater comfort - all this is for the audience.

**Excalibur:** Would Tarragon ever consider running a program to check out talent at Canadian universities? There seems to be a lot of talent there.

**Leech:** We just don't have the time right now to search around for talent. We will accept any and all scripts brought to us and they will be thoughtfully read. However, we can't extend ourselves too much as we are still in the process of getting organized - the writers program is still a main focus and we are gradually learning our purpose. We will experiment with new programs to get new material but we can't

take too many chances, not enough time. We help writers and try to provide for fairly stable productions.

**Excalibur:** Has Tarragon ever had a problem with censorship of material, either in terms of selection or content?

**Leech:** No. However, this season we're doing *Lulu*, the first play written which explores modern sexuality. It examines sexual dynamics and deals with women who are very open about sex. Even though it was written at the turn of the century it is still daring by today's standards, exploring issues like masturbation, for instance. Thus, *Lulu* will be the true test for freedom of presentation and will determine if there is a problem with the censors.

**Excalibur:** You've done shows like *Hossana* and *Bonjour La Bonjour*, which deal with such issues as homosexuality and incest. Does there seem to be public acceptance of such controversial and touchy subjects?

**Leech:** The primary goal of these plays was not to deal with the gay scene or incest but to explore relationships between people. The fact that there existed unusual sexual circumstances make the stories more dramatic. The aim was to explore honesty in relationships. As far as public acceptance, I know that our public accepted both plays - both were very popular and *Hossana* ran for seven weeks at 111 per cent attendance.

**Excalibur:** Is there a particular Canadian experience as opposed to American or British - is there such a thing as Canadian writing?

**Leech:** Canadians have distinct sensibilities which are not the same as in any other country. It isn't easy to name a universal characteristic, as Canada is diverse and our sensibilities have local variations. Canadian playwrights usually have no intent to crystalize the Canadian character - they just want to write well. Unique Canadian characteristic? I think the way people in Canada relate to each other is unique. There are universal things but nothing exclusively Canadian. I guess if Canadians are at all unique, this will be reflected in our writing.

**Excalibur:** Can you give me some figures on who attends the Tarragon and if lately, more people seem to be going to "alternate" theatres?

**Leech:** I can speak only for Tarragon. Attendance still depends primarily on what the production is like, the better one will attract more people. I would say that, whereas in the late sixties there was more of a particular underground theatre scene, today more people are coming who go to the established places. Our greater range of plays will attract more and more of an audience. Also, as we develop a reputation for presenting competent productions, we will attract more viewers. Tarragon has always been in an awkward position in terms of being labeled establishment or experimental. But I find that for the last few years we get every type of person coming here.

**Excalibur:** Do you find that the average student at York would spend a Saturday evening with Tarragon rather than see a film, go drinking, dancing...

**Leech:** Yes. As a matter of fact we always get a strong turnout from York. However, many students attend when they can enjoy the lower rates. Except for Saturday and Friday night it's three dollars for students and on Sundays it's pay-what-you-can.

**Excalibur:** Is there any reason why Tarragon opened its season with *Artichoke*?

**Leech:** It's a good play, we wanted to do it - it has never been done in Canada before. It played in New Haven but we'd like to help Joanna Glass build up an audience at home. Also, it was ready to do for our opening.

**Excalibur:** What is the main idea behind *Artichoke*?  
**Leech:** The play deals with how one can come to terms with life.



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