

Directing: an exercise in diplomacy

by Gary Dhillon

"Meet me... 2:00 p.m. outside the Java Jive in Sub," I told Karen Redford. But I forgot to ask her what she looked like. So I was left with the insufferable task of carefully watching every woman that walked by the Java Jive shortly before two.

What does Karen Redford, the successful, young director of the up and coming play *The Dining Room*, look like?

Unfortunately, I did not even have a vague stereotype to rely on, so I made a point of exaggeratedly looking at the clock. I hoped Redford would notice and approach me. I did not want to risk approaching the wrong woman like a pick-up artist with the line, "Hi, I'm doing an interview for the *Gateway*."

It worked though. She noticed me. She was wearing a long black coat, she had reddish hair and she greeted me with a friendly smile.

I asked a little about her background and she told me she had taken a degree in theatre history at the U of A. I had heard she spent some time in Paris and I wondered why she had come back.

"I spent a year in Paris studying theatre." And the reason for coming back: "It was financial." Of course! But there was more. "In Paris I was concentrating on one thing, theatre, but in Edmonton I'm involved in so many different things."

Dining Room, the latest play Redford is directing, is described as "an allegory for the decline of society in the northeastern United States." That was a vague description, so Redford elaborated. "A.R. Gurney, the playwright, is an English professor at MIT and in his summers he writes plays. He feels his New England WASP background did not prepare him for life and the plays are a sort of exorcism. An ongoing exorcism which has now led to his most gently humorous play yet, *The Dining Room*."

Redford believes it is the duty of the director to "present the playwright's version of the play." It is this duty which forces her to look at the real problems in Gurney's society. She says one of these problems is "the difficulty in expressing emotions." For example,

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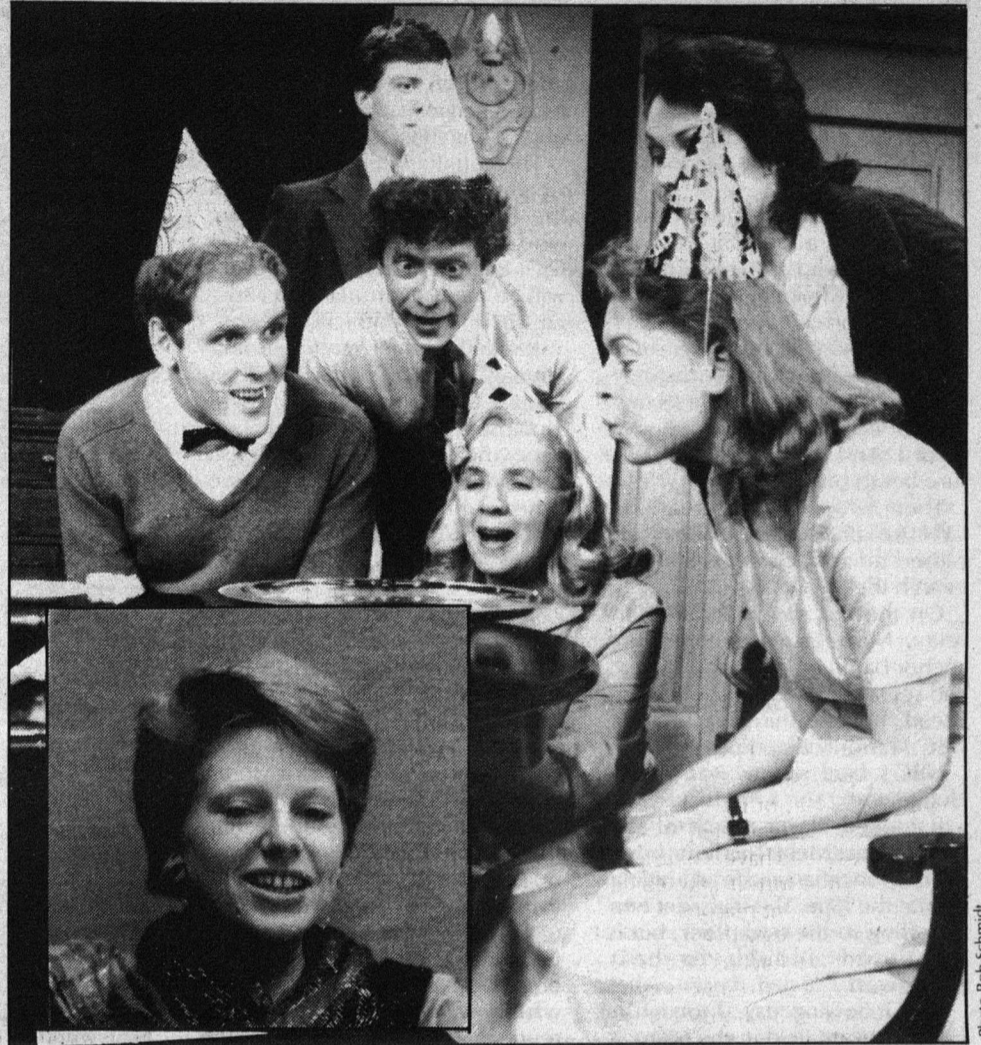
"a husband probably might never say 'I love you' to his wife."

Redford does not have this problem. She laughs easily and shifts restlessly in her chair. Occasionally she drapes her legs over the arms of the chair and then shifts them back again. When asked about her directing, a question obviously close to her heart, she becomes animated.

"When I first started out as a director, I was very insecure and I was very easily manipulated and influenced by everybody around me. But as you go on you get more confidence. The thing that I've found is that actors are scared out of their minds and they respond to it in different ways. What they want is to have confidence in their directors. At the same time, they want to know the director has enough give and take to take a suggestion without being personally affronted. If they have confidence in their director, they're a lot happier. If they're not happy, they tend to mutiny."

Dining Room is a series of vignettes where six actors play the 57 different roles; a fact which adds complications to Redford's job. "Having the overall idea of what is happening is more important at the end of the play than at the beginning. The actors are getting more and more specific in their roles. And the director has to think — how does this relate to the whole theme of the play. And with this play (*The Dining Room*), it's even more difficult because each scene is so fragmented."

These reservations may be true, but with Redford's self-described diplomacy and readily apparent enthusiasm, the direction of *The Dining Room* appears to be in professional hands.



Scene from the Dining Room (inset) Director Karen Redford

Photo: Rob Schmitt

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