

# ARTS

## Studio Theatre—still crazy after all these years

by Karen Redford

The idea of drama and universities being connected may not seem so strange and wonderful to us now. Most of the universities in Canada and the United States have drama departments, and many of the bright young actors that we see on the stage and screen have graduated from such academic institutions as Julliard and Brandeis; but in 1947 when the University of Alberta created a drama division in its fine arts department to offer evening classes in acting and general theatre craft, the idea was not only new - it was revolutionary. Perhaps in the west, among people not far removed from their adventurous frontier heritage, and far from the stuffy academic traditions of older universities, new directions were more possible.

There had been a Drama Society on campus since 1914 which had given the students and faculty of the U of A a chance to put on plays, but with the start of actual classes in theatrical techniques, a more permanent theatre space was needed. The university gave the new group the Quonset Huts to use for their productions. In August of 1947 the students presented *The Trojan Women* in Hut A.

In 1948 the division tossed around several ideas for a name for the new theatre, including *Drama Studio*, *Laboratory Theatre*, and *Experimental Theatre*, among others, before deciding upon *Studio Theatre*. In the fall of 1949 they

presented Pirandello's *Henry IV*, but it was not until the following year that *Studio Theatre* was officially inaugurated and opened with *School for Wives* by Moliere.

Initially the drama division offered programs through the Extension department, as a formalization of the extracurricular participation in drama already existing among the student body. Very early on, however, the university realized that among some students there was a more intense interest in drama than simply as a hobby, and so in 1955 a B.A. program majoring in drama was instituted. The thrust of the drama division's role remained training people to take an active and able part in amateur theatrical activities in the community once they finished university.

In 1947 the deteriorating condition of the Quonset Huts finally became untenable and they were torn down, leaving the drama division temporarily homeless. For a year they tried unsuccessfully to share living quarters with the music department in Convocation Hall, and for a while it seemed as if theatre at the U of A might disappear altogether. Finally, the University found them a space in the Old Education Building, which became Corbett Hall in 1967. The department moved into the new Fine Arts Building in 1972, but *Studio Theatre* has remained in the auditorium at Corbett Hall ever since.

The department continued to grow, so that in 1968 it was the largest drama



photo Bill Inglee

Inset: *Studio Theatre's* latest production, *Marat/Sade*. The theatre is now housed in Corbett Hall (large photo).

department in the country. By this time, theatre in Edmonton itself had begun to develop. *The Citadel* opened in 1965, and *Walterdale Theatre* continued to expand its season. With the reasoning that the university trained students for such technical jobs as medicine and engineering, the drama department in 1964 began professional theatre training programs for actors, directors, and designers, and in 1968 added graduate programs in design, directing, and playwriting. *Studio Theatre* remained a workshop for these students to try out and perfect the theatrical techniques they had learned, but it also became a showcase for the accumulated work and training of the four to two years that the students spent in their respective programs. The theatre continued to draw from the faculty, student body and community for participation in its productions, but its focus became much more on these graduates of the department's professional programs.

Because the focus of *Studio Theatre* has always been on the training of its students, it has provided a great variety of productions for the enjoyment of the people of Edmonton. Each season has tried to include as broad a spectrum of styles and periods as possible. Besides this, it has felt a great responsibility to encourage and foster new Canadian playwrights and different and exciting approaches to theatre. From its world premiere of *At My Heart's Core* by Robertson Davies in 1951 to its presentation

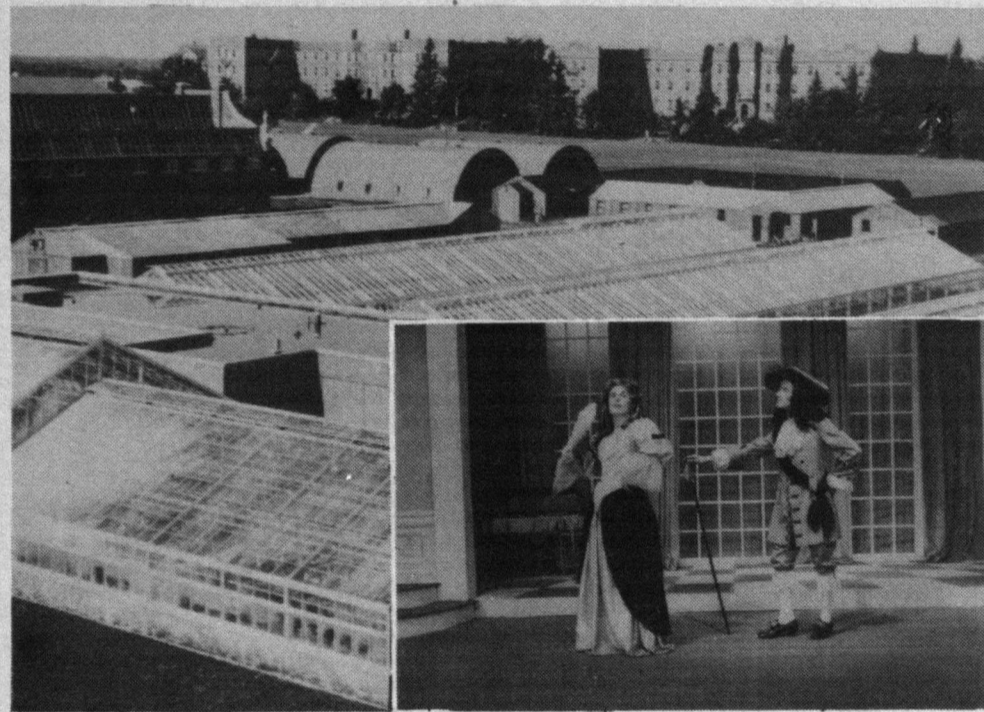
of Paul Gross' *The Deer and Antelope Play* this year, *Studio Theatre* has followed its mandate of providing a place not only for young actors and directors, but young playwrights, as well, to exercise their training. In 1961-62 the department organized *Interface*, a playwriting workshop, to foster and encourage new playwrights.

From 1946 when a group of students called the *Provincial Players* took their productions on a tour of Alberta, the university has taken part in touring plays, and in 1962 it began *Torches Theatre*, a summer open-air theatre that took place in the Courtyard at Corbett Hall, and played to enthusiastic audiences for many summers.

For many years *Studio Theatre* provided the only consistent presentation of theatre that could be had in Edmonton, and it continues to provide some of the best and most exciting theatre to be seen in our city. Special notice should be given to Robert Orchard, Elizabeth Sterling Haynes, and Gordon Peacock for their participation in the beginnings of *Studio Theatre* and their ongoing nurturing of theatre on the campus of the U of A.

The drama department is making available a brochure on *Studio Theatre* that covers the history of that institution much more extensively.

Thanks to Bill Tepper for his assistance in researching this article.



Inset: Last play of the 1955 season, at which time *Studio Theatre* played in the Quonset Huts (seen behind the greenhouses in large photo).

## Ghandi: Passive resistance, active enjoyment

by Zane Harker

Under Sir Richard Attenborough's tenacious direction, *Gandhi* may well prove to be the film of the year. This may be a rash prediction, but those who filled the theatre Monday night for a special screening seemed to be in agreement. The fact that such a mammoth project as *Gandhi* ever made it to the screen is a monument to Attenborough. That Ben Kingsley could equal the feat with such a monumental performance combines for what the New York Film Critics agree is the best picture and actor of the year.

The horrendous task of making this film is a story unto itself; a hardcover in fact, written by Attenborough, it describes what is probably the most complex production ever. Any film with over 150 speaking parts and approximately one million extras is bound to be a tad difficult. The most spectacular and complicated scene, the funeral march, involves approximately 300,000 people.

All of this sounds impressive, but Cecil B. DeMille has proven over and over that big can be bad. Thankfully, Attenborough never lingers on any scene and keeps a steady flow throughout. This comes from the problem of fitting Gandhi's life into the space of three hours: as a result, every frame of film is a vital one. Another benefit of this skillful cutting is that for all of its three hours, *Gandhi* is never boring, not once.

However, the biggest reason for keeping the audience riveted to the screen is the mesmerizing performance of Ben Kingsley. Born as Krishna Bhanji, Kingsley not only has the features for the part, but the ability as well. He is a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, no less. Said Attenborough of Kingsley, "He was a miracle, he burst out of the screen with credibility and magnetism." This perfectly describes the

incredible presence that he has. Kingsley turns in a powerhouse performance through subtlety, just as Gandhi himself did.

The story carefully traces 56 years of Gandhi's life until the age of 79 when felled by an assassin's bullet. The film is meticulously shot on location. Most scenes are completely authentic, from the street slums to the palaces to the sacred Ganges. Gandhi's character is carefully developed from the arrogant young lawyer who

demands to be allowed the sidewalks as a British subject, to the "Mahatma" (Great Soul) who advocates "non-violent, non-cooperation" against the Empire. This is not just a case of Brit-bashing, but rather a story of a man with no official position who led a people of 700 million to independence. Attenborough takes great care not to portray Gandhi as a god, his fallibilities are quite apparent and only serve to highlight what Gandhi really was, a great man.

The rest of the cast is just as impressive, those who stood out especially were Roshan Seath as Pandit Nehru, and Rohini Hattangady as Gandhi's wife. While Candice Bergen and Martin Sheen also perform

admirably, their parts are quite incidental compared to many others played by names unfamiliar to Hollywood-saturated eyes. Bergen and Sheen are highly visible in promotion in hopes of drawing those that will pigeonhole the movie as being "foreign".

I feel though, that *Gandhi* just may catch on through word of mouth alone. It is such a moving picture (dreadful pun) that co-stars Martin Sheen and Edward Fox donated their entire salaries from the movie to charity. If this movie can part a star with their money, it must be good! *Gandhi* opens Friday at Meadowlark Cinema, don't miss it!

Well, the good news is that we all have a chance to delve into the fascinating and fun world of *film noir*. The Edmonton Film Society will be presenting a *noir* series on Wednesday evenings at 8:00 p.m. beginning Feb. 2 in Tory Lecture Theater II. Series tickets are 20 dollars for ten films and are available at Woodward's, S.U. box office and at the door. It should be great stuff! (Note: The EFS brochure has two errors in it concerning the *noir* series: (1) It begins Feb. 2 not Jan. 27, (2) The Feb. 27 screening is on Tues. Feb. 22. There is no Feb. 27 screening).

While your anxiously awaiting the *film noir* series go see these movies:

*Violette Nozriere* (1978) A bizarre, moddy film by the forgotten man of the French New Wave, Claude Chabrol. Isabelle Huppert is superb as the 18 year old Violette who kills her father and faces death because of it. Jan. 27 (7:15 pm.) at the NFT.  
*Wild Strawberries* (1957) Ingmar Bergman's austere, sympathetic film about an old professor taking stock of his life. Classic stuff. Jan. 31 (9:30 pm.) at the Princess.  
*A Week's Vacation* (1980) Nothing but favorable reviews for this French flic about a teacher's search for personal meaning. Jan. 28 (7:30 pm.), Jan. 30 (9:25 pm.), Feb. 2 (9:25 pm.) at the NFT.

Don't forget the "noir"!!

## Jump Cuts

by Jack Vermees

Surely a lot of you readers have seen the movie *Bladerunner*? If so, recall the flashing neon lights, the dark streets and the rain-swept avenues of director Ridley Scott's Los Angeles, A.D. 2019. Made for a visually striking movie, didn't it? What a lot of people don't realize is that Scott borrowed, and then futurized, these visual ideas (and Harrison Ford's character) from one of the most bizarre and entertaining of Hollywood genres: *film noir*.

Especially popular during the forties and early fifties, *noir* films showed us a kind of inverted moral order; nightmares come to life. As critic Jack Ellis said in reference to *noir* films: "Theirs was a nightmare hallucination full of indecipherable complications, a pervasive sense of threat, and fear and helplessness in the face of enigmatic human malevolence." The standard subject matter of a *noir* film included murder, adultery, blackmail, suicide, alcoholism and virtually every other type of immoral act. "Noir" films were peopled by sleazy, man-eating women, weak-willed men, tough private eyes, alcoholics,

prostitutes, drug addicts and thugs of all types. Definitely anti-social characters engaging in anti-social acts in an anti-social world.

This anti-social world is created through unique visuals, sets, and settings. Visually, *noir* films are distinguished by a mesmerizing combination of garish neon lights, slick, rain-swept city streets, seedy apartments and a seemingly endless night. Lone figures scurry through this twilight zone while dark shiny cars whizz by, briefly illuminating things in the glare of their headlights. All in all, these things provide the perfect visual metaphor for the twisted inner-workings of *noir* characters.

Let's you get the impression that *film noir* is too seedy and morally debased for your refined tastes, I should point out that these thrillers are great entertainment. The likes of Edward G. Robinson, Humphrey Bogart and Susan Hayward uttering lines like "I didn't want any part of her, but I kept smelling that jasmine in her hair and then I wanted her in my arms." (Can't you just see Bogie saying that?) is too classic a combination to resist.