

# Brechtian drill rig invades bar!

by Chris Morash

What do the bar in the Belmont Hotel, German playwright Bertolt Brecht, and the Ocean Ranger incident all have in common? On the evening of November 12 the Popular Projects Society commandeered the bar in Dartmouth's Belmont Hotel to produce a play by Bertolt Brecht entitled **The Exception and the Rule**, using the play to point out the greed-driven disregard for worker safety that caused - you guessed it - the Ocean Ranger oil rig disaster.

While this may sound like an unlikely mixture, it actually proves effective. The play is a simple, moralistic tale of a merchant racing across a desert to win an oil concession, exploiting and eventually murdering his coolie along the way. Written in a series of "didactic" plays in the 1930s, the story deplores the tendency to justify a wrong - such as worker exploitation - simply because it happens all the time.

In true Brechtian style this is all done in a very non-sensational, emotionally alienated manner that engages the mind, forcing one to judge rather than bewail exploitation - in this case, of off-shore oil workers.

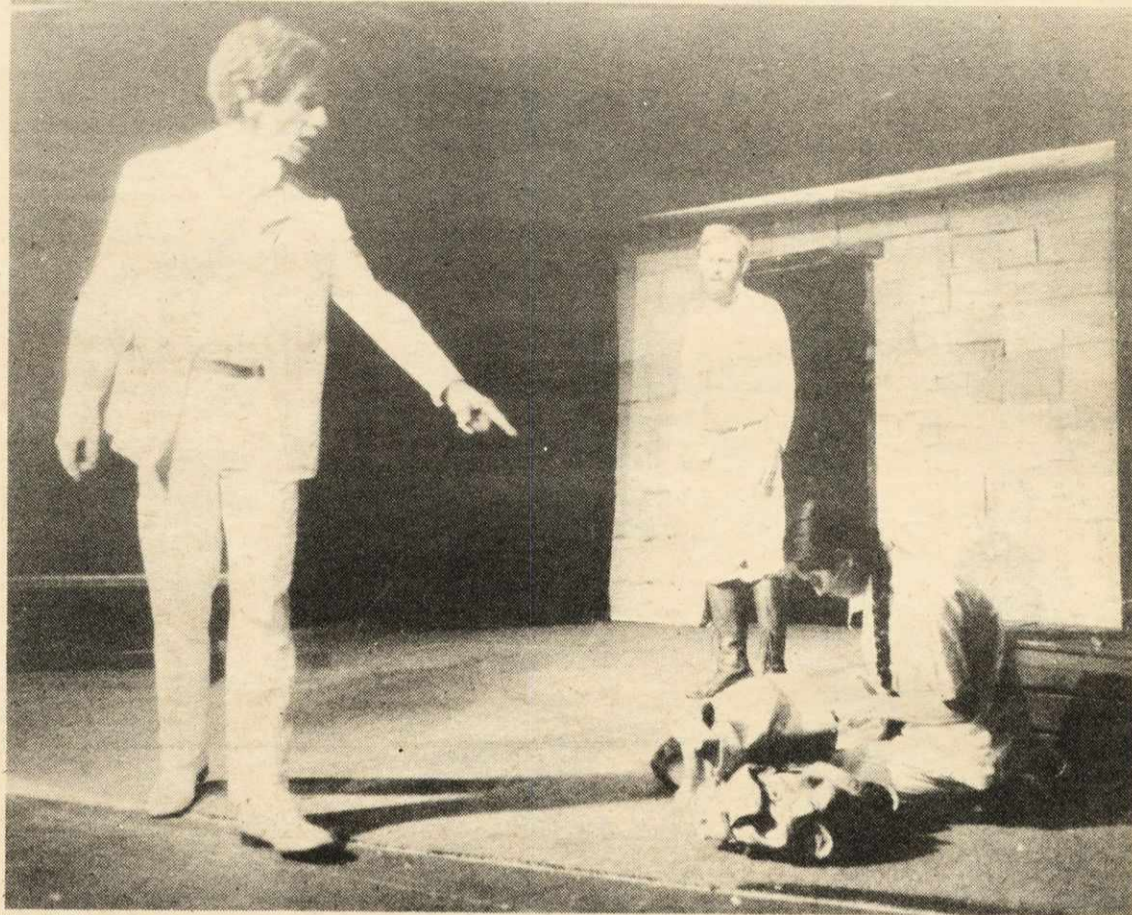
Of course the difficulty with this sort of material is making it entertaining as well as informative. The Brechtian ideal of the actor maintaining an emotional distance from the character he is

portraying, thereby making the audience constantly aware that they are watching a play, is a tricky balance to strike. When it works, it can be very exciting; when it does not work, it can be a bit, well, dull.

Moy Mah, who played the down-trodden coolie, best touched this balance, at times capturing and controlling good emotional depth, and yet able to step out of her role to make an innocently detached comment upon it. As for the acting level of the rest of the performers, although it must be remembered Popular Projects is an amateur group, it can only be called mediocre, despite occasional flashes of quality from Ken Ward as the Guide and Neil Thompson as the Judge.

This did not, however, detract enormously from the effectiveness of the show. Even the miscast Jim Williams in the lead role of the Merchant, with his monotone voice and melodramatic posing, was not a serious problem, for this production of **The Exception and the Rule** was more than a series of performances. It was a concept.

One way in which Bertolt Brecht described his ideal theatre was as a "smoking theatre", where people went not to be lulled into a hypnotic suspension of belief, but where an informed audience could sit, smoke their cigarettes, drink their beer, and rationally evaluate the events



Jim Williams points out the relevance of Bert Brecht to a despondent (and seated) Moy Mah as Ken Ward looks on in Popular Projects Society's staging of Brecht's "The Exception and the Rule."

they saw on the stage.

This was the sort of production Popular Projects attempted in the bar of the Belmont Hotel. The show was kept extremely simple in terms of staging and produc-

tion values, and was interspersed with projected images and documents relating to the Atlantic off-shore oil industry. One could not help but understand the connection between the current

off-shore situation and the play's message of how corporate greed leads to worker exploitation through inattention to worker safety.

# The Dead Zone makes the big time

Review by R.F. Macdonald

Well, well, well, Canadian cult horror moviemaker David Cronenberg has finally graduated to the big time. *The Dead Zone* is a veritable gathering of the clans of horror heavyweights: Stephen King, author of "Carrie", "The Shining", and countless other bestsellers; Debra Hill, the producer of the never-ending "Halloween's", and, of course, Cronenberg himself. This is a big budget film, no cheap leftover CBC sets here. And real actors - Christopher Walken - what luxury! Filmed in Canada you say? And it's Good? Impossible!

Well, not really. *The Dead Zone* is an effective and disturbing film that owes more to Hitchcock than to the current crop of abattoir out-takes. There is little gratuitous violence and practically no virtuoso blood'n'guts excesses. Instead Cronenberg skillfully utilizes the camera and the editing to achieve maximum shock. The images are not particularly vivid, it's the motion that provides the thrills and chills. Some shots are very long, yet they are constantly changing and developing, giving the films a strange, restrained feel. There's an alien quality to the progression of events, as if the landscapes and settings are indifferent and hostile at the same time.

The acting is uniformly excel-

lent. Christopher Walken as the protagonist is particularly convincing. He plays a teacher who, after an accident with a milk truck and five years in a coma, is blessed/cursed with ESP. Walken's moral situation is difficult: He chooses to remain in limbo rather than to exploit his gift. Of course, rational choices don't exist in a situation like his, and soon events conspire to force him to use his powers. The role demands much from Walken, and he delivers admirably, adding a touch of subtle perversity. Martin Sheen plays a power-mad Senatorial candidate who is the catalyst for disaster. It is a less demanding role that Sheen plays to the hilt, almost humourously if the consequences of his actions were not so horrible. The other performances are all very affecting, yet restrained enough for Walken to dominate.

As for the story, I'm afraid I feel quite inadequate to pontificate upon this one. I've never actually read a Stephen King novel, although I have seen Depalma's adaptation of "Carrie" (the standard to judge all others by) and Kubrick's less successful "Shining". King is obviously very important to rate such attention: George Romero and King will soon have "The Stand" out and John Carpenter's version of

"Christeen" is about to be released. In short, every major horror director, and several distinguished others, have tried their hand at King material. The reasons for this are simply: though often dismissed as trash, King's writings aspire to the firm roots of the New England Transcendentalist tradition. I kid you not! From the witch trials to Emerson and Thoreau to H.P. Lovecraft to Jack Kerouac to Marie Claire Blais, and finally Stephen King. Theirs is a universe where temporal decisions mean less than specific actions, and any grand designs are folly against the nature of this world. Then again this is a movie review, and considering my ignorance of King's written work, I'll restrain myself.

Anyway, the point is that filmmakers prefer the above kind of situation because it puts them in the driver's seat. The destiny of the characters and situations are not in the subjective characters' hands; instead it is the objective camera that makes the final decisions. Hence, Stephen King's books make the perfect fodder for talented or overly ambitious directors.

And that is what David Cronenberg is, a very talented, very ambitious director. *The Dead Zone* is a first rate thriller.

