

the balcony (post mortem reflections)

The run of Studio Theatre's presentation of Jean Genet's play, *The Balcony* having concluded, it seems reasonable to take advantage of the time spent in contemplation on its artistic merits; time not normally available to a critic. In this case it is possible to take a look at the production from a distance and offer opinions which may have an increased objectivity, these opinions having been tempered somewhat by the passage of time.

I approved of the drama department taking on *The Balcony*, an important and demanding play, both for actors and audience. For selecting such a difficult play they cannot be faulted. After all the department is a part of the university and they do not deserve to be censured if their audience is asked to exercise some of those grey cells which so frequently go unchallenged at many of the campus' offerings. If the production failed to engage its audience, then criticism is fair enough since they failed to fulfill their part of the bargain. All in all it seems to me that this was an honest production that made a considerable attempt to engage my attention. Nonetheless it also employed a number of devices which served to disengage much of my attention.

On the one hand there was the dynamic use of lights. Keatley's use of lights was most impressive; they were charged with emotional content and made use of an inspiring range of tonal values. The lighting was definitely a coherent and cohesive part of the spectacle a true artist's touch. Then on the other hand there were moments when the stage was lit well and yet the actors were poorly illuminated. The visage was sacrificed to a vision of an image, sometimes pardonably so, at other times inexcusably so.

Then there was the set. An elegant combination of grace and strength, a palladium of vertical mirrors, perfect for reflecting a thousand times the embellished fantasies played amongst them. Flexibility was the strength of this set which was capable of offering a stage for spectacles of many dimensions. Now, on the side walls of the auditorium, slides, which featured contemporary revolutions, were flashed on and off. These were irritating for a number of reasons, first of which was the neck strain which resulted from trying to absorb them or their implications. Oddly enough, horrifying as their subject matter was they had no shock value. One wonders whether this was because we have become immune to these horrors or because we are simply bored with such pyrotechnics, the theatre having been inundated with slides of late. I felt sorry for

the actors who had to compete for attention with this distraction.

About the acting one can say little. There were moments but all too often they were surrendered to images, gigantic images, grotesque images, poetic images. The actors were smothered by the practicalities of dealing with cumbersome costumes, which however elegant, remained cumbersome. This affected Jacques Paulin, Paul Kelman, Larry Zacharko, and Glen Roddie in particular. Some succeeded in surpassing these problems, others succumbed part of the time. Jacques Paulin as the Bishop failed to find voice enough to give the lie to his apparel. Paul Kelman as the Judge survived with witty renderings and a fine comic touch. Larry Zacharko as the General triumphed over costume and the semi-nude, scene-stealing horse of Marion Zoboski by sheer ecstasy and fine timing. Linda Kupecek as Irma and Lorraine Behsan as Carmen were lost in a rhetorical fog which they never cut through. If they did, they failed to convince anyone in the back row of the house. Steven Walsh as the Chief of Police died long before he shot himself. If that judgement seems harsh it should be qualified that this was so because he was stripped of all but his voice. Brian Webb in the other extreme was too easily dismissed as the fluttering Envoy. He was never allowed to stand still long enough to convince me that the words he was muttering had meaning. In effect he was all surface and no grey matter or red matter underneath the façade. Jean-Pierre Fournier turned in a neat hat-trick performance that was enjoyable simply because each brisk appearance was a shot in the arm of a flagging experience.

The most difficult task comes in apportioning blame for the play's failure to excite. The choice is whether to level the accusing finger at the director or at the actors. Ultimately it is the director who ends up with the egg on his face and this is not always fair. John Terfloth took on a staggering task and

failed to pull it off. Not because the vision was inadequate, it wasn't, its scope was admirable and his intention of capturing the poetic beauty of the play was realized, if somewhat crippled. The play dragged, determinedly so, unfortunately. Some people even fell asleep near where I was sitting. I could understand this reaction. I got very bored watching people glide balletically from pose to pose, picture to picture, composition to composition. Such delicate fluttering was no mean accomplishment in those costumes and it was done with pinache but it quickly became redundant and then rapidly boring. Boring not because it was not anchored in reality but because it lacked the ring of truth. Jean Genet said, "Realism is much farther from the truth than is my house of illusions. It is through poetry that my work of literature attains its highest realization." This production was at times a worthy realization of Genet's play but

it was just as far from the truth as a realistic treatment might have been. If we are to perceive we must believe. If the actors do not believe and their truth is obscured by an over-abundance of theatrical trappings we cannot believe.

The vision was there; it was faint and now it has faded away. If it failed, that is no disgrace. There were many who failed to meet the play within the terms of its own mythology and so perhaps it is our failure too. If we have not the strength to dream we will never dream to dare to change our reality.

Walter Plinge

apologies

Apologies to Meadowlark Cinerama: due to layout difficulties, the review of "Pride and Prejudice" was not printed last week as was pre-arranged. May I take this opportunity to recommend "Tale of Two Cities", this week's feature in the series of classics being presented at Meadowlark.

dh

a day in the life of joe egg

Should you be a movie freak, make this one next, because, like good films in Edmonton often do, it may leave before you get a chance to see it. A DAY IN THE LIFE OF JOE EGG, based on Peter Nichols' play of the same name, deals with a subject rarely brought to our attention: life with a child who is physically normal, but is incapable of mental activity of any sort.

Alan Bates and Janet Suzman both turn in fine performances as Brian and Sheila, the parents of Joe. Joe is an 11 year old pale but beautiful girl who exists like a rag doll, occasionally emitting short, painful moans.

When the focus is put on one particular evening in Brian and Sheila's marriage, their eleven years together are revealed through a series of flashbacks (well done, so don't panic). From the recollections and memories gathered, we watch Brian and Sheila disintegrate; the relatively happy, peaceful world of a young, loving couple becomes a battlefield where weapons are words hurled at each other, and the only truce is found in bed. On the particular night, separate roads must be taken or peace established on a level other than a sexual one.

Sex in continually down-graded; through sex Brian and Sheila vent their frustrations, re-affirm their usefulness as a married couple, and their ability for successful physical contact, less the disastrous results of Joe.

Both Brian and Sheila have their private worlds, he wishing for the death of Joe, belating past opportunities to kill her, that were never used; she retaining dreams and

the valachi papers

The "Valachi Papers", currently playing at the Odeon is an 'interesting' movie. Interesting if you're a sociologist, penologist, criminologist, anthropologist or just an ordinary out and out violence freak. Based on those beloved melodies warbled by that immortal songbird, Joe Valachi, for the Senate Committee on Organized Crime label, the movie is at heart no more than an adequate rendition of a way of life which Joe Valachi helped keep alive and ultimately helped to bury.

Comparisons with *The Godfather* are inevitable considering the subject matter. In comparison *The Valachi Papers* doesn't exactly lose, but it certainly comes in a distant second. Valachi's story has the ring of truth, *The Godfather* had the resonance of drama. Simply put, this movie tells the story of Joe Valachi and his connections with the Cosa Nostra, in jail and out of jail. This movie is a rather curious kind of historical artifact. The film's chief merit is that at last we have a way of sorting out who all those gangland victims were. Some of the movie's inspiration seems to have come from *Sesame Street*. It sure does try to get a point across.

Terence Young's direction is anything but exciting. One

gets the sensation that he never quite able to find the right solution to the problem of dealing with all his material. An embarrassment of riches, as it were. For example, there were so many violent episodes in Joe Valachi's life that a good deal of it appears in one sequence as a pile of photographs that keeps increasing. These photographs are of victims which illustrate some of the highlights in a few months of Valachi's life. (The story is amazingly dull, considering the story that might have been fashioned from his confessions.) It may be that Young's credit that he declined to capitalize solely on the violence of Valachi's lifestyle. There had to be more to Valachi's life than violence so Young has let Valachi tell his own story. In this manner Valachi makes an appeal for empathy and illustrates the emotional vacuum that characterized his existence.

Valachi is presented as a kind of hero who was sucked into a life of crime by circumstances. A big city version of Clyde Barrow, the audience empathizes with him and begins to root for him as his existence becomes increasingly more tenuous in an environment whose character he helped to define. Valachi is offered as the most virtuous man amongst a group of bad men. Lest we miss this point we are constantly reminded that he did spill the beans about the Cosa Nostra to the Senate Committee. This theme runs throughout the movie. We see gangsters that are, lo and behold, mere mortal men after all. Even Salvatore Maranzano, the Boss of Bosses, we are informed, spoke seven languages which he learned while studying to be a priest. The organization of the Family was inspired by the writing of Julius Caesar. Some of the nicest people become criminal.

Charles Bronson as Valachi is the only real surprise the film has to offer. His performance is a totally creditable one even if it is considerably less than inspired. There is a kind of simple animal vitality about his presence that works to produce a certain natural charm. Bronson creates the impression that Valachi might have been an amenable person to know, as long as you weren't starring on the receiving end of a business deal. Why, you might even want to try the food in his restaurant. The comic relief episodes reveal a knack for comedy. He is especially good in the engagement permission ordeal, which is rapidly becoming an obligatory scene in movies involving Italians.

Don't run to see this one, walk. Walk around the block and think twice about blowing your bread. If you just gotta have your dose of violence, if the watered down violence of the boob tube is no longer strong enough to get you off, or if you have a sociological interest in organized crime, then go and see it. All other considerations aside, this movie is a cut above most of the film fare in town at present.

Walter Plinge