

Murder and mayhem at the Phoenix

photo by Ed Ellis

Theatre

Twists fire Phoenix play

Being at Home with Claude
Phoenix Theatre
Run ends March 27

review by Rosa Jackson

The Phoenix Theatre's current production, *Being at Home with Claude*, combines elements of a murder mystery and a tragic love story, and adds more than one distinctive twist.

Sound complicated? It is, but don't let that, or the play's unabashed treatment of homosexuality, scare you away. The play will leave you shocked and perhaps morally disturbed, yet with the feeling of having gained a new perspective.

The action takes place in a Judge's Chamber in Montreal during Expo '67. Yves (Randy Hughson), a male prostitute, has confessed to brutally killing a lover with a steak knife,

but refuses to disclose any further information. The Inspector (John Wright), after 36 draining hours of questioning, still cannot uncover the sequence of events leading to the murder, or, most importantly, Yves' motive.

The situation, as the play opens, seems to be at a dead end. The Inspector has run out of new ways to approach the sullen, incoherent Yves; he attempts to fit together what he has learned, but the result is like a 1000 piece jigsaw puzzle with 997 pieces missing.

The audience is as confused as the Inspector: we know that a judge is involved, we know that the press are waiting outside, hungry for a scoop, but what we want to know is the whole story, from beginning to end.

Throughout the play, a high level of tension is maintained. Yves and the Inspector drip with sweat, and seem ready to jump at each other's throats; it is easy to believe that they have been at it for 36 hours.

The play is essentially a psychological and physical confrontation between these two men; the other characters' main function is to provide breaks in the tension. It is not until the end of the play that Yves and the Inspector develop a kind of rapport, albeit one that is never expressed in words.

Yves' character is paradoxical: he is a modern tragic hero with an unusual flaw—an addiction to sex. No matter how deeply he might love one man, he is incapable of giving up his life on the gay strip.

Yves is trapped in a culture which is both rewarding to him and destructive; this adds a new dimension to the play. It is an especially frightening one because we know that the underworld portrayed is one which does exist.

Randy Hughson is stirring as the male

prostitute; at first reluctant to talk, and then anxious as he finally pours out his heart to the Inspector. His 37-minute monologue is absorbing, and though what he has done is horrifying, we grow to understand him and empathize with him.

As the Inspector, John Wright gives a strong performance, and we share his frustration. Although at first he seems hardened by his long experience with criminals, he proves himself to be sympathetic to the hardships faced by gay prostitutes. And at the end of the play, he places himself symbolically in Yves' shoes.

The character of the Stenographer (Paul Purny) fulfills a welcome role, that of providing comic relief. He accomplishes this very effectively with his nervous tic, his constant gum-chewing and coffee drinking, and his loping walk. The rhythm of his typing emphasizes the rhythm of Yves' speech, and when he stops typing near the end, we know that he, too, is enthralled by what he is hearing.

The set is designed symmetrically to emphasize Yves' place as the central figure of the play. Our focus is drawn to him and to the clock above his head. The music, ominous but unobtrusive, is heard only at particularly dramatic moments.

With this production, the Phoenix Theatre's artistic director and director of this play, Jim Guccio, shows his willingness to give up a portion of his audience for the sake of putting on a play which he considers to be exceptional. The version we see is an English translation of the original French text, and fortunately the poetry of the language has been preserved.

Admittedly, some of the images evoked, such as that of blood bubbling "like on a milkshake", might strike you as less than appealing, but the play has the effect of being a kind of purification, a cleansing of one man's squalid past through confession.

Portman part of duo in Dialogue for Lovers

interview by Elaine Ostry

"We've never been so tired in our lives," says Gordon Portman, rolling his eyes. Portman and Kate Newby star in Nexus Theatre's *Dialogue for Lovers*, adapted from Shakespeare's sonnets by Eve Merriam.

The play is demanding for a couple of reasons. First of all, there are only two people in it. "You really have to learn to rely on each other," Portman says. "Luckily Kate and I had already worked together at a workshop in Calgary last May."

Secondly, it's Shakespeare. "The emotion

in Shakespeare is bigger than life," Portman claims. "The emotions he talks about are ageless — it's the ultimate, or eternal humanity. I love Shakespeare."

The Bard's works are difficult to perform, Portman agrees. "The difficulty is getting past the technique, and being able to speak the words... it isn't the kind of words we're used to."

Dialogue for Lovers consists entirely of Shakespeare's sonnets. The play turns "a long string of monologues into a dialogue," says Portman. "John [Millon Brandon; the director] has given us a lot of give and take in trying to find a way to fit them together."

One of the challenges of *Dialogue for Lovers* is that he and Newby age from sixteen to sixty-five. "A lot of the sonnets are about age; sharing older people's view of the hassles (in their lives) before."

This is not the first Shakespearean venture for Portman. He performed in *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Cymbeline* at the Studio Theatre when he was a BFA Drama student. "I'm a period actor," Portman states. "Period in style is my strength; it comes easily to me. But I don't want to be typecast."

Portman graduated from the BFA program in 1986, and praises it. "We learned the how to do it: how to approach a script, how to

approach a character, using our emotions and personalities. Studying drama is "being open to everything around you—including yourself."

Since graduation, Portman has participated at Expo '86, and toured with the Chinook Theatre's *Dragon Dreams*. But the Real World, Portman admits, is tough: "It takes awhile to adjust yourself to the working world. There aren't many jobs and too many actors to fill them."

Dialogue for Lovers is Portman's first Nexus performance. It is a long run for a play, which Portman enjoys. "There's more of a chance to get comfy and do a good job... finding the fresh things, and the enjoyment in the play."

Music

James plays the blues

interview by Tracy Rowan

For the last couple of years now rock critics across this country have been running out of superlatives to describe a very hot rock 'n' blues property, Colin James. No doubt this Saturday's Dinwoodie show will convert a few of the uninitiated, if James has his way.

"We're not what you would call a traditionalist blues band," says James when asked about his band's particularly exuberant style. "We're more aggressive, and louder."

While the singer/songwriter/guitarist is now based in Vancouver, his roots are in Regina where exposure to an eclectic variety of music came around the age most Canadian kids are lacing up ice skates for the first time.

"My parents were really into music and started taking me to live shows when I was real young," recalls James. His early influences include seeing the late blues legend Sonny Terry at age eight.

"Regina had a great folk house back then," adds James, who attended the Winnipeg Folk Festival consecutively for about seven years through his early teens. Finally a move to Winnipeg when he quit school in Grade Ten resulted in a change of styles, from the Celtic traditions of folk and bluegrass to the more raw style of blues he is associated with

today.

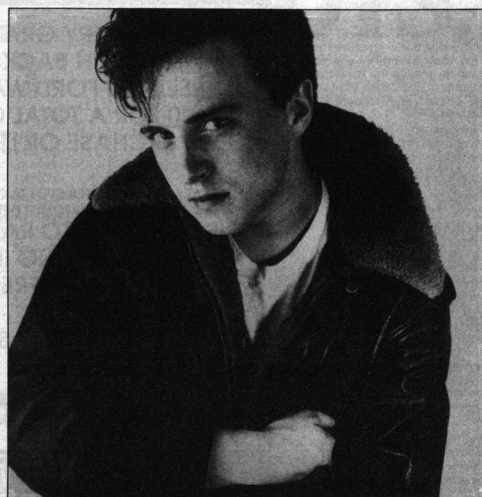
After a hectic touring schedule in '86-'87 and the near completion of his new, first full-length album, James is "trying to lay low for awhile" until the LP is released in late May on the Virgin label.

Offers have been coming in to play dates with Stevie Ray Vaughn and B. B. King, but the band just has to wait it out pending this release, which Virgin hopes will break James in a big way south of the border.

Praying that at least "one song makes it on radio," James is optimistic. "It's a bluesy album but there are some real kickass tunes as well. In Miami (where most of the LP was recorded with producer Tom Dowd) we were trying to come up with something that has content and mood."

Spring plans for James include a visit to the Virgin "empire centre" in London, where some collaboration plans with Glen Tilbrook of Squeeze are in the works, as well as some video work for the new album which may be shot in Mexico. "Virgin is really cool about that sort of stuff" says James, referring to the videos being shot in exotic locations.

Saturday night's show should prove to be a great preview of material from James' upcoming album, as well as a sizzling double bill of energetic rock and blues with Calgary's Burners as the opening act.



Colin James: looking cool, sitting pretty