

# Dal Theatre Productions Splits audience

*Split*  
A Play by Michael Weller

## Review by Maven Gates

After the strains of Stevie Wonder's version of "We Can Work It Out" slowly fade and the stage lights go up we meet Paul, one half of everyone's favourite perfect couple in Michael Weller's *Split*, the most recent offering from Dalhousie Theatre Productions, which ran last week in Studio I of the Dal Arts Centre.

Paul (Glenn White) is visibly shaken; almost in a shock, he sits bug-eyed and trembling on the couch, drink in hand. His wife, Carol (Jennette White) appears at the door and their eyes meet, reflect and magnify each other's terror; they have had an argument and one of them, strike his tongue numb, has suggested that they should split.

After six years of marriage the thought of being alone, not belonging to someone is more than either can face—or is the thought so appealing that they are afraid to reach for it lest someone snatch it from their grasp?

Is the price too big to pay? Not only would they have to deal with their own disappointment and sense of failure but they would have to bear the responsibility for disappointing their friends as well. As the most stable couple in their circle of friends they have become minor symbols of stability; of hope. It's tough to let so many people down.

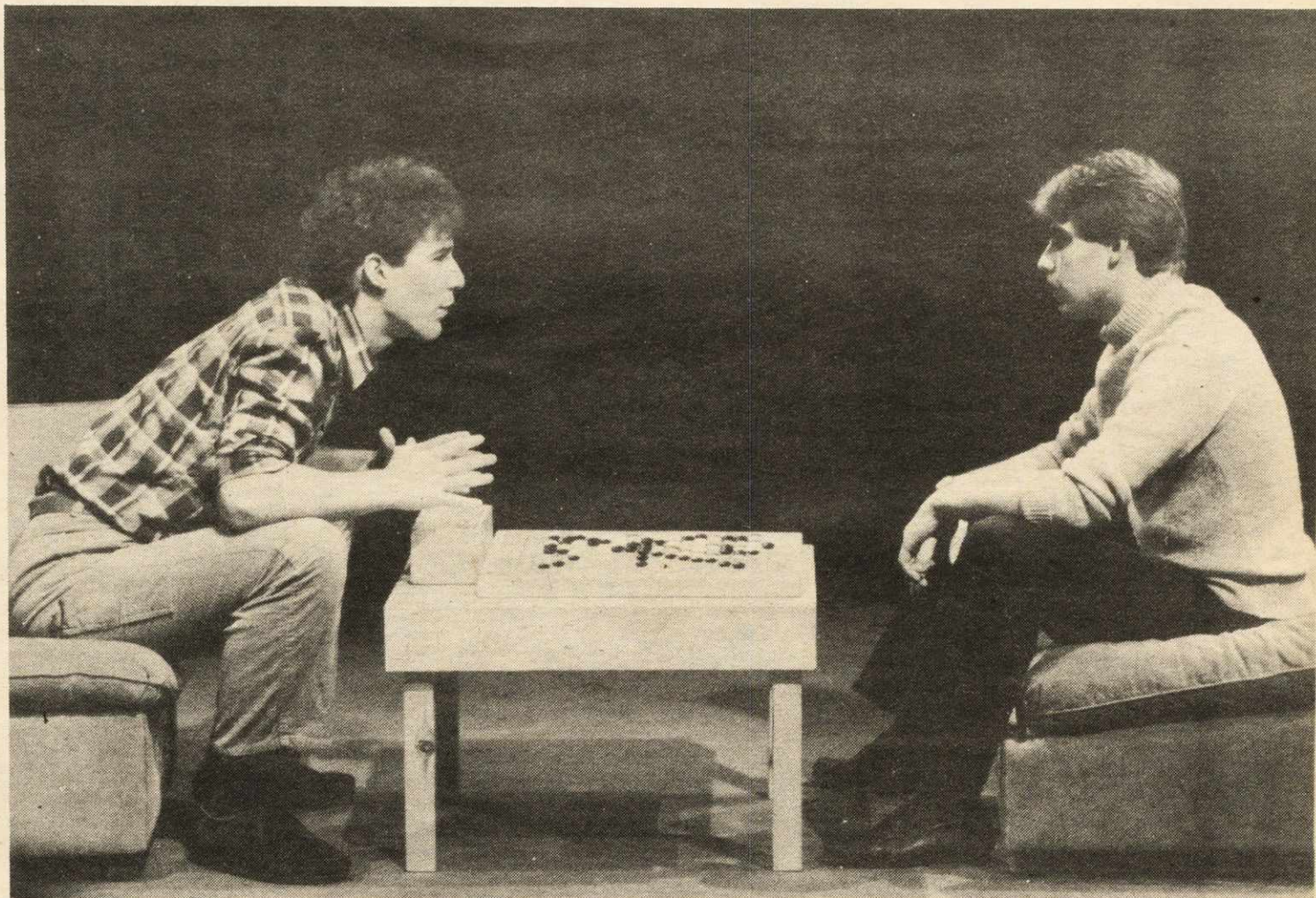
*Split* deals with the struggle of Paul and Carol, the unit, to become Paul and Carol, the individuals, and the desperate throes of the friends who just won't let go.

This perceptual fuzzing of the edges between Paul and Carol is brought to a peak in the scene between Paul and Jean (Sherrie Ford) in the bar after the big split. Their mutual attraction, which has always been held in check by their loyalty to Carol, was one of the main ingredients in the Molotov cocktail that finally exploded and split the couple. Even with the break-up official, Jean cannot relate to Paul as Paul the man.

When Jean leaves Paul alone in the bar he refuses the advance of an obviously willing partner, revealing that he seeks more than the mere physical comfort that he reported, but is in need of something more, something like intimacy, like contact.

Pretty heavy stuff for a comedy, eh? The moods change pretty quickly; flopping back and forth between comedy and drama without a second of notice. Laughter melts into tears and serious talk-talk pops into absurd tom-foolery.

Peter Perina's Spartan set of grey gauze takes us from an apartment in "A Major American City, 1979" in the first act through a busy city street, Bob and Marge's apartment, a restaurant, a loft, and a disco bar with a few changes of furniture.



**Bob (John Jay) is making a rather delicate proposition to Paul (Glenn White) in a scene from Dalhousie Theatre Productions' recent offering of *Split*, a play by Michael Weller which ran in Studio I of the Dal Arts Centre. (Photo by C. Cheung)**

Although it is always interesting to try different seating arrangements, the metaphorical "split" of the audience in two proved distracting. It was very difficult not to gaze through the action on stage and watch the reactions from the spectators on the facing side. I'm sure that was the artistic intention of the set-up; to make us observe ourselves in reality as well as in the play, but practicality worked against this very heavy-handed symbolism.

A rubber "red carpet", of sorts, was lowered before the play started, at its conclusion, and during the intermission so that those who sat on the "inside" could cross the stage. I was very disturbed by those people who watched a crew member carefully present his vulcanized cloak for them to step on and then rudely and inconsiderately walked across the set with their dirty boots.

What was interesting about the placement of the audience was the way in which the actors had to flip their facings so that one side did not have to watch the back of a character's head for a whole act. The blocking was choreographed smartly with the reversals of mood.

Glenn White, who has displayed great versatility in a diversity of roles in past productions, appears to be in danger of being type-cast as the "cute" leading man. This would be a serious waste of his talent. As Paul he was suitably warm as a character that, I am afraid, most of the audience had great difficulty car-

ing about due to the restricted identifiability of the character he portrayed. He was at his best displaying fury and frustration but the profanities he expressed without the anger during his "make-up" offer sounded forced and artificial.

Jennette White did admirably well albeit being miscast as Carol. Possessing too great a dynamic physical presence, she was very difficult to accept as a woman who could be compromised by personal pressure. Only someone extremely fragile and insecure could be seduced as easily as Carol was by the Video-creep and White just has too much of an ambiance of strength.

John Jay (Bob) was a treat. He showed notable intensity as well as a seemingly-natural knack for comedy. His body control, his delivery, and his timing showed great potential. He delivered some incredibly complex lines adroitly without diminishing his control over the other aspects of his performance. In other words, he had his act together. I look forward to seeing him perform again.

Shanna Kelly is destined to be a fine character actress. Her scenes with Jay were every bit as intense as the interactions of Paul and Carol, even though they were extremely short in comparison and did not allow much time for development.

Scott Burke's portrayal as the obnoxiously arrogant video-clerk was a little stiff. Sherrie Ford, as Jean, did a competent job playing a character that was talked about more than she actually

talked herself. Her scene with Paul in the Disco-bar was moving.

All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed *Split*. The material was written for a specific sensitivity which I fear many of those attending did not possess.

Although fragmentary, the second act flowed smoothly and allowed digestible chunks to command the audience's full attention.

Dalhousie Theatre Productions will be presenting *Grease* in the Sir James Dunn Theatre March 28-April 1.



**Do these two men look like they're having a good time? I suspect they should seeing that they have been performing together, on and off, since 1958. Tommy Maken and Liam Clancy will bring their talents to the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium Saturday, Feb. 18 at 8 p.m. In the last several years, both singer-composers have been acknowledged as two of the world's foremost experts on traditional Celtic folklore. If you're Irish, wish you were, or wouldn't mind pretending for just one night don't miss the show. Tickets are now available at the Dalhousie Arts Centre Box Office.**