

# TNB plays it safe

**Kwame Dawes reviews Norm Foster's new play.**

**Play:** The Affections of May  
**Writer:** Norm Foster  
**Director:** Michael Shamata  
**Cast:** Catherine Barroll  
 Wayne Best  
 Ron Gabriel  
 Stephen Morgan  
**Set:** Patrick Clarke  
**Light:** Brian Pincott

TNB's much celebrated World Premiere of Norm Foster's latest offering *The Affections of May* is worth seeing if only because of what it tells us about the direction that the company has embarked on this season. Under Michael Shamata's leadership, TNB has gone high profile this year with a slick, efficient marketing strategy which seems to be trying to increase attendance at shows across the province. Thus far, the strategy seems to be working. Everyone is apparently quite pleased with Shamata who comes across as a friendly "boy-next-door" type with a sincere commitment to entertaining the people who support the company. According to local critic Anne Ingram, on a CBC interview, Shamata's efforts have increased subscriptions significantly. She thinks that the company is now far more interested in pure entertainment than it was while under Sharon Pollock's leadership.

The staging of Norm Foster's play fits in perfectly with this strategy and if the crowd response to the show is anything to go by, the formula is working wonderfully. Opening the season with a Foster comedy makes excellent marketing sense. Foster is essentially a local writer who has made it big across Canada and is likely to see one of his plays staged on Broadway early next year. But Foster has not gone the route of many of the city's greats by disappearing into the hyped up world of Toronto or Montreal, but has instead chosen to curtail his time away and return to the place where he got his start. Foster has returned to his old job as a disc jockey on an AM radio station in Fredericton.

The cast list for the show is yet another indicator of the strategy at work. Of the four actors in the show two

(Wayne Best and Stephen Morgan) are New Brunswick natives. In fact, Morgan is a novice actor whose credits are mainly in the area of carpentry. His appearance in this show represents his return to TNB after a thirteen year hiatus. Patrick Clarke who designed the set is a Frederictonian, as well. While all this may be accidental, it says something positive about the company's interest in exploring the talent of local artists. This is no doubt an encouraging direction and it should go a long way in convincing the subscribers that the company is very concerned with developing the talents of artists from the province.

Finally, the play itself and the manner in which it is staged indicate that certain important choices have been made based on the company's evaluation of what the New Brunswick audience desires. Foster's play is not a particularly original and challenging piece. As a comedy it relies more heavily on the effectiveness of his witty one-liners than on the comedy of situations and ideas. Set in a bed and breakfast in a small rural town, the play revolves around a young baby boomer, May, (Catherine Barroll) whose husband leaves her for another woman abandoning her with this small business and a painful mistrust of men. Enter the town's black sheep, Quinn (Wayne Best) who will become the handsome lover that will rescue May. He has a very shady past which turns out to involve the suicidal death of his father. Finally, enter the town nerd, Hank Beavis (Ron Gabriel) a plump banker who is on the make for a nice single woman. The bulk of the jokes surround small town life; sex; and women's inexplicable hatred of men.

Foster's play is riddled with theatrical cliché and overwhelming predictability. It is essentially a very safe play because we know from the onset exactly what we are getting and there are very few surprises. Predictability of plot is not always a bad thing if it is complemented by fresh and innovative characterizations.

On the most part, Foster's play fails on two counts: it is not inherently funny nor do the characters have distinctively humorous personalities. Admittedly, there are some very funny moments. The scene in which a drunk May dressed in a Little-bo-peep suit tries to fight off the advances of the banker in his rabbit costume is funny. So is the cleverly structured sexual innuendo in the scrabble scene when May and Quinn begin to realize their mutual sexual attraction. However these are not enough to off-set the overly long closure of the piece. We know the husband will come and will be ejected and we know that there is little chance that May will assert her independence as a woman and not depend on a man for her sense of identity; thus we know she will end up with Quinn the black sheep who will turn out to be less of a black sheep after all. We know all this by the end of the first act. The second act becomes, then, a painfully long denouement.

Shamata gives us an early clue as to how to approach the play. The piece is staged as a situational comedy. The pre-set design points us in that direction. The stage is covered by a large cinema screen which has painted on it what appears to

be the publicity card of the bed and breakfast. As the house lights fade the music, lively top-forty type material, blasts through the theatre as credits for the play are projected onto the screen. Message: this is to be treated as television or film, not so much as theatre. Shamata's uses this screen between scenes as well. The device is intentional and it helps us to cope with the shallowness of the plot and characters. The play then runs as two pilot episodes of a sit-com that combines the "Newhart show" with the new comedy "Working it Out". The second part is less successful than the first but it ensures that we maximize the use of the actor who plays the husband and it does give May a chance to display her instability as a woman left alone to fend for herself in this world of very bad men.

The performances are not memorable. Catherine Barroll who plays May is faced with a fairly difficult task of keeping up the energy and pace throughout the piece. She has to convince us that she is not a helpless flake while being at the same time hysterical and paranoid about the motives of men. At times she is convincing although her failure to maintain her drunkenness in one of the funnier scenes was no-

ticeable. Given the limitations of the script she does quite well and she has some wonderful moments of repartee with Wayne Best, who plays Quinn with the necessary charm and dead pan delivery. Ron Gabriel, who plays the banker is a funny caricature of the nerd figure and his timing is often very good. Stephen Morgan who plays May's husband is not very effective during his non-speaking moments and his delivery is sometimes stilted. He is more comfortable in the final scene when he displays a nonchalance about leaving his wife. But the part is not an easy one simply because the character has absolutely nothing at stake in the piece, but then, that is the writer's failing.

*The Affections of May* will no doubt do well for TNB this season and it is perhaps a good idea to open the season with just this kind of play. Theatres like TNB depend on an audience that is primarily interested in variety. It is conceivable that the Foster play will introduce more people to the theatre thus making the more challenging dramas that are to come this season more likely to succeed at the box office. I suppose it is a fair price to pay.



**SLUT** ...Is That a Word?

bum and (you guessed it!) it's yet another re-mix. This one has more "studio" sounding drums but the violins in this mix sound like they've gone through mild mutations. This version sounds a little more like the original than the "Apple Brightness", but not much. When she sings acappella at the end of this tune Sinead sounds better than ever before. Naturally. Onward to the second side. The first masterpiece of this side just happens to be anew next of one of my favourite songs from O'Connor (the hairless Empress). The Emperors New Clothes (Main Mix) is what they call it and this beauty is fantastic. In this version the guitar is toned down a bit and

the drums just go wild. Sinead's voice on this track still sounds great and this song rivals her first (and best) album *The Lion and the Cobra*. If you don't have either - buy them. Now! The last song on the *I Am Stretched On Your Grave* mini-cassette is - *The Emperor's New Clothes* (original). For those of you who have never heard this song I'm not going to waste my breath trying to describe it to you - crawl out from under your rock and give it a listen. For those of you who have heard it I don't need to describe it. And so our little visit comes to an end - but not before Sinead gets a 9 out of 10 on the Iggy Scale. Buy this album? I'm gone... see you next week.

### Three Penny Opera

Auditions are being held for the male cast for Bertold Brecht's lively musical, *Three Penny Opera* on Tuesday, October 23 at Memorial Hall at 7pm. The female cast is set and the machinery is set for rehearsals, BUT WE NEED MEN. The lack of male interest - not talent - threatens to cancel the production, as has been the case with other Theatre Productions this year. COME ON, FELLAS! This is a fun, exciting musical - WE NEED YOU!! Contact the Director, Prof Ed. Mullaly in the English Department

## Iggy's World

### Of Bald Women and Song ...

**Iggy's World** Mornin' Ralph. What's doin'?  
 Not Much huh?  
 Well, just a short scream this week folks, thanks to the 4 or 5 billion! Mid-term assignments I have. Yes, my children sadly enough this effort will be slightly shorter than usual.  
 Sinead O'Connor. . .darling Sinead. What can was say but "thank you God for the bald girl." For those of you, like myself, who are real Sinead fans do I have a treat for you. . .it's the I Am

*Stretched On Your Grave* remix mini-cassette. Granted, it only has four songs on it but it's worth the eight bucks. . .trust me.  
 The lead off song is (of course) *I Am Stretched On Your Grave*, but not just the ordinary one, this is the "Apple Brightness" mix, and kiddies this on is wild. With remixed drums on a slightly different rhythm to it, this track will surprise and delight one and all. *I Am Stretched On Your Grave* is also the second piece on the al-

by Lise  
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by Chris  
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