

antonioni: watching the eclipse

It would not be amiss to dub this year at the Edmonton Film Society colloquially the "meaning-in-life?" season. The theme has served as the fulcrum of no less than five films to date—"Ikiru," "Feu Follet," "Winter Light," "La Vie à L'Envers," and finally, two Mondays ago, Antonioni's "L'Eclisse."

This steady service of quasi-philosophical fare is probably justifiable. A concentrated diet may be quite apt when it (1) serves a deficiency, with (2) variety and taste. Edmonton is Edmonton.

The films chosen have varied approach and situations. It follows that the surfeit of comment on values in life may be quite a propos.

"L'Eclisse" provides its own unique variation on the theme. It presents a few days in the life of a comfortably middle-class Roman girl. At the beginning she breaks off an affair. At the end she commences another affair. The vacuum in between she fills with visits to the stock-market, war-dancing with the girls, a plane trip and flirting. That is all.

Vittoria passes through all these events disengaged. Even when she seems to care, as when telephoning Piero, it is merely part of a bigger game.

Nothing holds her. Nothing matters very much. She avoids deep relationships. She shuns marriage. She refuses commitment and risk, even on the stock-market.

She is Sartre's unauthentic individual, refusing to commit herself to either cause or person, refusing to create values.

So far, so banal. The twist that distinguishes "L'Eclisse" from other comments on valueless modern life is that the film does not at all disapprove of this state of affairs.

There is no hint that Vittoria is really dissatisfied, or that she would be happier living a more committed life. Undistracted by great passions, she can pay attention to little things.

She is free to be the disinterested aesthete, whether delighting in the beauty of a newly acquired picture, or making love.

Social problems, which have been held up by others as one of the main reasons for being serious about life, are mentioned.

But instead of appearing as wrongs which should goad more fortunate fellow humans to action and self-sacrifice, they are treated as state of affairs which, with the girl from Kenya, we must tolerate. In the same way as Vittoria can love Piero without, in her words, "knowing him," she can enjoy the African culture without understanding or caring about its problems.

Director Antonioni presents his quiet approval of our affluent, material, somewhat sterile world with his usual effectiveness.

His biggest asset is Monica Vitti. One hesitates to call her an actress; one has the feeling she is successful because she is just being herself. Her movement, her facial expressions, her speech and laughter are not learned, but natural.

His second asset is photographer Gianni di Venanzo, whose skill we have noted before in other films this year.

Finally, there is the definitive Antonioni style. He is more careful than ever about correlating surroundings with the mood of the action.

Moreover, natural surroundings often assume symbolic significance in "L'Eclisse"; Vittoria feels

smothered behind the heavy drapes of Ricardo's house; water, either from the garden hose or the little barrel is associated with the new romance (it runs out at the end); empty streets and electric bulbs present the lonely, uncommitted, life.

—Bev Gietz

chekhov: control and compassion

In conjunction with VGW, Studio Theatre presents the first unquestionable masterpiece of its current season, Anton Chekhov's "The Three Sisters".

Many have found it Chekhov's finest play (though some might claim that place for "The Cherry Orchard").

It has been called his most sombre play too. And yet Stanislaski records that when his company first read the play Chekhov was appalled to find that they viewed it as tragic, being moved even to tears; he himself spoke of it as a comedy.

Essentially Chekhov's art is neither uniformly comic nor tragic; its unity derives from the immensity of the author's amused and agonized compassion.

It will be interesting to see how well Studio Theatre conveys Chekhov's almost legendary "atmosphere".

That the drama department and its students are capable of putting across very delicate nuances indeed won't be denied by anyone who saw "Summer and Smoke" last summer.

But Chekhov presents the director and his actors with a number of very special problems. The tone must be just right, the comedy must be neither exaggerated nor played down, and a perfect control must be maintained which nonetheless must never suggest slickness or chitchess.

Chekhov has several false reputations. His reputation as a naturalist, as a dramatist interested only in the literal representation of reality, is perhaps the most unfounded.

The Chekhov universe is constructed with the utmost care. Each element within it is significant, driving the play irresistibly forward. No "slice-of-life" realist could play upon our feelings with so sure and delicate a touch.

Chekhov's reputation for plotlessness is scarcely less misleading. In fact, the plot of a Chekhov drama is inconspicuous not because of its thinness but because of its smoothness. Events fall into place so smoothly that we are lulled into forgetting the presence of the puppeteer's hand.

If Studio Theatre succeeds in dispelling these illusions about Chekhov—but nonsense! The play's the thing; and what we want, and will almost certainly get, from Studio is a good performance of a great play.

For if drama has moved from Chekhov's realism to Theatre of the Absurd, from compassion to a despairing giggle, Chekhov must serve as a balance, a moving reminder that in the midst of the absurdity of our existences we retain, even in spite of ourselves, a certain beauty, a certain dignity.



—Dave Blackmore photo

STUDIO THEATRE'S PRODUCTION OF "THREE SISTERS"

... futility, hope, and a candle

drama: the exploding department

During the past two years the drama department has become one of the fastest-developing and certainly one of the most active departments on campus.

As early as 1948, students from the Education or Arts faculties were graduating with their major in drama. Jack Downey and Walter Kaasa were among these earliest graduates.

But it was not until the 1964-65 session that the department instituted a program leading to a Bachelor of Fine Arts in drama. This year saw the enrolment of the first large class in the program.

At present, forty-five first-year students are registered as drama majors. Twenty-one of these students are B.F.A. students. These students come from Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Nova Scotia and Ontario, as well as from Alberta.

To meet this increase in enrolment, the staff of the drama department has been doubled this year. Previously Professor G. Peacocke, department head, and Professors Tom Peacocke and F. Bueckert had handled both the teaching and the administrative duties.

This year three new staff members are sharing these duties. Vera Kaye is now administrative assistant to the department and Professors Bernard Engel and Leonard Feldman have joined the teaching staff. Prof. Feldman has also been appointed technical director.

Students enrolled in a B.F.A. program begin by taking general courses which serve as a basic introduction to theatre art. In the first year courses in acting, speech, movement and stagecraft, as well as English and a foreign language, are required.

During the second year these basic studies are continued, supplemented with classes in theatre history, directing and Shakespeare. In the third and fourth years, students are enrolled in more specialized courses, and have to choose acting, directing or technical practice as their main area of work.

The program is designed to give the students a general background in the humanities as well as specific training in theatre art. In order to bring a wide range of experience in the Arts to their work, courses from the fields of music, art, literature classics, history or philosophy are required, also.

In addition to taking theoretical courses, the students must do a certain amount of "laboratory" work. They work on lights, sets, and costume crews and take roles in Studio Theatre and Theatre Upstairs productions. The direction of experimental and workshop productions in Theatre Upstairs is another responsibility they have to undertake.

It is through the Studio Theatre productions of the drama department that the general public is most aware of the department's work.

Each of these productions is directed by a member of the faculty and draws upon local actors as well as students for the casts. If a graduate from the program has done outstanding work during his university years, he is made a permanent member of the Studio Theatre Players.

The productions each year are chosen to give the students a wide range of acting and technical experience. This aim is exemplified by the choice of this year's plays.

Tennessee William's "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" and Stephen Benet's "John Brown's Body" have been produced. Currently playing is Chekhov's "The Three Sisters", and a Greek play is being planned for the final production of the year.

During the last few years, increasing numbers of roles have been filled in Studio Theatre productions by students. This trend will continue. Prof. Gordon Peacocke has said that by the fourth year of the B.F.A. program, he hopes the plays will have a completely student cast.

The fall of 1965 saw the institution of a free-ticket policy for Studio Theatre. A grant for the operation of Studio Theatre has freed it from the necessity of financing its operation by means of office sales. Under this policy, a student may gain free admission to performances by picking up tickets several days in advance.

Since this policy has been instituted, student attendance has risen from around two hundred to seven or eight hundred.

It is expected that four more people will be added to the staff next season. One of these will be a theatre history expert, one will teach playwriting, and two will teach speech.

Next year Drama 210—a survey course covering theatre history, criticism, writing, theatre art and directing—will be offered for the first time.

Different members of the department will teach the varying aspects of the course so that the widest possible range of views will be presented to the students. Students who are not registered as drama majors are eligible to take this course.

Another, and possibly the most exciting new course to be offered next year, is playwriting. Expectations are that this course will develop into a full scale workshop for new plays, in which the author will see his plays acted and will rewrite in production.

—Shirley Newman