

Raucously wild *Tanzi* provides powerful contrast to dark anarchy of Brecht's angst-ridden *Baal*

by ALEX PATTERSON

The Toronto Free Theatre is playing host to a couple of remarkable return engagements this summer. Upstairs until August 4 is Bertolt Brecht's dark and introspective *Baal*, while downstairs for the rest of the summer is Claire Luckham's raucous wrestling extravaganza *Trafford Tanzi*. *Baal* is held over from an earlier run at the Young People's Theatre, while *Tanzi* is a "rematch" of TFT's production from last summer, which slugged out the war between men and women for over four months, breaking both records and ribs. Based upon a simple premise—to take literally the phrase "the battle of sexes"—*Tanzi* is the story of a woman's struggles from infancy to adulthood. In ten rounds, in a regulation size ring, the young *Tanzi* fights symbolic battles with her tarty Mum, her chauvinistic yobbo of a Dad and her even more chauvinistic greaseball of a husband, the Ever Popular Dean Rebel.

Concocted in 1978 as a way to bring theatre (not to mention the feminist perspective) to the ale-guzzling patrons of Liverpool's pubs, *Trafford Tanzi* has since become an international sensation. The accents and references locate it in the industrial English North, but the points the play makes are universal.

The fact that playwright Luckham has provided the wildest, loudest, most enjoyable show in town seems almost incidental. The laughs begin as soon as Musical Monty has finished his warm-up medley of easy-listening schmaltz such as *Blue Spanish Eyes* on rhythmic organ... in fact, for some, the laughs may have already started. Toddler *Tanzi* fights Round One against Mum over some vile pabulum, which she sprays from her mouth over the first few rows of two sides of the ring. This is one of many gestures which seek to break down, as Brecht wished to, the imaginary fourth wall which divides the players from their spectators. (Interestingly, the Brecht play now on view does not attempt anything of the kind, but then it was written before its author had elaborated his Alienation Techniques.) Lelani Marrell has a round, chinny face and kinky hair that make for a convincing baby, as well as the body language. She is also incredibly strong, and can throw her athlete husband over her shoulder and pin him to the carpet, although only after she has built up her confidence. As her none-too-bright, two-timing spouse, Henry Czerny too must give and receive a lot of physical punishment in an evening, and both leads must be thoroughly exhausted by the end. The stunts involve bone-crunching galore, and the supporting cast gets off not significantly lighter, as they make full use of the mat, the ropes, the corners, the floor of the building and even the aisles between the seats.

The show maintains its own wrestling coach, Michael Kristiansen, who deserves at least as much credit as director Howard Lester. The calibre of the scuffling is better than that of many professional bouts, much quicker paced, and a good deal less moronic. The timing and choreography rivals that of the ballet. This wrestling, ironically, is nowhere near as stagey as the real thing, and the actors can, and have, injured themselves doing it. The sheer physicality of it all is exhilarating; a liberating experience for stodgy theatre-goers to hoot and holler rather than sitting quietly and applauding politely at the end.

Not only must the cast beat each other up, they must also sing. Marrell has leather lungs in addition to her biceps of steel, and her rock and roll duet with Czerny is one of the two musical high points. The other is

Bridget O'Sullivan as Mum advising her daughter to *Stand By Your Man*, which takes on wry meaning in this context. Most of the songs are mockeries of popular genres (the '50s love song, the lounge crooner, country and western) and are reminiscent of

rous 45.3 company, who have in the past year innovated "dinner theatre" in a greasy spoon, and performed Sam Shepard's *Killer's Head* in a storefront window on Queen St. West while the audience watched from the sidewalk. This time, the



INTELLECTUAL EXERCISE: Simon du Toit, as Baal, employs his Rasputin-like charms on yet another victim.

the score of *The Rocky Horror Show*.

This is a show not to be missed. Even if you go to only one weird amalgam of English Music Hall/Righteous Anger/World's Dumbest Sport, this year, go to this one.

However, if your tastes run more towards amorality, anarchy and angst, Bertolt Brecht's *Baal* may be just your cup of hemlock. Allegedly written in four days to win a bet when the great one was only 19, *Baal* was his first play, predating his collaborations with Kurt Weill and his conversion to Marxism. A lesser known work, *Baal* had all but fallen out of the regular repertoire before David Bowie took the title role in a version for British television three years ago.

This production is by the adventu-

venue is conventional, but they have dared to case athletic, granite-jawed Simon du Toit as the dissolute minstrel Baal. If du Toit is not as fat and ugly as the script describes him, neither is he as skinny and pretty as Bowie. This is not a casting problem, since du Toit is very good indeed and makes us forget that he is supposed to be physically repulsive. The character is repulsive enough without the yellow teeth that Brecht called for, and makes Baal's endless amorous conquests easier to swallow.

These seductions make up the bulk of the action, and drunkenness and death fill in the rest. We watch Baal work his Rasputin-like charms on a series of women and, later, men, only to humiliate and/or brutalize them afterwards. All the while he is

in a drunken stupor (for if Baal don't find the next whiskey bar/I tell you he must die), reciting his poetry which is occasionally profound but oftener simply obscure. When he finally succumbs to Movie Disease (coughing, weariness, no known cure), few tears are shed. Recognizing that his protagonist inspires little sympathy, director Darrel Wasyk has wisely chosen to stage *Baal* as more of an intellectual exercise.

Wasyk has also designed his own set; a stark yet fascinating series of diminishing proscenium arches, repeating themselves off into the distance. The floor is fresh dirt and the props are minimal but well chosen. The overall effect is appropriate: a stage as cold as the work it serves. *Baal* really is a nasty piece of business, relentlessly portraying Man as not much better than beast and the world as a dark, cruel place, so if this production is something of an ordeal to sit through, it only means that the cast and crew have done their jobs well. It is a little like Orff's *Carmina Burana* in its preoccupations with dissipation and sensuality, and its secular conception of God, only without Orff's lust for life.

The play is structured in short scenes separated by blackouts. These vignettes, which last from a matter of seconds to several minutes, often require items to be carried on or off the stage during the time between. The lighting director, who has otherwise done his work splendidly, does not always allow enough time for the scene changes, which tends to spoil the illusion. If this were later Brecht, it could be attributed to the deliberate falseness of Epic Theatre but it is not. (Nor is the acting stilted and stylized in the Epic mode, in fact much more stylized caricatures can be found downstairs in *Trafford Tanzi*.) The effect of seeing trees or chairs carted on and off the stage is jarring, and allowing just a second or two longer between fade-out and fade-in would solve it. Graeme Thomson's lighting is dramatic, sculpting the actors with white or drowning them in darkness, even to the point where it is hard to see them. Similarly, the director has positioned them in some memorable posed groupings, yet in one early scene the action is obscured at the rear of the stage. In Baal's novel, his friend Ekart is sitting furthest from the audience behind the poet's drinking cronies who are playing cards onstage. Ekart begs Baal to come on a binge with him, but this important speech is all but lost behind the chat-



ter of the gamblers, and we can only guess as to their facial expressions. Given that Ekart is a soft-spoken type, the dramatic force of this exchange is squandered, yet this waste could easily have been avoided.

Ekart, played by Martin Neufeld, begins as Baal's drinking buddy, becomes his lover and later his victim. Neufeld admirably underplays the character, working as a foil to the poet's ranting and raving, which makes for a much needed break in the cacophony. He is the intellectual side of Man, while Baal is the animal nature, though they are not to be seen as halves of a whole, as the animal kills the intellectual in a stupid fight over the attentions of a whore. Baal is guilty of all the seven deadly sins except avarice, as he turns down the opportunity to have his poems published by insulting the man who made the offer. The animal in us evidently prefers lust to greed, so Baal seduces the publisher's wife instead.

As precocious as Brecht was for taking on such Big Themes before he was out of his teens, he was not quite up to the task. It is the work of a genius not yet mature, part melodrama, part psychodrama. That Brecht could write better during his adolescence than most playwrights do at the peak of their careers is a testament to his unique talent, but it can't change the fact that *Baal* has its weaknesses as a tragedy. One has to wonder how much of the sex is there for dramatic purpose and how much is just the expression of your Bertolt's fantasies. Analogously, how much of the play's obsession with morbidity and nihilism is well-considered philosophy and how much is unfocused youthful anger? This does not mean that the play isn't worth seeing; it is, and this is an especially good interpretation of it. Still, it is more the product of the nineteenth century than the twentieth, a closer kin to Goethe and *Woyzeck* than *The Good Woman of Szechuan*. 45.3 Inc. have presented an evening of bleakness and obliqueness with considerable potency, which is what Baal the character and *Baal* the play are all about.

EXCALIBUR TYPESETTING
EXCALIBUR TYPESETTING
EXCALIBUR TYPESETTING
EXCALIBUR TYPESETTING
EXCALIBUR TYPESETTING
EXCALIBUR TYPESETTING
EXCALIBUR TYPESETTING

Wide Variety of Typestyles
Low Prices Design Consultation

Resumes Posters Journals
Books Newspapers Flyers

111 CENTRAL SQUARE 667-3201
EXCALIBUR TYPESETTING
EXCALIBUR TYPESETTING
EXCALIBUR TYPESETTING
EXCALIBUR TYPESETTING
EXCALIBUR TYPESETTING
EXCALIBUR TYPESETTING

WE CAN HELP YOU PREPARE FOR:

OUR 47th YEAR

MCAT
LSAT · GMAT
GRE · GRE PSYCH
GRE BIO · SAT
DAT · VAT · OCAT
MAT · PCAT
NAT'L MED BDS
NDB · NPB · NLE
ECFMG · FLEX
TOEFL
VQE



The test preparation specialist since 1938

COME VISIT OUR CENTRE

Call Days, Eves. & Weekends

967-4733

720 Spadina Ave. Suite 410
Toronto, Ont. M5S 2T9
Other Centers in More Than
100 Major U.S. Cities & Abroad