

A sense of humour helps

# Pilk's Madhouse is the absurd of the absurd

By LYNN SLOTKIN

Pilk's Madhouse, at Theatre Passe Muraille, is a composite of skits, vignettes, and situations written by Henry Pilk, who doesn't exist. Weird isn't it?

This is theatre of the absurd at its most absurd. All the goings on are of the Monty Python Flying Circus variety, and it helps if your sense of humour runs along these crazy lines.

The first skit should be done away with as quickly and as quietly as possible. Two characters played by Bob Dermer and Andy Jones, sit in chairs, laughing at the top of their lungs. In order to be understood over this forced hilarity, a third character (Phillip Schreiber) screams his lines at the top of his lungs. A fourth character, Jennifer Watts, just stands there doing nothing much in particular, except look pretty. The result is neither funny nor entertaining. One might have thought the show's purpose was to 'klip' the audience of their hard earned money. (The more astute readers will have observed that 'klip' is Pilk spelled backwards.)

However, the quality of the skits does improve. There is one about a nagging mother who calls a mental institute to have her son put away. He thinks he's a chicken. Another is about a homicidal nymphomaniac.

And still another is about moving up in the baseball world.

Phillip Schreiber shows a fine flair for comedy, especially if he's playing a lecher. His scraggly beard and leer give him a shifty, lecherous look.

But Bob Dermer walks away with the show. He's an elf-like character with more hair than height. He has a wide-eyed stare and a goofy grin. And he does a marvellous imitation of a chicken.

The whole evening is compiled, edited, directed, and one suspects, written by Ken Campbell. He has a great feel for theatrical 'bits' what with the loud explosions in the show and 'planted', phony experts on Pilk in the audience.

Campbell seems to want to make a deep sociological comment at the end of the show when one of the characters says that out of all this craziness and confusion, the world was born. However, the significance of the comment is lost amid the laughter.

To repeat, this humour isn't for everyone, but if you can see the hilarity in a man spitting custard out of his mouth as he does an imitation of a broken boil, you might like Pilk's Madhouse.



Elf-like Bob Dermer and stoned-faced Jennifer Watts supply some craziness to Pilk's Madhouse. It is a composite of skits vignettes and odd situations, and is at Theatre Passe Muraille.

## Little man against big business is evident theme in Hey Rube

By LYNN SLOTKIN

Toronto Workshop director, George Luscombe's concerned with the plight of the little man against the power of big business is no more evident than in his production of Hey Rube.

The play first had great success in 1961, and with some revisions Luscombe is enjoying the same success today.

Superficially the play is about a struggling circus company that is trying to survive by fighting the power of an always absent big businessman. The businessman is calling 'the shots', where the circus will play, where it won't. Finally the circus people band together in an effort to stop the unknown power.

Allegorically the subject is very topical. The circus is really the small community or neighbourhood; the unseen businessman is the big time developers who decide the future of the neighbourhoods.

Basically the cast is a strong one. Geoffrey Saville-Read is cool and confident as Wagnerian, the leader, as is Krysia Jarmicka-Read as Josie. Barry Wasman as Pandro and Grant Roll as Charlie are appropriately meek as they lead some of the audience to their seats, and aggressive fighters in the context of the play.

Zoe Alexander as Dora has a very strong face, which adds to the part, and she moves well, but her voice is her downfall. It's too hoarse and

raspy and it prevents her from giving Dora more levels of characterization, other than just a shrewish woman.

Nancy Brown's circus ring set a clever design but seating the audience all around the set was a bit impractical. If you don't sit in the section of seats on the same side as the entrances to the theatre, then you'll miss some important reactions of the actors.

Douglas Livingston's music composition was effective in creating a mood but at times it drowned out the voices.

However, these few problems were overcome by the high quality script, most of the acting, and the clever bits of theatre.



### Good Eats

#### Big Finish

By HARRY STINSON

Seeing as 'tis the season to be jolly and all that, and the time of year for rich gloppy desserts, it seems only timely to trot out this motley collection of scribblings on puddings.

Mix together 1 lb. each raisins, currants, breadcrumbs, suet, light brown sugar, 1/4 lb. mixed peel, 1 tsp. nutmeg, a dessert spoon of salt, 1/4 cup flour, 1/2 cup coconut, 3/4 cup almonds, juice of 1 1/2 lemons, and 3 eggs. Moisten with milk. Add some cherries if desired, and steam it all for 2 to 2 1/2 hours. Serve it with caramel sauce.

Some of you might feel more at ease with more year-round fare such as rice pudding (which is not only good for you, but can be made sufficiently rich for anyone's taste by the addition of cream, syrups, sauces, etc.). In an ovenproof dish, stir in 3/4 cup rice, a can of evaporated milk (13 oz.) and water to make 4 cups liquid, and 3 tsp. sugar. Bake at 275° for 3 hours, stirring frequently, and adding milk or cream if it becomes too stiff. When it's all done, mush in a teaspoon each vanilla and butter. Present with maple syrup, or mix in fruits.

The glorious muckiness of a good tapioca is really, deep done, what everyone would love to stick their nose into, and slurp with disgusting abandon. Stir together in a double boiler 3 tsp. quick cooking tapioca, 1-3 cup sugar, 1/8 teaspoon salt, 1 or 2 beaten egg yolks, 2 cups milk. Cook over madly boiling water for 7 minutes, but don't stir (now there's a switch). Then stir, and cook 5 more minutes, and snatch from heat. As it cools, the tapioca should thicken. Meanwhile, beat 1 or 2 egg whites and 1/8 teaspoon salt, gradually adding 2 tsp. sugar. Pop a bit of the tapioca into the egg whites and fold together. Then pour back into the tapioca. Next, fold in 1/2 tsp. vanilla or a tsp. grated lemon or orange rind. Chill and serve with your favourite fruits, berries, sauces, syrups, etc.

If you remove the egg, you can add stuff like 1/4 cup or more coconut or toasted almonds, 1/2 cup or more chopped dates, 1/2 crushed banana and 1/2 the egg. You can add stuff like 1/4 cup or more coconut or toasted almonds, 1/2 cup or more chopped dates, 1/2 crushed and 1/2 diced banana, and serve with custard sauce.

In the unlikely event that you'd rather not apply yourself to 'from-scratch' puddings, skip the 'fresh applesauce' called for in the following recipe, and use canned stuff. Beat 3 cups of it with 3 egg yolks, a tsp. grated lemon rind, 1/2 tsp. vanilla, or 1/4 tsp. almond extract, or 2 tsp. lemon juice. Make a meringue (3 egg whites) 1/8 tsp. salt, 6 tsp. sugar, and 1/2 tsp. vanilla, and mix 1-3 of it into the pudding to make it lighter, heap the rest on top, and set the dish in a pan of water, there to bake for 15 minutes at 300. Serve hot or super-cold (with cream!). (Please sir, I want some more!)

## The master Layton 'tweaks balls'

By JOHN OUGHTON

Irving Layton is the master of a peculiarly muscular kind of literary polemic, one in which the opponent's ears (or balls) get a good tweak.

His vituperations have a real kick, and that's what make reading his collected prose in Engagements fun, whether or not you happen to agree with their content.

Reading the sections entitled "Forewords, Prefaces and Introductions", and "Assorted Letters and Vituperations" conjured up a vision of Lord Irving (down with Athol WASPS) Layton, setting

upon therest of the Canadian literary league with a series of blows from loaded insults hidden in his trunks, and finally wrestling in phrase to phrase combat that dreaded Shick of intellectual academia, Northrop Frye.

In a letter concerning a Warren Tallman review, for example, Layton suggests "Tallman's piece doesn't even begin to be criticism, unless a series of yelps, barks, grunts and other noises heard in a setting of verbal chestnuts decomposing under the weight of their own mould would be taken for

such." However, there is more to Engagements than well-tuned catcalls. In the literary controversies that have enlivened the past twenty-five years in Canada, in retrospect, Layton generally seems to have been on the right side. He has fought puritanism, provincialism, and critical viewpoints which for political, traditional or narrow-minded "modern" reasons, have attempted to restrict the scope of what constitutes literature. There is some truth to Robert Fulford's comment that Engagements would have been a more readable book had it included the original letters and reviews to which Layton responded, but the poet's ideas are generally so emphatically expressed that one has little doubt where Layton, at least, stands.

The "Articles and Reviews" section demonstrates the range of Layton's interests outside of poetics, and may surprise some readers whose acquaintance with his prose is sketchy. There are comments on politics and history concerning Harold Laski's The Forge, a review of Bertrand Russell's A History of Western Philosophy, and some interesting opinions on cinema auteurs in "Poets with Cameras in their Fists."

Layton's recent political views are less illuminating than his other ideas. Certainly poets are not obligated to be liberals (or anything else), but a statement such as that in the Preface that "the only hope for civic and world peace lies in the rapid growth and spread of multinational corporations" gives one pause, to say the least.

Although the book may seem a bit scattered in its collection of Layton's short stories as well as his nonfiction prose, it does make a good companion to the recent and monumental Collected Poems. The price is \$6.95 in hardcover, not \$12.50 as was mistakenly printed on some of the earlier covers. McClelland & Stewart, of course.

## Charming, or just a bore — it depends on your taste

By ROBERT FISHER

If you are not a fan of Emily Dickinson's poetry, several ounces of scotch might help to make Bolts of Melody, New Poems of Emily Dickinson, more palatable.

Part I of the book entitled Bolts of Melody is very simple and almost childlike in style. All thoughts of punctuation have been carefully tossed aside in a seeming effort to give the idea of fluidity. The language would not trouble anyone who is looking for simple poetry. The potential trouble lies in looking for too much in the meaning of her vocabulary or style.

The subject matter of the poems, that period from dawn to dusk, is also simple. The first poem of the section deals, predictably enough, with the sunrise, and the last poem deals with, as you have probably guessed, the sunset. In this poem titled 599, the symbol of the sunset is that old friend of every writer with any pretense to greatness, death. Dickinson asks the now boring

question, "Where is God?" Then she answers, "Nowhere to be found!" Perhaps a better place for this depressing poem might be in a handbook for things to read when contemplating suicide.

The title of Part II of the book is self-explanatory, Poems Incomplete or Unfinished. They are quite disjointed and there is no attempt to draw them together into a framework. Poem 656 is an example of her style in this part of the book. "Least rivers Docile to some sea — My Caspian, thee." Is it any wonder that such lines are left unfinished?

Dickinson's writing style is definitely not everyone's cup of tea, but this volume must be recommended to all fans of her poetry. The introduction contains some interesting information about the life and work of the woman.

Bolts of Melody is charming if you like her poetry, but a crashing bore if you don't.

Bolts of Melody, New Poems of Emily Dickinson, Dover Press, 333 pages, \$3.00 paperback.