

arts

The whole world's a stage...

Besides the "dinosaur theatre" image the Citadel tries to push on Edmonton, drama in this city is certainly coming into its own. There are several theatre

groups operating at different levels, ranging from university students to professionals and semi-professionals. In this special Arts section, various theatre groups are looked at, in terms of their current

productions and future plans. Though all of the groups have their ups and downs in quality and popularity, it is obvious that, contrary to what Paul Simon said in 1968, the theatre is not dead.

Walterdale show exquisite and sincere

"Abelard and Heloise"
Theatre review by Beno John

Walterdale's current production, *Abelard and Heloise* is a compact theatrical gem which gets its lustre from an all too rare combination of excellent acting, tight direction, imaginative design and a provocative, intelligent script. Walterdale's production breaks up a long season of conservative, tried and tested formula drama with which the 'professional' theatres have valiantly tried to bore Edmonton audiences.

Abelard and Heloise (Ronald Millar's adaptation of a popular 12th century medieval romance) is an ambitious undertaking. With a cast of 22 characters, a medieval setting, a complete array of medieval costumes and a script consisting of long chunks of monologue, the capabilities of any theatre—professional or amateur—are put to a severe test.

Director Eric Candy treats this difficult script with an ease that is disarming. By breaking up the play into a series of vignettes, Candy is free to modulate the tempo of the drama in a manner that is interesting and at times, elegant.

The script invites this kind of treatment; *Abelard and Heloise* is one of those impossible romances which involves two lovers whose intellects and passion intertwine inextricably. And in the rigid church hierarchy of medieval Paris, Abelard and Heloise's involvement is often of a paradoxical nature. There is an honest lustiness in Abelard and Heloise's relationship as well as a true meeting of two keen, scholarly minds which is truly paradoxical in a society that takes its cues from St. Jerome, Aristotle and Aquinas, whose doctrines are rigidly applied to separate intellect from flesh, spirit from matter.

Abelard, a reputed scholar, Master of Schools in Paris, attracts flocks of young scholars from all over Europe with his "theology of reason." Cultivating "reason" and "intellect" as instruments towards truth, Abelard's teaching is revolutionary, and causes discontent in the upper echelons of the church hierarchy, rendered impotent only by Abelard's brilliance and popularity. It is at this promising point in Abelard's career that he is invited by Fulbert, (an aging canon of Notre Dame) to tutor the priest's 17 year old niece, Heloise, a bright, convent educated girl.

Stimulated by Heloise's sharp intellect, vitality and charm, Abelard is forced to reconsider his celibate life at the same time Heloise is disarmed by Abelard's intellect and his zeal for learning and truth. The inevitable occurs, and it quickly becomes public through the grapevine.

Abelard's advancement can only occur within the church and is conditional upon him taking vows of celibacy. Heloise, who holds a high regard for Abelard's intellect, does not want him to sacrifice his career for marriage, even though she becomes pregnant. It is a measure of Heloise's love of knowledge that she prefers to be known as 'Abelard's whore',



Karen Gartner and Jim Watt in a scene from "Abelard and Heloise".

rather than as the woman who broke Abelard's career through marriage.

Heloise's view of marriage has an amazingly contemporary ring; she considers it as the great compromise between mind and flesh and views it as an institution that puts constraints on love. Love does not need sanction; out of this emerges Heloise's belief in God which borders on agnosticism. Heloise goes against the religious current of the time; made of flesh and living in the world, she does not subordinate the world or her flesh for the Otherworld that God has not been kind enough to reveal to her.

On the other hand, Heloise is not St. Jerome's caricature of woman as animal, tempting man with animal appetites; she recognizes her sexuality for what it naturally is, in a sincere, healthy, non-Christian way. Heloise is the embodiment of innocence and completeness which makes no distinctions between the physical and the mental, she is a synthesis of both—a complete human being.

Karen Gartner, as Heloise, is sensitive to all the facets of this complex, interesting character. Gartner's portrayal of Heloise's frustration with a society that attempts to decimate and dehumanize her is acute. Gartner's anger at the petty maleness, which tries to keep Heloise's intellect down, brings this play genuinely home over a distance of eight hundred years. That is acting.

Jim Watt is Abelard, a little slow in warming up to the part, nevertheless proved equal to Gartner and together with Gartner portrayed Abelard and Heloise's love with delicacy, understanding and vitality that is hard to match.

Ronald Wigmore as the hard drinking, cynical

Gilles de Vannes was excellently typecast—he brings an earthiness to a character resigned to bureaucracy and petty politicking of church government. Similarly, Jackie Lotery plays a wisened, early Sister Godric with a warmth that drew instant applause for the one appearance she made.

What characterizes this play's generally excellent acting is the teamwork that went into the production—right down to the actors moving the set between the many, many scene changes which provided swift, natural transitions that the Citadel revolving stage has yet to match.

The costumes which added so much to the mood of the play were elegant examples of craftsmanship and were designed by Joan Olsen, who also played the Abbot of Argentville, a major role in this play.

It is hard to list the many detailed touches which resulted in this competent, engaging production. Walterdale's production displays a professionalism that has been generally lacking in our so-called professional theatre that have the budgets, paid actors and directors to churn out productions equal to the quality of Walterdale's, if not better.

At any rate, the Walterdale has proved with this particular production that you can make first class theatre without colossal budgets, imported actors and directors and stupendous government handouts. I speak of the Citadel Theatre and Theatre 3 in particular, which have not produced any plays this season to match the quality of *Abelard and Heloise* (leaving aside gimmickery and good marketing procedures).

Touche, Eric Candy and the Walterdale.

Northern Light shines on local scripts



Photo Shirley Giew

Frank Moher of Northern Light Theatre

Northern Light Theatre is currently producing a comedy written by U of A instructor James DeFelice, titled *Take Me Where the Water's Warm*. The production is another step in Northern Light's development of a truly regional theatre, and, according to the organization's publicity director Frank Moher, the play has the "potential to be a terrific success."

Originally from Boston, DeFelice is an experienced playwright, with seventeen plays to his credit so far. This is a comedy set in the Canadian West Coast, thereby fitting the philosophy behind Northern Light's activities.

"Plays draw their strengths from specifics," says Moher, and this underlines the group's selection of scripts intended for production. Through the coordinating body of the Playwrights' Unit Workshop, Northern Light actively seeks out scripts that are written by local and regional playwrights and that focus on Edmonton and Western Canada. Moher notes that "theatre is an urban, immediate art form, and a play should concentrate on the playwright's time and place." Much of the theatre currently being produced in Edmonton is, according to Moher, "theatre for directors, actors, and designers. The theatre is based on these people's conceits, sometimes ingenious conceits. This makes their drama self-indulgent and ultimately worthless." Moher feels that

the playwright is the ignored artist in local theatre. "Playwrights are often not allowed into their own theatre."

Frank Moher is himself no stranger to the problems of a local playwright. Since leaving the U of A B.F.A. program in 1975, Moher has written several plays which have received high critical acclaim. He wrote and produced three scripts for Theatre 3 before moving on to his current position at Northern Light Theatre as Publicity Director and coordinator of the Playwrights' Unit Workshop. He sees his time at Northern Light as productive and educational, and is especially excited about *Take Me Where the Water's Warm*. "It's a new play that stands on its own merits," says Moher, "and the play stands an excellent chance of being produced elsewhere."

Take Me Where the Water's Warm runs from February 18, on Tuesday through Fridays at 12:15 (the "nooner") and Saturday and Sunday evenings 7:30.

Coming up in the next few months at Northern Light Theatre are a number of local plays, including a M.F.A. student Tony Bell's *Till Human Voices Wake Us*, as well as Gordon Pengilly's *Songs for Believers*, and another work by DeFelice, *Yard Pucks*. Moher stresses that Northern Light Theatre is always willing to receive and appraise scripts from local amateur writers.