

# On Axis displays originality and diversity

BY JANET FRENCH

While there are several well known international dance stars, *On Axis Dance* is trying to provide a niche for Nova Scotian artists.

On Jan. 17 and 18, the Halifax dance scene was treated with "Open Studio Dance", a creation of *On Axis Dance*, at the DANSpace on Grafton. The Open Studio series, coordinated by Dance Nova Scotia, is essentially an informal performance setting in which companies perform material they refer to as "work in progress" in order to receive some audience input.

The evening began with a small audience interaction game in which the audience chose the order in which a shown sequence of steps was to be performed. The dancers then attempted to perform this series to a randomly chosen piece of music, and did so quite eloquently. This game was important for setting the informal "hang-out-for-a-bit, take-off-your-shoes, and-watch-us-dance" attitude, which was a very nice change from all the pretentiousness which can accompany live dance performances.

The pieces themselves were as varied and distinct as contemporary dance gets, ranging from sorrowful and tranquil to bountiful and explosive. This heterogeneity of the choreography was likely due to

the diversity of the creators' backgrounds, and proves indeed that four brains are better than one.

The first piece, entitled "Dangerous Pool", was an excellent opener because it was derived from universally understood emotions. The emphasis on the uneasiness and oddities of looking within oneself was effectively portrayed by the interspersing of large, expansive movements and tight, rigid movements resembling squirming.

This piece was followed by a solo dance, which also seemed to be somewhat exploratory, in which the dancer used branches for hands. Although well done, this piece was a bit confusing, for it was not clear exactly what gave the choreographer the idea to use the branches in the first place. This is not to say that there must be an explanation for every aspect

of dance, but the dance itself provided no clue whether the dancer was relating to being a tree itself or exploring trees in general. Nonetheless, yew-tree branches appear to make good props for interest's sake.

A piece entitled "Deusa de Paixo", described in the program as "Lady of passion, womb, breath, life", seemed quite fitting, although I think that they left out "power". Passionate indeed, and vigorous, this piece was well-performed with a perfect balance of energy and grace. In contrast, the following piece, "In the Calm" was a tranquil, gentle reminder that peace and quiet need not be boring. "In the Calm" conjured images of flowing water and light wind from the dancers' rippling movements and the flowing of the breezy costumes.

Finally, perhaps the most amusing piece (although possibly not intended to be) was "Frappe

la Rue". This brief solo, involving a woman mucking around in an oversized overcoat, caught the audience as both humorous and fascinating.

Overall, the evening was excellent, for there was quite a mosaic of local talent between the performers and the choreographers. The only problem was that the audience was ready for more, and it was all over too soon. Do not fret if you missed this evening of raw contemporary dance at its best, *On Axis* assuredly will be performing again.



*On Axis* opens up a new experimental dance niche to artists in Nova Scotia.

## MacKeel paints the Grawood Plaid

BY KAREN PARKER

Pictou County natives MacKeel played to a packed Grawood last Friday night with their spirited brand of celtic rock. The band performed two sets comprised of hits from their debut CD, *Plaid*, as well as a good deal of new material and a few old favourites.

From the rousing tunes featuring

fiddler Fleur Mainville and piper Dane Grant, to the hit single "On That Day", the band maintained an incredible energy level throughout the concert. They slowed down only a few times for beautiful ballads such as "Heaved Away".

The enthusiastic crowd at the Grawood was on their feet dancing early in the first set and the floor remained crammed to the very end

of the gig. MacKeel has always been a favourite of Halifax audiences, and this was no exception.

The band first burst onto the scene with the release of *Plaid* in the summer of 1996. It quickly became one of the best selling independent CDs on the East Coast, and gave MacKeel some well-deserved exposure outside of Nova

Scotia. As a result, they've had a busy year touring the Maritimes and Ontario in support of the CD. Now they're back home in Nova Scotia, preparing for a big weekend at the end of January, when the 10th annual East Coast Music Awards come to Halifax.

MacKeel is up for two ECMAs — Group of the Year, and Traditional Vocal Artist of the Year. They'll be making several appearances around the city during the ECMAs — most notably in a sold out show at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium on January 30.

To add to the excitement, the band recently inked a Canada-wide distribution deal with A&M Records, and will be re-releasing *Plaid* with one additional track. The new track, "Star of the County Down", will be the first national single off the album, and will be released to radio stations across the country on January 25 — just in time for ECMA weekend. The re-release of *Plaid*, complete with funky new cover art, will hit the stores on Feb. 24.

## Wag the Dog falls short of expectations

BY AMBER MACARTHUR

There is nothing new about the government, media and high rollers in Hollywood covering up scandals by sucking the general population into believing a string of lies. But coercing the general population into paying money to sit through two hours of this in *Wag the Dog* is tiresome at the best of times.

This movie is a deservingly satirical look at the American electoral process, where it is taken for granted that "no one votes". The movie begins with the U.S. president, who is caught in a compromising position with a young "Firefly girl" just days before an election. High powered spin doctor Conrad Brean (Robert

DeNiro) solicits the help of under-appreciated Hollywood producer Stanley Motss (Dustin Hoffman) to cover up the incident.

Motss divulges the fine line between Hollywood and Washington when he claims, "I could have gone this way. It's all a change of wardrobe," grouping together the similarities between the job of producer and president. With the help of Anne Heche, Willie Nelson and Dennis Leary, a diversion is created for the American public.

At this point in the movie hopes are high for an elaborately planned distraction, but the scheme falls short. Their plan involves convincing the American people that they are at war with the

Republic of Albania, who are hiding nuclear weapons in the Canadian prairies (although they do not actually name the prairies, this looks like the area of Canada they point to on the globe).

The political commentary is appropriate at a time when the leader of the most powerful nation in the world is decided by polished sound bites, but as the diversion in this movie unravels, it loses credibility. Brean and Motss are constantly reaffirming that the "President is a product", and that the general public will sink their teeth into anything they read or hear through the media. And although this proves to be true among the public in the movie, hopefully in reality there is an overriding

element called common sense.

Most likely producer Barry Levinson is stretching this idea of displaced power in an attempt to bring humour to the movie, but it comes across as ridiculing a nation. And not even the original "asshole" himself, Denis Leary, can save this movie with his humour; nor can Woody Harrelson as the malicious, nun-raping convict who plays the hero of the Albanian war, Sergeant William Schumann.

There is only one character who shines in this movie, and it's not Hoffmann or DeNiro, but Willie Nelson. He writes and sings catchy and trivial folk songs, allowing the audience a break from a story that we have all heard one too many times.

## Paintings and the inevitability of death

BY KIRSTEN MCALLISTER

Naked emaciated bodies lie woven together on a canvas. A crematorium door hangs huge and open on a white wall. Gaunt and terrified faces stare helplessly from the past. These are paintings by Herzl Kashetsky in the exhibition *A Prayer for the Dead*, which is currently showing at the Dalhousie Art Gallery.

Through a combination of photos and memory, Kashetsky creates a photo-realistic documentation of holocaust victims, and a grim

reminder of the mass-murder which took place less than 60 years ago.



Sharing the same gallery space, remnants of a bull constructed from floral china lay scattered on the floor, delicate

images of dead birds and wilting flowers hang across from black and white oil paintings, and charcoal drawings illustrate translucent paper. These are the works of artists Suzanne Gauthier, Rick Burns, Susan Wood and Gerald Beaulieu.

Like Kashetsky, these four artists explore the inevitability of death and decay in a show called *In passing/En passant*. In contrast to Kashetsky, these works suggest natural decay, rather than forced

destruction, as an inevitable factor of life. This idea is largely achieved through abstraction, where lines and brush strokes hint at, rather than state, the temporary nature of life.

Overall, the effect of both exhibitions is one of silence. The bleak image of a Warsaw cemetery next to a painting of fragile, dying red birds are both serene explorations of the passing of time. One is hopeful, the other sobering. Both are very much worth seeing.

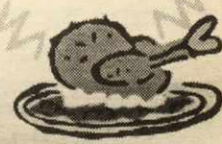
Kirsten McAllister is an intern at the Dalhousie Art Gallery.

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