

# York theatre grads are spirited yet shallow in: *The Merry Wives of Windsor* & *In the Boom Boom Room*

By REBECCA CANN

Have you got troubles? Wait! Don't run! This kind of trouble is lots of fun!

There may be no popping dice but there's plenty of people popping up and down and in and out in last week's Graduate Theatre Company production of Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*. Boppy and boisterous, the play bounced its way through Burton Auditorium in a short three hours. Almost too short. The fun and energy of the performance frequently tripped over itself in its eager attempt to garner giggles on the run.

More often than not the plot became secondary in this production of *Merry Wives*. Difficult to follow at the best of times Shakespeare's storyline was submerged in a huge array of sight gags, schtick and between-scene action. Director Neil Freeman has set the play in modern day, centering it around a health club. This move provided both actors and costume designer Anna Campioni with an abundant choice in developing characters and costumes. Unfortunately the result was often inconsistent—some choices worked, some didn't and some could have if they'd been carried through. These inconsistencies laid waste to the solidifying of either plot or concept.

What appeared onstage was a diverse collection of social types. While *Merry Wives* is recognizably a box of licorice Allsorts when it comes to people the Graduate production came across as a regular candystore. This could have been effective if some of the packaging had been better understood. When Page, played by Gregory Hertel, appears onstage in a scout uniform one wants to know why. A moment of comprehension arrives when, threatened with a switchblade, he calmly plucks it out of his would-be assailant's hand to compare it with his own. But this is the only time his costume plays some significance in relation to his character.

Other characters suffer a similar fate. Gayle Murphy's Mrs. Quickly is a strange combination of hairdresser-cum-punk—it's never quite clear what she's meant to be. Nick de Kruffy's Slender initially

appears in tennis togs, an outfit and concept which could have worked but for two factors; the concept of the Garter as a health club is never fully developed and de Kruffy decided to go for the gags with a lot of very funny eye-popping, toe-bouncing and wrist-rolling instead of applying his schtick skills to character development a little more carefully.

There were times, however, when characters came together with their costumes and light bulbs flashed. Falstaff's followers as motorcycle gang vivified their attitudes and relations to other characters. Julie Lemieux's Hostess, attired in black leather, spiked hair and wielding a whip left no doubt as to what she was all about. When Ford, played by Steven Hill, disguises himself as a mafia-man Brook, the dynamics of the scenes between himself and Falstaff have much to play with. And one can understand why Anne Page prefers Fenton over other suitors as David Richards plays him (for the most part) with funky-punky style.

Then there are the characters who lack these garish qualities of interpretation. Robert Seale's performance of Falstaff is the archetype of the foolish old man. Yet he's almost too perfect—he's floating in a time warp in this production. Duncan Ollershaw's Shallow suffers a similar fate—his is an acute, amusing performance that doesn't quite fit in with the weirdness around him. The two wives of the play, played by Catherine Marrion and Julie Bond, lack both interesting costumes and remarkable performances. Neither woman manages to convey any striking particulars of character and as the focal point of the play they are disastrous. The minor, more unusual characters easily grab the focus.

Upstaging is not an unusual aspect of this production. In fact, faultlessly guilty of this crime are the two servants John and Robert, played by Glenn Heyna and Walter Boscaroli, whose understated antics while moving set pieces between scenes provides some of the best comedy in the production. It is refreshing to watch performances of a more subtle nature.

There is so much happening onstage at the same time so often

By PAULETTE PEIROL

When director Steven Gregg said that *In the Boom Boom Room* involved "a slow degeneration," he probably did not mean it literally. Yet last week's production of *In the Boom Boom Room* by York's Graduate Theatre Company did indeed slide into degeneration, if not irrelevance. What began as a potential tour de force culminated in little more than a tour de farce on the Burton stage. Playing for laughs is fine and dandy, but not when it derides the deeper, and more pertinent issues of a work.

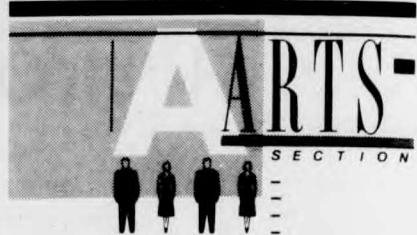
*In the Boom Boom Room* is a controversial play which propels an audience by its symbiotic balance between comedy and tragedy. Hence all three elements, the comic, the tragic, and the controversial, must

be dealt with thoroughly to understand Rabe's play. For example, many of the characters seem, on the surface, simplistic, but closer examination reveals their hidden complexities and often angst-ridden consciences. This depth of character was rarely realized in the Graduate Theatre production. The result was a pervading sense of one-dimensionality which undermined the interrelationships between characters. Gayle Murphy, for example, played the main character Chrissy as shallow and flighty. Murphy was incredibly convincing in her role, yet instead of eliciting sympathy for this distraught character, her interpretation of Chrissy only served to alienate the viewer from the character's anguish. All too often the actors played superficial judgements of their characters rather than fully realizing their motivations. This treatment of character-as-caricature works well for comic moments, but renders dramatic climaxes flat and disappointing. A prime example of this is in one of the major scenes of the play with Chrissy and Susan. Susan (Julie Bond), who is Chrissy's boss at the nightclub where she works, has just told Chrissy that she wants to make love to her. Susan declares "You'll be a person..." which Chrissy desperately wants to be. Yet in last week's production, Bond's Susan lacked conviction and authenticity, thereby leaving Chrissy merely shrugging her shoulders at the proposal. So much for dramatic tension and character development...

that it is difficult to find the focus of the production. By the end of the play, however, one realizes there isn't much focus. Amidst the rollicking revels of the performance the fairy scene appears out of nowhere, dark, ominous and almost classical in its staging. After this strange but beautiful scene it is almost impossible to understand precisely what it is Freeman is trying to suggest. The townsfolk are nasty in word, calm in manner, Falstaff has been banished to a dark unnoticeable corner of the stage, and when the young wedded couple appear in their dandified wedding outfits there is a half-image of fresh new blood usurping the positions of others, but without the emphasis necessary for clarity. The play is left up in the air with no direction in which to take wing when one rather expected things to settle a little. The production lacks grounding, both as a whole and in particulars. Flashy, fun but inconsistent, a little earthiness would go a long way in *Merry Wives of Windsor*.

John Milton Branton, playing Al, also seemed to be a proponent of the Simplistic School of Acting. Granted, Al is not the most likeable character to ever hit the stage, but to play him as a superficial jerk only compounds matters. Julie Lemieux (Helen), and Barry Yzereef (Harold)

did however achieve depth of character, which helped the audience understand Chrissy's background more fully. In terms of production values, *In the Boom Boom Room* was strongly realized, even venturing to offer moments of technical brilliance. The set was simple yet above all effective, allowing instantaneous scene changes which flowed smoothly thanks to the lighting of Peter McKinnon. Costumes by Anna Campioni were exciting, and Campioni deserves an award for choreographing the quickest and slickest costume changes ever.



Music, (pop tunes from the '60s), was carefully and appropriately selected, and helped to bridge scenes. However, its significance could have been more strongly emphasized (as it was when in the first act Chrissy rehearses a tune with the radio).

The end result of *In the Boom Boom Room* was a professional looking performance lacking substance and relevance. Director Steven Gregg may as well have been trying to polish plastic with Pledge: all gloss, no guts. *In the Boom Boom Room* will be playing again at the Robert Gill Theatre in May. Hopefully by then, the company will have had enough time to confront the play's "slow degeneration" and find meaning in it.

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