

York experimental poet is an institution

By C.J. KEEP

Bp Nichol—poet, author, editor, play and script writer, is something of an institution in the Canadian literary scene. Relentlessly experimental, his numerous books and public performances have earned him a great deal of critical attention and respect. It is this reputation and multi-faceted experience that he brings to his writing workshops at York.

Thirty-nine years old, Nichol is a Vancouver native. At 16, he decided writing was "the thing I liked most doing and I started to take it seriously." He attended the University of British Columbia and had a brief stint as an elementary school teacher before coming to Toronto to become involved in the Therafields communal living project which he was involved with until last year.

Early in his career, Nichol took an iconoclastic stance to the forms of traditional poetry. His claim that "poetry being at a dead end, poetry is dead... we are free to live the poem" reflects the author's need to attack the "static notions of what poetry should be. I see it now as what is possible."

The author first came to prominence through his work with concrete poetry, in which language is used much as a builder uses bricks. Nichol believed that he was "too often coming to the occasion of the poem to be smart. So I made a conscious decision to play with the elements of language." An example of this kind of word play is his poem "Popular Song":

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This work in concrete poetry led to the development of what Nichol came to call "ideopomes"; visual poems that bring the medium of typewriter and paper to the fore. Thus, his arrow poem reflects the physical shape of its subject while "The End of the Affair" is a visual catharsis of the word "organ." The result of this experimentation was that the poet "got a feel for what the poem looks like on the page. It taught me how to read. I began to read the page as well as the context."

An interval at the University of Toronto Library in 1963 impressed on Nichol the vast volume of well-meant words that have simply gone unrecognized; no longer did he believe one could change the world by simply writing books. This experience seems to have contributed to the ephemeral nature of some of his work. The Dada-influenced "A Condensed History

of Nothing," for instance, is a couple of blank pages "brought to you by the same great press that's been producing instant garbage for the nation's wastebaskets these last five years."

A further outgrowth of Nichol's experimentation is his work in sound poetry. Nichol believes the importance of sound poetry lies in its ability "to free the emotional content of speech from ideation or from words, necessarily, and it is able to let out the voice." Perhaps the poet's furthest exploration of sound is his involvement with the Four Horsemen; a four voice ensemble whose inspired (and often improvisational) performances have earned the group considerable acclaim.

Nichol's most ambitious effort to date is *The Martyrology*, an ongoing, deeply personal work that is evolving in a direction complete unto itself—that is to say, the poet is exerting no conscious control over it. Referring to *The Martyrology*, Nichol once said, "It's a journal. I have no final master-plan for it. I think that would be a failure in conception on my part. If you don't reach it by the time you're dead you lose the race." *The Martyrology* is "concerned with the notion of process. In it I'm tracking my own voice experimenting with the 'i'."

While this formal experimentation with language has no doubt led Nichol to a fuller understanding of his craft, it has also brought him some negative criticism. One of the four books for which he received the Governor General's Award for Poetry in 1970 was *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* ("about this guy who had a short dick and who went around killing people") and its notoriety reached as far as the House of Commons. A certain Mr. Nowlan said *Billy* was "nothing more than pornographic." However, the poet has come to terms with such uninformed response to his work—"You are less affected by bad criticism if you feel the critic has missed the point. *Billy* wasn't by definition pornographic. It was an attack on a certain function of literature—the glorification of creeps."

Recently, Nichol has begun to move beyond his firmly established reputation as a poet. This past summer he co-wrote a musical titled *Tracks*, which was staged in Coburg, and his fourth novel *Still* has just been published. *Still* has a special distinction in that it won the Three Day Novel Contest last year.

Even more prominent on Nichol's expanding horizon is his work for the TV program *Fraggle Rock*, a fantasy series featuring Jim Henson's Muppets. The author's first script for the show



York professor bp Nichol

aired in October and others are in production. Nichol sees no artistic conflict between his poetry and the more commercial medium of television. "In poetry I've been interested in experimenting with the 'i', while in prose I've been working against the given. In the plays and film scripts I'm dealing with traditional narratives—working with the given. TV is a cooperative medium, it's so unlike poetry it's hard to call both writing."

While Nichol is excited by his work with *Fraggle Rock* and intends to concentrate on more scripts in the future, there's no doubt that his typewriter will continue to produce work in a variety of genres and with the same high regard for quality and experimentation that has become expected of this author.

Bloody Scarface is passionate

By PAUL PIVATO

Director Brian DePalma's *Scarface* (starring Al Pacino) inevitably elicits a passionate response from moviegoers: they either love it or hate it. Most hate it.

The critics butchered the movie in reviews all across North America. More blood was probably spilled on the page than in the film itself.

But *Scarface* is one of the best movies of 1983. It will go down as a classic in gangster cinema alongside *The Godfather* saga and *Bonnie and Clyde*. It is certainly the most vicious gangster film ever made. Pacino, as Cuban exile Tony Montana, delivers one of the greatest performances of his Oscar-studded career. But when Oscar nominations are handed out this spring, *Scarface* will probably be ignored.

Scarface clearly has many minor flaws: weak accents, rambling dialogue, flabby editing, a mishmash of mood and style. And yet it remains a great movie. *Scarface* is sprawling, bloody, comic, horrifying. It is a white-knuckle adventure film, a tragic vision of the American Dream, the story of a brutal man's grab for glory.

Scarface is anything but "boring," which is what *Toronto Star* critic Ron Base called the film. But then Base belongs to the same tribe of critics that hailed *D.C. Cab* as "the surprise hit" of the season (surprise indeed), and named *Cujo* one of the year's most chilling horror flicks. John Harkness of *Now* was one of the only film critics in Toronto to praise *Scarface*.

Scarface has hordes of enemies. Cuban organizations tried to ban the filming of

Scarface in Miami. Many are furious over what they perceive to be the film's insulting depiction of Cubans. But *Scarface* is concerned with the life of underworld figures, not with a realistic portrayal of the Cuban community. Indeed, the film goes out of its way to show Cubans as honest, hard-working, decent American citizens. The most dangerous criminals in *Scarface* are the ones nobody ever sees: the bankers and politicians.

But the slur most often hurled at the film, especially by those that have never seen it, is one of "gratuitous violence." Now that sex and nudity are no longer considered obscene, the cleaver of censorship has been turned on violence. *Scarface* has the misfortune of appearing at a time when pious liberals are taking the scalpel to Bugs Bunny cartoons, "editing" the "excessive violence."

Scarface is unquestionably violent. But the violence is not "gratuitous." Any realistic portrayal of underworld warfare must of necessity be violent.

The infamous chainsaw scene was cut by director Brian DePalma in order to avoid an X-rating. The scene, however, is not terrifying because of the blood and gore; the viewer never sees the chainsaw cutting into flesh. Rather, the camer focuses on Montana's desperate attempt to avoid watching. Far more graphic shots can be seen in any cheap horror movie, but the chainsaw episode in *Scarface* is one of the most horrifying scenes in cinema.

Despite the reams of sour press and negative response, *Scarface* is worth a viewing. Like *Carrie* and *Phantom of the Paradise*, two of DePalma's earlier efforts, *Scarface* is likely to become a cult classic.



Al Pacino in Brian DePalma's *Scarface*.

York Jazz Orchestra performs for enthusiastic mob in Winters

By HELEN HINKLE

It was billed as the Jazz Policeman's Ball, but the enigmatic presence of the Jazz Police was felt only in spirit as the York Jazz Orchestra performed for an enthusiastic crowd in Winters JCR recently.

The event—described by some as a quasi-religious experience—prompted one to wonder just who the Jazz Police were, and why the York Jazz Orchestra was paying homage to such an organization. David Mott, music professor, conductor, and leader of the 18-member band explained before the show that the Jazz Police were formed when jazz made the transition from a popular art form to a university course. At that instant, when this free-spirited music was suddenly subject to all the rules and regulations of university bureaucracy, when impromptu musical expression was forced into a system of right and wrong notes, the Jazz Police were born.

The performance opened with an energetic version of "Alinlam," a tune composed by former Orchestra member, part-time astronomer Richard Fiet, and from the opening phrase the Orchestra played with an abundance of zeal. Based on a rhythmic ostinato that conjured up a cosmic tribal ritual, "Alinlam" featured extended solos by both brass and reeds, reaching a fever pitch at the urging of reedman Bill Mulhal's wailing tenor sax.

After a quiet, melodic interlude reminiscent of Miles Davis' "Sketches of Spain," the band closed the first set with a rousing performance of "Braxton Bop," a tune dedicated to free jazz exponent Anthony Braxton and written by Jazz Orchestra alumnus Jane Ira Bloom. An elastic piece, the tune seemed to stretch open with long, intense instrumental solos punctuated by angular group accompaniment. Soloing over a loose form that allowed for lots of freedom to incorporate shouts, screams, and other extra-musical devices into their playing, Keith Honeywell (trombone) and Roger Shepherd (Flugelhorn) delivered performances that captured the audience with their avant-garde expressionism.

As the first set ended, it was obvious that

the York Jazz Orchestra was very different from the traditional jazz groups that reside in most educational institutions. By stressing the performance of student and Orchestra alumni original compositions,

allotting a great deal of space for soloing, Mott has shaped a motley group of students (ranging from untamed street players to classical musicians) into an exciting, unique unit.

The second half of the performance began with "Farm King," an alto sax feature styled after the music of Ornette Coleman that spotlighted the diverse soloing styles of saxophonists Johnny Bakan and Richard Howse. Howse soloed first and amused the crowd by playing speech-like phrases in devil-may-care fashion. In great danger of receiving a citation for swinging too hard and too fast, the Jazz Police let this offense, certainly not

his first, go unnoticed. Bakan, on the other hand, built up a complex bed of arpeggios and then proceeded to alter the structure he had set up, unleashing a shrieking flurry of sound to end his solo.

Following a soulful rendition of the Charles Mingus classic "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat" by passionate tenor saxophonist Richard Underhill, the band embarked on its final, and perhaps most challenging piece of the night, "D-Concert." The highlight of the performance, "D-Concert" was a blues magnum opus, featuring extended band solo passages, and several swinging solos by Orchestra members. Performing with incredible energy and an obstreperous intensity, the band built the tune to a shattering peak that threatened the brick structure of the JCR and left the audience clamoring for more.

Although the Jazz Orchestra won't be performing again until sometime in the spring term, remember—when you're dancing to disco, or snapping your calloused fingers to MOR or C&W—the Jazz Police are watching you.