

Give him an evasive answer. Tell him to go fuck himself.

—W.C. Fields

arts

Turning tables on science



K.J. Butler's "Science Painting"

By HENRY SUM

“You stay away from home for three or four months and when you get back, everything in your refrigerator has turned into a science project,” or so jazz-singer Tom Waits has said.

Now you stay away from the Art Gallery of York University for two or three weeks and the next thing you know is that *it's* turned into a science project! So it seems with the recent installation of “Art/Science Tables” by K.J. Butler, running until March 18. About the most immediate description you can give the show is “weird.”

Butler has constructed a couple of 16-foot chipboard tables that are purposely scarred, gouged and otherwise defaced. The tops of these tables are 18 inches across and five feet high. One of the table tops is made of fibreglass and is backlit by fluorescent tubes.

On the tables is an almost mad scientist's assortment of alchemic knick-knacks. Some pieces lie about in a haphazard fashion, while others hang suspended from flimsy strings and thin wire girders. A majority of the pieces are made out of moulded fibreglass or painted gauze mesh. Some have the raw, corroded look of shattered artifacts from a plastics junkyard. Other pieces resemble highly polished remnants of anatomical parts.

It is by way of these anatomical pieces that we can trace Butler's origins as a medical artist engaged in the construction of three-dimensional models. Terrance Heath, a writer and interpreter of Butler's works, says that the working experience of “opening up, dissecting, and reconstructing in order to understand is seen by Butler, the artist, as a cultural act which is not peculiarly scientific or medical.”

When you combine Butler's medical research with his interest in Tantric Art and Inuit Indians and you have an investigative art-form that embraces the metaphysical.

“Butler sees art not as a visual entertainment,” Heath says, “or even as a spir-

itual experience; what he is doing as an artist is creating those basic cultural forms by which the universe is understood by man.”

“Art is like an intellectual-spiritual tool,” Heath added, “a means by which we understand and experience, survive and hope. The task of the artist is to create ‘true, workable models of life.’”

We can see Butler ingenuity in Butler's other major work in this show, a large 12 x 12 foot corner installation entitled “Science Painting.” Curled, tadpole-fetus shapes are juxtaposed against multi-colored silhouettes of hearts. Concentric stroke after stroke of red, bloodied gouache seem to suggest circulation combined with respiration and new life. By hanging empty human outlines or shells just below the ceiling level, Butler has created a kind of meta-physical monument to the inner workings of the unborn.

Butler himself likens the development of the embryo “more to art than science because it is based on our conceptual grasp of what's happening. So little is known. You start with one cell then several cells make a little flat plane that curves on itself to make two planes.”

This curving of planes upon themselves compounds until eventually “as it is being folded it forms a magnificent, tiny human being,” Butler says, “like a Fabergé jewel, a breathtakingly beautiful, transparent human.”

Butler foresees a greater synthesis of art and science emerging. He believes science should adopt a wider, metaphorical approach and become less dependant on technology. Conversely, he feels that, “Art is going to have to take a firmer stand in believing in its own products as true, workable models for life and the world.”

The show also includes Butler's recent paintings and constructions, photographic studies, medical models and his sketchbooks. Two films will accompany the show featuring a documentary on the artist and on his medical research. It should be of interest to artists and biologists alike.

York graduates cast in Madhouse as Equity showcases *Marat/Sade*

Marat/Sade
by Peter Weiss
Equity Showcase Theatre
until Saturday

By JASON SHERMAN

York theatre graduates are popping up just about everywhere. Recent and current downtown productions, including *The Changeling*, *Tiger at the Gates* and *Prague* have featured alumni both on stage and behind the scenes. Now comes the Showcase presentation of Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade*, with over half-a-dozen members who have been through one or another York program, and one, director Michele George, who headed up graduate study with David Smukler from 1980 to 1984.

For actors Ralph Small, who was at York in the mid-seventies, and Ellen Cohen, the prospect of working with George was almost as much of a draw as the play itself. Cohen in fact studied with George here, and auditioned for the production “to see if she (George) could still use me. You might get tired of someone's work.”

As with the undergraduate program, the approach was toward ensemble work, with George and Smukler overseeing a handpicked group of three directors, two playwrights and 16 actors. “The focus,” says Cohen, “was to expose us to as many influences as possible that have affected theatre.”

Small, on the other hand, was here when things weren't so focused. In fact, “there was no focus, as such. The program was just not tuned in to the practical aspects of the daily grind of theatre.” He says that “in retrospect” he thought “the work was valuable. Right now, there's an everything-is-fair-game approach. Well, this was the beginning of that.”

Small was not expecting to play catch-up. If anyone in the cast was expecting George to expound upon what she discovered working with Peter Brook at the International Center for Theater Research, in general, and the Brook-directed production of *Marat/Sade*, in particular, they expected too much. “She brought the research ideas in with kid gloves on,” says Small, adding that “we did our own work.”

It's hard to believe George herself can have removed all traces of it; but then her directorial approach is such that much of the success or failure of the production is dependent upon the work of the actors. George didn't sit the cast down and point the way to the one-true-meaning.

“She's been criticized for being too general,”

says Small, but there's a method to her madness.”

That may be entirely true, but it's a method which doesn't seem to have paid off for this production. Not entirely, anyway, and a large part of the reason has to do with the clash between the idea of the play and the idea of Showcase. The latter is intended to give as many actors as many opportunities as possible, resulting in large casts made up of people who have not often worked together. The idea of the play, however, is a densely layered, highly crafted, complex drama which requires that those on stage be aware of and convey these complexities. This way the play's enigmatic warning makes sense. That warning, concerning the spreading the seed of the ideas, acts to further the overriding sexuality of the play.

But the irony is lost because the sexuality, somewhere, also was lost. George has molded everything, all right. There is the semblance of order, of a controlling force behind the madness that is Charenton (the scene of the play within *Marat/Sade*: the murder of Marat, written by inmate Sade). But while everyone and almost everything seems to be “in place,” the awkwardness of the physicality betrays the actors' inability to get inside the ideas and ultimately, the roles. On more than one occasion, as with the groping of Corday, the actors seem almost unwilling to want to carry out the gestures demanded of them.



Fortunately, Sade and the Herald are well-conceived and well-realized. These are the men who control the play, and both actors concerned make us believe they are in control. We never lose sight of them physically or, in a sense, spiritually. Sade, after all, has written the play we are seeing. We begin to wonder about his motivation for doing so. John Innes' constant smirk, and his obtrusiveness make us aware of his possible motives. Possibly this is meant as a demonstration of the supremacy of man over nature, of the flesh over the spirit, and of the concrete (“general copulation”) over the abstract (the ideas of the revolution).

York writer ‘lucks’ into \$3,000

By JENNIFER DUMPERT

John Gregory considers himself, with a slight bit of humility, lucky to have won first prize for drama in this year's CBC national Literary Competition. The 32-year-old York graduate student, working towards his MFA in theatre, won \$3,000 for his 15-minute radio play entitled *Stations*, which he describes as “about driving and having that creeping feeling that someone's in the back seat.”

In the play, an old man drives through the British Columbia interior at night, listening to the radio. The radio in effect narrates the play. “It was a lucky thing,” Gregory says. He heard about the contest, wrote and submitted the play all within a number of weeks.

Though luck may indeed have something to do with it, his theatre experience plays the major role. Gregory completed undergraduate work in film direction at the University of Victoria, after which he became a consultant for Theatre BC. Gregory found this experience invaluable. He said that the travelling company sometimes performed a different show every night, so that he often had to judge what worked what didn't in just one day. He liked working in the small communities the company performed for. “People love it in small communities,” he said. “It's a social involvement, it's like everybody gets together and puts on a show.”

Gregory is also quite enthusiastic

about the experience he's gaining at York. Gregory explains that he writes a few scenes which are then workshopped by theatre students, criticized and rewritten accordingly. “Working with actors during writing quickens the process,” he says, by providing insight into what does and doesn't succeed. “It's contact with the actual situation,” he added, “a practical theatre community.”

The reason a “practical theatre community” is useful is the same reason why being a playwright is such a difficult thing. As John Gregory put it, “Playwriting is such a difficult medium to work in. One must take into account all elements on stage, all limitations. Everything right down to the lighting. Also, an audience no longer wants just a spectacle, they want psychological content.”

As difficult as playwriting is in itself, the problems are compounded by problems of a Canadian inferiority and bureaucracy. Gregory spoke about the problems of the overwhelming presence of and attention paid to foreign plays. In addition, the Mulroney government has made a number of cuts into the arts. Still, Gregory is optimistic. “People are tired of amusement in their own living rooms,” he says.

Stations will be heard on March 17 at 11:40 on CBC's *Morningside* radio show, hosted by Peter Gzowski.