

Entertainment

Challenging the city and challenging themselves

Phoenix facing toughest challenge

by Dean Bennett
& Gilbert Bouchard

Bob Baker has a problem. Entering his fourth season as artistic director of Edmonton's Phoenix Theatre, Baker faces perhaps his toughest challenge yet — trying to surpass the unprecedented financial and critical success of his previous year.

"That's the challenge — topping last season," he said. "I held off choosing this season and have been looking at shows all winter. The plays last year came with a reputation and I don't want our theatre to be pegged as a 'little Broadway.'"

Last year, hits like *Night, Mother*, and *Torch Song Trilogy* played to packed houses in the Jubilee Auditorium's Kaasa Theatre. This was in stark contrast to Baker's first season when plays like *Dreaming and Dueling* played to audiences sometimes as small as 21 people.

"My first season was fairly eclectic. We tried to appeal to the entire city. That was pretty ambitious for a theatre staff of three. We were successful artistically, but made little money," said Baker. "Nobody in the city was taking chances. We knew the Edmonton youth had disposable income, but they weren't going to live theatre simply because live theatre had nothing to offer them. We tried to offer them something."

Baker's plan worked to perfection. In his second season, the Phoenix deviated from the norm with controversial shows like *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You* and *Extremities*. The former play cast Tom Wood as a sharp-tongued nun and the latter was a disturbing tale of rape, chronicling the degradation and slow torture of a rapist at the hands of three frightened women.

The end result was success. *Mary Ignatius* was a complete sell out and was held over for a week. Phoenix subscriptions tripled.

"We'd hit our target," said Baker. "We'd reached the young adult audience — the Yuppies, though I don't like the term."

"Last season took us one step further and the shows were even more challenging."

This season, though, the Phoenix will be going a slightly different route.

"We're still dealing with controversial plays — our mandate — but two out of the four plays will be world premieres," said Baker.

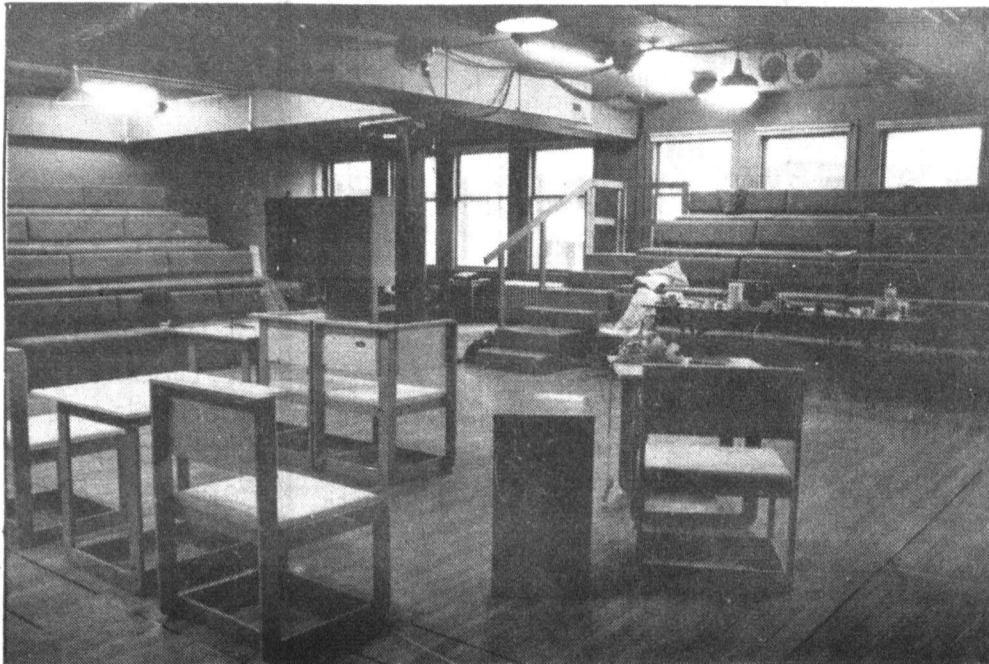
"The first of these two premieres, *The Zen of an Intelligent Machine*, is described by Baker as a play about computer technology married to Frankenstein.

"Zen is the first play by William Kuhns. He's a computer journalist who has moved from essays and papers on the philosophy of technology to a play," he said. "It's not a silly science fiction story. It has good moral points."

"Two other theatres are doing versions of this play, but all productions are independent of one another."

"We're also going to be receiving big technical software and hardware for the set. IBM, Xerox, and Sperry Rand see it as a way of showing off their new material."

The second premiere is Tom Wood and



Experimental theatre will be offered in the Phoenix's new downtown space.

Michael Becker's *B-Movie*. "It's a musical really wild," said Baker. "It's our piece de resistance for the season."

"This play is almost impossible to explain. *B-Movie* is part of a trilogy that Wood is writing. The first part was *North Shore Live*, a satire on television; the second part is *B-Movie*; and the third part, as yet unwritten, will be an examination of the theatre."

"The play is about one man's obsession with the movies. The protagonist is a kind of Woody Allen character, but not a take-off. He is a schlep who thinks he is brilliant. He's a Canadian filmmaker trying to shoot a remake of *Oedipus* called *Eddy and Joanna*. This guy sees everything as a movie image."

"The play will be a multi-media extravaganza with film clips, slides, and Michael Becker performing all the music. 'It's a new way of doing a musical and it won't follow any known formula,'" said Baker.

The Phoenix is currently in the process of negotiating a Toronto and Vancouver run for *B-Movie*.

But while the Phoenix's other two plays aren't premieres, they certainly aren't tame.

The first play, Christopher Durang's *Beyond Therapy*, is a satirical look at contemporary relationships and the profession of psychiatry.

"In this play, the psychiatrists have more problems than their patients, but what makes it stand apart is the author's twisted sense of humour. It satirizes the trendy 80's — taking the yup out of Yuppies."

The second play, *When the Wind Blows*, deals with nuclear war. The story is derived from a British adult comic book of the same name. The play is about an elderly English couple following ludicrous government directives in the wake of a nuclear attack.

"It's not a study of nuclear war, but it's a playwright's version of how a nuclear war would be," said Baker. "The sets will be two dimensional, and the costumes almost cartoonish. I don't think theatre should be

documentarized."

Apart from their regular season, the Phoenix is expanding with late evening shows and more experimental offerings in their downtown space on Rice Howard Way.

"We've tried to get the program off the ground this summer and we've had quite a success with our first production, *Soap on the Rocks*."

Baker would like to see the downtown

space have a "life of its own" and wants to "open the doors for some really new stuff." Unfortunately, the biggest limitation on the viability of the space is funding.

"The Phoenix budget is small and most of it goes into our four plays. The downtown space isn't in the regular Phoenix budget and so far the funds have come from the theatre's fund raising support group, the Friends of the Phoenix."

Baker also feels that the city hasn't been as supportive of the arts as it should be, particularly in the downtown projects like the Phoenix.

"The city has been cutting back our grants just as the theatre is trying to grow. What we are trying to do is for the community and for downtown."

But even with the city's less than enthusiastic support the theatre is still better off than when Baker started and "had offices in a foreman's shack on the south side and was renting rehearsal space wherever I could."

"We're in year four of a five year plan."

"I'd like to see more original work. This year, two out of our four plays are original, and next year I'd like to see three out of four. Also, we have the rights for a play about AIDS for next season. It's called *As Is*. We wanted to do the play this year, but it was too popular and we couldn't get the rights to it."

"We want to keep breaking ground," said Baker. "And you can't do that till you're established. It's our mandate to challenge; challenge the city and challenge ourselves

convince people to see the world like they want it to be seen."

Take for example a recent story in the Edmonton Journal (Monday August 12, section B, page 7) entitled "Stars Debate Rights of AIDS Victims."

The story examined the panic surrounding the escalation of AIDS in the Hollywood acting community as gay and suspected gay actors are being discriminated against, culminating in the inability of some of them being able to find work. The story in itself was fine but was found sorely lacking when it tried to estimate the size of the Hollywood gay community: "No figures of course are kept on the size of the gay population in the entertainment industry, but it can be said to be a sizeable minority. Estimated by representatives of gay organizations tend to run high — one interviewed for this article stated that six of the 10 top male box office stars are gay."

Now, while that statement appears to be impressive and documented, upon closer scrutiny it becomes obvious that the statement is nothing more than very manipulative hearsay.

First of all, the statement is based on an assumption that most people take for granted: that the entertainment industry is a haven for homosexuals. Right off the bat the reader is less likely to question the statement because he probably agrees with it, and the writer probably knows that and realizes that his story won't come under the same kind of scrutiny that it would if he were scribbling on some other less universally agreed upon subject. So out the door goes documentation and logical arguments.

Who exactly are the sources in this Journal story. "Gay Organizations" can be anything from a gay teachers' social club in Kansas to a gay actors' support group in LA. You'll have to agree that the story's quote from the second group would be thought provoking but from the first group would be ludicrous, but since we're not told what gay organizations the author contacted, how can we be certain that it wasn't the gay educators from Kansas? Would you trust a news story on cancer that quoted "a doctor" from "a medical organization"?

By not identifying their sources and establishing beyond any reasonable doubt their authority and validity, the story becomes nothing more than innuendo, serving only to reinforce the unfounded prejudicial opinions of the reader. After all, it must be true that all actors are fags, I read it in the Edmonton Journal.



Gilbert Bouchard
MEDIA WATCH

In his column Mr. Bouchard will be examining the various forms of mass media. The following weeks will see systematic investigations into the print and electronic media, movies and live theatre.

by Gilbert Bouchard

"Don't believe everything you read."

How many times have you heard that silly cliché, and how many times have you muttered to yourself: "Of course I don't believe everything I read."

But like everything else in life, sometimes the most obvious traps are the most likely to lure us headfirst into their maws.

Everyone does it. We pick up a newspaper or magazine and read the articles uncritically, sometimes because of intellectual laziness and other times because of conscious manipulation by the mass media itself.

Newspapers, for example, are experts at hiding their lack of research and biases in a cloak of objectivity and respectability. Manipulating their privileged status, the expectations of their readership, and the language and conventions of their media are second nature to the editors and scribes of most major newspapers. They are out to



Tom Wood: the drag queen in *Torch Song Trilogy*.

photo Alex Miller