

# ENTERTAINMENT

Play chronicles ups and downs of working life.

## Just towing the line

**Life on the Line**  
Workshop West Theatre

review by David Jordan

Not many theatre companies would take a gamble on entertaining an audience for 90 minutes with just one actor, no elaborate costumes, and next to no set design. But that's what Toronto-based Mixed Company has done with *Life on the Line*, and the gamble pays off.

*Life on the Line* follows the emotional ups and downs of a typical middle class Canadian worker, from the lowest depths of anyone's life — looking for work — to the exhilarating high of that first job. Between the peaks and troughs of Steve's emotional life fall the ego-tripping, the excuses and justifications that go along with promotions, slacking off and being sacked.

There is no story *per se*; the emotions are portrayed through suggestive poetry, brought to life by actor Steven Bush's evocative gestures and the music of Allen Booth on keyboards and Ben Cleveland-Hayes on drums. Without any of these three ingredients, the play would fall dead, but *Life on the Line* is a perfect blend of drama, poetry and music, and the effect is more powerful than any single genre could produce.

Interest does lag a little in the second (and final) act. Whereas Act I portrays those vis-

ceral emotions that we've all felt at one time or another, the play's second act expands to cover less personal, and more political themes, thereby excluding a fair portion of the audience.

For example, we can all laugh at a bit of ourselves in Steve's aspirations as he moves out of the unemployment line and into the working world in Act I: "I'll get a bigger place," he decides, "one that doesn't look smaller with people in it. I'll get a new couch — in tortoise shell to match the carpet."

But in Act II, unless your life has ever been dominated by fears of a nuclear war, songs like "Countdown" will mean little to you. And unless you're a Poli-Sci major, comparisons of the U.S./Canada relationship to Russia and Poland won't get much of a chuckle. The weakest moment in the play comes with a comparison of the Pope to Michael Jackson, a joke that became a cliché almost the moment it was first uttered when the two mega-tours coincided last month.

Whether or not you are included in the narrowed audience that Act II is directed at, *Life on the Line* is an artistic success of the highest order. One cannot give enough credit to the young Canadian company that produced it, or to Workshop West Theatre, who brought it to Edmonton.

*Life on the Line* is playing at the Chinook Theatre until October 21. For reservations and tickets, phone 429-4251.



Steven Bush, Ben Cleveland-Hayes, and Allen booth in *Life On The Line*.

Photo Tim Kubash

Musical review hits the mark

## Don't eat the quiche

**Working Title**  
Theatre Network

review by Dean Bennett

*Working Title*, a revised musical revue, is currently playing at Theatre Network. Written and performed by Stephen Heatley and Edward Connell, the play runs a satirical gamut of problems facing contemporary man, while at the same time poignantly looking at our self-perception and our value systems.

Everything from quiche to jazzercise to self-help books is parodied. Throughout the various skits, Heatley and Connell poke fun at stereotyping and man's predilection for surface appearance. Heatley is particularly notable here. His portrayal of Petie, a clown who cannot escape a typecast of rustic simplicity, is amusing yet also touching.

*Working Title* pays tribute to the never-say-die attitude of the underdog work ethic. With songs like "I am a Srew-Up," Connell and Heatley present characters who have faced their share of problems and setbacks, but have refused to give in. Even if we laugh at the foibles of these happy losers, they have still gained our respect as they embody an intrepidity we hope is inherent in all of us.

Despite the clichéd theme of "always being darkest before the dawn," the play never degenerates into camp.

Quite the contrary: The satire is intelligent, but never black, deriving humor from its grandiose treatment of commonplace events.

Another reason *Working Title* works well is because Heatley and Connell have produced a play that takes advantage of the close proximity of the audience to the actors. Both performers constantly talk to the crowd as if on a one-to-one basis, and Heatley even begins roaming among the patrons during Act II. This elicits audience response, and by participating in the action one does not feel so far removed from it.

The acting, if not noteworthy, is certainly competent, especially if one considers that Connell's talents are focused primarily on music, and Heatley's on directing.

Probably most memorable are the musical compositions. Connell exhibits polished piano skills, and the songs are as witty as they are dull. Although the odd joke will drown in a sea of polite tittering, this does not prevent *Working Title* from being an entertaining and even thought-provoking piece of theatre.

*Working Title* runs through to October 21.



*Working Title* parodies everything from quiche to jazzercise.

Photo Tim Kubash

## Drama is sparse in modern Shakespeare

**The Fairy Queen**  
Pro Coro Canada  
Conductor: Michel Gervais

review by John Charles

Maybe the Tri-Bach Festival paid Michel Gervais off so other Baroque composers won't look too good. Why else would the conductor make Henry Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* sound so dull?

Pro Coro's concert performance of Purcell's glittering 'semi-opera' of 1662, at All Saint's Cathedral last Wednesday, was disappointing for several reasons.

The original 1662 production was so lavish with dancers, singers, costumes, and special effects, that it had to be given the following year just to cover production costs. Gervais attempted to semi-stage it, but in the most tentative fashion. Having soloists march on in an endless series of cloaks isn't staging, and

only underlines the fact that nothing dramatic is happening. If you don't have appropriate stage business which helps the audience understand the work, it's far better to have the soloists just stand in evening dress in front of the orchestra, and concentrate on their music.

There's nothing singers can do dramatically here, because Purcell's music is really incidental music, originally meant to accompany a five-act adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. So the texts of the songs talk of extra characters — gods and goddesses, seasons, monkeys, Chinese dancers — and not of the play's plot. It's much better for us to just listen to Purcell's wonderfully inventive music.

The other, more crucial disappointment was that five of Gervais' six soloists weren't up to the demands of this music. It takes a lot of art to master Purcell's vocal lines, and sing them in a simple, pure way which realizes his

exquisite melodic lines and concern for words.

Soprano Linda Perillo was a cheery chirper, who handled her high-lying passages excellently. She also conveyed joy in her art with her lively eyes and smile.

But her colleague, Eva Bostrand, often had a drooping tone that dragged her basically rich and lovely voice down, and conveyed nothing of her songs' moods. She had some limpid moments, but not enough of them.

The four men were either inaudible, raw in tone, or uncertain in manner, so that we never got beyond the notes to the music itself. And they were often drowned out by the orchestra of 20 — and even by a basic accompaniment of lute, cello and harpsichord. When bass Alec Tebbutt sang, "My Torch has long been out," we knew exactly what he meant.

From a university group this would have been acceptable, but not by a professional

group with a national reputation.

The 24-voice strong Pro Coro was excellent, with a gleaming tone lacking in the soloists. So the choral moments were stand-outs, reminding you of the Handel oratorios written a few decades later.

And the orchestra, led by James Keene, was also solid. A little bird-call trio for recorders and bassoon was delightful, as were most of the dances and preludes. And the trio which provided many solo's backup, was pointed and incisive.

Gervais' tempi tended to be brisk, and sometimes pushy, which blurred string lines occasionally. More flexibility from number to number would have emphasized the remarkable variety of Purcell's writing.

It's a pity this imaginative event wasn't better performed. We don't often hear Purcell at concerts in Edmonton, and a lot of listeners are probably still wondering why some of us make such a fuss about him.