

Features

Interview: Richard Monette talks about his career and new play Bent

By Ronald Ramage

Richard Monette is dressed in a tailored thin brown leather vest with a white shirt that breathes elegant casualness.

His greeting is deeply warm; he oozes charm. Behind the smile, his eyes are sharply watchful. His speech, heard by all who rented the cassette guide at the A.G.O.'s Vincent Van Gogh exhibition, is finely articulated, hypnotizing in its measured cadence.

Monette became an important Canadian actor with his starring role in Michel Tremblay's *Hosanna*, although he had been acting for ten years before that part.

An outspoken man, he became the focus of the Stratford search-for-a-director controversy with an impassioned outburst calling the festival's Board of Directors irresponsible.

Recently he starred in *Dracula* at the Young People's Theatre, where he also directed and produced *Stevie*.

This week, he'll be opening in the lead role in Martin Sherman's *Bent* at the Bathurst Street Theatre.

Bent is about the Nazi persecution of homosexuals, and was already in production when the infamous bath house raids occurred. The timing of the Toronto run becomes especially crucial in light of allegations that arresting officers made remarks such as "Too bad the showers aren't hooked up to gas."

How did your career get launched?

I was of French and Italian background. I had an accent. I was 17 and I wanted to act. So I went to Eleanor Stewart who I'd heard was very good. She was, indeed, an extraordinary woman. In my first lesson she asked me, "Mr. Monette, why have you come to me?"

My reply was, "I want to be a great actor, like John Gielgud and Laurence Olivier." She replied, "Well, Mr. Monette, we have a great deal of work to do."

You attended York University?

I spent one year at York. It seemed to me very far away. I remember getting extremely bad marks in my Shakespeare class, at which point I had done about 15 Shakespeare plays, and getting a very good mark in a course on existentialism and logical positivism, a thing I thought I could never conquer.

How come you left for England after your stint at Stratford in the 60's?

At that time there was hardly any theatre going on at all. There was nothing here in Toronto. I stayed in England for five years, until I was thrown out by the Home Office because I wasn't English.

What being away taught me was what you learn when you travel. Who you are. There's nothing that makes you feel more Canadian than being somewhere that isn't. It teaches you what's good about your own place, your own home, and what's lacking in your own place.

What's lacking in Canada are audiences and critics. I think the work from the artistic community is exceptionally good. I think it is the most exciting place to work. It's also very demoralizing, because there are no financial rewards.

There's very little public recognition.

The media are ungrateful for the amount of good stuff around. I think the media often panders to what they consider public taste, instead of shaping the taste of the public.

We've got to recognize that our values are not the values that go in New York, or even the values that go in England. By pretending we have other's values we are losing our own.

In Stratford, the criticism is so heavy of their productions. Sometimes they're right, and sometimes they're wrong, but I want to say, "Oh yeah? Where have you seen better? I've been to the Royal Shakespeare Company. They're not all that much better, and sometimes they're much worse."

When I came back to Canada, things had started up again. I thought I had something to say. If you're an artist, or potential artist, that's all that matters, having something to say.

You hesitate to declare yourself an artist?

I think it's a very presumptuous thing to say. An artist has insight. Somebody who is not an artist is a craftsman. It is a perfectly respectable thing to be a craftsman. To be an artist is exceptional. Lots of people, in their motivation, want to be artists, but don't have the talent. There are a lot of people with the talent, who choose to do commercials, and so will not fulfill their potential of becoming artists.

And there are those few who have the talent and work at it, and do fulfill their potential.

Tell me about Something Red.

Something Red was the first time I acted in Toronto in six or seven years. I did *Something Red* last year at the Tarragon.

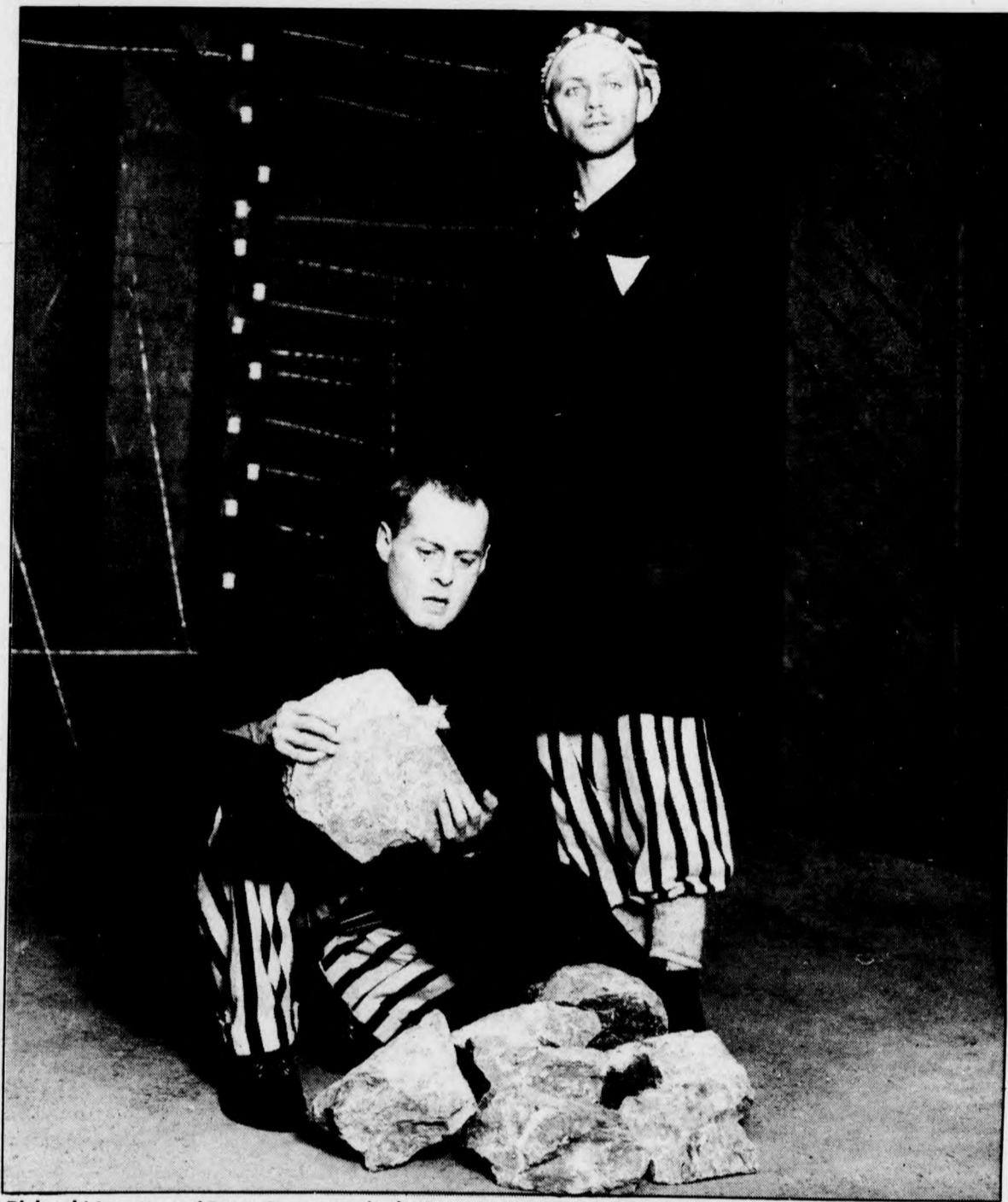
I was nominated for a Dora Mavor Moore Award for best supporting actor for it. I thought *Something Red* was an extraordinarily good first full-length play by Tom Walmsley, who I hope keeps writing plays.

I did the play because I thought it had an extraordinary sensibility, a very depressing one, but very committed, existential. I thought, this is a simplistic statement, but I believe in it.

"I think all the great plays have to do with metaphors which are sexual."

I think all the great plays have to do with metaphors which are sexual. *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, *A Doll's House*, *Hosanna*, *Something Red*, *Bent*. When an audience comes to see a play, I think they come in with different backgrounds, different economic situations—there's only one thing they have in common—sex.

And it's not for no reason. *Oedipus Rex* is the greatest play ever written, because it strikes the fundamental root on a dramatic level. You can opt in and out of violence, but you cannot opt in or out of sex. It's a common denominator. I'm not saying it's the most important problem, I'm saying it's basic to us, no matter



Richard Monette and Brent Carver star in the Toronto Production of *Bent*.

what.

What are your thoughts about Bent's success?

I'm glad in a way, that it had such a huge success in England and America. Because if it had been done in Canada, I suspect that everybody would have thrown up their hands and said, "Oh my goodness. This is outrageous." But now of course, because other people have said it is not only respectable, but an extremely important play....that no, because others thought it was important, I guess we should too, because we always follow.

usually the easy things don't interest me. Occasionally, I'll do something like *Dracula*, in which I will have a wonderful time. That hasn't happened much in my life. I've been lucky, though. I've never had to take a job other than acting. And very few actors can say that.

How will the Stratford incident affect your career?

I don't know, because it's too soon. I have been made an offer to go back to Stratford this year. That's all I can say, because I don't know.

I will say this, however, and this is very important, that my remarks were not premeditated as the

with *Bent* because it was brought to my attention three years ago. I loved the play. I thought it was important. So I flogged it around, but nobody was willing to produce it.

Then it was done in London, and it was a big success.

Then it was done in New York, and it was a big success.

Now, finally, after all this time, somehow, I'm being vindicated, and I was offered the part.

I think the character I play, Max, is an everyman figure. He doesn't know who he is and is trying to find out. We all go through that. Who we are politically, who we are sexually, who we are economically: defining ourselves.

Max is not an admirable person at all, as Horst, the other character is. But he's human, and because you see him go through certain events, and you see him develop and change, you follow him because he is flawed, as we all are. As in most cases, he changes not because he's brave or strong, but because of what he's forced by external pressure to become. It's a wonderful balance.

If, as you've defined it, acting is a way of speaking to the community, what is important to say?

There are many things that are important to say. It's important to entertain, for instance. I loved doing *Dracula*. I thought it was important to do it for kids, and I think it's saying something doing *Bent*. Especially at this time, in this city.

You've been in some very important Canadian plays.

Since I was in college, I've always believed in Canadian plays. I think we have an extraordinary output of good plays from this country, when you compare it to America and what goes on in New York City.

You've been quoted as saying you want to do light comedy, which Bent certainly isn't.

There are certain plays that you have to live and die with when you do them. When I made that statement what I was saying is I would really like to take a break, and do something easy for a while. But

Toronto Star suggested. They were absolutely unpremeditated. In retrospect, I feel that silence would have been morally wrong. There was too much injustice and too much pain for nobody to have spoken. I just happened to snap at that meeting. I was under the impression that there was information being withheld. It wouldn't have happened, I think, if that had not triggered it. If I thought I had lied, then I would withdraw what I said. I did not lie. I spoke what I considered the truth.

I'm told you had the original production rights to Bent.

No I didn't. I've been associated