

Theatre 3 wants the best

by Judy Fisher

This is the first in a series of Gateway articles about the theater scene in Edmonton; professional and amateur. Keith Digby, Theatre 3's Artistic Director, is the focus of the first story.

I met with Keith Digby on the morning of the first day of rehearsals for *The Philanthropist*, Theatre 3's opening play. He looked remarkably cheerful for a man who until recently wondered if there would be enough money for a season at all. We sat in the theater's foyer and enjoyed a cup of coffee and I asked him if his attitude to theater has changed since he became an Artistic Director:

"It's much harder than I thought it was. My attitude to theatre hasn't changed. It's starting to refine itself in that what you blithely assume you can do, when you haven't been an Artistic Director before, you find very difficult to accomplish ... around play selection time it's pure paranoia."

We talked about a play he was eager to do and then just before he announced his season, the rights were withdrawn and he had to make another choice. "It would be nice," said Digby, "if we didn't have to announce a full season here at Theatre 3. If I could say these are the first three plays, you know what kind of fare you'll see at Theatre 3 and buy a season ticket with four blanks in it. I would like to develop that but I, as an Artistic Director, must have more of a track record before I could do it."

"What I did last year was to introduce a new arm to Theatre 3, in which could be briefly described as the 'plays of the 1970s,' small house commercial plays. I'm hoping that will now be a part of Theatre 3, as the Canadian play and the updated classic are and have been a part of Theatre 3."

He added that his aim is "to provide a range of theater for our seasonal audience. When I'm choosing a play, I choose it because it's good. If it has language in it, or nudity, or as with *Streamers*, violence, then that's because it's a necessary part of that play and I believe that play should find an audience."

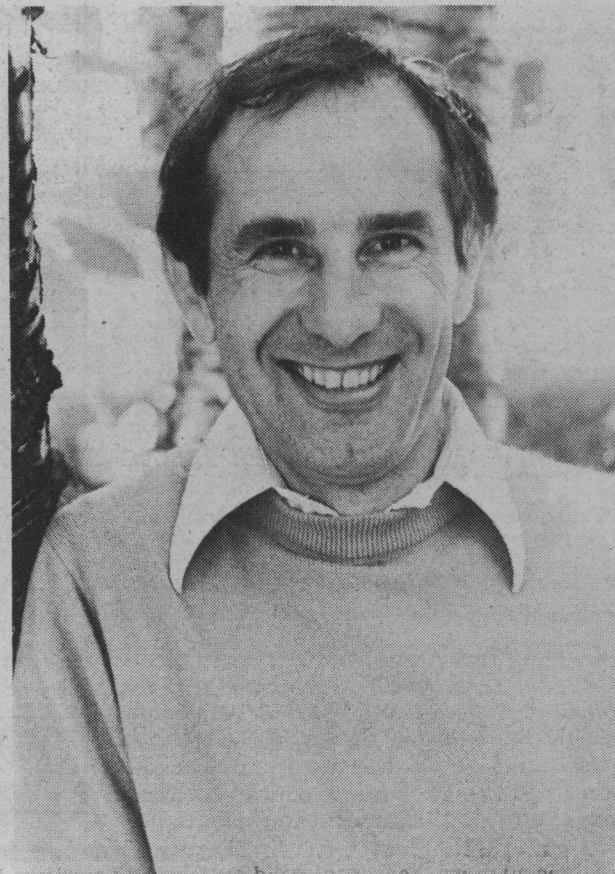
I asked him if in his play selection he relates to the other theaters in the city and tries to do something they are not going to do: "Yes, I try to be cheekier. I try to be a little less restrained in my choice of material. I expect my audience to go with me a long, long way and I'm finding that they will. A lot of people came to see *Streamers* and a tremendous amount of people came to see *Otherwise Engaged*."

"I like the type of play that has a lot of humor and some strength, playwrights like Simon Gray, Christopher Hampton and Michael Frayne write like that."

Noting that they are all British playwrights Digby gave me an impressive list of this season's Canadian works: Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations*, Warren Graves' *Beauty and the Beast*, John Murrell's

translation of Machiavelli's *Mandragola*, and a new Michel Tremblay play.

Last season Digby discontinued Theatre 3's association with Northern Light Theatre in producing the playwright's workshops. I asked him why: "The style of that doesn't suit me. It is a marvellous idea and has produced good stuff, namely Ben Tarver's *Auguste Dupin* which was a Northern Light, Theatre 3 workshop eighteen months ago. But I'm more of a person who works with an individual playwright by himself, forcing him or her continually back to his or her typewriter and then maybe getting a group of actors together for a day and reading the play through



Keith Digby

and commenting on it to the playwright. And then myself and the playwright going away and doing exactly the same thing again until it's good or until we're sick of it and we go away and find different people!"

As it is always a current issue in theater, I asked him how he felt about 'imports.' "I would like to see free trade between Canada, Britain and the United States. If the rules were the same for people travelling to Britain and to the States as for them coming to Canada I would welcome it, but they're not and therefore I think Canada has to be careful that it doesn't do with its theater what it's done with its oil....

"You have to decide how strong your own theater is before you can allow that free trade. In other words, it's probably true that while there's a load of ex-Brits

running Canadian theaters, you might have to watch your rules about who you let in, because their tendencies and knowledge of actors will be based on their roots and where they came from. Therefore they may tend to choose with that in mind. If they're sufficiently Canadianised themselves to find the excitement that's there, then fine. If they aren't then watch it, or you'll suddenly find that X director has lifted Y actor from England to play a minor role simply because he doesn't know the people who are eminently capable of playing that role here."

For actors to be "eminently capable" they do have to have talent and a good training. I asked Digby what he thought of the training in Canada: "Several places are developing good training grounds. I'd never believed that a university was the place to train actors and yet I suddenly find myself using an incredible number of University of Alberta grads, so I'd better change my mind about that because every time I hire yet another BFA student from the U of A it makes my argument look silly ..."

"Their training at U of A is better than most other universities ... Two good training schools in Canada are the U of A and the Vancouver Playhouse Theatre School ..."

"I don't care what background an actor has, however, it is nice when I'm doing an early Renaissance play, as I am this year, not to have to teach people about the early Renaissance or about what that means in terms of theater style I'd rather have someone who is talented rather than educated. I look at their pieces, their resumes and hope to see them in a play."

"The real problem with the U of A training is that they have all those teachers who are wonderful actors and directors and who are lost to us for most of the year The great thing is that they do allow their professional staff to continue their work in the profession as much as they can and I think that's of benefit both to the staff and to the students. For just so long as the staff are still working in the profession they won't get all "university" on us, in the bad sense of the word, and they will continue to turn out students who are realistically orientated."

When Digby took the post of Artistic Director he stated that he was going to have a repertory company, a core of actors for the whole season. I asked him what happened to that idea: "It proved too expensive — actors don't want to be tied anywhere for a full season. It's still on my mind and I still think it's a marvellous way of running a theatre. It's just that I can't afford it right now."

And what of "right now"? What can we expect from Theatre 3? "What I'm doing is defining a range of experience that I think fits Theatre 3. If we do a light comedy we will do the very best available light comedy from this or another century. My 'philosophy' is that I'm looking for the best Canadian playwrights, I'm looking for the best plays of the commercial successes of the 70s, I'm looking for the best of the modern classic and the best of the classic classics that we can do here, within our limitation of a 230 seat house."

"I want to draw a lot of people, I want to entertain a lot of people, to make people think. The standard of the vehicle is important, there is a standard of writing and playwright below which I do not wish to go."

Kuerti in top form

Concert review by Ken Meyers


Pianist Anton Kuerti played to an expectant audience Friday, October 26, at the Jubilee Auditorium. He was accompanied by the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra under the baton of principle guest conductor Pierre Hetu. The occasion was an all Beethoven concert consisting of the Overture to *Fidelio* (Op. 72), the Piano Concerto #3 in C minor (Op. 37), and the glorious *Symphony #3* in E flat, the "Eroica" (Op. 55).

Kuerti displayed an impressive understanding of the middle-aged Beethoven's concerto. The concerto's Mozartian influence was felt in the delicate instrumental approach as befits a solo voice in such a classically styled concerto. What is amazing about Kuerti is how he can draw out the lyricism and elegance of such writing but still maintain the intensity of Beethoven's immediacy. As the structure of the concerto is of the classical persuasion, the expressive power contained within the combination of soloist and orchestra must be subdued, but still ever present. To relate the emotion of a rapidly evolving Romanticist within the format of a classical structure is indeed an accomplishment.

The orchestra's best performance of the evening was the opening number, the "Overture to *Fidelio*." The horn and clarinet combination of the first theme was authoritatively stated, and the second theme was played by the strings with equal precision. The treatment of the presto section was handled quite deftly with the phrase from the first theme being developed as much from the performance as the composition itself.

In the *Symphony #3*, the second movement shone above the remainder of the work. The low strings opening the movement created as somber a mood as could be expected, and the development of the emotion within the movement was adhered to diligently.

The symphony's next concert will feature the much acclaimed pianist Alicia de Larrocha playing Beethoven's fourth piano concerto as well as Vaughn William's *Symphony #5*. It will also be under the direction of Pierre Hetu.



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