

Unblended reefer gladness

By Gay Walsh

The success of a musical comedy revue is determined by many things, but three ingredients are essential in building and sustaining interest throughout — song, dance, and comedy. These ingredients when executed with a reasonable level of competence can maintain, from moment to moment, a constant flow of entertainment. *Reefer Gladness: The All Marijuana Revue*, presently at Cafe Soho, is a musical comedy revue which fails because the production lacks a total blending of these three qualities.

With the opening song, "Around Goes the Pound," we find that out of the five ensemble members, only one really has a bearable voice — Busi Mhlong — but she has miscalculated the dimensions of the performance area to the point where her voice overexerts itself. It is too powerful, too loud for the small intimacy of Cafe Soho. Not only are the remaining four performers unable to carry a tune but they also are unfamiliar with the performance style which is inherent in a cabaret revue. They do not know how to sing to an audience, how to suck them into the mood and tone of their songs.

Besides the music, *Reefer Gladness* is composed of several comedy skits all revolving around situations which might arise while smoking marijuana. "Airport Strip", with Ralph Benmurgey and Mary Vingoe, shows a middle class couple returning from their vacation in Peru, having bought presents for their children — a pound of dope. We see them awkwardly attempting to smuggle it through customs. In "The Confessions", Jim Tuck, a dope pusher confesses to a priest that he sells Columbian Gold. Ralph Benmurgey, the priest, asks the pusher his price and when Tuck replies, "\$95 an ounce", the priest is unable to grant him divine

forgiveness. This is a sample of the level of humor which one finds in *Reefer Gladness*.

Occasionally we do experience moments of humor which are based on real situations and therefore have substance. For example, in "Not a Pretty Job", Benmurgey gives a short but very moving portrayal of a narcotics agent. There is something pathetically real about this narc and consequently, the humor stems from a base, forming substance and depth from a legitimately funny character. Unfortunately, such portrayals are too rare throughout the revue.

The problem with *Reefer Gladness* is a simple one; it finds its roots in an inability to realize where talent is lacking and then to act from that realization. Starting with the script, it was easy to see that the comic material was not

particularly funny. Moment after moment, the script was just not filled, packaged with enough humorous situations with which the performers could work. The music by Dan Larsen and Pat Clemence took me to no emotional heights; the lyrics were lost somewhere in the untrained throats of the performers.

In short, the shortcomings of the revue are a direct result of misjudgement. The ensemble, the composers, the playwright — all misjudged their own talents as well as the talent of their co-workers.

It is necessary to say that with all of the apparent faults and weaknesses in *Reefer Gladness* Michael Boncoeur, an adept director, managed to move the revue along quickly, changing from skit to skit smoothly and efficiently.

'Hearts' lacks heart

By Mickey Trigiani

Cabaret, York's unique campus theatre, combining rowdy bar and hushed playhouse, presented its first offering of the year last week entitled, *Do You Play Heats?*

Directed by Andy Lewarne and featuring six players, one pianist and a spotlight, *Hearts* investigated the popular theme of love through the medium of song, dance and short dialogue.

As with *Roustabout*, last year's first Cabaret, the script for *Hearts* was based upon the writings of R.D. Laing and the songs and dancing once again animated his sharp, simplistic, circular dialogue.

Unfortunately, such strong semblance to last year's show demands comparison. *Roustabout* explored the human condition within the framework of a circus thereby giving the show the possibility of moving in hundreds of different directions and using props and costumes to heighten the effect. *Hearts*, on the other hand, restricted the vivacity of the material by relying on metallic speeches emitted with robot-like accuracy and offered us only a couple of surprises from the flow of perfectly memorized lines.

These surprises represented more than a good laugh. They drew us closer to the performers' excitement. In a cabaret, we want to be part of the show and not the distance *Hearts* provided. We want to share in Suzanne Bennet's and Charlotte Moore's vocal energy. We'd like to soft shoe with Doug Bergstrom as he floats across the stage or tolerate the vain questions posed by Jean Diagle in the bedroom scene.

What *Hearts* lacked was the intimacy so important in a cabaret. As last year's artistic director Kate Lushington so aptly put it, we want to be able "to touche the actors' faces and take the make-up off."

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