Avner's eccentric display of mime, circus, clowning and magic

Moira MacDonald

THEATRE

Avner the Eccentric
written by Avner Eisenberg
Leah Posluns Theatre
until February 16

To describe Avner Eisenberg as a quiet man may be correct but it doesn't tell the whole story. True, the first hour of his one-man show *Avner the Eccentric* is done in virtual silence, but it is punctuated by the violent outbursts of laughter which he inspires.

Avner, what a devious fellow you are to make us laugh so hard — such a rare phenomenon these days.

arts

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Running until February 16 at the Leah Posluns Theatre, *Avner the Eccentric* performs what our wise elders apparently would call vaudeville. It is a melange of clowning, mime, circus and magic techniques which Eisenberg picked up while at the Le Coq school in Paris.

With the absence of dialogue and minimal props, it's amazing that Avner can keep his audience in such rapt attention. But Eisenberg's presence, sense of timing and use of audience participation holds it all together.

Is Avner eccentric? Well, he does start out doing some pretty mundane things, things that we all do, like dropping a pack of cigarettes on the floor then dropping his broom when he stoops to pick the pack up, then emptying the pack's entire contents while trying to retrieve the broom.

What makes Avner unique is that he turns klutziness into an art form by pushing every seemingly innocuous activity to its extreme; dropping things develops into an elaborate juggling act. Only near the end of the 90 minute show does he turn to circus mainstays like balancing ladders on his chin and walking a tightrope — netless.

Eisenberg has successfully managed to blend tightness with spontanaeity. A camera flash explodes in the front row. Avner immediately interrupts his arm-lengthening gag, descends the stage and walks over to the already-embarrassed patron, takes the camera and begins to examine it like a curious primate.

Suddenly, he flashes it in her face, then rushes around the theatre posing other spectators for pics before dutifully returning the camera. He smiles, but wags a chastising finger at the culprit for her faux pas. In this situation, Avner's clown could become absolutely terrifying (a clown's mischievousness can get downright mean); but it remains gentle, goodnaturedly poking fun at everyone's faults.

Avner's greatest eccentricity probably lies in his enthusiasm for humour in its simplest, yet most powerful form. In a world where entertainment often depends on how loud and visually spectacular a show is, such simplicity is rare and appreciated.

Eisenberg will be available until February 16 to present theatre workshops for interested groups. For more information, call the Leah Posluns Theatre, 630-6752.

Avner Eisenberg, also known as Avner the Eccentric, brings his unique blend of clown techniques to the Leah Posluns Theatre until February 16. His greatest eccentricity lies in his enthusiasm for simple, yet powerful forms of humour.

Kafka makes no pretensions to being at all kafkaesque

Azed Majeed

Steven Soderbergh was the youngest filmmaker ever to win the top prize at the Cannes Film Festival, for *Sex, Lies and Videotape* in 1989. Soderbergh's new film, *Kafka*, stars Jeremy Irons in the title role, as well as Theresa Russell, Joel Grey, Ian Holm and Sir Alec Guiness.

Kafka is a mystery/thriller that takes poetic licence with the life and works of seminal 20th century writer Franz Kafka. However, as Soderbergh adamantly points out, the film is not meant to portray a biographical reality, nor does it attempt to examine the creative process behind Kafka's work; rather, it is a film in which there happens to be a character named Kafka at the centre of an enigmatic plot which owes more to German Expressionist films than to Kafka's metaphysical writings.

***Azed:* How did you come to cast Jeremy Irons as Kafka?**

Steven Soderbergh: For a while, a couple of the producers were pushing Daniel Day Lewis because he was in a thing called *The Insurance Man*, in which he played Kafka in a kind of supporting role. I just wanted Jeremy — I thought for the film that I was trying to make that Jeremy was more appropriate. I've always liked Jeremy, I'm a big fan, and I knew that he could carry a movie, which he really has to do here.

Most of the cast members have or adopt distinctive European accents. Theresa Russell, on the other hand, is the only actor who hangs on to her American accent. Was this a conscious choice?

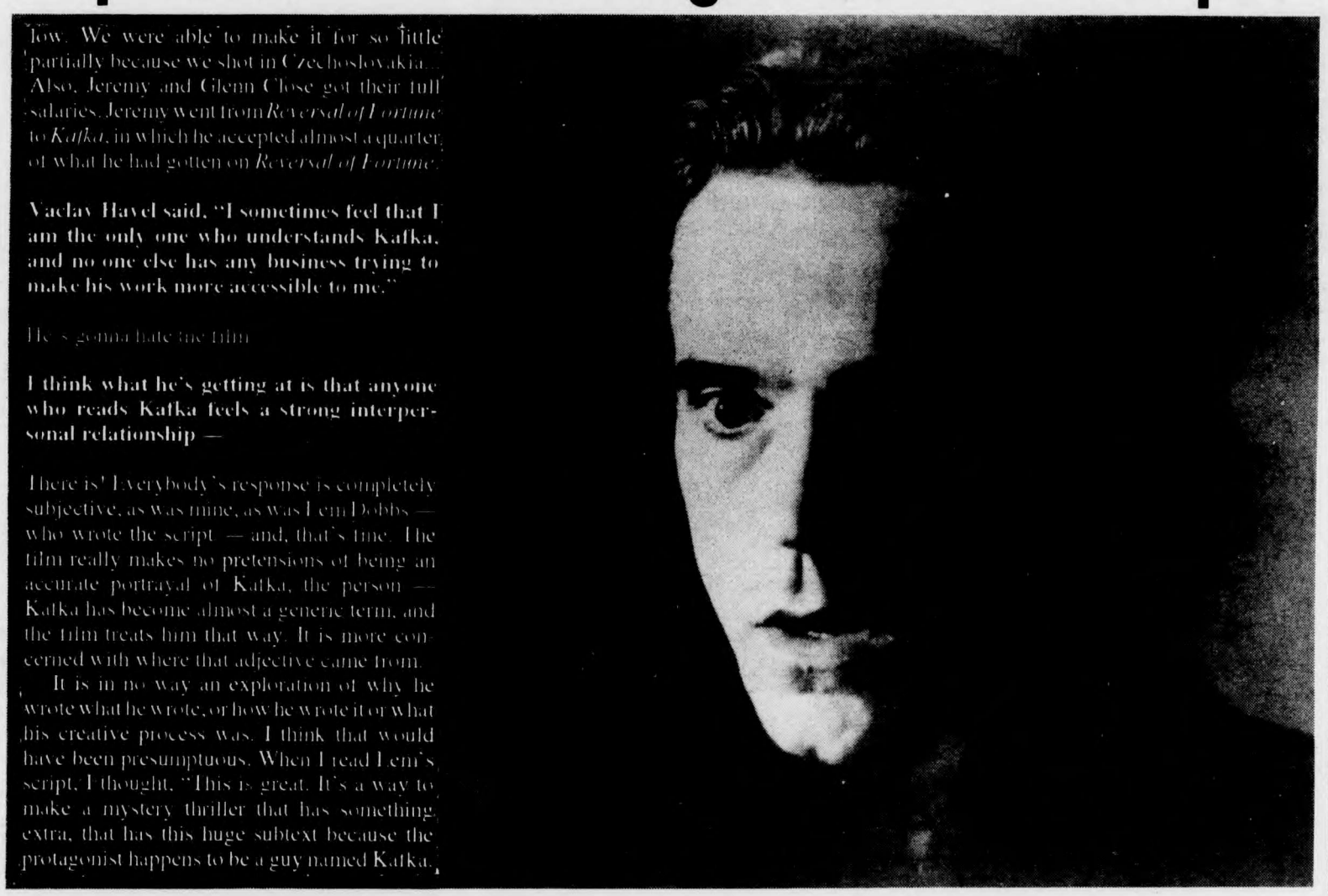
We had cast a French actress, Anne Parillaud, who was in *La Femme Nikita*, in that role. But, as hard as she worked, she couldn't quite overcome the accent to my satisfaction.

I had two days to get somebody to Prague. Theresa was interested and available. I knew she was going to get some amount of criticism because she is an American and everybody else isn't. I didn't mind too much — the only thing worse, in my mind, than an American accent sticking out is her trying to do an accent that doesn't work...

It was the kind of thing where I knew we'd get criticism, but, ultimately, I felt that she was perfectly capable of doing the part, she wanted to do it, and I needed her. Fast. And she agreed to do it for little money, as did Jeremy, as did everybody.

So, this was not a big budget film?

It was twelve (million dollars), which, to me, is a lot of money, but by Hollywood standards is



"low. We were able to make it for so little partially because we shot in Czechoslovakia... Also, Jeremy and Glenn Close got their full salaries. Jeremy went from *Reversal of Fortune* to *Kafka*, in which he accepted almost a quarter of what he had gotten on *Reversal of Fortune*."

Vaclav Havel said, "I sometimes feel that I am the only one who understands Kafka, and no one else has any business trying to make his work more accessible to me."

He's gonna hate the film.

I think what he's getting at is that anyone who reads Kafka feels a strong interpersonal relationship —

There is! Everybody's response is completely subjective, as was mine, as was Lem Dobbs — who wrote the script — and, that's fine. The film really makes no pretensions of being an accurate portrayal of Kafka, the person — Kafka has become almost a generic term, and the film treats him that way. It is more concerned with where that adjective came from.

It is in no way an exploration of why he wrote what he wrote, or how he wrote it or what his creative process was. I think that would have been presumptuous. When I read Lem's script, I thought, "This is great. It's a way to make a mystery thriller that has something extra, that has this huge subtext because the protagonist happens to be a guy named Kafka.

INTERVIEW

Steven Soderbergh, director of the popular *film sex, lies and videotape*, talks about fame, Oliver Stone and his new film, *Kafka*. For a review of *Kafka*, starring Jeremy Irons (above), see next week's *Excalibur*.

You must be aware, then, that this film will receive a mixed response.

Clearly there are gonna be people who just loathe this, who find it almost too irreverent or just silly. It was my intent to make a piece of entertainment that had a little something extra. Frankly, I know enough about his life to know that a straight biography would have been pretty stale.

Why call the film Kafka, then? Isn't borrowing the name and merging fact with fiction, in much the same way that Oliver Stone does in *JFK*, slightly misleading?

It could be. We thought about that. But the difference between *Kafka* and *JFK* is that *Kafka* at no point presents itself as being true. It is clearly, I think, from the opening three minutes, a piece of fiction that happens to borrow a few incidents that were real and change them.

Why did you choose film as a career?

As a kid, I saw a lot of movies. I was the guy in school who saw everything. But, it never occurred to me that you could go into that until I was 13 and got my hands on a super-8 camera and understood that you could have a job doing this.

Then, it just clicked and I thought: "That's what I want to do." I moved quickly, making a lot of short films and advancing fairly rapidly. By the time I was a senior, I was making things that still remain some of the best things I've done.

How did the success of *sex, lies and videotape* influence your career?

It bought me the opportunity to make something without any questions. The performance of *Kafka* will determine how far that extends.

Did your success have any negative consequences?

As I said at Cannes after I won, "I guess it's all downhill from here." At the moment, you feel like, "This is too much, too soon."

So, you didn't expect it to be a big hit?

No. I didn't expect it to get released when we were making it. I just thought it would be a resumé piece, and that I would be able to use it to make a real movie.

Now that *Kafka* is ready for release, how do you feel about it?

I'm pleased with it. There are things in it that I don't like, there are things in it that I don't think work. But, in general, I think it's different, it's an attempt at something. I think people will be relieved by the fact that it's as entertaining as it is, that it's got some funny stuff in it and it's got some scary stuff in it — it doesn't have prerequisites attached. It's not homework to sit through.