

Entertainment

Playwright Raymond Storey.

Gas: a sour story

by Suzanne Lundrigan

The Lodgepole blow-out introduced Albertans to the hazards of hydrogen sulfide. The Bhopal incident left them shaking in their boots.

Playwright Raymond Storey had run-ins with this gas as well. "An oil company commissioned me to make a safety education film on sour gas. At that time they told me how deadly this compound was. Later, when I was researching my play, these same individuals said that there was no danger because they knew what they were doing."

This is one example of the contradictions and exaggerations which Raymond Storey encountered as he researched his play *Something in the Wind*.

The play examines the conflict which arises between a ranching family and a multinational oil corporation when a sour gas well is moved into the neighbourhood.

Storey spent six months interviewing ranchers and oilmen in southern Alberta in preparation for the eighty-minute play. Says Storey, "There was plenty of passion on both sides."

"The ranchers firmly believe that the gas wells are making their kids sick and killing their livestock. They're worried. Yet, when I spoke with the oilmen, they would look at me and say, 'If I felt there was a possibility that the plant emissions would give me cancer, would I live here and expose my kids to that?'"

As Storey discovered, the sour gas well was a great source of tension in the community. "Brothers weren't speaking to sisters; marriages were strained to the breaking point. People shook with rage as they expressed their opinions."

Yet another issue clouded the affair. "These people are incredibly attached to their land. When I asked them why they didn't move they told me, 'My land is more important to me than the air I breathe.'"

Storey is animated as he discusses the different sides of the argument. He stands up and paces as he explains, punctuating his conversation with gestures.

Yet Storey does not lose sight of economic and political realities. "The oil companies brought Alberta into the twentieth century. Before them there were no paved roads in this province and inadequate medical care." Labelling the efforts of groups like Greenpeace as irresponsible, Storey warns against a simplistic solution to the problem.

Storey believes that there is a solution, "If we can send a man to the moon, we can make plants which are totally pollution free."

When asked why this technology isn't being implemented, Storey answers, "It costs money to retool plants. It costs jobs to close plants down. I'm not talking about fat corporate bosses oiling themselves on the Mediterranean. Innumerable little towns' economies rely on the existence of a sour gas well."

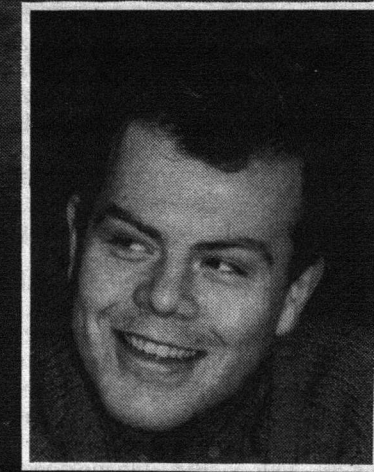
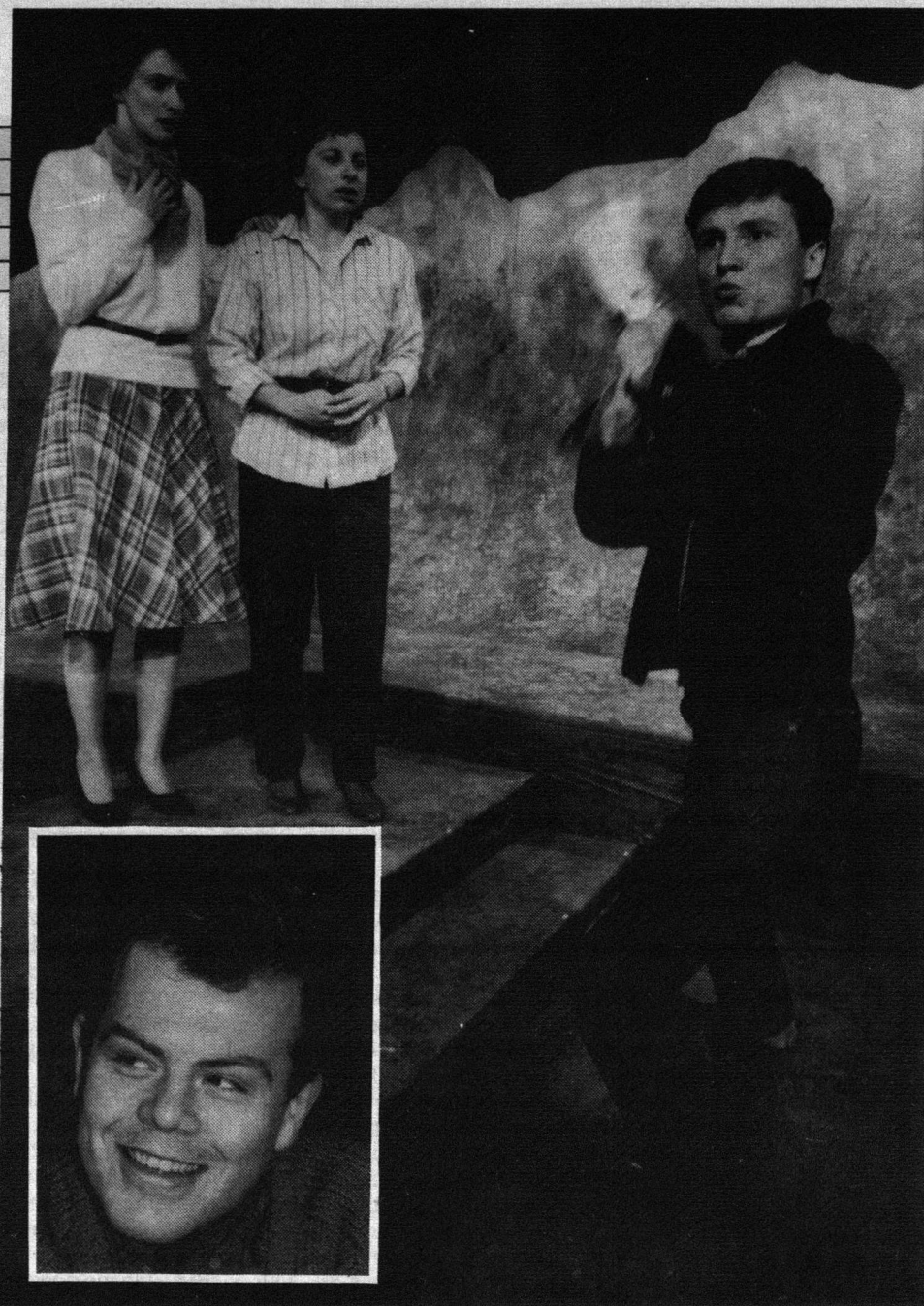
Having written the play in the hopes "of shaking people out of their lethargy and to let them know just what it costs to live in this society. Perhaps they will then pressure the government into looking further into this situation."

Storey is frank about the manner in which he has treated this topic. "It is always easier to sympathize with the individual. In the course of this play the individuals frequently contradict themselves and distort reality. I followed the whole story through until emotion comes into play, once emotion comes into play that's when it becomes, in a sense, unfair because your sympathy cannot help but go to somebody who is concerned for a sick child."

Storey is satisfied with his portrayal of business and the ranchers. He admits to problems insofar as the government portrayal went. "It was hell on wheels to figure out what they were talking about. For example, they talk about serving the people but they don't talk about the people."

In the end Storey shakes his head "you really begin to wonder what the truth really is. I don't think anyone really knows. . . ."

Something in the Wind opens Thursday, January 23rd at Theatre Network.



Sour gas is not dangerous

by Suzanne Lundrigan

The Senior Safety specialist for Gulf Ltd., Chris Smith, dismisses hydrogen sulfide as a public health threat.

"No member of the public has ever been harmed or killed by hydrogen sulfide. The deaths that have occurred have been on the job site. In two cases the hydrogen sulfide concentration was approximately 1,000 parts per million."

Smith explained that hydrogen sulfide is a naturally occurring substance. "It is essential to plant life on this planet; without it man would not exist. Man and hydrogen sulfide evolved alongside one another."

Smith noted that the maximum permitted

emission level in Alberta is six parts per billion. "At a recent beer and chili party we recorded a human fart at 200 parts per million."

"Official studies in the town of Rotorua, New Zealand, where the hydrogen sulfide level is seven parts per million on a daily basis, revealed that the residents were by and large as healthy as the rest of New Zealand population."

While Smith does not view hydrogen sulfide as a threat to public health, he does point out that, "There may be other chemicals being emitted along with the hydrogen sulfide. These are possibly the real culprits."

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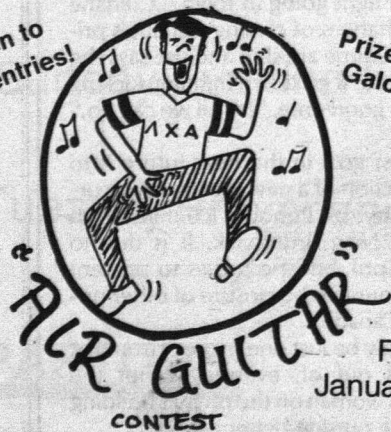
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