

# Announcing the 1983/4 Gazette theatre awards!

## Chosen by Chris Morash

It's that time of year again—the time of year when critics try to sum up the best of a theatrical season in a few well chosen envelopes; the time of year when Tonys, Oscars and Obies sprout up like crocuses.

Well, this year there's a new, humbler member of the award crop—the *Dalhousie Gazette Unicorn*.

Like its namesake, the Unicorn is a highly subjective beast who invites dispute and may raise a bit of controversy; and, like unicorns of yore, it is extremely difficult to actually lay hands on a real Unicorn.

Any play staged (although not necessarily originating) in the Halifax-Dartmouth area between September 1, 1983 and April 1, 1984 is eligible for a Unicorn in each or any of eleven categories, as well as the two additional special awards. There will be an Honourary Mention in each category, if warranted. And the winners are:

**BEST PLAY:** *God's Trombone*,

Kwacha Playhouse. **Honourary Mention (HM):** *The Actor's Nightmare/Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You*, Another Theatre Company.

**BEST DIRECTOR:** David Renton, for *The Actor's Nightmare*, Another Theatre Company. **HM:** Tom Kerr, for *The Seahorse*, Neptune Theatre Co.

**BEST NEW SCRIPT:** Walter Borden, *God's Trombone*, Kwacha Playhouse. **HM:** Rising Tide Theatre Productions (groups writing effort), *Joey*.

**BEST DESIGN:** Peter Perina, for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Dalhousie Theatre Productions. **HM:** Robert Doyle, for *Grease*, Dalhousie Theatre Productions.

**BEST ACTOR:** Kevin Noble, for the role of "Joey Smallwood" in *Joey*, Rising Tide Theatre Productions. **HM:** Walter Borden, for *God's Trombone*, Kwacha Playhouse.

**BEST ACTRESS:** Anna Cameron, for the role of "Martha" in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, No Name Productions. **HM:** Janet Wright, for the role of

"Gertrude Blum" in *The Seahorse*, Neptune Theatre Company.

**BEST SUPPORTING ACTOR:** Maurice Godin, for the role of "Mercutio" in *Romeo and Juliet*, Neptune Theatre Company. **HM:** Kim Coates, for the role of "Action" in *West Side Story*, Neptune Theatre Company.

**BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS:** Wanda Wilkinson, for the role of "Angelica, the Nurse," in *Romeo and Juliet*, Neptune Theatre Co. **HM:** Jennette White, for the role of "Rizzo" in *Grease*, Dalhousie Theatre Productions.

**BEST CHOREOGRAPHY:** Grace MacDonald, for *West Side Story*, Neptune Theatre Company.

**BEST COSTUME DESIGN:** Robert Doyle, for the costumes that formed a part of his design for *West Side Story*, Neptune Theatre Company. **HM:** Robert Doyle, for the costumes that formed a part of his design for *Romeo and Juliet*, Neptune Theatre Company.

**BEST ORIGINAL MUSIC:** Mar-

sha Coffey, for *Holy Ghosters*, Mulgrave Road Co-op.

**REGIONAL RELEVANCE AWARD:** *The Execution and the Rule*, Popular Projects Society. Despite being written over fifty years ago in Germany by Bertolt Brecht, this play's use of projected images made a powerful statement about the off-shore oil

industry in Nova Scotia.

**WET NOODLE:** John Gray, for *You Better Watch Out, You Better Not Die*. The "Wet Noodle Award" goes to the season's biggest disappointment; coming from the man who wrote *Billy Bishop* and *Rock'n'Roll, You Better Watch Out* was a real let-down.



## Present Laughter at Neptune: high-gloss comedy

### Present Laughter

- a play by Noel Coward

### Review by Chris Morash

Yes, another play from the land of champagne and white ties; another play where the characters "wear dressing gowns and make witty remarks"; another play by Noel Coward.

*Present Laughter*, running until April 22 at Neptune, is pure Coward; glorious, witty language wrapped around a slick, urbane, mildly inane plot, a concoction with lots of icing and very little cake.

*Present Laughter* deals with the little social world that spins around actor Garry Essendine, a virtual parody of the typical Coward character. Consequently, the play offers a commentary on itself as a sort of sidedish by contrasting the characters of Garry Essendine, a caricature of the

dressing-gown-and-wit school of theatre, and Roland Maule (pronounced "mole"), who keeps popping up with the preposterously tiresome suggestion that plays should actually have "ideas" in them.

How frightfully absurd! But, even while poking gentle fun at himself, Coward manages to come down firmly on the side of Director Tom Kerr gives this play, essentially about appearances, a slick, tight, fast-paced treatment that is as polished as Coward's language. Kerr has the performers create characters with superb clarity and definition, choosing broad gestures over detail, creating a theatrical equivalent of art deco that captures the time period of the play wonderfully.

Alan Scarfe, as the pampered actor Garry Essendine, makes this style of acting work marvelously

well, catching all of the mental manoeuvres of a character with a whole script library full of masks he can assume at a moment's notice, and who, in fact, has worn masks for so long that they have become a part of his face.

Scarfe's rich voice, with its overtones of Richard Burton, and his sheer stage presence, have the strength needed to bring Essendine alive, for he is a character who lives his life with a strong sense of the stage.

Jill Frappier plays Liz Essendine, Garry's ex-wife, with the same precision and presence as Scarfe, creating a stable counterpoint to Garry Essendine's emotional effusiveness. Because Frappier works with the same presence and purpose as Scarfe, the relationship between the two characters becomes the epitome of the Coward couple, whose wit and sheer *joie de vivre* raise them

above the level of the society around them.

The trouble with a broad acting style is that it is treacherously easy to step over the line between broad energy and pure hokeyness. Unfortunately, Barbara March, playing the predatory Joanna Luppiatt, stepped over that line enough to create some problems with her character (and the play as a whole) at certain points.

Generally, however, the quality of the acting is top-notch; Barbara Chilcott's Monica Reed is as sharp as a razor and as dry as a good martini.

Dorothy Ward's Miss Erikson, the Swedish mystic maid, has a delightful cartoon-like buzzing energy, and one of the best grasps on her accent in a play in which the accents are a trifle uneven.

A special treat is Brian Taylor's

Fred, the valet, who has a good solid physicality. In addition, John Dunsworth, Don Allison, Faith Ward, Glen Cairns, and Alison MacLeod all turn in well-polished performances.

In fact, everything about *Present Laughter*, including Guedo's set and Vivian Frow's costumes, is polished to a high gloss. And in a way this show brings out the best and the worst qualities in Neptune's first season under the artistic directorship of Tom Kerr.

It's great to see high-quality, well-crafted theatre, like *Present Laughter*, but a play like *Present Laughter* is anything but innovative, not very exciting, and generally safe theatre, and as such characterizes much of the past season. Consequently, while Neptune may have offered the best crafted theatre in town, it seldom offered the most interesting.

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