

Canadian As Is does it better

Exploitation avoided in serious treatment of AIDS

By ALEX PATTERSON

After a nine-month run on Broadway where it was nominated for three Tony Awards including Best Play, William M. Hoffman's *As Is* has arrived in Toronto. And it is a cast and crew mainly from western Canada whom we have to thank for it.

In New York, this drama about living with Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) touched not only the city's gay community, but the theatregoing mainstream. This is because playwright Hoffman has transcended the limitations of what could have been a special-interest topic by addressing questions not only of the disease, but of love and loyalty and death. AIDS becomes not just the Gay Plague, but the New Plague...as indeed it is becoming in life. This plague is no more confined to Greenwich Village than Camus' was to the town of Oran.

This becomes especially important when the play is taken out of its Manhattan home and transplanted in another city and another country: if the themes are not universal, it will not travel well. Fortunately for the Toronto Free Theatre—who are presenting the Canadian premiere until February 2—it does. The play works because it is a real play, not an exploitation item, and because of the strength of the local production.

High on the list of strengths is the acting: John Moffat as Rich, the central character and the victim of the virus, is very, very good. He wins the audience's sympathy even when his character is on his worst behaviour, tearing those who are reaching out to him, raging against God, and generally not accepting death like a good



Brian Thorpe and John Moffat look towards a not-so-bright future.

sport. His life had indeed been rich—a success in business, a published writer, a daily jogger—before he begins to succumb to "this disease thing," and Moffat suggests the former, healthy Rich as well as the present, dying one. As his jilted lover, Saul, Brian Torpe also contributes to the quality of the production with an affecting, though slightly fussy, performance.

Around Rich circle the people in his life before and during his illness: caring ex-roommate Saul, selfish current-roommate Chet, his married brother from the suburbs, his acquaintances from gay bars, and, later, the staff at the hospice. In these parts, the supporting cast of two women and three men play multiple roles, deftly changing costumes and positions on the single, all-purpose set.

Ahhh, the set...What was a marvel of simplicity on Broadway has actually been improved upon. A Barcelona chair, a leather loveseat and a bar are the sum total of the props throughout most of the show. (Strangely, though, the Navajo rug about which the protagonists argue during their "divorce" is not present). As with the original produc-

tion, five tall columns rise up from the stage to near the rafters. This time, however, set designer Alan Stichbury has made them not of marble, but of the same red brick as the walls of the auditorium. This, in combination with the rather low riser, integrates the performing area into the audience's area. All of this is a sensible complement to Margaret Bard's direction, which has actors coming down off the riser and trying to peddle drugs to the spectators in the front rows.

Similarly well thought-out is David Gibbons' lighting, which casts the shadows of fire escapes and catwalks onto the theatre's walls for the outside scenes, nicely capturing lower Manhattan's loftland atmosphere. (The ground floor space of the Toronto Free is particularly well-suited to this, having been a lower east-side warehouse itself.) Also contributing to an authentic mood are the brief snatches of electropop played over the PA system to connect some of the vignettes. These rhythm-box ditties are in keeping with the play's milieu of nightclubs, leather and glamour.

At just over 90 minutes in one act, *As Is* is a dynamic piece of theatre,

long on compassion and short on gay lib rhetoric. It wisely eschews passive/dominant stereotypes while retaining that subculture's profane jargon and bitter humour. That the author is better at portraying a relationship than at explicating the mysteries of a disease is a minor liability, but then he can't be expected to unravel what medical science has so far been unable to. The tidbits of AIDS into which he has inserted into some of the scenes are the only thing which may make the play seem at all didactic, and may contribute to its seeming dated in a few years.

Despite this minor complaint, *As Is* remains an absorbing tragedy on a most relevant topic. Although AIDS has now been treated to a disease-of-the-week TV movie, and although at this very moment it is probably that packs of Hollywood producers are bidding fiercely for the rights of *The Rock Hudson Story*, serious treatments of gay themes have been few and far between on the stage, on film, or in the electronic media. When most works about those who have come out of the closet have been enough to make them wish they had stayed in, *As Is* comes as a refreshing exception.

Monkey bars and plastic sploit in Dansproduktie's daring *Vertigo*

By NICOLE DESJARDINS

Do you remember when you were a kid playing on monkey bars? Well that is what Dansproduktie's *Vertigo* resembled when it opened the Premiere Dance Theatre's new avant garde Vision Series last Thursday. Yet the piece failed in its main purpose because there was no 'vertigo' effect. The five-member modern dance company from Holland looked too comfortable performing air-borne movements to engender any fear of heights.

Since the curtains were already open as the theatre filled, the audience was able to examine the 15-foot tall, three dimensional, tubular frame on a pentagon-shaped base on stage. This remarkable prop was designed by Roy Jongeling and Ruth Meyer.

The show opens with a loud 'bang' as a floodlit human form falls from the top of the structure like a spider from its web. The dancers then form a human chain interlaced from the floor to the top of the structure. The changing chain slowly descends flat onto the floor.

For an hour and a quarter, the five dancers glide, roll, stretch, hang, jump and work themselves around and through the three dimensional structure as a group, in duets or solos. The dancers were beautiful to watch: slim, strong and flexible. The apparatus lent itself to unisexual movements so that the one male dancer was not easily identified.

Minimal movement sequences were repeated over and over again. At one point the five dancers were doing the same sort of combinations, each in a separate phase. The overall view of these sequences is artistically interesting, the dancers joining at some points, working in a mirror-like fashion to part again, doing chassé-croisé without any hesitation on an accelerated rhythm, leaving the audience breathless for a quarter of a second.

There was communication between the dancers at all times, each of them reassuring the support and attention of the rest. One cannot deny the physical strength and stamina the choreography demanded and which the dancers performed with exactitude.

One side of the three-dimensional structure, an inverted leaning

triangle, was covered with a thick transparent plastic sheet with several horizontal cuts on which the dancers climbed, slid, hung and lounged upon. The lighting (design by Ad Schuring) occasionally reflected on the plastic like sunlight on water to produce a very pleasing effect. The dancers seemed very comfortable playing with the plastic.

As for the musical aspect of the piece it was comprised of string quartets (Debussy and Mozart), African tribal music, a text written and spoken by John Cage, with the voices of Meral Taygun and the vocal ensemble Tamam, and new music composed for piano and alto-

oboe by Henk van der Meulen who taped the entire composition. What sounded like a hammer striking a pipe assaulted one's ears at seemingly random intervals. The effect of this was to keep the audience from being lulled into any state not in keeping with a feeling of 'vertigo.' This worked better than caffeine pills could have.

Premiere Dance Theatre surely gave a foretaste of what is yet to come in the new Vision Series. Three more companies are scheduled: Terrill Macquire Dances, January 30 to February 1st; Northern Lights Dance Co., February 13 to 15; and T.I.D.E., February 27 to March 1.



IS THAT A ROACH? Stamina and strength were ket to the oft airborne performances in Dansproduktie's *Vertigo*.

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