

# Shange 'choreopoem' a unique and revealing experience

By STEPHANIE GROSS

*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf*  
written by Ntozake Shange  
Toronto Workshop Productions  
Through September

The Canadian production of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf* has been held over at Toronto Workshop Productions theatre for an extra month—and for good reason. The all-Canadian, all-woman cast lives Shange's poem-play to the height of its lyric potential, using body, voice, and language, to create an experience of movement and music that shudders its way into the heart.

The set is simple: a black stage with a pink rose. Seven women, each identified by the colors they wear, draw the audience into the growth of their characters. In the beginning of

the play we see the women as naive young girls. By the end they have become adults celebrating a bond of suffering and love.

The music is kept as simple as the stage. Shange, through her poetry, creates language rich in its ability to fill the hall's space with meaning and music. She animates the experience of seven women by using rhythm and sound uniquely tailored to each character. Common to all the women is their love and need for music. This musical essence of Shange's choreopoem is not only aesthetically significant but acts as a kind of 'saviour' for the characters. Music for them is a sanctuary; an escape from life's stolen promises.

The lady in red becomes transformed at night, making herself up "with rhinestones etching the corners of her mouth—pastel ivy drawn on her shoulders." Her erotic self lures men into her bed at night while her "ordinary brown braided" and "reglar" self forces them out in the morning.

The lady in blue who "used to live in the world" but then moved to Harlem, portrays the fear, alienation and grime of urban existence.

All the women grow up and find something missing in their personal lives. Each has been disappointed by love. Some have been degraded by rape while others went through the horrible experience of 'back-alley' abortion. Each woman exclaims in anger: "My love is too delicate to have thrown back in my face."

This intense drama is well-paced with comic monologues; the most memorable by the lady in green. In her poem-song she describes the anger and irony of letting one's lover sap all of one's energy. The lady in red (Anna Brooks) tells the story of a violent exchange between a wife and husband. Brooks is able to snap back and forth without losing perspective on the two characters, while at the same time evoking sympathy from the audience for the wife.

*For Colored Girls...* entices and enrages. Its invigorating form and daring exposure of women's experiences make the play a pioneering example of what is possible for women and art.

Produced by Gray-Wynd Productions in association with Rudy Webb, *For Colored Girls...* will be held over at the TWP theatre (12 Alexander St.) until September 30. Student tickets are \$5, regular \$8, half-price at Five Star (Bloor and Yonge).

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## Festival's Eyes need glasses

*York prof rescues Tif; Peggy and Richler beyond hope in misguided series*

By JASON SHERMAN

*Eyes Write*  
Readings by and discussion with Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findley, and Mordechai Richler

*Eyes Write*, the Festival of Festivals' series of panel discussions on the relationship between film and literature, has proven to be as clumsily handled as it was conceived and named. The panel have been, with one major exception, repetitive, non-argumentative, uniform meetings, not so much of minds, as of members of one terrifyingly large mutual admiration society. A brief consideration of three of the forums will serve to illustrate these points.

Authors Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findley and Mordechai Richler were all represented by films for which each had written a screenplay or treatment. Each author began his or her evening by monotoning (Atwood), tripping over (Findley) or stumbling through (Richler) short bits of prose. This was followed by what was to be a discussion of the movie and novel in question. In fact, only the Findley panel addressed itself to this question. Much of the reason for the Findley panel's success was that the moderator, York professor Robert Fothergill, came prepared for a discussion on the subject. Fothergill tried to give an idea of the enormous differences between the two media, and then specified how this applied to the filming of *The Wars*. He spoke about the necessity of creating a kind of cinematic poetry to parallel the poetry of the novel. Panelists Findley, *Wars* director Robin Phillips, and *Wars* actor Jackie Burroughs were all asked about their roles in the film adaptation. One of the more interesting points made came when Findley, speaking about *The Wars* as a novel, called himself a "cinematic writer." Phillips later responded, "It's much more difficult to direct a movie based on a cinematically-written novel, because your choices are limited. It's all been done, in a sense."

Later, in private conversation, Fothergill spoke about the difficulty of getting "film people to talk intelligently about film." This problem was compounded twofold by the selective approach taken by the Findley panel. First of all, Fothergill explained that the panelists "agreed not to mention the difficult stuff" surrounding the filming of *The Wars*. "Everyone knows," he said, "that there were a lot of difficulties."

Secondly, the panel was dealing with a fairly revered work of art, and the key question they should have addressed, Fothergill said, "must be: does the text have an authority which has to be respected? Is the filmmaker doing it as an act of respect? Any evaluation of the film must be in those terms." Which is why the panelists' cabalistic approach was so hampering.

The question must be raised here: even had programme coordinator Greg Gatenby made the intelligent decision to have Fothergill moderate the entire series, would the discussions have any value outside that of pure spectacle? The two media are so far apart that any criticism of their relationship can only help towards

an understanding of film and literature as unique arts. "They are almost reconcilable," Fothergill agreed in a telephone conversation, "but (movies made from books) are always being done."

The Atwood panel, which consisted of the author, moderator Garth Drabinsky and filmmaker-narcissist David Cronenberg, could not even rise to the heights of creative repetition. From the start, it was a battle for banality and self-appreciation between the artists, with Drabinsky profusely apologizing for calling the author "Maggie." ("Who's 'Maggie'?" Atwood asked. Her nickname is Peggy.) As Fothergill pointed out the following night, there was not much discussion about the film-literature link because there was not much to discuss: the Atwood movie came from a film treatment, not a novel. The panel was left to consider Cronenberg's *The Dead Zone*, based on Stephen King's novel of the same name.

Cronenberg could not decide which approach he like best—straight and strict adaptation, or what he called "reinvention" of the source material. The unfortunate part was that he was not himself aware of the contradiction: "I thought Stephen King's screenplay was the least faithful (of the five screenplays written). I don't think he understood his own book." This after proudly announcing that he (Cronenberg) had only read the book once—three years prior to starting the project. Later, he said, the best thing for a filmmaker to do when adapting a novel is to throw away everything but the characters and basic ideas. Good to see Cronenberg puts a lot of thought into his art.

But if the Atwood panel had an excuse for its misguided efforts, the Richler panel—by far the worst offender of the three—may full look to the author's lack of articulateness, awareness, and, at times, consciousness for its miserable failure. Oh, Richler plays the scraggly Bohemian to the hilt, and we are all the worse off for it. Sitting behind a microphone, all cigar, glasses and jowls, Richler looked and sounded as though the whole idea of being forced to think bored him. It is no wonder, however, when the author of *Duddy Kravitz* (the novel and the movie) answers an intelligent question (from a rather bumbling, underwhelming Martin Knelman) about the two works with "No, anymore questions?" that an audience might feel cheated. Not this particular audience, of course: the Richlerites loved it, and loved even more Richler's incisive response to this writer's query—Q: "Yesterday, Timothy Findley called himself a 'cinematic writer,' Robin Phillips said he found it more difficult to direct a film based on a cinematically-written novel. Could you comment?" Richler: "That's too intellectual for me."



No doubt this is true, but in any case the question was directed to Ted Kotcheff, the director of *Duddy Kravitz*. The question here is: why did Richler bother? If he put in an appearance merely to take a few more digs at the Canadian film industry, a diatribe which is beginning to sound as tired as Richler, why does he not rail in an effective way—by writing. *Eyes Write* has been, generally, a failure; its authors, without exception, redundancies.



## Toronto canvases not all doom 'n' gloom

By HENRY SUM

There are some pretty ghastly eye-sores at the newly-opened *Toronto Painting '84* show at the Art Gallery of Ontario (through October 28). Bold, mucky brushstrokes seem to be in vogue, along with casual, clumsy renderings. Much of the work is done in mural-size proportions which insist on large gallery viewing, and some pieces appear to have been spontaneously executed on the backs of large warehouse doors, flattened tin cans, and the like. There is a deliberate, irreverent ugliness to the finished product that seems to defy reason.

But then, one supposes, this is the key to understanding expressionism. It is a term applied to works with highly-charged emotional content. The approach is personal and intuitive. Technique and subject matter are subordinated to the artists' emotions; thus expressionism focuses on the individual artist rather than a whole artistic movement.

But despite all this, a great number of the 32 artists (some York alumni among them) represented here share the same apocalyptic vision. The creative outpouring is predominantly irrational, apparently motivated by a passion that is at once doomed and defeated. What else is one to make of a painting entitled "Death of Magic" by former Yorkite Howard Simkins? In a large, irregular triptych the artist depicts a frighteningly deep, primordial world inhabited by creatures living out a slow, lingering path towards extinction.

The show is often hard to stomach because of the artists' constant conscious awareness of the nuclear precipice we are all teetering on. The world, according to many artists here, is on a roller coaster ride to oblivion. Joseph Drappell, for example, blasts the viewer straight across the gallery floor with a fireball of a piece entitled "French Revolution." The explosive impact of this painting must be seen to be believed. The same shattering sensation is handled with great delicacy in Catherine MacTavish's huge bead-encrusted banner. At first, one gets the innocuous impression of a vast, nebulous space filled with migrating cosmic sperm; that is, until you encounter the title: "Arms Race."

MacTavish's meticulous over-work maintains the same gloomy prospect in her banner, "Both Sides." The title is a pun on the manner in which the piece is painted: one side is a rendering of two ominous mushroom clouds, while the other presents the opposite sentiment, a joyous, colourful cosmology rendered in minute detail. The sudden, harmonious sense of hope expressed here comes as a welcome relief after some of the other paintings.

This show demands a lot from the average viewer. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the gallery patrons on the day this reviewer attended seemed rather lost when it came to deriving some deeper meaning from the works on display. There are a great many obscure pieces in this show, loaded with the personal idiosyncracies, myths and dreamscapes of the individual artists. One of the best examples of this can be found in the almost inaccessible work of Renée Van Halm. Her work suggests a decapitated, psychic world that is at once haunting and unapproachable.

Happily, not all of the artists here belong to the doom and gloom school of Neo-Expressionism. Paul Hutner has been developing his own peculiar form of abstract expressionism for a number of years here in Toronto. Hutner's paintings ring out flamboyantly, populated with streamers, confetti, and bright colors.

Along with Hutner, there are three veterans in this show worthy of special mention. Joyce Weiland, Graham Coughtry, and Gordon Raynor all hail from another, earlier generation of artists, and their seasoned works invite comparisons with those of their younger compatriots.

Unmentioned thus far are the cool, clinical minimalists, who deserve scant attention. It is hard to imagine a style more exasperating than that of the minimalists included in this show. There is not much one can do with the overgrown color charts and gouged plywood on view here. Besides, this of painting died a quick death in the late '60s and there is no explanation for its minor resurrection today.

**Not Recommended**