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ARTS

Not so casual

by Matias Milet

*On the Eve of Uncertain
Tomorrows*
by Neil Bissoondath
published by Lester & Orpen
Dennys

Bissoondath's history of exile
from his sunny lands of origin,
might have developed in him a
tendency to romanticize, but
instead it has given him the out-
look of a pragmatic survivor.

His background mirrors that of
many of his characters: born in the
Caribbean to migrant labourers
from India and accepting this
mixed identity, before finally
being driven, once more by eco-
nomics and politics, to a new land
(Canada).

One character reacts to this dis-
location by becoming nostalgic.

After moving from the Carib-
bean to Toronto, he changes from
the patriarch and breadwinner to
the only unemployed member of
the family. He then becomes an
orthodox follower of Hindu reli-
gion which provides a haze of rosy
decency that helps him to ignore
his situation.

"Nostalgic visions are danger-
ous," Bissoondath explained in an
interview. "They distort the pres-
ent. Nostalgia is a distortion of the
past, first of all. But if you cleanse
the past, the present becomes a
much darker reality than it really
is."

Rather than romanticizing any-
thing, Bissoondath has chosen
the path of realism, showing us
snapshots of lives in motion.

An accumulation of detail and
the use of emotion-laden words
are the means by which he's made
stories that seem so real that the
reader feels like a spy or
eavesdropper.

In one story we get a strong
sense of personality and presence
that emanates from the things a

charwoman sees in this person's
house — things such as the
dozens of cosmetics with which
the effects of age are hidden.

Bissoondath's devotion to
"gritty reality" makes for interest-
ing reading, and, when we keep in
mind the dangers of romanticis-
ing, we see this devotion as a
noble thing.



Neil Bissoondath

Unfortunately the resistance to
fantasy and wordplay is combined
in his writing with a kind of prohi-
bition on fun. The characters are
usually glum, anxious or deluded
by happiness, and this heavy
atmosphere can't help but affect
the reader.

Bissoondath now seems to be
trying to move away from this
heaviness, which actually was felt
mainly in the first collection of sto-
ries (one of which was despair-
ingly titled, *Man as Plaything. Life
as Mockery*).

His latest work, *On the Eve of
Uncertain Tomorrows*, dust-
jacket advertises it as "his most
hopeful book so far."

Between the covers we find him
leaving behind his cynical treat-
ment of politics (a treatment per-
haps influenced by his uncle, V.S.
Naipaul).

No longer is there a need to cor-
rect well-intentioned Canadian
readers on their naive view of
Third World politics, to show us, in

his dry, ironic tone, that behind
revolutionary rhetoric there exists
violence.

The new stories don't present
clear-cut good and evil, smart and
stupid political actors; a point
coincident with the disappear-
ance of a condescending and
ironic narrative tone used against
some characters. Instead images
of love are placed in the narrative.
Unfortunately the author awk-
wardly places romantic clichés
amongst the sparse prose, creat-
ing a kind of mystical poetic
language.

These attempts at lightness and
joy don't go far enough for the
reader who would like to see more
of the human spectrum.

During a public reading at Har-
bourfront's International Festival
of Authors, Bissoondath read one
of his new stories about ball play-
ers in a quiet Spanish park.

"Old men stripped to their
underpants are rolling their steel
balls. . .". He realized he'd made a
slip, having substituted "under-
pants" for "undershirts." A huge
smile appeared on his face and,
after lingering for a humorous
moment, he added that he wished
he'd thought of that joke while he
was writing.

But we realize that this was just
a whimsical aside; he would not
have included any such joke.

Readers of *On the Eve of Uncer-
tain Tomorrows* will find tightly
constructed dramas in which
people either fail or succeed in
responding adequately to a dark
presence.

Some will enjoy the battle-
ground nature of these stories, in
which despair and a fledgling
hope have it out. But what readers
won't find is the smile that Neil
Bissoondath felt at a moment
when his guard was down, when
the "gritty reality" wasn't faithfully
described.

Complexity of Dance with the creativity of Theatre

by Daniel Judd

Take the complex agenda of performance
combine them with the creative potential
of theatre.

A talented and committed group of Toronto
based artists recently did just that, and the result
was the *And/Or Dance Festival*

The festival, which just finished a two week run
at the Dance Makers Studio, was "conceived as
an outlet for independent creators to realize pro-
jects that incorporate dance with other media," stated
artistic director Bill James.

The eight projects that were presented during
the festival, were chosen from over thirty propos-
als on the basis of either originality of concept or
of process.

According to James, three of the most interest-
ing submissions came from artists not based in
dance, which resulted in collaboration with other
members of the company.

The eight dance performances were separated
into two-one week shows each.
Out of this separation, strong distinctions grew
between both direction and tone.

The peices performed during the opening week
were conceptual, while the second week's line-

up was more dance oriented.

It was this contrast between the various tradi-
tions involved that formed the strength of the
series.

The provocative forwardness of dance both
offset and accented the terse and layered agenda
of the performance.

The presence of sculpture, video and film as
components of the various sets provided a con-
text for the fluid and dynamic "stories" that were
told.

The uniqueness of the series was based upon
the experience of the audience. An experience
flourishing in allegory and rich in intellectual,
visual, emotional and visceral appeal.

The show became a kind of creative summit
and open invitations welcomed artists, art and art
appreciators to enter into different means of expres-
sion, secure in the context of their own individual
tradition.

Another festival similar to the *And/Or* is hoped
to be created by 1992, according to James.
In the interim, the studio is planning on develop-
ing a policy which will make the newly created
space available to local artists for the lowest pos-
sible cost.

After two years of planning and waiting for
funding the Dancemakers, with their initial offer-
ing, have proven the value of their labours.