

Theatre

Odd Lemoine double-bill

Neck-Breaking Car Hop
Swiss Pajamas
Phoenix Theatre
Run ends February 28

review by Moreen Murray

Any expectations of a realistic storyline should be left outside to freeze at these two new Stewart Lemoine offerings. Already characterized as a playwright of somewhat offbeat works, these two plays justify that reputation and further enhance Lemoine's stature as a gifted playwright.

Neck-Breaking Car Hop drops the audience into the lap of Regina housewife Annette Styx, a woman with the wardrobe of K-mart specials, replete with mandatory hair curls and too-short knee highs. She is in the throes of a *Chatelaine* magazine article on where to live in Canada. The first inkling one has of this exotic creature's mindset is when she states she left her husband because he committed the unforgivable act of removing bark from trees for a living. Her absorption in her magazine soon takes a backseat to more pressing problems.

Her metalhead son brings home his new girlfriend who, it is learned, is the new

"Well, there goes the family allowance cheque!"

breaking car hop of the play's title. Sandy — "sounds like a dog's name" — accidentally broke the neck of a customer who tried to pay for his meal in drugs. But Sandy's criminal problems are far from over, as her visit has serious results for Sharon, Annette's tarty teenage daughter. Annette's only grieving remark over the loss of her daughter is "well, there goes the family allowance cheque!"

Lemoine's conclusion of the play is a wee bit of a letdown except for such gems of teenage wisdom from the newly-deceased Sharon as, "Hey, if we're invisible then we can go to Shopper's Drug Mart and take all the lip gloss we want." Lemoine's dialogue and characterizations, especially his depictions of teenage speech and attitude, ring so true it's frightening. He has a good feel for how real people really talk, even in odd

situations.

Speaking of odd situations, it may be hard to find an odder one than that of Arlene Curtis in the second play of the evening, *Swiss Pajamas*, a strange mixture of 60's sitcom with James Bond.

Pity poor Arlene, an interior designer at a conference in Geneva. She has only a few minutes to buy the perfect gift for her fiancé Roger — and takes the advice of a charming Swiss saleslady and purchases not only pajamas, but a ticket for a rollercoaster ride in international espionage.

Lo and behold, when she returns to Chicago and Roger (who writes literature for developing readers), she is beset not only by a rude and pretentious new neighbor, Edith (call me 'Dith') Marlowe, but a familiar Swiss Miss and a CIA agent who have a particular interest in Roger's pajamas.

After a gun-wielding standoff between the two agents, Sonia confesses her reason for being a Swiss terrorist: "I hate living in a dull country where all anyone thinks about is dairy products and snow. After several centuries without war they've lost all their aggressive impulses!"

After much chaos, the end result of this crazy conflict is true to sitcom form. (If I'm not going to tell you!) Lemoine must be commended for a sure hand at farce and good comic dialogue. Sets and costuming are also psychedelically precise.

Teatro la Quindicina is a remarkably talented and versatile ensemble of actors — they enhance the vitality of these already excellent plays. Their changes of character between the two plays are particularly admirable. Special kudos to Leona Brausen as Annette/Arlene, frowzy and bewilderer; Jane Spideell as Sharon the teenage tart/Sonia the self-sacrificing Swiss spy and Cathy Derkach as the terribly tony Dith, swathed in black and with the speech patterns of a Bette Davis clone.

The Phoenix Theatre, in presenting these two new plays in its new uptown space (just down from the city market) clearly points out the necessity of having smaller theatres and justifies the support and patronage they richly deserve. Look for continuing good work.

Dig yourself out of that snobknack! Take a break from patronizing sports announcers at the Olympics! Have a real adventure at the Phoenix!

Nuns' song and dance

Nunscene
Citadel Theatre (Rice)
Run ends March 13

review by Kevin Law

Nunscene, currently being staged at the Citadel's Rice Theatre, is a ribald musical romp through the comedic world of the nun.

Nunscene is about the Order of the Little Sisters of Edmonton who stage a fund raising night at the Mount Saint Helens school

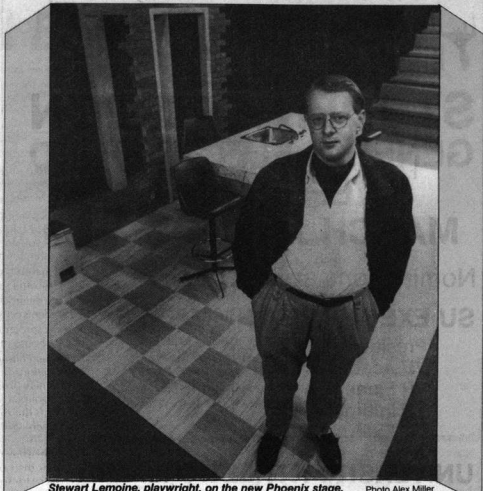
auditorium in order to raise money to bury some dead sisters, whose bodies are being stored in the basement deep freeze. To raise the needed money, the five "Little Eddies" as they are affectionately known, stage a variety show complete with song, dance and sales spiels.

Such an open-ended format is conducive to all sorts of humorous possibilities, and playwright Dan Goggin seems not to have been deterred by any Catholic guilt in his lively creation of frenzied characters and the manic show they perform.



Singing nuns kick up heels in Citadel production.

Photo Alex Miller



Stewart Lemoine, playwright, on the new Phoenix stage.

Photo Alex Miller

New Phoenix Downtown opens

by Elaine Ostry

The Phoenix Theatre has always been an odd bird in the Edmonton theatre community, but now the pink flamingo has really spread its wings.

The theatre presents most of its plays at the Kaasa, but now it opens its newly-renovated downtown venue, Phoenix Downtown. It was once an auto-body shop; now it's a small theatre with a small thrust stage.

The intimacy of this new stage suits the type of production it will present: plays even more bizarre and experimental than what you'll see in the Kaasa Theatre. The theatre's first production is a Stewart Lemoine double-bill: *Neck-Breaking Car-Hop* and *Swiss Pajamas*.

Phoenix Downtown is located at 9636-101A Avenue, just inside Chinatown, a block south from the China Gate.

With the massive renovations, the Phoenix Theatre hopes to draw a greater audience. The idea is to have an outlet for Fringe-type

shows all year round.

The renovations cost 70,000 dollars. The Government of Alberta supplied much of the funding. The costs of renovations still need to be offset, however, with the help of fundraising, which includes the "Loonie Bin" at the theatre.

Mayor Laurence Decore, with his entourage of aldermen, dropped a "loonie" in the "Loonie Bin" last Thursday at the official opening of the Phoenix Downtown. "I congratulate you for putting this magnificent building together," Decore said to the sound of cameras clicking. He commented on the "national acclaim" and local fame of the Phoenix Theatre.

George Ilagan, the President of the Phoenix's Board of Directors, talked about the theatre's role in "the development and nurturing of young Canadian talent." The purpose of the new Phoenix Downtown is "to provide space for alternative theatre. It's a place to do new things."

The show consists of a tableau of playful song and dance routines presented by the nuns both singularly and ensemble, all designed to "share the humor of the nun" as the opening number informs.

Parody and puns on nuns are rampant throughout the play, making it such an off-the-wall presentation it's a small wonder it received critical acclaim as Best Off-Broadway Musical. Silly scenes such as goofy impressions, risqué ventriloquism, hawdy vaudeville dance numbers, and nuns brandishing guns in a home movie called *Nun-smoke* make this play hard to resist.

The characterizations of each of the nuns are not lacking; their quirky personalities are well defined by Goggin, and the cast members manage to project distinctions of character despite the cocoon-like confines of the nun's habit.

In spite of a flat, unconvincing Irish dialect, Lorrain Foreman is very good in her role as the conservative, slightly behind-the-times Mother Superior. Although she has no lack of jocularism, she is often shocked by the enthusiastic and sometimes spicy performances of the younger nuns. Foreman's convincing acting ability is highlighted in a scene where the Mother Superior inadvertently gets high. Trying to talk and laugh at the same time, she literally laughs herself prone and the audience nearly followed suit.

Jill Dyck as Sister Mary Hubert, trainer of new recruits, effectively conveys an opposition of ideals in an ongoing conflict of ambition between her and Mother Superior. No resolution is ever attempted, however, as the conflict is washed over by the play's musical structure.

Ellen Kennedy as Sister Mary Amnesia suffers from a somewhat weak singing voice,

but her portrayal of the child-like eager-to-please sister who can't remember her past is full of innocent enthusiasm. Tracy Flye as novice nun Sister Mary Leo wants to serve God through dance. Mary Leo does so with much gusto but little finesse, and Flye approaches the character with spirit, bringing a suitable comedic intent to her dance scenes.

One of the strongest performances comes from Rhonda Trodd as Sister Mary Robert Anne. Trodd establishes a strong presence in the streetwise persona of a nun who is popular with inner city kids. She can not only drive the convent car, but "strip it faster than anybody." Trodd's presence is sparked by her aggressive mannerisms. Her facial expressions and husky voice delineate her part well and her final solo number "I Just Want To Be a Star" is a showcase for her strong singing voice that erupts into a self confident torch song, exposing an underlying sensuality no nun's habit can cover.

The ensemble song and dance numbers consist of respectable harmonies and hoofing, ending with a robust hand-clapping gospel number. The play as a whole is fast paced from the start, yet Director Ron Ulrich is able to maintain the consistency of pace without letting the high gear slip away from him, allowing the play to "catch its breath" between the balance provided by monologues and solos.

Brock Lumsden's gymnasium set is functionally realized with basketball hoops, scoreboard, pennants and giant posters of Elvis and Marilyn. Most significantly, the theatre audience in bleachers is integrated into the play.

Nunscene is a musical comedy with burlesque style and vaudeville wit. To use a much overworked phrase, it's a delight.