

Musical lands on Toronto stage with mixed message to audience, performers

by Lilac Cana

"Auditioning we will go, auditioning we will go, hire-a-ho' a-derry-yo, a-dissing we will go!"

So it's here, is it? S'happenin. Now. The time is ripe... for Toronto's Next Biggest Musical.

Musical production, musical theatre, musical chairs? It's a bird. It's a



plane. It's (gonna be) a hit. It's: *Miss Saigon*.

Last Thursday to Saturday, hundreds of singers, dancers and performers flocked to Roy Thompson Hall to audition for the extravaganza.

A big deal this is, indeed. What with Big Ed venturing into his latest

OPINION

Perhaps some people are more equal than others in contemporary musicals like *Miss Saigon*.

construction project: TO's very own helicopter garage. And the big advert in one of the city's big newspapers which called on all Filipino and Asian singers to come out and strut their stuff for the big directors.

About time, too. Toronto audiences are saccharine-overdosed with the outgoing sleeping giants of the past few years; can they restrain themselves from yawning severely at any more *Les Miz* or *Phantom* grind mills?

Can they even pretend to be thrilled by "new" offerings ranging from a funkified Donny in another remake of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Raincoat* to a brief stint of *Bye Bye Birdie* (another resurrected oldie) at the O'Keefe Centre? Or even by what promised to be a gutsier (ballsier?) staging of *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*? Well, naaah.

Popular opera (what these musical should be called) may have been transformed during the 1980s, with the introduction of the **through-composed** (without dialogue) form used in the first London productions. But the subject matter of all these hugely successful shows never went beyond the 19th Century.

Cats was based on the words and sentiments of the very dead poet (T.S. WHO?); theatrical rigor mortis, right there. A Dead Poet's Society indeed.

What was missing was an attempt to integrate the "Now" into a LIVE entertainment form with a potential to reach and involve the masses. Most people probably want nothing to do with the politeness of these offerings, anyway. (I won't get into the tangle of using words like "contemporary" or "postmodern".)

But, yeah. How about a bit of apocalypse—now (or reasonably then, like a fresh 30 years ago)—on stage, set to music reflecting the rhythms and inflections of a time closer to our own. *Miss Saigon* could very well tingle a few toes in a genuine manner, when it opens in 1993.



Miss Saigon comes to Toronto.

As for the portrayal of Asian characters as pimps, hustlers, rebel soldiers and whores. The story takes place in 1960's Saigon, after all, and during a particularly fucked-up war.

There isn't room in the plot line for the many varieties of Asians today, some of whom happily fill identities beyond these tired and oppressive stereotypes. It's ho's they need, and ho's they get.

A difficult squeeze, to be sure, for the many talented, accomplished and

highly-trained Asian and Asian-Canadian artists, who may find the roles too strangulantly alien (read: limiting). The gist is a significant breakthrough, though; themainstream has opened its flood gates and is flowing into a hitherto unformed tributary which includes Asians. Yaay.

Enough can't be said about fair representation, especially in the realm of entertainment. All in due time. When the audience is ready, they'll listen to new voices—and be amazed.

Good voices, different settings

by Ira Nayman

A great voice can only carry you so far; in the wrong setting, even the most beautiful stone's impact is diminished. Annie Lennox, for example, can belt out tunes with the best of them; but *Diva*, her first solo project, is a disappointment.

The music relies far too heavily on uninspired synthesizer riffs. The two or three darker songs, such as "Cold," have interesting textures, but they are exceptions. Listening to *Diva*, you'll yearn for the chunky guitars of Dave Stewart, Lennox' Eurythmics partner.

The lyrics, mostly about love and broken hearts aren't embarrassingly bad, but that's no great recommen-

ation. Cliches abound, and there seems to be no joy in wordplay. It's hard to believe that this is the same woman who wrote "Missionary Man."

Even Lennox' voice, which is still amazing, isn't enough to make *Diva* worthwhile.

On the other hand, an okay voice does nothing to diminish the strength of great songs. Michelle Shocked, whose voice is relatively thin, has put out a succession of fascinating albums, the latest of which is *Arkansas Traveler*.

The album combines bluegrass, country and other southern musical styles. With its fiddles, banjo and mandolin, *Arkansas Traveler* is a far cry from the folk of Shocked's early albums, or the big band sound of her last album.

She has the ability to take the conventions of whatever musical genre she works in and make them

MUSIC

Annie Lennox
DIVA
BMG/RCA

Michelle Shocked
ARKANSAS TRAVELER
Mercury/Polygram

her own, however; the album contains her usual mix of high energy, willingness to experiment, social conscience and joy at making music.

Even if you don't like this kind of music—I never have—you'll find Shocked's joy infectious.

According to the liner notes, Shocked wanted to appear on the cover in blackface in order to "provide a genuine focus on the real 'roots' of many of the tunes" on the album, the blackface minstrelsy. Shocked seems to be genuinely concerned with fostering a "context of true respect for the cultures we ape." Ex-



posing the black roots of popular white music is a worthy goal, although I doubt that reviving the racist minstrel shows is the best way of doing it. (To be fair to Shocked, she does use a lot of black artists on the album.)

In the language of the music biz, *Arkansas Traveler* isn't going to move anywhere near the volume of units of *Diva*. Too bad; it's a great album.

Contentment leads to unrest

"The possibility of an underclass revolt...exists and grows stronger... It has always been one of the high tenets of comfort that the uncomfortable accept peacefully, even gladly, their fate. Such a belief today may be suddenly and surprisingly disproved."

Reading famed Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith's latest book, *The Culture of Contentment*, one cannot help but be awed by his prescience. Although the innocent verdict in the Rodney King trial was the flashpoint, the recent riots in Los Angeles and other American cities developed out of a long history of economic and political deprivation, as Galbraith suggests.

Galbraith's thesis is that the well off middle and upper classes in the United States, who have enough material wealth to be "content," make up the majority of voters. Because of this, government policy is geared towards serving their interests. It is a simple idea, but the ramifications are vast.

Although many people recognize the US has severe problems with education, its medical system and a decaying infrastructure, for instance, the government doesn't do much to solve them. Why? According to Galbraith, they involve raising taxes, something the contented class absolutely refuses to allow, especially when the benefits are far in the future and diffused among the entire population.

On the other hand, the government is prepared to spend over \$500 billion (that's billion with a "b") to bail out the savings and loans companies, because the contented class can't afford to lose its savings. "However intervention by the state may be condemned..." Galbraith writes, "it has been relatively comprehensive when the interests of the contented are involved."

Given Galbraith's thesis, government policies which had seemed perverse start to make sense. The obsession with keeping the rate of inflation down, for example, despite the fact that it puts millions of people on the unemployment lines, is necessary for the contented class to reap the maximum profit on money it lends. They can accept the unemployment as long as they get paid back in money that isn't worth much less than what it was worth when they lent it out.

Almost every major economic

BOOK

The Culture of Contentment
John Kenneth Galbraith
Houghton Mifflin Company
195 pages \$29.95

policy of the 1980s comes under scrutiny in *The Culture of Contentment*. And, although

Galbraith sometimes stretches his theory too far to make a point, his arguments are very convincing.

The book is a hybrid, easily accessible in some ways, scholarly in others. The style is a little dry (you can tell Galbraith learned his economics in the 1930s!), but it isn't as off-putting as most works on the subject.

On the other hand, there aren't many footnotes and not a lot of supporting research. This may be an indication that there isn't much material available on recent events, particularly from Galbraith's Keynesian perspective, but it gives the author's detractors, who are legion, ammunition to trash the book.

Of course, Galbraith doesn't help his cause by devoting two chapters to what he calls "The Economic Accommodation," the propensity of economists to skew their theories to suit the prevailing political will. Although the chapters may be his response to the near universal ill-will other economists harbour for him, they are logically argued and make a lot of sense.

This is what I have long admired about Galbraith. Where most other economists spin ever more complex theories that have less and less to do with the real world, he tries to explain it.

Galbraith's prognosis for the future is uncharacteristically pessimistic. The contented class will not willingly give up its advantages; Galbraith states that it may take severe economic recession, an unpopular war, a revolt of the underclass or some combination of the three to improve the lot of the majority of poor, underprivileged Americans.

Galbraith's argument in *The Culture of Contentment* is compelling, if depressing.

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