

The Reviewing Stand

"SUMMER OF THE SEVENTEENTH DOLL"

Reviewed by DAVE FOLSTER

"The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll" undoubtedly fulfills the foremost task of any play, that is, it produces a challenge. Unfortunately for our audiences, the "Doll" is in just a few ways, a challenge too considerable for our local Thespians.

First we consider the problem of the Australian accents. Apparently there just weren't enough to go around. The consistency of Michael Gordon as Barney and Joyce Campion, as Emma, and the occasional fling by Jerry Scarfe as Johnny Dowd cover the excursions into Australian. The other four players apparently decided to stick to good, old, safe Canadian. The result is a contrast which certainly must have cast the unacquainted-with-the-play segment of the audience into a spell of wonderment at the outset as to whether Barney's new girl, Pearl Cunningham, is simply a visitor from Canada, as to whether Bubba Ryan is that new girl from the United States who has just moved next door, as to whether Roo's five-month lay-off is from the Canadian Army.

As a result of this contrast of

accents, or much rather as a result of this deficiency in proper accents, the audience is immediately faced with the task of reconciling Canadian to Australian and then carrying on from there.

It seems unfortunate that the director, although his obvious practice of allowing each player to interpret his role for himself is undoubtedly a good one, should not have cautioned his underlings concerning these voice ventures. A unity of accents, even though all-Canadian as local capabilities would apparently impose, would have helped a great deal.

The director also seems to have been more than somewhat concerned in circumstances so remote from ours. He is genuinely worried about the Christmas hot weather discussed in the play, the summer New Year's Eve fireworks display, the seven-months-on - five - months - off situation which is typical of the Australian field cane worker. Consequently, he seems to be attempting to reiterate continually that the setting is Australia. And one of his chief means of doing this has

been by adopting the Aussie melody, "Waltzing Matilda" as a theme throughout the play. We hear it on the parlor radio, during the scene changes, and when we come to the community singing session, Emma announces: "We'll start off with Waltzing Matilda". Since the original version of the script gives no directions for the use of this melody and, in fact, that Emma's favourite is "There's a Goldmine in the Sky", it appears likely that this was the director's aim.

An alternative suggestion might have it that he is trying to give the play some subliminal commercial appeal by taking advantage of the current popularity of the tune as a result of its being theme music for the film version of Neville Shutes' "On the Beach".

Perhaps, both of these suggestions are valid.

Concerning the individual performances, Michael Gordon must first be singled out for his interpretation of the role of Barney Ibbot. In the original company which produced the play, the author, Ray Lawlor, was in the

role. To begin with, Lawlor is much smaller in stature than Mr. Gordon and his portrayal produced a slippery scheming Barney who had the audience hating him moments after his first entrance. Mr. Gordon in a complete reversal makes Barney into a likeable, pseudo-Don Juan, and he should be complimented for his boldness in this interpretation.

Joyce Campion who has had professional theatre experience, makes that professionalism very evident throughout the play and her natural Irish brogue is sufficiently flexed to make an impressive Aussie accent.

Anneke Deichman, despite the sometimes slightly annoying ring of a high pitched voice, is a very capable Olive and her "break-up" scene with Roo is particularly well handled.

Walter Learning, who seems just a trifle miscast, re his ability to bully the much larger in stature Mr. Gordon around, nevertheless turns in a solid performance as Roo.

Sandra Kilburn appeared to have trouble mastering the lines of the second Act and conse-

quently saw her natural stage presence disappear momentarily, regaining it, however, during the finale, to yield generally a poised, if not at times an almost too sophisticated, Pearl.

Wendy Tidmarsh is a charming, if just a little too young for 22 years, Bubba Ryan.

In the role of the Johnnie Dowd, Jerry Scarfe appears to be quite often fitting the character of Johnnie Dowd to the character of one Jerry Scarfe rather than attempting to adopt an interpretation of the role. Nevertheless at times this natural stage presence is commendable.

In conclusion, then, I would say concerning the play itself that it is a solid writing with a theme of universal application. The consequences of living within an illusion are dramatically illustrated. The more perfect the illusion, the greater the crash when it is eventually broken. Lawlor is able to illustrate this through the lives of these simple people. He adds the local color, and a workman's language for realism, and his end result is an altogether honest work.

LES CHARLES—from MACBETH to JOHNNY COBRA, from DRAMA to DJ,—from NEW YORK to HOLLYWOOD—from A CROWD to 'SOLITUDE'

"When I was eight years old I worked one night with a kid who picked her nose. Ever since then I've been a single". In these sentences, Les Charles, Radio Atlantic's creator and producer of the late night listening tranquilizer *Solitude*, seems to provide a subliminal clue to the *potpourri* of a career which has carried him from the campus of the University of Indiana to the acting schools of Germany, to the BBC studios in London, to the massive sound stages of Hollywood, to the stage at Carnegie Hall.

"I ran away from home at the age of 16 and ever since then I've been wandering. I love to travel and barnstorm. You know, I've made 155 trips between New York and Hollywood and just for the record, I made 109 trips across the Atlantic during the war. That's a lot of water. It was all right though, because I love the ocean".

Our one-hour and a-half interview with Les Charles revealed that he has many more loves than just salt water. He is a musician ("For two years my mother crammed piano lessons down my throat, after that I went it on my own"), he has a "fair command" of six languages besides English ("My mother was German, my father was Polish-Russian. Spanish, Chinese, and French I picked up by various means"), he is a writer (he currently has two one-hour TV scripts in the hands of the CBC, one on the desks of Australian Broadcasting System producers, one being considered by the BBC), and of course, he is a radio-announcer—plus.

Les Charles' writings, besides his TV work, include the scripts for three movies, "Johnny Cobra", "The Hollow Men", and "Step Down to Evil", the scripts for thousands of radio broadcasts, and even some poetry. Concerning the latter, Les reflected, "I don't think for poetry. It just has to come and I have to be in the mood. I do what I like to hear and I don't tailor for an audience". He applies the same formula in scripting his show, *Solitude*. "I spend about four hours on it before the actual taping. I always do the show at night when the studios are quiet. That way I can get the mood I require. It's a matter of flipping through two mental card indexes, one for the poetry, the other for the music which I will use with the poetry. Sometimes it works the other way. I hear a piece of music which has the right kind of a beat to it and I simply file it mentally until I have occasion to use it".

And where did the radio career of this fascinating personality begin?

"It started at the University of Indiana. They had a radio station there and I thought, kicks—why not?" Consequently, Les Charles became a writer, announcer, producer, and director. In between these extra-curricular activities he obtained an M.A. "As a result of this I don't think much of American universities. I did absolutely no studying and still got a degree".

The next step along the path of his career was a large one—to Europe, and more specifically to Germany. There, he met and began studying under the tutelage

of the famous German director Erwin Piscator whom George Bernard Shaw has described as "the greatest in the world".

While in Europe, he became caught up in World War II and consequently exchanged his acting clothes for the khaki of Uncle Sam. During the war he did radio broadcasts to troops aboard the *Queen Mary*. "This was a real 'captive' audience", Les reflects.

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"There were 16,000 troops aboard the boat on each crossing and they listened whether they liked it or not". As a result of this, since the BBC news was used in the programming of the station on the ship, Les Charles became an accredited announcer with the BBC.

After the war, Les came to New York where he enrolled in the Dramatic Workshop which was founded by Piscator who had fled Germany earlier. During his years at the school, he worked with such stars as Marlon Brando, Shelley Winters, Eve-Marie Saint to mention only three. About this time he also appeared with Katherine Cornell in *Antigone*.

And just to keep his otherwise idle hours busy, he operated two theatres, the President on 48th and Broadway, and the Houston Street.

Later he formed his own company and played summer stock in New York and Connecticut. He also took his group through the Southern states. One night, in Louisville, Kentucky, he was scheduled to present *Macbeth*. On finding the audience to be a segregated one, he decided to present the same play the next night for negroes. "It was the most exhilarating audience I've ever played in front of", recalls Les. As a result of this stay in Louisville, he went on to found the only little theatre group in the U.S. solely for negroes.

On his return to New York, Les and his group had the honour of appearing on the stage at Carnegie Hall.

Then, it was out to the West Coast and Hollywood for this travelling Thespian. During his five year stay there, 1955-1959, Les did some legitimate stage work as well as entering the studio lots to coach such people as Doris Day, Tab Hunter, Bob Wagner, and Peggy Lee.

Our obvious question now was why he had left the U.S. to come to Fredericton. He didn't hesitate: "I simply got tired of being cooped up and fighting in an as-

phalt jungle, and I got fed up with unions. There is no longer any field for creativity in the United States. Everything that appears on American television must be tailored with a commercial pitch via the way of the double "S"—Sex and Sadism. I don't like to see animals caged and I don't like to be stifled creatively myself. Canada has artistic frontiers and they're slowly being opened up. As a matter of fact, I've got two TV series on tap right now. To film one of them, I'd like to get a big schooner and sail to all the ports of the world and get them on celluloid as they really are".

"I have one quarrel with Canadian poets and writers and in a way with Canadian politics—you are suffering from feelings of inferiority. Your writers don't stand for anything which they write. But I like the fact that in this country people are still searching for something. You are an embryo kicking in a warm womb. One of these days the moose is going to become aroused".

And so, this is the man who sits behind the microphone every Monday and Friday at 11.30 to bring listeners to Radio Atlantic the program *Solitude*. *Solitude*—a lonely word. Les Charles, probably at times a lonely man, but always, throughout his career, a fascinating and creative artist.

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and independence which you have erected to yourselves, does not sink you on the way.

And fear not, boys of UNB . . . woman will put up with you, perhaps because she likes Old Spice . . . or perhaps because there's always an optimistic hope that you may someday blossom into manhood . . .