

State of the Art-Nancy Bauer-Salon, TJ-Saturday August 6, 2016

Fifteen Julys of summer theatre on the stages of the capital city

The Notable Acts Theatre Festival has been going for 15 Julys. It's attached through the person of Len Falkenstein and his cohorts to Bard in the Barracks, which performs Shakespeare in Odell Park every June. That's a lot of summer theatre.

All the plays of the festival—198 of them over the 15 years—are written by New Brunswickers. This year the plays, in various stages of development, were held afternoons and evenings in venues all over Fredericton—The Playhouse, Milda's pizza parlour, the Cathedral, the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Memorial Hall, Barracks Square, and who knows where else.

The section of the festival called "Play Out Loud" was held at the Beaverbrook. One play, *Tissue*, was by the dramaturge-in-residence Erica Kopyto. I understood that this was her first play, odd for a dramaturge, but then I remembered all the successful creative writing teachers who had written little themselves. In her notes about the play she writes, "Experimenting with process, the text is sourced from the writing of 7 different authors: including a therapist, a novelist, a theatre critic and a 7 year old." Not an auspicious start to a writing project and what comes out is a clichéd adultery plot. Rebekah Chassé and Devin Luke did a credible job of making the characters come alive. Muriel Falkenstein instilled real pathos into 7 year old Frances, the child caught in between.

In readings, when the actors just stand there in ordinary clothes, delivering lines from a paper, their naked talent is visible. Young Falkenstein already has charisma. I hope she doesn't decide to be an actor because it's a brutal profession.

Clarissa Hurley, active in many capacities on the festival's board, was busier than the proverbial one-armed paper hanger—acting, moving furniture, directing two of the plays. She chose her cast well—for Bruce Allen Lynch's *Weekenders* two of the best actors on the local scene, Liz Goodyear and Ian Murphy. The play is a spy story involving Russians, even Putin himself. Murphy has a booming voice, welcome to the faint of hearing, and his accent and mannerisms as Mikhail Trepashkin were so convincing that I thought the clever Hurley had found a Slav to play the part. Goodyear, wisely playing Yelizaveta Yazova without an accent but with a Slavic rhythm, evolved convincingly from a cold, calculating spy to a distraught grandmother. Her performance kept the whole swashbuckling plot on track.

I've seen several of Lynch's plays—about Wallace Simpson and Virginia Woolf for two. In a half hour *Weekenders* has a love story, the murders of children, the lingering clash of former Russian serfs and aristocrats, how our children are our chief motivation and much else. His plays hold the audience's attention, no mean feat.

Patrick Toner was also inspired by world events, but in this case one in which a New Brunswicker played a leading part. In *Gracenotes* a New Brunswick woman, a Second Lieutenant, takes down a terrorist in the Parliament, is sent off to the embassy in Jordan, there becomes a leader of a bagpipe band, meets Syrian and Palestinian terrorists. Mary Milliken, playing the Miramicher Grace, was the perfect female counterpart of the real Parliament hero, Kevin Vickers. Many current concerns were crammed into the plot—even a Quebecer/English love affair. Never a dull moment.

The tradition of writing plays about far-away places, potentates, and celebrated events is long. Certainly Shakespeare did it.

Two one-act plays won the competition to have a full production at Memorial Hall. “Caged” was written by Alex Donovan and directed by Jake Martin; “Wasters” was written by Jake Martin and directed by Alex Donovan. “Caged” portrayed two Americans, a Vietnam War deserter and a young female sergeant deserter, both arrested crossing the Canadian border. Donovan was fortunate in the casting of the two principals, Scott Harris and Stephanie Doucette, who helped us feel their grief as they tried to get home to see their children. The play was enhanced by a dramatic set of the two adjoining jail cells and by the comic relief of two jail keepers.

“Wasters” used the “Waiting for Godot” plot, setting it on a hotel rooftop. It worked remarkably well, with two engaging actors--Dillion Matchett and Esther Soucoup--, a visually entertaining set, and absurd but amusing busyness.

Every time I go to the Notable Acts festival, I come away dreaming of writing a “site specific” play that takes place in my house and yard. I have the characters and the plot in mind, but where would I put an audience? In 1992 well-known actor Clare Coulter came to town, needing a living room for performing Wallace Shawn’s monologue “The Fever”. I offered ours. Every once in a while something reminds of the occasion, and I see her sitting in our big leather chair telling the story to ten of our friends.