

Murder on the Edge

Edge Players stage Canadian Murder Trial

By ERIN FAGAN

There is both a chill and an intoxication which comes upon finding yourself as a witness at the edge of conflict.

When the personalities and their actions are very much in your face, you are forced to look, listen, and speculate about things that are otherwise avoided.

Last week, the Edge Players' production of *Canadian Murder Trial* was held at The Barn for three evenings, combining elements of multi-media, a gritty and witty script, powerful character performances, and well-metred crime-drama suspense to create a theatre experience filled with impact. While some parts of the show were somewhat slow and repetitive, this was by far outweighed by performance and suspense in the innovative troupe's seventh production.

The themes and structure of the play were reminiscent of the highly acclaimed television show "Law & Order" in following one brutal murder from the crime scene through the investigation and on to the climactic trial proceedings.

The writer-producer-director team of Randy Burrows and François Weber, long involved in the four year history of the Edge Players troupe, began the project two years ago out of an interactive creative process.

"We thought it would be a cool idea to try a courtroom drama of some sort -- like Law & Order -- so we drew up ideas," explained Burrows as he described the origins of the play.

From what Burrows

referred to as the completion of the "first bastard script," he described the role of input and ideas from the performers into aspects like characterization as being highly formative, although the inclusion of news clips and video evidence presented on three screens around the set was an idea that they had desired to include from the beginning. I felt these elements served to compare what is seen by the general public with what actually occurs in a criminal investigation.

"We wanted to have a multimedia component, to recreate the audio-visual evidence [that would be found] in a courtroom," said Burrows, whose cameo as reporter Steve LeCavelier in televised news reports bridged scenes and added wonderful lightness to the proceedings.

The plot of the show was based in part on a true story, namely a relatively recent case where a man used the infamous "too drunk to know" defence after a brutal Canadian murder.

In this play, the body of an assaulted 17-year-old girl is discovered in a store-room. The victim (played by stage manager Alison MacDonald) had apparently used fake I.D. to enter a crowded bar, and is discovered to have had high levels of alcohol and rohypnol (or "Rufies", the highly publicized "date rape" drug) in her system at the time of death.

When a suspect, dynamically fleshed-out by Michael Farrell, is found, there is new tension on both sides as opposing ideas on personal responsibility and a

defendant's rights confront each other on legal grounds. The startlingly violent conclusion leaves a few more questions than answers -- which is always a good thing in murder mystery.

As a result of the close proximity of the recreated murder scene and the realism of investigative characters (highlighted by the strong presences of Dennis Ellsworth and Tony Larder as embittered and frustrated detectives, and by Jennifer Campbell as a traumatized and somewhat confused witness interrogated by Kirk MacKinnon), it felt like the closest experience for an audience member to tangibly investigate along with the police.

The starkness of the scene, blended with infusions of humour, brought the brutality home and the audience into the interrogation room. In this scene, one was impressed by the striking "mean streets of Oshawa" attitude of one suspect played, although slightly smirkingly, by Todd MacLean, and by the equally good characterization of a bartender/witness by Lisa Carmody.

The court scene, including a jury section filled with inadvertant audience members, showcased the measured and well-styled bantering of François Weber and Aynsley Batherson, further vivid performances by witnesses and court members such as Jennifer Godfrey (who was naturally reminiscent of the sort of "expert" one would expect on the stand), Robertson Library's Leo Cheverie, and the judge portrayed by Kevin Docherty. Other characters

portrayed by Haley Crane, James Hicken and Darcy MacDougall added to the vivid realism of the story and the power of this large cast.

What impressed me most about this show was the outstanding performances by Michael Farrell and François Weber as the "seemingly" normal suspect and the emotionally charged defense lawyer, respectively. Farrell was a disturbingly changeable and creepy psychopath, complete with an Edward Norton

crew cut and a thinly varnished smugness which made this character so psychologically and physically present.

"It was an interesting character because of the shift in character, the challenge of two characters in one," stated Farrell about the nature of this complex role.

"You just wanted to hit the guy or something," complimented one audience member, also struck by the performance.

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