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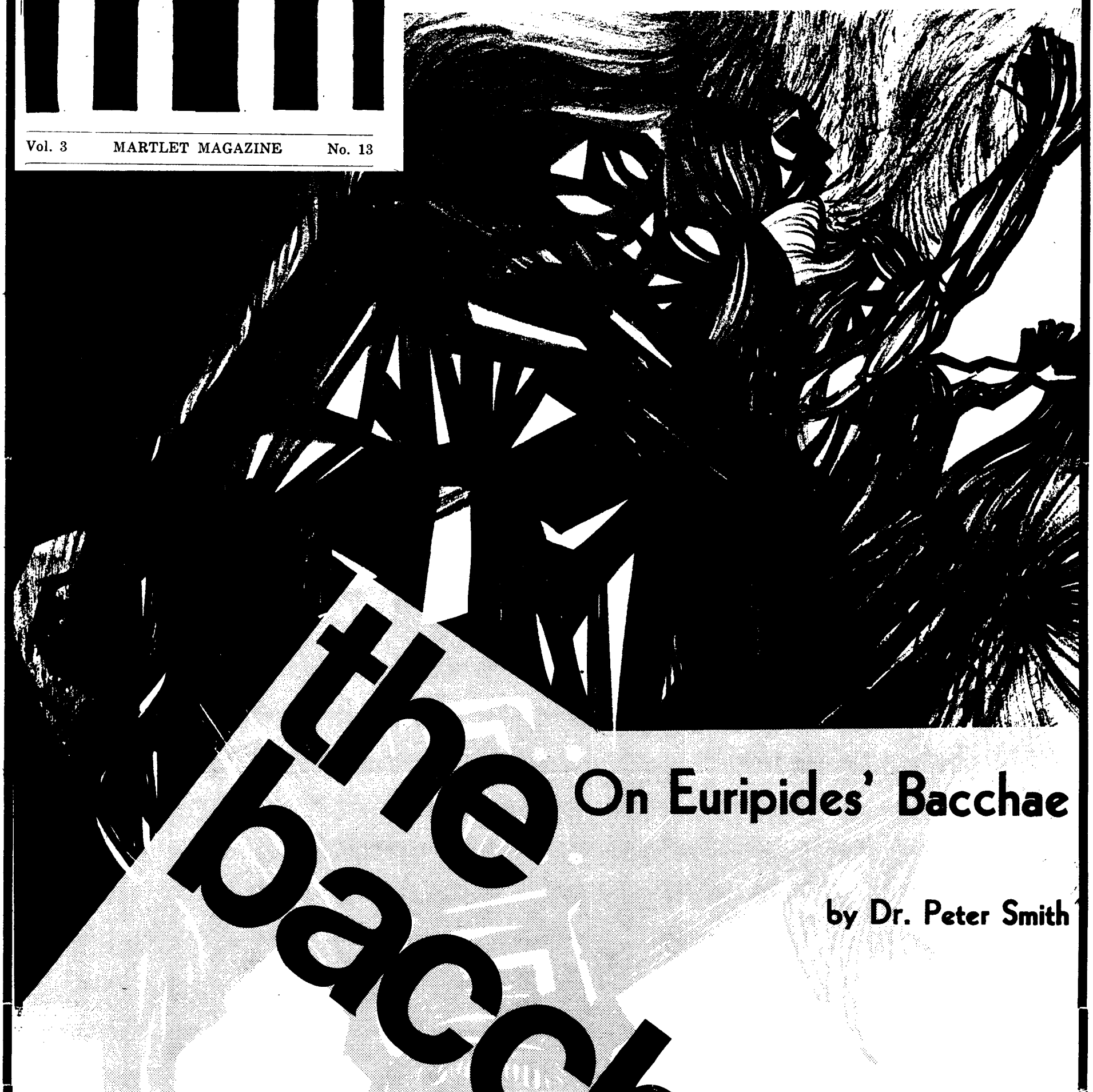


The Bacchae

On Euripides' Bacchae

by Dr. Peter Smith

The last play of Athens' last major tragic poet, the Bacchae may be the most profound single achievement of the Greek imagination. Its effect even upon a reader is often deeply disturbing; its impact upon a live audience can be overwhelming. Here is a dramatic comment about the basic rhythm of life, about forces of creation and destruction, about tensions between the instinctive and the calculated, the primitive and the civilized, the rational and the emotional. The play explodes with conflict.

bacchae . . .

The Rhythm of Emotion, Music of the Bacchae

by Christine Chester

The music for **The Bacchae** has a two fold purpose: to set, or outline, the action taking place, and to further formalize the various ritual sequences.

Music was an integral part of the Greek way of life and therefore played a prominent part in their religious exercises., That the priestesses of Dionysus should accompany their own rituals was appropriate to their concept of the ritual as an expression of the total emotional and religious self.

As the play takes the form of a primitive ritual rather than the traditional version of a stylized Greek drama, the refinements of melody and harmony tend to be out of place. So as the basic and elemental form the 'raison d'etre' of this presentation, the rhythms of the action and dialogue dramatize this theme. The instinctive verses the rational, the bestial verses the human, the savage verses the civilized, the primitive verses the sophisticated; these are the juxtaposed elements that compose the conflicting undercurrents. The emotions and actions that externalise these conflicts and comprise the dramatic texture belongs to all ages, all cultures, and all classes; the music supports and expresses these.

Generally the rhythm patterns are unsophisticated, being based on the two- or three-beat pulse. The complexities arise only out of the combinations of two or more of these patterns being alternated or superimposed on or against each other. The patterns themselves are derived immediately from the natural rhythm of the poetry they accompany, sometimes imitating its meter, sometimes counterpointing it. Agave's song of triumph is carried on a pulsating six-eight rhythm. The earthquake scene, frightening as it is wild, furious, and passionate, is set to rhythm (sixteen-eighth) rapidly accelerating in speed and intensity. The Bacchants cry of vengeance uses a relentless beat in double time.

The music, vocal and instrumental, is neither imposed on, or composed independently of, the play. It arises out of the language itself and the needs of the individual entities for which it serves as a vehicle of expression. It unites the Bacchants, it carries the emotional tempo, and it sets in relief character against emotional background, rational exposition against emotional pitch, to define and accent the conflicting forces which move through the dramatic action.

The musical instruments are the product of much research and were particularly designed for this production. Like the set they are constructed of natural primitive materials: wood, hide, and leather. The cymbals, gueros ,and clappers, are used to amplify and support the main rhythm instrument, the hide drum. The cichara is played during one scene of relaxation as the Bacchants indulge in nostalgic reminiscences of their homeland.

All these instruments are authentic models, very close to those employed in traditional Greek drama. Although sometimes different in shape (the Greeks used foot-clappers rather than arm-clappers), their function is, as near as can be determined, the same. The thyrsae (staffs carried by the Bacchae), the hand, feet, and voices, or the chorus, are used for added colour.

The music of this play is not conscious music; it is as natural as breathing. It is as unobstrusive as the incense on Semele's tomb, pervading the atmosphere, but never destroying it. ●

Christine Chester is a third year music student in the Fine Arts Division of the University of Victoria, and is responsible for composing the music for The Bacchae.

POWER IN TERMS OF THE RHYTHMIC AND THE RITUAL

The Bacchae, opening tonight
8:30 p.m., January 23-27, 30, Feb. 3

review by Martin Segger

The kinetic and violent stand in relief against a background of lucid dialogue and careful character revelation in the Players Club production of Euripides' **Bacchae**. The translation from the Greek by University of Victoria students, Robert Foster and Margaret Hooper, gains colour and power as well as dramatic reality in the hands of Mr. Hare and his very competent cast.

Aesthetic distance shrinks to practically nil as the entire theatre becomes the stage, while Bacchants dance wildly up the aisles, soldiers march through to seize prisoners, Teiresias screams his prophetic warnings into the faces of the seated, and the hand-maidens of Dionysus bring smoking incense through the theatre. Continual movement both on the rational level of the dialogue and the sensual level of the wildly erotic dances of the Bacchants allow for no interest lag during the uninterrupted one and three-quarter-hour performance. The rhythms of the movements and the speeches supported by the primitive music of the rituals welds audience and actor into a singe emotional and sensual unit. Chorus and audience gasp, moan and breathe together through the emotive contortions of the Bacchants.

There are few static speeches but the rational co-exists with the emotional in terms of carefully stylized sequences where the instinctive forces of the wild and bestial are suspended in temporary abeyance while characters communicate and proclaim in cool and logical terms. Even the Bacchants prove capable of this at times. Something of Felini, the druid, even the West Coast Kwakiutl is evident in the painfully expressive masks. But though the masks do come between actor and audience they serve to communicate more dramatically the put-on characters of the wearers. They lend the play that aura of mystery while taking on and personifying the ritualesque itself.

Even the costumes stress the opposing forces of the tragedy. The Bacchants in their wild loose flowing hair and robes, the soldiers of the court of Pentheus in military uniform, while the use of nets symbolizes not only the physical trap into which the Bacchants, and eventually Pentheus, fall, but also the trap of blindness—blindness of understanding, reason, and belief, of which both Pentheus and his mother, Agave, are victims.

The play takes on a rhythmic intensity which binds it together, accentuates the highpoints, and carries the emotional pitch. The two dancers weave in and out of audience and actors interpreting and expressing in choreographic terms the emotional movements that surge and resurge in strophe and antistrophe between the bestial and the godly, the instinctive and the logical, the melancholoy and the jubilant, the pitiful and the hateful, conscious and unconscious. Rhythms of speech, rhythms of action, live in the dramatic texture in the form of a weird, primitive music that rolls of ankle and hand clappers, the drum, sticks, thysre, feet and hands, as action integral to the play itself. Whether screaming in fury or keening in sorrow the Bacchants vocal parts fill in the hollowness of the dry rasping instruments with a rich and expressive effect.

The power of the production is such that the characters remain secondary to ideas, the plot secondary to theme. There is no attempted balance in terms of emotion and reason. Emotion clearly dominates. Indeed Euripides purpose was to assert the existence of this element of the human psyche.

The play leaves us with no greater understanding of the all-powerful, proud, unmerciful Dionysus, nor does it explain the injustice of the punishments which befall the ill fated house of Echion. Even Teiresias becomes a meglomaniac of reason, passionate in his own beliefs. There seem to be no resolutions to the themetic dilemma either in terms of character or plot. What lives rather, in terms of the presentation through characterization and dramatic technique is that the emotional as well as the rational demands an expressive role in the extended ritual of human existence. To deny its existence is sinful, to suppress it implies tragic consequences. ●

ON EURIPIDES' BACCHAE (cont. from page one)

The play explodes with conflict. But its power and profundity stem less from conflict as such than from the terrifying ambiguity of the conflict. How should we, as a civilized audience, react? Can Euripides ask us to applaud the vicious triumph of a demented god? Or are we expected to side with an insufferable young prude who is intolerable and arrogant?

Dionysus, a divine egomaniac, exacts a terrible vengeance from the people of his native Thebes for their refusal to accept him. Pentheus, king of Thebes (the god's own cousin), is singled out for exquisite punishment; for Pentheus has denied the divinity of the god and tries to crush the group of Asiatic women who forms Dionysus' retinue. As a result, the young king is seduced by the god into spying on an ecstatic Dionysiac celebration, where he is killed and torn apart by his own mother Agave.

The myth might have produced crude melodrama. Perhaps the tragic passion of Pentheus became mere melodrama in the hands of lesser playwrights. The great poets, however, explored beneath myth to seek ritual meaning. In the Bacchae, Euripides penetrated to the basic foundations of Greek drama—man's need for Dionysiac experience and his urge to worship a god of ecstasy.

Dionysus (or Bacchus) is not an easy god to describe, for his role in the Greek pantheon was complex and varied. Although he was worshipped for his gift of wine, he was never seen as a paunchy, jolly, purple-stained Silenus. Instead, he was a young, powerful, frightening god, master of all fertility, fruit-bearer, life-giver, bringer of release from pain and fear of death. He was a strangely paradoxical god, endowed with polar functions of creation and dissolution. His contradictory nature partook of gentleness and cruelty, ugliness and beauty. Unlike Aphrodite, who controlled erotic sexuality, Dionysus was almost ambivalent in sex: at times intensely masculine, he was shown at other times as soft and effeminate, and was worshipped, in the popular sphere, by cults of women devotees. These "Bacchae" or "maenads" practised wildly emotional rites that aimed at communion with the god and ecstatic oneness with all creation. Naturally enough, the unconverted were suspicious of celebrations that were held on dark mountain slopes. Long after their god had won a place among the Olympians, Bacchant women continued to be criticized or even persecuted for their orgiastic rituals.

In depicting the conflict between Pentheus and Dionysus, Euripides is clearly commenting on the inadequacy of the coldly rational life. Without abandoning reason, he insists that the truly rational man must recognize the presence and power of the irrational. It is almost certain that Euripides believed literally in the myth no more than would a modern playgoer. But he did see its ultimate truth: to deny Dionysus is to suppress emotion, to betray the other self that will not submit to conscious rational mastery. Thus, with intuitive insight, the poet could lend the myth eternal psychological validity.

But what of the ambiguity? Does the Bacchae advocate a life directed solely by irrational emotional forces, often cruel, capricious, uncivilized? Few would argue that this is the case. Recognition (worship, in a polytheistic Greek context) is not total surrender. Presumably the same man will seek true wisdom, to be distinguished from shallow cleverness by its balanced awareness of all facets of the human experience. All of the chief characters, not least the blind prophet Teiresias, lack the equilibrium that permits human survival and may lead to ultimate joy. This balance has perhaps been achieved by the chorus of Asian bacchants, who are capable of rational lucidity; it has not been achieved by Agave and her sisters, who are the tools of Dionysus' vengeance after they become his uncontrolled converts.

Though the arrogant academic may try to explain it, the Bacchae remains mysterious and provocative. It also seems to remain perpetually relevant. Sixty years ago, inspired by Gilbert Murray, Shaw adapted the play as Major Barbara, using the Salvation Army as the vehicle for Dionysiac experience. (With Shavian irony, the Pentheus figure was converted into a professor of Greek!) Today a psychedelic response is almost inevitable; and it must be admitted that the beautiful people of the chorus are strangely familiar in their clash with an authority that will not "turn on." The scholar will protest that Dionysus is a far cry from Timothy Leary; that Bacchus' ivy is not precisely the daffodil. Still, it is probably appropriate that a play about the role of the non-rational should continue to evoke a personal and emotional response. Dionysus, of course, is still alive. ●

Dr. Smith is head of the classics department at Victoria University.

windows, a poem by d. dedora

I.

Draw back your plastic drapes,

Look out the frosted window.

See a jungle

Overgrown with Venus Fly Traps,

Waiting for unsuspecting human flies

Carried by the wings of pay cheques,

Sucked into the spined jaws,

Caught in the sticky ooze of economy

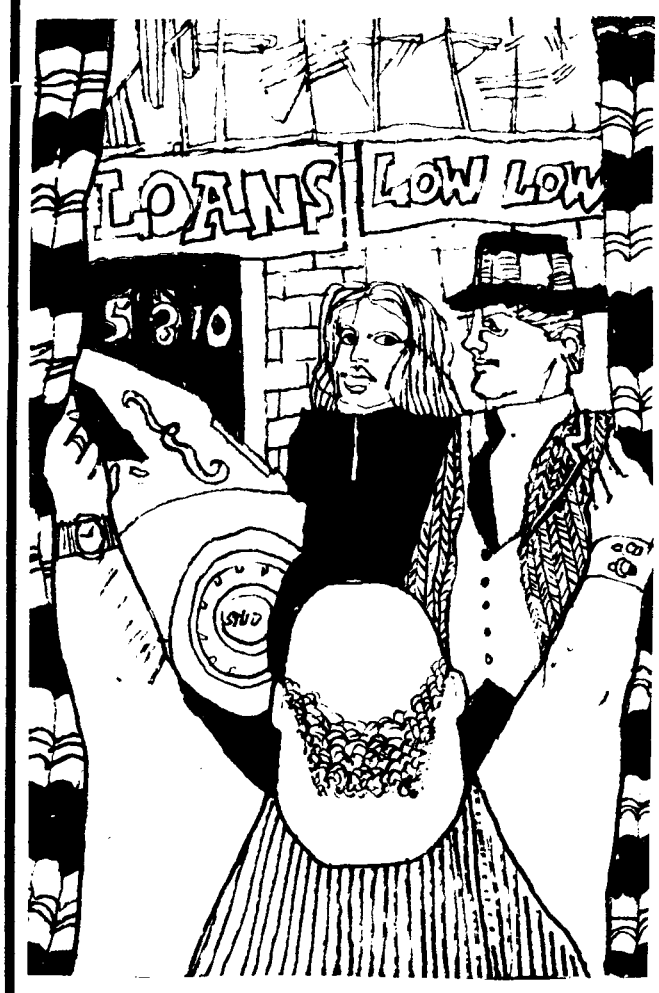
Until they no longer fly,

Digestion — long payment security,

Excretion by the bowels of inhumanism.

See the door to door salesmen,

II.



See the door to door salesmen,

Sepulchres with life in a suitcase—
peddling,

Sales people with a sales pitch

Scurrying back to their pre-fabricated
suburban box

With pay cheques in claw,

Their shower nozzles come alive

Hissing like snakes

Spitting deceptive pearly beads

At a shredding paper white body

Covered in saliva like lather,

The clean skin squeaks at the touch,

Water beads and collects

Dropping down and away,

Soon—wash day white,

Sponge like towels wipe and dry,

Look through the Fleshy barrier,

A stovepipe turned inside out.

III.

See the black shroud of night

Descend and overwhelm,

Alleys become highways

Travelled by cats

Seeking hors-d'oeurve carrion

Amidst bottles

In the garbage can coffins of parties.

IV.

See a desert

Sparse with the life of vultures

Perched on cactii pedestals,

Clawing for their green paper prey.

Former Uvic Prof. Stars in Local Play

Perhaps some might remember the strange rather corpulant figure who cut rather an obstruse figure on the campus scene last year. Head melting into a heavy overcoat or rather tattered academic gown. The loss of Harry Hill left a large vacuum in the realm of dynamic entertainment on the Victoria scene. Mr. Hill's return in the Bastion Theatre's presentation of the **Odd Couple** was a welcome and relished delight. Mr. Hill and co-star, Robert Price, portray a couple of divorced bachelors who for reason's of economy and friendship set up house together to provide, with their poker-playing friends, two hours of light comedy and generous humour. The two friends, Felix Ungar and Oscar Madison, in violent contrast personality-wise satirize the badly matched wife-husband domestic scene.

As Felix Ungar, the fussy, talkative, worrying, henpecking, husband-come-spouse, one can hardly believe Mr. Hill is typecast, yet he carries off the role with convincing authenticity, and as usual, dynamic zest. Oscar, the sloppy, henpecked and harried mate, bearing the brunt of Felix's eccentricities and foibles, carries through with almost stoic resignation, a very demanding role.

In Pinteresque fashion the apartment room becomes the scene of two characters gradually discovering one another, exploiting one another, and eventually hating one another; but rather than the tragedy of a murder, or suicide, both of which are continually suggested resolutions to the dilemma, the play ends fittingly — happiness for both, — relief and resignation.

The play moves quickly, the dialogue fast, the action continuous. The humour, always light, sometimes biting, often burlesque, and occasionally bawdy gives the play an air of flippent yet vibrant vitality. The supporting characters, Speed, Murray, Roy, and Vinnie, always on cue, always in type, provided the necessary contrasts in comment and character that keep the action and dialogue alive. The Hosie sisters, as Gwendolyn and Cecily Pigeon were as convincing as their counterparts in real life, lending the necessary colour to the gloriously successful ending.

The play was generally a pleasant and entertaining experience; it was obvious that the actors, like the audience, enjoyed every minute of it.

MM ●

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