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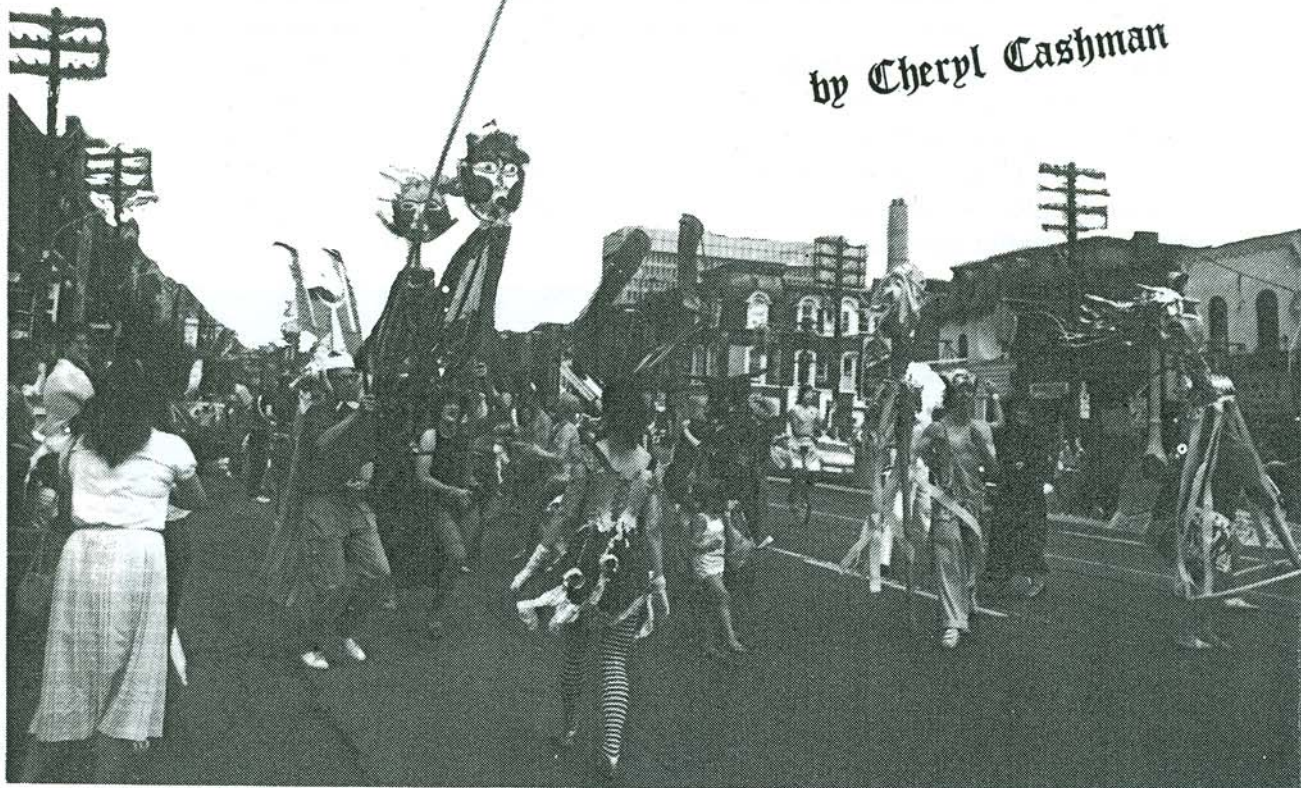


Issues in Performance
• Augusto Boal, Cheryl Cashman,
Kate Lushington, R. Murray Schafer,
Lib Spry, Peter Elliot Weiss
Script:
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Canada's Clowns

by Cheryl Cashman

PHOTO: ROBERT MACINTYRE



*The comic spirit, in fact the need for comedy, exists in every known culture. Comedy is as old as humanity itself, older than recorded history. The theatre is believed to have originated in religious ceremonies, and most present-day tribal peoples do not seem to feel, as we do, that clowning and capering are out of place in the midst of solemn ritual. Among the Hopi and Zuni Indians of the American Southwest, the clown is an important member of the community, credited with special healing powers and a particularly close relationship with the forces of nature. In return, he is allowed the privilege of ignoring or deliberately violating ordinary social conventions: he may use the coarsest language, play the lowest pranks, mock the performance of the most sacred rites, without fearing retaliation, or even loss of respect. He is permitted, even encouraged, to be profane, boastful, gluttonous, and foolish, to defy all the standards and customs of his community, since his clowning is really a skillful dramatic commentary that illustrates and interprets the laws and rituals he appears to ridicule. – Lowell Swortzell, *Here Come the Clowns* **

This spirit is alive and well in Canada. Under the guise of what some have called "the new vaudeville," clowning has survived the 70s to thrive in the 80s, while somehow keeping alive an enthusiasm and excitement more typical of the 60s. A wholly Cana-

The opening parade of the Kensington Karnival, a two-day festival held annually in Toronto's Kensington Market under the artistic directorship of Ida Carnevali.

dian form of clowning has sprung up and is growing wild in every province, a unique hybrid of European, American, and Amerindian traditions.

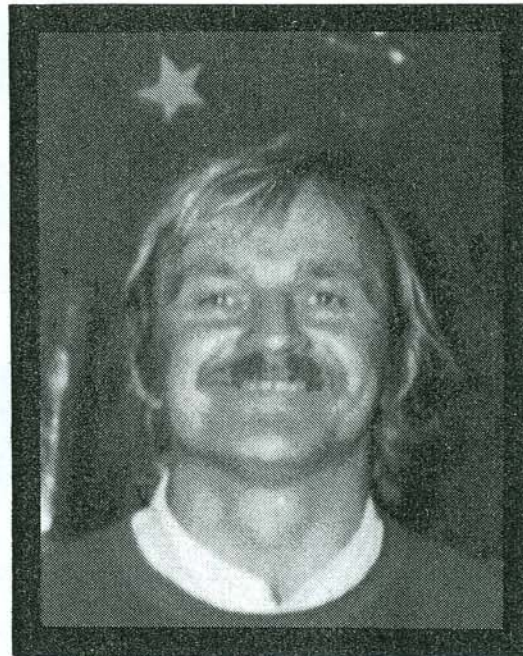
What is it about clowning that has allowed it to survive, and why have so many performers – most of them with classical theatre backgrounds – been drawn to it? I believe it is because clowning is challenging, exciting, risky (and rewarding), and limitless in its creative boundaries. One can express anything through it, and the individual performer can take it in an entirely new and personal direction. Through clowning it is possible to reach the public directly, to communicate with all ages and cultures. It is almost always wordless and hence it is as universal as music. It can be sophisticated or outrageous, moving or funny, or it can be all of these things – and more – at the same time.



Leah Cherniak, Jim Warren, and Allegra Fulton in Infidelity, a co-production of Crow's Theatre and Theatre Columbus at Toronto's Theatre Centre last December which incorporated clown performance with techniques traditional to farce. PHOTO: MICHAEL COOPER

Just how popular this type of theatre is in Canada, and some of the people who have made it so, is the subject of this article. The variety of styles and subject matters of the diverse artists mentioned herein gives some idea of the amazing scope of what we call clowning. For instance, in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver there are full-time clown schools. For two of this country's master clown teachers, Richard Pochinko and Dean Gilmour, conducting workshops throughout Canada, the United States, and Europe is a full-time occupation. Also, there are yearly clown festivals: the Kensington Festival in Toronto put together by Ida Carnevali; the Festival of Fools in

Vancouver (sponsored by the Fool Society); the New York International Clown Festival co-ordinated by John Townsend (at which Ian Wallace and myself represented Canada in 1983 and 1985); and this month Vancouver's Axis Mime produced "Beaux Gestes," an international festival of mime, clowning, and dance, with Wayne Specht as co-ordinator. As well, across English-speaking Canada alone, there are hundreds of street performers: in Ontario, Nion, Jim Warren, Brenda Caar, John Lambert, Dean Gilmour and Michele Smith, Dominique Abel, Makka Kleist, Ida Carnevali, Neil Lees, The Flying Walumpies, Gord Robertson, Sue Morrisson, Monica Moyica, Billy Marasti, Gary Farmer; on the Prairies, Paula Jardine (whose specialty is parades), Jan Miller, Jan Henderson, Robert Astle; in Vancouver, Gerardo Avila, Gina Bastone, Paul Gibbons ("Koko"), "Snake-in-the-Grass" Company, "Pepper," Luke Lukasek, Axis Mime Company, Lawrence Smythe, "Taxi Whizz," "Special Delivery," Dick and Danny, Danny Vic ("Festival of Fools"), again to name only a few.



Richard Pochinko, teacher of clown, has had a seminal influence on the careers of many of Canada's best clowns.

Pre-eminent among Canadian clowns is Richard Pochinko, a robust, contradictory, and artistic rebel. Born on the Prairies of Polish descent, he ran away from home at age 14 to join the theatre (perhaps because no circuses were available). In 1967 he went to Europe where he studied clowning with Jacques Lecoq in Paris, and then to Denmark to work with Jerzy Grotowski. Somewhere along the line he decided he preferred laughter to angst, and dedicated his life to clowning. Eventually he returned to North America, first to Seattle where he worked with a singularly gifted Native Indian clown teacher named Jonsmith and then to Ottawa where he founded the Theatre Resource Centre. Pochinko, along with two other teachers – Annie Skinner (voice) and Linda Rabin (dance), gathered together 18 prospective clowns, initiating a year of the most incendiary and seminal work in Canadian clown history; among their numerous performances were *Clown Chowder* and *Fantasy National Park*, which toured the country. The company of clowns was comprised of Ian Wallace (who would later create *Nion: Birth of a Clown*, now a classic); Jan Henderson and Jan Miller, who subsequently created Small Change Theatre Company and toured Canada, as well as performing in Edinburgh, Paris, and Tokyo; Jan Kudelka, whose play *Circus Gothic* recounts the story of the group's tour of the Maritimes with a "real

American circus"; Marsha Coffey, renowned for her extraordinary musical compositions and performances for the theatre; Bob Pott, who has since done original clown shows in Montreal and Vancouver; Robert Moore, whose subtle clown-sense was evident in his puppet manipulation in several of Felix Mirbt's stunningly theatrical productions; Michael Fahey who helped originate the Mulgrave Road Co-op in Nova Scotia; and many others whose work forms part of the living tapestry of Canadian theatre.

After the TRC venture, Richard Pochinko, along with Paul Kirby, was instrumental in the formation of BC's Caravan Stage Company, was regional director of Toronto's version of *Hair*, and turned down an offer to become "Ronald McDonald" and make a cool fortune. Instead, he continues to teach, direct, aspire, and inspire his way across the country – Polish, poor, crass, classy, dreams intact.



Ida Carnevali and Ian Wallace, two performers who credit Richard Pochinko as a major inspiration, perform in Circus Bizarro '84. PHOTO: JEAN-PIERRE MULLER

Ian Wallace was born in Edinburgh, Scotland and grew up in Edmonton. He graduated from the University of Alberta with a degree in mathematics and art, taught high school, and created an extraordinary series of paintings and batiks. In 1967 he met Richard Pochinko, the beginning of a creative union which has continued to grow to the present day. Together, the two amalgamated and refined the European and North American shamanistic approaches to mask and clown, resulting in the development of a uniquely Canadian style of clown theatre. *Nion*, Ian's one-person show (subsequently titled *Birth of a Clown* and *Commedia Bizarro*) is the most outstanding example of this.



Ian Wallace in Nion: Birth of a Clown. Note the anthropomorphic creatures at the front, all created by Wallace.

Ian performed this now-classic piece for the first time in his living-room one spring afternoon, for Richard Pochinko and myself. He used few props and talked us through the visual sequences. Oddly enough, I had the same reaction to it as I was to have later, when I saw it in performance with all of its deceptively simple complicated tech. That first day I laughed, I cried, I was afraid; I was left full of excitement and hope. Richard too, by the way, was hyperventilating happily after the living-room "première." Perhaps the best description of the piece as it came to be was made in one of its press releases:

Commedia Bizarro is essentially a one-man show by talented Canadian Ian Wallace (Nion). Arriving as a small visitor from outer space, Nion goes through dazzling costume, persona, and even sexual changes as he tours our culture's mythologies. Over the course of the show Nion is a squealing infant, a weekend artist, a motorcyclist, a female stripper, a rock star, a game-show host, and an eerie fox-headed figure of death. This delightful evening is designed around that unavoidable question that mankind has been asking for thousands of years: "What is the meaning of life?"

In style, *Commedia Bizarro* most resembles avant-garde German cabaret. Ian also was much influenced by the Mummenchanz Theatre, as is evident in his extraordinarily imaginative puppet-like props, all of which he built himself. The metamorphosis he undergoes during the course of the piece takes us through both familiar and totally uncharted territories; a marriage of the mundane and the mysterious, this breaking of honoured taboos is more an experience than a show.

Although two of Small Change Theatre's three members were schooled in mask and clowning by Richard Pochinko, they each bring different experiences to their performances; Robert Astle has an ample background in classical theatre, while Jan Henderson's is in clowning, teaching, directing, and singing, and Jan Miller's in



Edmonton's *Small Change Theatre's* production of *Hazard and Darlene in Love*, stars two clowns, Jan Miller and Robert Astle.

clowning, film acting, producing, and teaching. The company produces one new show every year to challenge themselves, as they could certainly occupy all of their time touring their first two pieces, *One Beautiful Evening* and *Hazard and Darlene in Love*. The two Jans alternate the directing and performing of the pieces in their repertoire.

One Beautiful Evening, a mask piece, is a warm, humorous romance that deals with the lives and dreams of bingo players in a small Alberta town. Max and Flo, two lonely elderly people, meet at a weekly bingo game. They share a table, watch a raffish young cowboy win all the prizes, and, just when they think their luck has run out, win an unexpected jackpot. The piece derives its power from focusing on the simplicity of the desires and emotions of two humble human beings who would not be considered interesting by the world at large. But as the audience gets to know them in all their sad-funny humanity, we come to care for them. The sense of union they embody when they walk away together at the end of the play overflows and affects the audience: we walk away elevated in spirit, and feeling less alone.

Hazard and Darlene in Love is also a clown show about a couple – but much more riotous and robust in its exploration of the relationship. The piece views the humour, fantasy, frustration, and caring of a modern couple totally committed to each other, but from the clown's perspective. And again, in the spirit of simplicity that is a

hallmark of the company, a whole range of emotions is telescoped into one event – trying to go to bed. To quote a critic at the Edinburgh Festival: “Two characters create havoc for 50 minutes with a bed and a few bed clothes, performing with manic energy and collapsing at the end with an exhaustion that may not be entirely acted.” The fun is created by simple props: the pillow transforms into a baby and back again; the blanket becomes a python; he chews gum in bed; she steals the blankets.

Behind the portrayal of people – whether in mask or in clown – lies great and lively compassion from which many a grateful audience member has walked home smiling as if carrying a secret. Jan Henderson, along with Ian Wallace and Richard Pochinko, were my original clown teachers, and their work with me created the inspiration for my solo show *Turning Thirty* and the clown therein. Over the years Richard has been godfather to my growing clown, and in the workshops we later taught, he, Ian Wallace and myself have creatively cross-fertilized to broaden the scope and depth of each our work. Like *Small Change*, I too have branched off stylistically, with my new clown show being a departure from our previous work. *What do Clowns do in a War?* is a full-length clown musical on the subject of nuclear war. For me, the most exciting aspects of the piece are its equal appeal to both children and adults of any class or culture background; and that it skirts no vital issues but, through alternately broad and sophisticated clowning, actually leaves one feeling invigorated and potent after having addressed that difficult question of whether we are going to grow up or blow up.



The "Hiroshima" clown from What do Clowns do in a War? by Cheryl Cashman and company. PHOTO: RICK ASH

End of the Pochinko family clown tree Meanwhile, back in Paris, in the mid-70s, a shy, small-town boy by the name of Dean Gilmour had ventured across more distance than he had ever traversed before to study with the "Grand Master of Clowning," Jacques Lecoq. I remember sitting with him, at the beginning of his two-year study stint, in a tiny Paris cafe – he looked boyish, skinny, and vulnerable as he voiced his thoughts about art, life, and the future: "Oh Cheryl, I don't speak a word of French, and I've never lived in a city before, and I miss my girlfriend so much I call her long distance every night, and I *hate* the snobby people here, and I don't know how everybody can live on French bread and coffee. I *know* I'm not getting enough protein, I've lost 10 pounds already and I think I'm going to die!"

Three years later I did not recognize the tall, compelling, soft-spoken, sophisticated gentleman who stopped me on a Toronto street one evening and introduced me to his Parisian wife. Today Theatre Smith-Gilmour tours its two-person clown theatre pieces to France, Germany, Italy, and Denmark, and when they're not touring they're playing downtown Toronto. Much in demand as a clown teacher (and currently teaching at Montreal's National Theatre School), Dean and partner Michele Smith perform a repertoire of pieces.



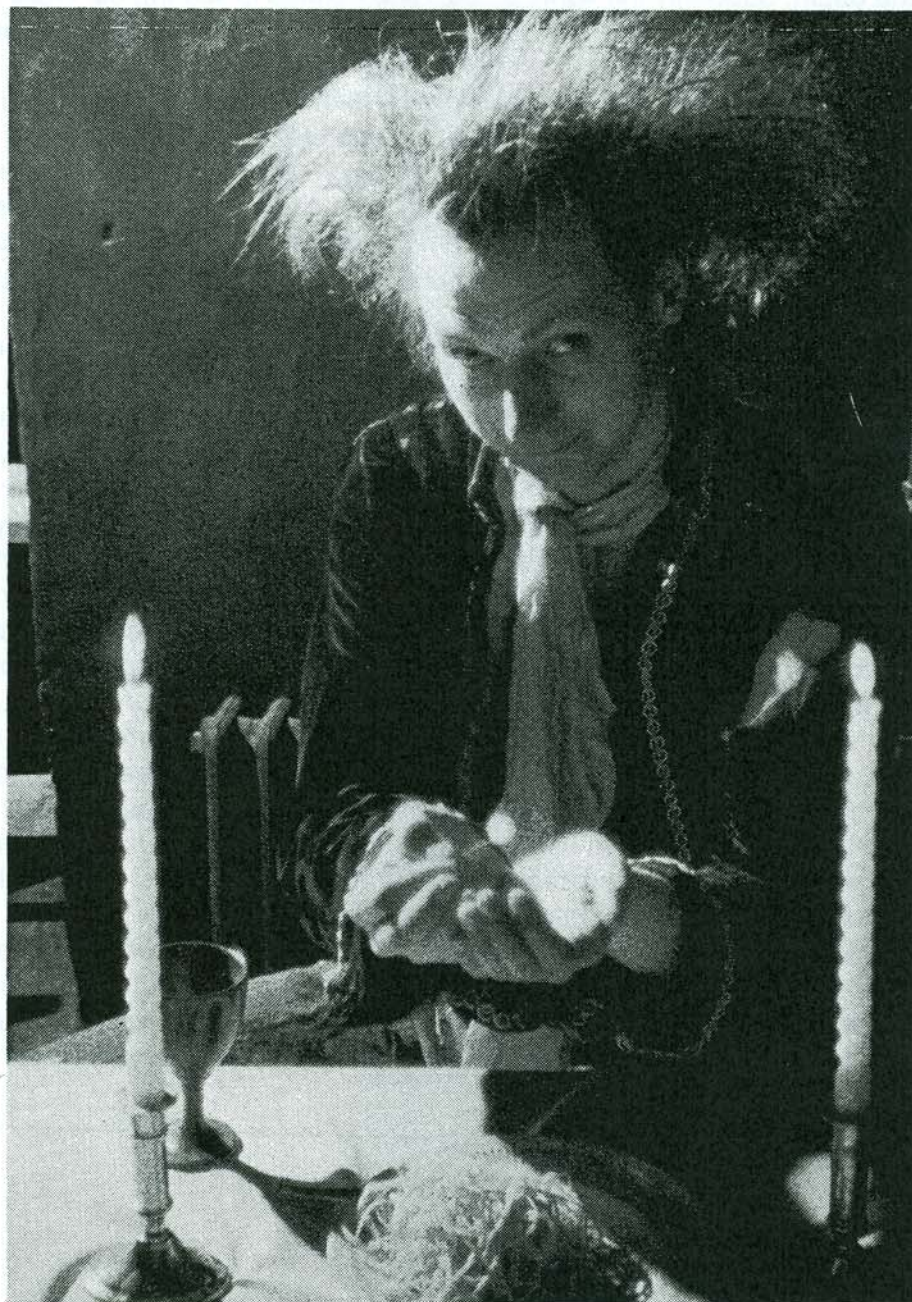
Michele Smith and Dean Gilmour (Theatre Smith-Gilmour) in Carmen: An Opera for Two Clowns. PHOTO: MICHAEL COOPER

The first production to emerge from their creative collaboration was *No Escape*, in which two shy strangers discover that they are the last survivors of the human race, and that their obvious mission is to repopulate the earth. The clowns (no noses) are perfect foils for each other: Michele's is wide-eyed, energetic, and breathlessly communicative, while Dean's is reversed and somewhat blustery behind his black cape and droopy mustache. It is a comedy of characters, a glimpse of two people in

an unusual situation who just happen to be clowns. A second piece, *O Canayen*, performed in Toronto in 1984, consisted of "highlights of Canadian history as told by clowns," and includes four additional performers, red noses this time, and a wilder, far more slapdash style than *No Escape*, which tended more toward the European style. *O Canayen* consists of a series of clown vignettes ever so loosely based upon historical events; a rubber pool, for example, is used to represent the Atlantic Ocean and later the Niagara River. The *tour de force* of the piece is a scene in which dinner is served with table, chairs, and performers in a restaurant set on its side. This creates some difficulty in keeping the cutlery in place, and even greater difficulty when one of the performers is moved to dance upon the table.

Theatre Smith-Gilmour's most recent show, *Carmen: An Opera for Two Clowns*, appeared in 1985 to critical and popular acclaim. It is a consistently strong, mature work which retains the simplicity of *No Escape* and the slapstick dimensions of *O Canayen*; no longer nicely European, neither is it American; rather it demonstrates a balance of focus between character and gag that has come to be called Canadian.

Jim Warren as "Jerome" in *My Dinner with Jerome*. PHOTO: TIM GRAHAM



An uproarious send-up of the entire operatic tradition, *Carmen* is performed in a deserted theatre by a stage-hand and a cigarette-girl, who eventually fall in love at the end of their illicit and thrilling romp.

Once a student of Dean Gilmour, Ian Wallace and myself, Jim Warren has taken clowning in yet another direction, creating an eccentric clown whose character "Jerome" becomes both the form and content of the play. The creation of Jerome evolved over several stages, the first being in Warren's piece *Tenting with Jerome*. Jim's clown Jerome is a vain, self-assured, and debonair man-of-the-world on the surface; but beneath the poised exterior lurks a less confident psyche, suggested by the wild hair and the eccentric and ragged clothing he wears. What do you do with a persona exuding such seemingly utter control? Pit him in a mortal battle against the dark forces of nature, of course; and so Jerome goes tenting, in a world where all objects one can imagine might attack him – a plunger, his glove, his own arm – and do! This unique and disarming aspect of Warren's clowning, where ordinary objects have a life of their own, is taken to a hilarious extreme when the "invincible" Jerome is finally attacked by a monster lurking in his tent. As he emerges through the tent flaps Jerome is snatched back inside and the entire tent becomes animated with a battle to the death. Suddenly the lights go out, and Jerome is scaring us. While it sounds silly on paper, it gives me the goose-bumps in performance; many in the audience ache from laughter after this roller-coaster ride for the imagination.

In Warren's next play, *Lost Marbles*, Jerome teamed up with Brenda Caar and France Dansereau, to take this fascination with inanimate objects coming to life to its greatest extreme. In it are three persons, and all their reactions, as they pursue and are pursued by various objects that appear, cross the stage, and then disappear into the wings. Comic timing and syncopated movements create a rhythm that carries the audience along with the players; with surprise and anticipation we participate in this newly-invented sport.

My Dinner with Jerome marked a growth in Jim's style. Retaining his zaniness of imagination, he simplified the scenario to include only Jerome's room, his world. Much slower-paced than the previous two shows, gradually the dimensions and layers of the character unfold. The contradictions emerge psychologically, not just physically, as we see that it is only through the imagination, in the making up of games like a prisoner in a cell, that Jerome enjoys his life. With bursts of zany unpredictability, Jerome, like a mad professor, performs an unruly chamber concert of the rhythms by which we are profoundly touched. A fourth piece, *My Christmas Dinner with Jerome*, broadens this scenario and takes us deeper into the hopes, dreams, fears, and aspirations that mill about the four walls of Jerome's strange little world. Jerome, shabby, unkempt, but with that ever-present eccentric gleam in his eye, is alone, bored, and lonely in his room at Christmas. He sleeps, dreams and has a wild fantasy about dancing and romancing the night away with his "dream girl" Fred (Brenda Caar). Because he's now interacting with a real live human being, he evokes a deeper, more human kind of laughter from us than in any of his previous plays. Jim Warren's talent, style and craziness are constantly growing and his next piece, which will be performed at the Toronto Free Theatre in July, should not be missed.

These are only a few of the many dedicated Canadian artists who have kept the tradition of an innovative and sophisticated art form alive and well across the country. A renaissance of clowning is only just beginning in Canada. It promises laughter and vitality to our times, enrichment to our future cultural heritage, and a whole new way of looking at the world. Bravo!