

August 18, 2005

THEATER / Rebecca Daniels **Fringe Fish & Chips: delicious**

The Woodstock Fringe opened its third season at the Byrdcliffe Theatre with a lively musical tour of London's streets, dance halls, music halls and pubs. The charming and versatile Malcolm Gordon, singer, raconteur and vaudevillian, created this fun-filled evening of songs, poems and monologues. If you enjoy British humor and you're looking for some light, bright entertainment to take your mind off the heat, you can catch this award-winning show Friday and Saturday August 19 and 20 at 8 p.m.

The evening opens with musical director, James Followell playing the piano with such flair that we are immediately caught up in his enthusiasm. A simple, yet eloquent set depicts an 1880s music hall stage. Enter Malcolm Gordon with a red bandana tied around his neck, who tells us about the costermongers, the street vendors who sang while they sold their wares. Launching into a medley of these jaunty songs, we are immediately transported to the London streets of that time.

Moving on to the music halls, Gordon returns, after a brief interval during which Followell entertains us with his brilliant piano playing, wearing a top hat and tails and carrying a walking stick. Gordon sings a series of "toff" songs, "Champagne Charlie," "The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo," "Burlington Bertie" and recites a humorous poem, "My mother doesn't know I'm on the stage." Gordon not only adopts different accents for each strata of London society he depicts, he also fills his songs, monologues and poems with emotional energy and flawless comic timing. His articulation is so keen that he is able to sing at an extraordinary speed on - occasion and still be perfectly understood.

After another musical interlude and costume change, Gordon treats us to music and poetry devoted to the workingman. The humor in this segment seemed to focus on families, marriage and food. Wearing a bowler hat and vest, Gordon sings, "I'm Henry the 8th, I am," "Boiled Beef and Cabbage," and a very funny song about a hen-pecked husband. He also performs two marvelously understated versions of the poem, "Albert and the Lion," the first in Act I, and the second in Act II.

Act II takes us to the Seaside, where Gordon performs a medley of songs in a straw hat and striped jacket. After that, we visit the East Enders, the "Pearlies," who sewed pearl

buttons on their clothes and sang in Cockney rhyme. "I've Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts" and "Doing the Lambeth Walk" are included here. We end up in today's London, in an East End pub, where Gordon sings a rousing medley framed by "Saturday Night at the Rose and Crown."

A pleasant surprise at the end of the program was Gordon's delightful rendition of Noel Coward's "Mad Dogs and Englishmen" followed by an audience sing along to "Her Mother Came Too." Coward fans will want to attend a free reading of Gordon's new show Sunday, September 4 at 8 p.m. It's part of the "First Looks" reading series at the Fringe, which includes *Rogues Gallery* by William Baldwin Young on Sunday, August 21, at 2 p.m. and one act plays by Phillip Levine and Norma Jean Howland on Sunday, August 28, at 5 p.m.

If you haven't yet seen Yasmina Reza's dark comedy, *Art*, or even if you have, you'll want to see the Fringe production, playing for eight performances from August 18 through August 28. Nicola Sheara is directing Wallace Norman, James Prendergast and Lou Trapani in what should be a marvelous show. When I reviewed *Art* in February at the Rhinebeck Center for Performing Arts, I described it as "intelligent, witty and hilarious." With the same director and two of the original cast members, the Fringe production of *Art* should be even better.

Two by Three by Three, a full production of two new plays by three playwrights, performed by three actors, opens August 31 and runs through September 4. The Fringe is also producing an American Songfest which includes performances by the percival duo (Russell Podgorsek and Dennis Sullivan) August 26 and 27 at 5 p.m., an evening with Charles Mays Jr. August 26 at 8 p.m., and a recital of art songs by soprano Kathleen Callahan-Hardman September 3 at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$20; \$17 for students and Seniors. "First Looks" readings are free. Fringe Passes cost \$45 and admit you to all events. Call 679-0167 or visit www.woodstockfringe.org for tickets and information.++