

A very good beginning

Dal theatre launches season with innovative play

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THEATRE REVIEW

Albertine in Five Times by Michel Tremblay. A Dalhousie Theatre Department Production directed by Gyllian Raby. Oct. 16-19.

MICHEL Tremblay, Quebec's and Canada's greatest dramatist, is best known as a chronicler of lower-class francophone Montreal life. No simple kitchen-sink playwright, Tremblay's works are rich in contemporary political symbolism that is matched by ritualized behavior derived from classic Greek theatre.

Dalhousie Theatre Productions has, in the past, struggled with his plays such as *Forever Yours*, *Mary Lou* and *Saint Carmen of the Main*. Under the assured direction of Gyllian Raby, Dal theatre has staged an effective version of what is Tremblay's most innovative and difficult play, *Albertine in Five Times*, as the launch of its 1996-97 season.

It's a play that challenges and redefines some basic theatrical rules. There are only two characters: Albertine and her sister Madeline. However, Albertine is represented by five actresses, all on stage throughout the play, portraying Albertine at 30, 40, 50, 60 and 70 years of age. This extraordinary device allows Al-

bertine to cross-examine and challenge her various selves through the crises of her life.

Abandoned with two children by her husband, Albertine faces a series of lowly service jobs amidst all the tumultuous changes wrought through Quebec's Quiet Revolution. To Albertine, it doesn't seem to make much difference; at times she is repressed, detached, distant or even doped out. Remarkably, at 70, she has made peace with many of her past demons, reflecting a confidence and stability achieved by Quebec society in the mid-1980s when the play was first performed.

In translation, some of Tremblay's striking use of Quebec street language, known as *joual*, gets lost. He often includes rough slang and English words like coke and french fry to emphasize the increasingly anglicized state of spoken French in North America. These invasive words lose their force when the play is performed in English.

Ironically, in Scotland, Tremblay's works have become wildly popular once translated into Scots dialect. Similar issues of just-out-of-reach nationalism and English domination attracted the Scots to Tremblay. His popularity

there, in some ways, set the stage for such literary works as *Trainspotting* and the current Scottish cultural revival.

Language issues, crucial to identity in Quebec and Scotland, are almost totally obscured when the play is performed in English. Raby has, however, let her actors deliver their lines in heavy Quebecois accents. It's a choice that initially flirts with caricature, but soon settles down into a simple, strong stylization. The cast rises to the challenge, particularly Jody Stevens as the rage-filled, hard-as-nails Albertine at 40. Sara Holmes puts in the strongest performance as the oldest Albertine, blessed with a wizened need for reconciliation with her past necessitated by the demands of the present and the future.

Albertine in Five Times is perhaps the ultimate small-scale theatrical ensemble piece. No character dominates and the stage management must be precise. Mhiran Danson-Faraday and assistant Marigold Chandler-Smith keeps things moving smoothly. The down-market set, by Torin Buzek, helps define each Albertine through one single utilitarian item — bed, counter, washrail and the like.

The staging is one more example of the drama school's growing reputation as one of the region's most consistently challenging theatre institutions.