REVIEW STUFF

A Harrowing biography

The Doors reviewed by Kwame Dawes

At first it was clear that they were anxious - fidgeting like kids about to open a present. The excitement was irritating. It got worse. The film opened with a wonderful montage of colours - we were entering the psychedelic age - then Doors music filled the theatre. The kids behind me started to sing along with the track. I was beginning to realize that this was going to be a very painful experience and my anxiety had nothing to do with convincing lope and sneer of **Val Kilmer** who plays a convincing Morrison in this Oliver Stone movie. Here were high school kids mouthing the complex and hip poetry of a twisted but talented popular artist who died before they were born with the devotion of hardcore fans.

But the excitement died as the harrowing details of Morrison's life began to unfold on the screen. The singing was replaced by a stunned silence. The graphically evoked vision of alcoholism, drug addiction and pathological cruelty overwhelmed the "coolness" of Jim Morrison the deified icon of the 60's Dionysian mystique, and the scene lost its hip quality, at least to the kids who were behind me in the cinema.

The Doors is a disturbing film because its main character rarely emerges from the murky world of drugs and alcohol. It is disturbing because the indulgence with self-gratification and the suicidal inclination of Stone's hero is shown to have had a unrelentingly negative effect on the people closest to him (Morrison). It is disturbing because Stone's portrayal of the world of the sixties is not as far-fetched as many of us would want to believe. The painful uneasiness that his fellow band-members show during the performances of the band remains with the viewer long after the film is completed and the common epithet for this era of music "Sex, Drugs and Rock-n'-Roll" takes on a sinister and dark meaning in this film.

Reviewers argue that Stone's bleak film fails to capture the brilliance of Morrison the poet and folk icon while others suggest that the film's obvious premise that performing rock and roll at the time was essentially painful and unenjoyable is a misguided one. Whether these critics and sixties experts are right or not is moot. Stone's vision of the Morrison world is dictated to him by his worship of this rock star when he was a youth himself, the result is a film that betrays a peculiarly vicarious pleasure in the entry into the drug induced world of what Stone feels was Morrison's mind.

For the non-Morrison fan (I include here the Doors fan as well), the film is wholly onesided and and cannot be described as anything near a biography of the band's history. This is Morrison's story. Stone begins the story with a surreal vision of Morrison as a child riding in his parents car through a desert. He is witness to the aftermath of an accident which involves a native family. An old native leader is singled out by the camera which locks in to the young Jim's point of view. Jim is affected by the incident and his apparent connection to the Indian becomes a recurring image throughout the rest of the film. We are then taken into his masochistic and sadistic love affair with his long time girlfriend and then into the progressively dark world of the Doors, and the notorious Jim Morrison of Rock and Roll legend.

Stone's work is most effective and evocative when he enters the world of the relationships between his characters - when he tries to penetrate the mystique of Morrison and enter the complex world of motives and counter-motives. His work is less successful when he attempts what can only be described as a hokey mythification of Morrison by trying to connect him with the world of Native spirituality through a series of drug induced hallucinations and through a vaguely supported allusion to Morrison's dependence of some mystical Native medicine man.

It is hokey because in many of the shots depicting the live shows it tries to present Morrison as a griot figure who expresses the passions of the native people. The Morrison portrayed in Stone's movie may have been a lot of things but he certainly could not be said to represent the spirit of an oppressed and marginalized community that could have benefitted from even a fraction of the wealth that he acquired. Stone makes too much of one of Morrison's typically hyperbolic and poetic conceits about his creative inspiration. (Morrison, it is said, claimed to have assumed the burden of native people after witnessing the "wipe-out" accident referred to earlier.) Morrison fans have on the most part been white and middle-class Americans who are attracted both to his unquestionable talent as a blues-oriented singer and a poet. Stone failed to explore fully this political dimension to the Morrison mystique by being bogged down in the process of deification. Stone never capitalizes on the poignant and ironic moment when Morrison's reporter woman friend confronts him with the fact that his father is a Naval Officer of some standing in the US Armed Forces.

The performance of Kilmer as Morrison is a remarkable *tour-de-force* in studied acting for he appears to have studied with tremendous detail every bit of footage available of Morrison. I watched a number of documentaries on the Doors shortly after seeing the film and I was amazed at the ability of this actor to capture the boyish insolence of Morrison and the vocal styling and stage antics that have become trademark gimmicks for many lesser rock vocalists. Co-star Meg Ryan who plays Morrison's blonde-haired and equally drugged-out girlfriend is handled with a cute charm and intensity. Her vulnerability and assailed innocence is effectively evoked throughout the film.

There are some funny moments in the film which allow the viewer a breather from the tense atmosphere that permeates the entire film:

Morrison's girlfriend #1: Did you put your cock in her?

Morrison: Sometimes (Twisted smile, shrug, as-a-matter-of-factly.)

Some of Stone's portrayals of the insidious and cannibalistic music industry types are essentially one-dimensional caricatures and those a good for a few laughs, also.

Along with the humour are some curious details about Morrison's sexual liasons and his abuse of women, as well as an inside look into the ins and outs of a band trying to cope with its growing popularity.

The Doors is not a pleasant film. It is not a film that will endear a non-Morrison fan to Morrison largely because his lyrical brilliance is never given a proper context within which to shine. We learn nothing significant about his abilities as a musician or a poet nor do we learn anything about the impact of the Doors band on the music scene of the time and after. What we learn is that Morrison lived a painful life and that his shows were wild, crazy affairs, but then, we knew all of that. What is new is the video-like narrative that tracks some of Morrison's songs, given them a framework of angst that helps explain something about his work. I feel a bit sorry for the kids who sat behind me, but I am grateful to Stone for avoiding easy cliches and sugar-coated portrayals of the sixties in this film. Ultimately, however, one is left with the feeling that another Doors film could be made - a better one, even.

(w)ri(gh)t(e)s: some great moments but disjointed.

Reviewed by Kwame Dawes

The Fredericton Women's Theatre Collective's production *(w)ri(gh)t(e)s* is an eclectic and disjointed selection of dramatic pieces performed by a group of .... women. The pieces which are in the main monologues about women are written by members of the collective. Since the staging of *Talking With* three years ago by a core of women who have evolved into this collective, the unit has committed itself to staging a dramatic production at least once a year that addresses women's issues. Last year's production was titled *flights* and it made use of the works of local women writers as well. The format was essentially the same as that used both in *Talking With* and in *(w)ri(gh)t(e)s*- dramatic monologues and the occasional dialogue.

Collective theatre is a complex and potentially rewarding form because it demands the imagination of a large number of individuals in the shaping of a single project. However there are certain challenges that come with collective theatre which make it a far more demanding form of theatre than conventional playwright/director/actor dynamic. *(W)ri(gh)t(e)s* was apparently written and workshopped by thirteen women and an attempt was made to weave the various pieces together into a single theatrical piece. Unfortunately, *(w)ri(gh)t(e)s* fails to find that cohesiveness and it flits around from idea to idea without focusing on a single area long enough to fully engage the viewer. Many of the monologues are cute but superficial and lacking in dramatic force. Very often, during the production, one had the impression that one was attending a reading of short fiction rather than a dramatic production.

Interesting stagings were attempted by director Linda MacNutt and in some moments she managed to bring to live pieces that are essentially quite prosaic. A brilliant example is the marvellous dialogue that she managed to create between mother and daughter in the piece "The bird dance" by Sandra Birdsell. But this does not always happen: Magarita Enriquez's piece "Letter to My Mother" is a wonderfully written piece of prose but it lacks the dramatic tension that would allow it to be effectively staged. On stage it sounded like a well rehearsed piece of elocution.

There are some outstanding moments in the production which are deserving of mention. The piece "Evie," played with confidence and aplomb by Clarissa Hurley is an extremely amusing monologue that seeks to demythify the story of the Garden of Eden. Here, the monologue was shown to be the engaging dramatic form that it can be when properly written and the piece remained one of the high points of the evening. Effective also were the pieces "Seeing Red" and "My precious books" played with control and ease, and the dialogue "Coming Out" by Lorna Drew which begins to explore the question of lesbians "coming out" to their straight friends was insightful. The performances by Alane Boudreau and Julie McGowan in the series of pieces about fathers were appropriately energetic and amusing.

Despite all these positive things one left the theatre wishing that fewer pieces were selected for staging and more extensive and involved work was done on fine-tuning and expanding the best pieces for the stage. Connections between fewer pieces would perhaps have been far easier to accomplish. I also wondered about the rational of having all the performers on the stage for the entire production. While it demonstrated the company's commitment to the collective tenet of "getting everybody involved" it was still apparent that a select few actresses were relied upon to carry the bulk of the production. MacNutt's decision to keep all the actresses on the stage for the entire show was an unfortunate miscalculation for the presence of many of the performers passively observing the production from the stage only drew attention to the redundancy of their presence on the stage.

The wonderful pun that the title of the production bears is done justice by the piece, for ritual and shared experience between women are common themes of the various selections. At the same time, the work is produced by clearly skilled artists who seek to exert their rights as individuals through the arts. But without the glue that should hold the various elements together, the viewer struggles to make the spiritual journey that the last piece "Lilith" seems to assume we have taken.

One looks forward to seeing more offerings by The Women's Theatre Collective in the future. The collection of pieces that were staged have been published by Wild East Publications and are available for sale. A read of the collections would be entertaining and rewarding. Perhaps next year, the Collective will attempt another form of theatre.