What's love got to do with it?

'Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love' opens this week at UNB

by Ashley Bursey

They've just finished a six-hour cue-to-cue and Justin Read, Director of "Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love" is exhausted. He's been sitting, headphones on, calling light cues to his technical team since just after noon – and they still have a dress rehearsal to run.

But the long hours are worth it. Read knew what he was getting into when he took on the decidedly ambitious play, penned by Canadian playwright Brad Fraser in 1986. At first read, he knew it was a perfect fit.

"It just spoke to a type of lifestyle that I understood," he explains, leaning back on a red couch on the play's set at Memorial Hall. "I really fell in love with David, the character of David, and how he's so disconnected from society, yet all he wants to do is connect. And the only thing he wants to say is 'I love you,' but he's so afraid to say it. It's beautiful.

"I picked it because it was something that would be really challenging to do, instead of doing something that is easy, that I could throw up onstage and get a credit for it, I wanted to do something that actually challenged myself, like academically, but also artistically and mentally."

As the cast files out for supper break, he adds, shaking his head: "And there are 200 light cues." For a show that runs an hour and 50 minutes, that's an almost insurmountable task, with spotlights illuminating the stage for often as little as a single word at a time.

For this kind of production, however, the devil might be in the details, but that's also where the piece really comes to life.

A highly controversial play for its time, "Human Remains" shocked audiences in the late '80s with its explicit sexuality, rough language, and raw imagery. 20 years later, it's still one of the most relevant pieces of theatre to date with its uncomfortably realistic dialogue and a dark, highly sexual plot.

The plot is fairly simple, but nuanced in such a way that the characters and their emotions propel the story into something profound, hitting a visceral note with audiences across the globe. Simply put, it's the story of a handful of sexually frustrated adults who, in an attempt to figure out what they want from life and relationships, experiment with homosexuality, violence, and obsession. The plot is underscored with a morbid note: A serial killer is on the loose and we're not quite sure who he (or she) might be.

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> - JUSTIN READ, DIRECTOR

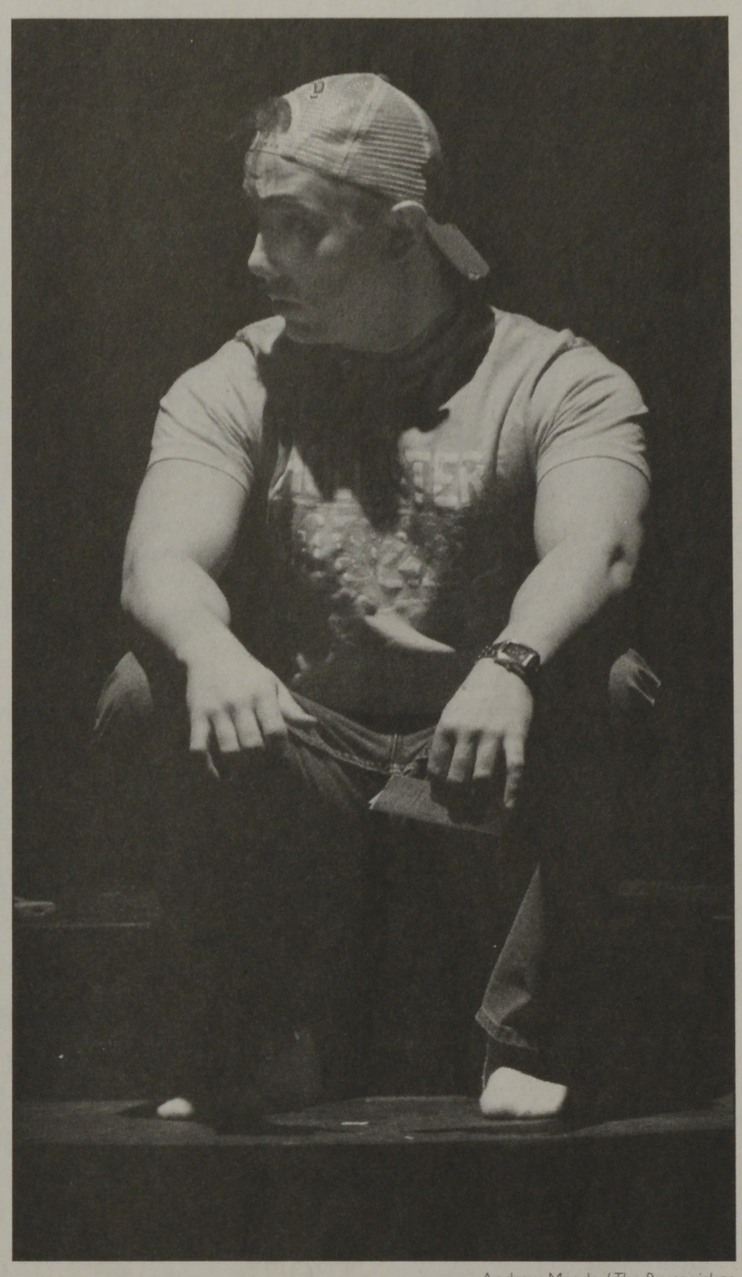
Fraser's masterpiece could come off as terribly campy, Read admits, if not done well; the script requires precise timing (think disembodied stream-of-consciousness dialogue during the entirely of the play) and gravitas during the particularly awkward moments.

But Read's done well; despite replacing the main actor in early January, the cast is fluid and strong, with the talented Shawn Gallant, Aidan Dewhirst, and Edward McNamara as the male leads.

"This script needs to be acted by good actors," Read concedes. "It has that possibility of becoming cheesy, because the content is heavy enough that people aren't going to take it seriously if it isn't delivered seriously. I think the cast I have understands as much as I understand the importance of this script, what Brad Frasier is trying to get across, how we all want to connect but we're so disconnected from each other and how we tend to gravitate towards each other."

But, despite a strong (and decidedly "Freaky Stories"-ish) opening monologue by Amanda Spear, who plays psychic prostitute Bonita, the play takes a few minutes to get into. The jarring dialogue – "Breasts!" "Come!" "Blood!" – seems vaguely cultish until you get into the flow of the piece. Ultimately, it's a constant subconscious thread of speech, traveling parallel to the main storyline and revealing characters' thoughts or emotions along with the staged scenes. It forges links between the characters and proves to be less of a distraction as the play continues.

"The way I describe it is kind of like a record skipping, like the record just goes, but then it skips and someone says a line and then it goes back into the scene again," Read says. I think it will work. It is a very fast-moving play and scenes go from one scene to the next and switch back and forth, so I think the stream of consciousness is because Brad Fraser's trying to say that all this is happening at the same time and it's like a wave – It just comes towards the audience."



Andrew Meade / *The Brunswickan*

Greg Shanks as Robert in a scene from the controversial 'Unidentified Human Remains', playing at Memorial Hall from Feb 20-23.

And the audience can expect to get caught up pretty quickly, wondering about the "Honey, I'm homo!" David (Shawn Gallant), or the anorexic cutie Candy (Marissa Robinson), and especially, the mysterious, "is-he-or-isn't-he" Bernie, played by "Doc's" Aidan Dewhirst.

"Living in Fredericton, we don't really get to see a lot of plays like this that deal with these types of issues that the characters have to deal with," says Read. "There'll be issues within the city and New Brunswick, but I just think that Theatre New Brunswick can be very timid about the choices they make.

"It's like nobody's trying to be a bit radical and push the limits within theatre, because theatre is one of the last artistic avenues we have where we can actually push the boundaries. And one of the reasons I chose this play is because I just want to get some people riled up so they can just keep upping the bar and upping the bar. I mean, this play was written in 1986. Can you imagine this play going on in 1986? That's pretty intense. I think it's still relevant today. 20 years later it's finally being put up here in Fredericton. I think that kind of says a lot."

The play actually opens on Read's 26th birthday – which has special significance, he says, because Fraser was also 26 when he wrote the piece. Still, Read's not sure how it'll go over with a New Brunswick audience.

"I can't lie and say I'm not nervous about this, because I am," he says. "This play is heavy. One of the things I'm really worried about is that the audience is going to walk away and say, 'Holy fuck, I just saw two guys kissing!' That's not what I want, you know? I want them leaving with this feeling of, 'Holy fuck, if only I could say I love you when I wanted to, if only I could connect with people.' That's more important for me.

"The way Fraser wrote the script is brilliant, because he wrote it in the sense that sexuality is on a gray scale – it's not just black or white. And there are these characters dealing with that, and the actors are forced to deal with the same issues. It adds that double punch and just makes for some really great theatre."

Monday Night Movie Series
PERSEPOLIS

February 25, 2008 at 8 pm
Tilley Hall, room 102

Before debuting to much fanfare at the 2007 Toronto International Film Festival, where it played to packed theatre as a Special Presentation, "Persepolis" was well-known as the autobiographic novel of talented graphic novelist, illustrator, and children's book author Marjane Satrapi.

Persepolis is Satrapi's darkly humorous take on her experiences as a young Muslim woman Marjane, played by Chiara Mastroianni ("Carnages", "Les chansons d'amour"), who comes of age in Tehran during the rule of the Shah, the Islamic Revolution, and the Iran-Iraq war. Fit with an exceptional cast including her mother's voice, played by Catherine Deneuve ("8 femmes", "Les liaisons dangereuses") and her father's voice played by Simon Abkarian, ("Ararat", "Casino royale"), Presepolis dares to examine heavy issues through the animated grace of storytelling like no other.

We follow the misadventures of Marjane from mischievous little girl in Iran to rebellious teenager finding first love amid decadent anarchists at a snooty French school in Vienna. The film then charts the young woman's heavy-hearted return to Iran, and finally her emigration to Paris. Marjane's family history reveals how the Islamists who took their place then persecuted her Communist relatives who fought against the Shah even more harshly. Amidst these harsh realities, the film maintains a refreshing levity as each haunting event is balanced with Satrapi's charming animation style – bold, graphic, and simple, yet forcefully stylized.

MUSIC ON THE HILL
PRESENTS



DAVID JALBERT, PIANO
Sunday, Feb. 24, 2008
8:00 p.m., Memorial Hall, UNB
Pianist David Jalbert, a Juno award nominee, has been called a "firebrand talent" of the new generation.



TRICHY SANKARAN, MRDANGAM MAESTRO
Wednesday, Feb. 27, 2008
8:00 p.m., Memorial Hall, UNB
Drummer Trichy Sankaran will be accompanied by his daughter, singer Suba Sankaran, for an evening of South Indian music.

Music on the Hill Info Line – 457-2233. Tickets available at the door, UNB's College of Extended Learning, Gallery 78, Westminster Books, and The Paper Trail.
Ticket Prices: $23 adult, $21 senior, and $7 student (HST included).

UNIVERSITY OF NEW BRUNSWICK UNB St. Thomas University LEADERS IN LIBERAL ARTS

Haute couture and low budgets

The New Brunswick College of Craft and Design is presenting its exhibition, the Muslin Challenge, to show Fredericton what its talented students can do

by Naomi Osborne



Andrew Meade / *The Brunswickan*

Several dresses from the Rags to Riches: The Muslin Challenge, created by students at the New Brunswick College of Craft and Design and showing at their gallery until March 10.

It's haute couture with a twist in this year's exhibition by the graduating class in the fashion design studio at the New Brunswick College of Craft and Design.

The exhibit, which challenged students to create dresses from a unique material – muslin – is called "Rags to Riches: The Muslin Challenge", and it shows at NBCCD's gallery until March 10.

Opening night of the exhibition, February 7, featured live models walking the red carpet displaying the impeccable muslin dresses. The material, which is a type of finely-woven cotton fabric, has been used for centuries to create breathable dresses and other clothing items.

The challenge is unique because each of the designers agreed to make their dresses out of the same material. The material itself is an unbleached, course, cotton material that is extremely difficult to dye because it is such a raw material.

Two third-year fashion students, Melissa Eagar and Cheryl Ryan, are proud of the presentation, and were both very impressed by the diversity of all the dresses.

"Everyone's dress is completely different. We all actually came up with our own ideas and styles; they are all actually quite different," said Eagar.

Each of the styles had a unique quality, but almost all of them feature corsets. It was interesting to see how many widely different dresses could be made out of this material, which is definitely not the average haute-couture pick for designers. As a press release says, "instead of silk or satin, velvet, or tulle, it's cotton muslin that was tucked, pleated, poofed, stitched, embroidered, dyed, textured, buttoned, zipped, sewed, and pressed into catwalk-ready haute couture."

The fabric itself was originally used as throwaway material, until the idea arose to use it for a challenge.

"We thought, wouldn't it be funny to make up a garment out of this mock-up material?" said Ryan.

Eagar's dress was full of vibrant and lively colours, while Ryan's was more subtle, with a quilt-like patchwork extending lengthwise along the front of the dress.

"My mom quilts, so I got a lot of inspiration from her," said Ryan.

The room itself held eight different dresses. Along with their two, there was a midnight black dress with a laced halter-top, accentuated by a corset. There was a tuxedo-like style dress, a large fluffy pink piece with a bow tied in the back, a colourful circular dress meant for glowing in the dark, an elegant peacock dress with silk green lining, and a vibrant red cocktail dress with a black sash across the midriff.

In order to make the dresses, each of the girls designed them specifically to fit their models.

"I think it's critical to make them for someone else," said Eagar. "A lot of people ask, 'Don't you want to wear it?' When you think of that person wearing it, it's made for their body and for them so it's kind of their thing, their dress, their look – but still your design."

All of the dresses are meant to be unique, and definitely aren't your run-of-the-mill prom dress from the local boutique.

"They are supposed to be high fashion, one-of-a-kind couture, so it's not like the types of dresses you could really wear to anything," said Ryan.

When the girls were making their dresses they had to be extra careful not to mess up the delicate material, but at the same time be willing to take risks.

"It's nerve-wracking to make this thing and then drop something on it or cut something wrong, because it can go bad quick," said Eager.

Each student presents their own inspirations and incorporates pieces of themselves into the dresses they make, that is why they are all so refined in their own way.

"We are so passionate here," said Ryan.

All of the dresses are truly exquisite, and the girls were very proud of being able to show the community what work they have been doing.

In their first year at the college, students are introduced to working on metal, pottery, and fashion. The second year consists more of pattern construction and draping. For the majority of their third year, the class has been working on their own personal fashion lines, which will be shown at the upcoming annual fashion show on May 10 the Delta Hotel. Each student has about eight outfits, and these will be the focus of the show. The muslin gowns will also be shown, but will be seen in a separate part of the show.