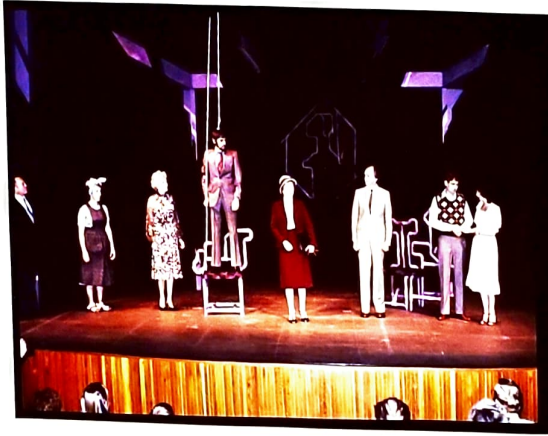


CAST: Lawrence Thornton
Doreen Boss
Anne Molland
Peter Jefferson
Christine Clark
Stephen Jones
Tony Clark
Rosemary Lawless
Brian Welsh
Jenny Haynes
Geoff Molland



HABEAS //
// CORPUS



"IT WITHERS".... "IN BAD TASTE"....
 THEY SAID IN TORONTO !!!

West End transplant withers

BY RAY CONLOGUE

IT IS HARD to believe sometimes how tiresome and pointless a production can be. But *Habeas Corpus*, which opened Thursday night at the Bayview Playhouse, comes up to the mark in this regard.

At it takes is a species of farce who, like intertidal sea life or rare orchids, can survive only in a specific environment—in this case, a West End London stage catering particularly to local obsessives with boums, Anglican clergy, randy doctors and wimpish sons. Transplant it to a Toronto stage. Put it in the custody of actors going carelessly with the playing of too many facile comedies for understanding audiences, and watch

blight transpire it instantly. You start noticing how tacky the production values are, with a tatty painted backdrop of a Brighton promenade and a few random pieces of furniture unimagination-plunked every so often in the middle of the stage. You see how the crisp gesture and withering delivery of well-played comedy are replaced by a hazy mixture of miming, head-shaking, tipping and belching that relate only approximately to the action. You begin to notice the gaping seams and mechanical construction of the play, which better acting might disguise.

It's impossible to say what is the focus of Alan Bennett's play. There's Dr. Wickstead and his wife, both longing to jump into bed with somebody—anybody—else. There's Felicity Rumpers, trying to cover her illegitimate pregnancy by marrying the Wickstead's boy Dennis who is



Scene from Alan Bennett's *Habeas Corpus*.

going to die in three months (she doesn't know he's a hypochondriac). There's Wickstead's spinster sister Constance, who hopes father will lend meaning to her life; Canon Throbbing, the cleric who wishes to marry her; Felicity's mother Lady Rumpers, a hardhearted recently returned from the colonies; Sir Percy Shorter, a pompous doctor; and Mr. Purdie, who has nothing whatever to do with the story but comes on every so often trying to kill himself.

The focus might be Mrs. Swift, a cleaning lady who narrows and manipulates; except she's overshadowed by Mr. Shanks, the false instigator who returns whenever the action is flagging to

manipulate yet another beam in search of the one wearing his product.

Although Bennett can write a funny line every so often ("The air is black with the wings of chickens coming home to roost"), he also expects us to laugh at gems like "having sex is not something that happens overnight." He frequently abandons even the pretence of ongoing action to pursue a purple innuendo, usually sexual.

Burrie Baldaro as Dr. Wickstead has presence; but with his vast comic experience, he could not do otherwise. What's worth noting is that he doesn't even try to do more. He's content with turning in the gestures of a similar role in *Mad World My Masters* last year: without any of the manic energy he manifested on that occasion. Cynthia Long as Felicity in the show's entire sex appeal, but does she have to stand perpetually on one foot with her knees appealingly crossed like a sleeping heroin? Roy Wordsworth and Don Cullen have the accent roles of the false salesman and the suicide, respectively, and they dole out the customary vaudeville turns.

A bright (or at least glimmering) light in the evening was Bunty Webb as Lady Rumpers. This substantial lady refrained from indicating every word in death and managed a moment or two of style. Moya Fenwick was a bizarre enough cleaning lady, peeping out from under a swath of prickly red hair. But apart from that it looked like blocking time at an early rehearsal. It made the pizza joint across the street look like an appealing venue for an evening out on the town.

Black comedy in bad taste

By Bob Crew Toronto Star

Habeas Corpus is a rather nasty black comedy.

True, there are all the classic ingredients of farce: the pants that won't stay up, the scantily dressed women, misunderstandings galore and so on. And there are some genuinely funny lines, as one would expect from playwright Alan Bennett, one of the *Beyond The Fringe* originals and author of the fine comedy *Forty Years On*.

But the underlying philosophy—a nihilistic view of the world where lust reigns supreme—is

repugnant. The right people end up with each other but the relationships are forged on black oil and deceit. Jack may get his Jill, but, to quote one of the final lines of the play, "He whose lust lasts, lasts longest."

Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), the house last night failed to bring out the underlying blackness. Indeed, the farcical aspects are more than the cast can handle. Vulgarly needs to be performed with zest and relish, too often last night the predominant feeling was one of embarrassment.

Fish out of water

The events take place in the Sussex home of lecherous Dr. Arthur Wickstead and his formidable wife. He has a boring, spineless hypochondriac of a son, Dennis, and a flat-chested sister, Connie, who is engaged to a reliable canon. Connie decides to augment what nature has cruelly denied her, with some lively rears.

Enter Lady Rumpers, a colonial fish out of water, and her lovely daughter Felicity, who is instantly pursued by the dirty doctor. His wife, meanwhile, is interested in Sir Percy Shorter, president of the British Medical Association, not to mention the false salesman, Mr. Shanks, who arrives to check on the success of Connie's splitting experiment.

Then there's a cleaning lady and a suicidal patient who fills in and out as the plot twists and turns.

Love, decency and morality have no place in Bennett's scheme of things, almost everyone turns out to be hypocritical, selfish and despicable. For example, Felicity only agrees to marry Dennis when she is spun a yarn that he has only three months to live. But the real twist of the knife comes when we learn that he really is sick and hasn't got long to live.

Barrie has his moments

It's a cast of easily recognizable stereotypes and few of the performers manage to rise above the defects of structure and characterization.

Of those who do, Barrie Baldaro has his moments as the doctor, Charlotte Vale Allen performs well as the hand-wringing, round-shouldered spinster Connie, and Bunty Webb was quite enjoyable as Lady Rumpers.

And things aren't helped by Desmond Scott's stogy direction. It may seem a contradiction in terms, but farce does have to be handled with some subtlety. Even just moving people from place to place seems to present problems, all too often the cast appears to be strung out formidably across a bare stage (the only objects on it are three wooden chairs).

But even a slick production wouldn't sweeten the sour message Bennett wants to ram down our throats. Ugh!

Habeas Corpus:
 By Alan Bennett. Directed by Desmond Scott. Bayview Playhouse, 1625 Bayview Ave. 481-6101.



Vulgar comedy: Barrie Baldaro and Cynthia Long give a broad interpretation of acting in *Habeas Corpus* at the Bayview Playhouse.

BUT
 IN KANATA !!!

Endearing lunacy spices British farce

Habeas Corpus
 Earl of March High School
 until May 9

By Audrey M. Ashley
 Ottawa staff writer

Habeas Corpus means "You should have the body," and it's a sentiment the characters in Alan Bennett's play spend a couple of hours trying to put into practice.

They don't try too hard, though—they, and playwright Bennett, would rather talk about it. The terms in which they talk are often straight out of the English music-hall, with occasional glimpses of the wit that made Bennett famous some years ago in *Beyond The Fringe*.

The play is really pretty awful, although there's a

kind of endearing lunacy to it that threatens to win you over now and then.

The characters are introduced by a sort of Everywoman-cum-chorus played with Elizabethan zeal by Anne Holland, an altogether admirable char-lady of a philosophic turn of mind who speaks for the working class.

Among those characters are a lecherous doctor from "the silk-stocking district of Brighton. How," his raucous but neglected wife, his hypochondriac son, and his spinster sister whose greatest sorrow is a flat chest. Or "bust," as the English say. Much of the dialogue, and the action, revolves around the matter

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of bust, flat and otherwise.

There's also a troubled cleric, Canon Throbbing, who wants to marry the flat-chested maiden lady. "Why do you want to get married?" asks the doctor.

"Because I look up girls' legs," answers the Canon. "Marriage won't stop that," is the doctor's snappy rejoinder.

That's a fair example of the dialogue, plus the char-lady's telling line at the end: "This is the first time this evening every-

body's had their trousers on."

The plot, in the fashion of classic farce, revolves around a number of Thursday afternoon assignments in which identities are mistaken and the wrong couples get together.

From time to time the characters address the audience, sometimes in ex-citable rhyming couplets. They even do a little dance to *Shuffle Off To Buffalo*.

The doctor, finally found out, speaks of himself affectionately in the third person: "At the corners of his sensitive mouth there hovered a hint of a smile. . . ." Lady Rumpers recalls regrettably that the passing-out party at Sandhurst had left her husband, the General, incapable of having children. And when lecheries are uncovered, the char-lady announces in portentous tones: "Suddenly the air is black with the wings of chickens coming home to roost."

It's impossible not to overstep the bounds of good taste, given the play's

obsession with the female form. But its exuberant good nature, fostered carefully by director Jim Holmes and his hard-working cast, offsets that to some degree.

It's all done very simply with the aid of what looks at first like a group of pink and mauve boiler-room pipes, but which turn out to be three chairs of fantastic design, created by Bill Williams with a flight of fantasy in keeping with the playwright's own.

If there's a moral in *Habeas Corpus*, it's to be found somewhere in the play's last line: "He who lusts last, lasts longest."

HABEAS CORPUS—Kanata Theatre, Earl of March High School, through May 9, 8 p.m. Tickets \$3.50 at the door, or call 592-1715.











