

HEADLESS MALE SEEKS MATE, CHILD

[boxhead] is superbly realized by Buddies in Bad Times theatre



ROBERT CUSHMAN

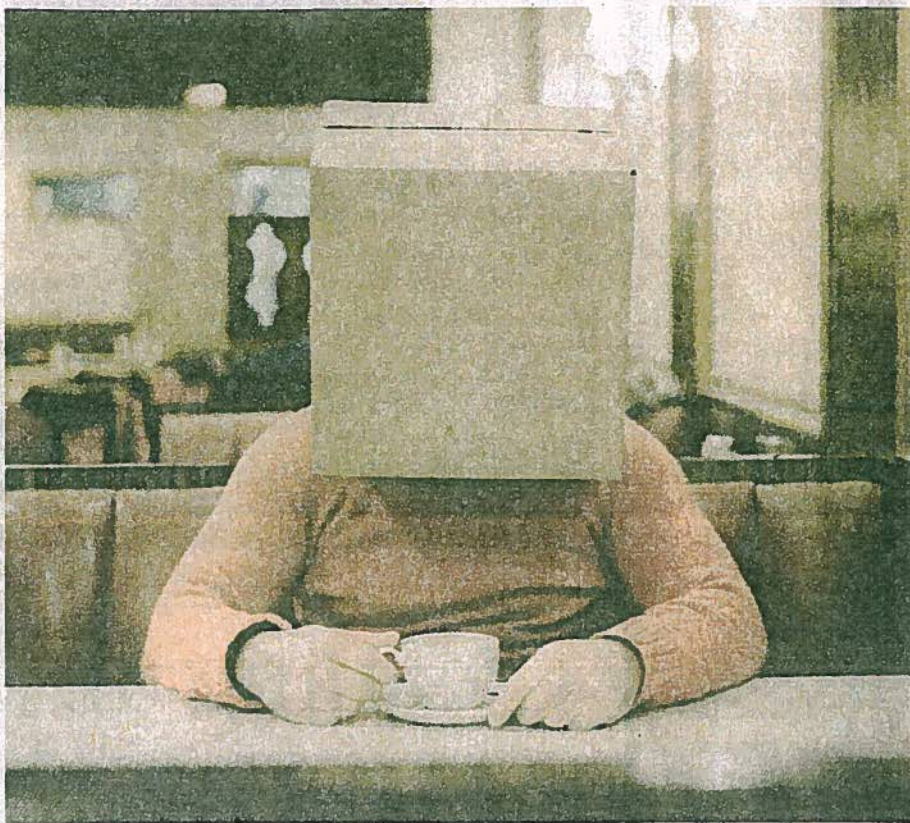
First seen in 1999, Darren O'Donnell's *[boxhead]*, with text by Darren O'Donnell and direction by Chris Abraham, is a kind of Creation myth. (The current revival is by Crow's Theatre, which is now Abraham's company, "in association with" Mammalian Diving Reflex, which has always been O'Donnell's.) It starts with a character identified as Dr. Thoughtless Actions, "a young geneticist" who awakens one morning to find that his head is enclosed in a box. Happily for him, he doesn't seem to suffer from claustrophobia but after a while he does get lonely. So this Adam gets himself a mate, a male one, by cloning himself. He and his new double, Dr. Wishful Thinking, are happy together but decide that they would be even happier if they had a child. After some experimenting they realize that this is impossible as, with the same DNA, they are really the same person. The fact that they're the same gender can't help either, but it may be unfairly literal-minded to point this out.

Still, as long as I'm being literal, I'd like to ask a question. The fact that Dr. Thoughtless wakes up unexpectedly boxed means that there was a time, culminating in the night before, when he wasn't. Does this mean that humanity has encased itself in limitations of perception that aren't natural but enforced? If so, whose fault is it? The play seems to be blaming God, or perhaps gods. The show unfolds be-

hind a false proscenium and within an encompassing blackness. Apart from the two doctors, cavorting at ground-level, the only being we see is represented by a pair of roving eyes shining high up in the dark. They belong to a narrator, of the omniscient variety: a divinity, in fact, of Old Testament proclivities. He doesn't want them to take their boxes off. But his creations, if that's what they are, do have free will; the issue becomes whether or not they will exercise it.

In due course the narrator, too, splits up, and starts having arguments with himself: more enlivening, actually, than those the two mortals have. This may be because there's something intrinsically entertaining in the idea of gods having internal disagreements (the Greeks knew that); it's also because they have the more interesting voices: deep and fretful, as opposed to those of the scientists which are squeaky and querulous. I also found it appealing that the sonorous sounds and twinkling orbs, in a sea of nothingness, combined to remind me of *Sesame Street's* Cookie Monster with the colour-scheme reversed.

Down below, Thoughtless and Wishful pursue such ambitious projects as creating a voiceless echo; I have no idea whether these are meant to signify noble aspiration or crass foolishness, modern man and especially modern science getting above themselves. The names, though, rather suggest the latter. This doesn't stop them from being endearing, but it also severely reduces their level of interest, as of course does the fact that they're interchangeable, and not just because they're clones. I realize that the show isn't exactly aiming at psychological realism, but like nearly all drama on which can be hung the term absurdist, it inevitably harks back to *Waiting for Godot*, but a Godot from which the contrasts between Vladimir



BETH KATES

One morning, a scientist woke up and found his head had been encased in a box.

and Estragon have been ironed out, leaving us only with image. One that makes its point early but then hangs around for the duration.

Still, it's superbly realized in the *mise-en-scène*: in Steve Lucas' lighting, in the percussion music of Romano Di Nillo, in the set (credited to O'Donnell, Abraham and Naomi Campbell, the producer) and in the performances of Andrew Shaver and Adam Lazarus, who seem not only to be playing the headless helpless duo on earth but to be supplying voices for the bodiless deities as well: a staggering feat on any number of levels.

Last Monday, the Stratford Festival paid tribute, in its principal theatre, to its late artistic director Richard Monette. This wasn't an occasion designed to be reviewed, but I can at least say that there was some lovely singing, solo and choral, and that Dan Chameroy was both hilarious and touching in his demonstration that he ceased to be afraid of the director when he

found he could "do his voice." He recreated it flawlessly, largely in its moods of calculated exasperation: "you hire singers, you get singers; you hire dancers, you get dancers; you hire actors — *pot luck*" — the last delivered on an upward inflection, as a guttural snarl. Brian Bedford read simply and affectingly from Monette's autobiography, on how he fell in love with the theatre and what it continued to mean to him; Martha Henry spoke passionately, even fiercely, about his undervalued legacy. She also cued a tape of his famous outburst at the embattled AGM of 1980 when, still just an actor, he denounced the Festival board as "pigs." I'd read about this many times, even written about it, but I'd never heard it before. It was amazing. So, too, was the montage of interview excerpts that closed the evening, allowing us to see a Monette still achingly young, before his tenure and even during its first years. As many of the speakers suggested, he could

rage or tease for effect, but when he spoke of what he believed, he was transparently real. At the end, we gave a standing ovation, even though the stage was empty. As someone said afterwards, Richard would have loved it.

[boxhead] runs through Nov. 2 at Buddies in Bad Times theatre. Call 416-975-8555 for ticket information.

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robert.cushman@hotmail.com

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