

THEATRE PREVIEW

Sexual positions

Actor Evan Buliung plays with gender and orientation in Cloud 9 **By JON KAPLAN**

CLOUD 9 by Caryl Churchill, directed by Alisa Palmer, with Evan Buliung, Ben Carlson, Megan Follows, David Jansen, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Yanna MacIntosh and Blair Williams. Presented by Mirvish Productions at the Panasonic Theatre (651 Yonge). Previews through January 24, opens Tuesday (January 26) and runs to February 21, Tuesday-Saturday 8 pm, Sunday 7 pm, matinees Saturday-Sunday (except January 23) 2 pm. \$30-\$65. 416-872-1212.

BEFORE HE GOES ONSTAGE IN CARYL Churchill's head-spinning play Cloud 9, actor Evan Buliung has to remember whether he's wearing the white Victorian gown with corset and heels or the far less flashy male gardener's garb.

In Cloud 9's first act, Buliung plays Betty, wed to the protective Clive in colonial Africa. In the second, he's Edward, Betty's gay son; the action moves ahead a century to 1970s London, though the characters have aged only 25 years.

"I have to get used to the heels," laughs Buliung, "but on one level it's not very different from the costume I wore as Aragorn in the musical version of The Lord Of The Rings."

The dress, though, is another matter.

"The corset almost bursts through the see-through material, which I think has to do with Betty's desire to have the freedom of the men in her world."

That first act is a send-up of patriarchal attitudes, especially toward women and indigenous people. Churchill looks at various sorts of colonization at the hands of a pa-

tronizing white male culture. She spoofs it by casting men as women and vice versa, and by having a white male play an African native.

"From the start of the play, Betty says that Clive is her life. She buys right into the female duties of the day," says Buliung, whose recent Stratford and Shaw roles include Petruchio in The Taming Of The Shrew and Dick Dudgeon in The Devil's Disciple.

"Still, Betty wants more than that and is attracted to the rugged explorer Harry Bagley, but her training convinces her that her feelings are wicked.

"In fact, she's only expressing normal human desires."

The first act, not surprisingly, is dominated by male characters like Clive and Harry who indulge in their own sexual desires.

Clive's having it off with a neighbour, Mrs. Saunders, and Harry romps with other men, including the African Joshua and the young Edward, played by Ann-Marie MacDonald. MacDonald plays Betty in the second act.

"Ann-Marie and I read the other's parts to each other early on so we could see the arc Betty travels during the play. It also gave us a chance to discover vocal similarities and the character's emotional through-line."

For Buliung, changing from Betty to Edward doesn't mean changing everything about his performance; we're supposed to see a clear connection between mother and son. Among other things, they share an internalized guilt for not being what society expects of them.

"There's a definite femininity to

Edward, a diva quality that he usurps from his mother. I think Betty would be considered a gay icon today, a woman blessed with beauty, grace and style."

Edward, on the other hand, doesn't want to be male – either as a boy or a grown-up.

"He rejects so much that society considers masculine," says Buliung. "Watching his mother and learning from her how to be a self-sacrificing partner, he takes the traditional husband-and-wife equation into his relationship with his frustrated lover, Gerry."

Cloud 9's second act empowers the female and queer characters, and Churchill includes lots of comedy as part of her discussion of sexual politics.

"But we have to be careful how to play the laughs," admits Buliung. "If we go for too much wacka-wacka, the material doesn't land firmly. We have to bring real intention and integrity to it."

"It'd be wrong to do this as panto. Instead, I feel like I'm channelling Kate Winslet when I play Betty." ©

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GEORGE WHITESIDE



Stratford, Shaw and LOTR veteran Evan Buliung is literally on Cloud 9.

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How to find a listing

Theatre listings are comprehensive and appear alphabetically by title. Opening plays begin this week, Previewing shows preview this week, One-Nighters are one-offs, and Continuing shows have already opened. Reviews are by Glenn Sumi (GS) and Jon Kaplan (JK).

The rating system is as follows:

- NNNNN Standing ovation
- NNNN Sustained applause
- NNN Recommended, memorable scenes
- NN Seriously flawed
- N Get out the hook

● = Critics' pick (highly recommended)

How to place a listing

All listings are free. Send to: stage@nowtoronto.com, fax to 416-364-1166 or mail to Theatre, NOW Magazine, 189 Church, Toronto M5B 1Y7. Include title, author, producer, brief synopsis, times, range of ticket prices (include stu/srs discounts and PWYC days), venue name and address and box office/info phone number. Listings may be edited for space. Deadline is the Thursday before publication at 5 pm.

Opening

ANDROMACHE by Jean Racine (Theatre Erindale). Unrequited youthful passion leads to tragedy in this adaptation of Greek mythology. Previews Jan 21. Opens Jan 22 and runs to Jan 30, Tue-Thu 7:30 pm, Fri-Sat 8 pm, mat Jan 30 at 2 pm. \$14, stu/srs \$9. **Erindale Studio Theatre** 3359 Mississauga Rd N. 905-569-4369, theatreerindale.com.

BILLY BISHOP GOES TO WAR by Eric Peterson and John Gray (Soulpepper Theatre Company). Soulpepper remounts last summer's sold-out production. This revival of the Owen Sound boy turned First World War flying ace simply soars. The two artists' age (they first performed it three decades ago in their early 30s) adds poignancy to the show, and they know how to savour each word and note for maximum resonance. Ted Dykstra

and a fine design give the production the intimacy, clarity and emotional heft it deserves. Don't miss it. Previews Jan 22-25. Opens Jan 26 and runs to Feb 27, Mon-Sat 7:30 pm, mats Wed and Sat 1:30 pm. \$36-\$68, stu \$28, rush \$20 (stu \$5). **Young Centre for the Performing Arts** 55 Mill. 416-866-8666, soulpepper.ca. NNNNN (GS)

CARMEN by Georges Bizet (Canadian Opera Company). A gypsy seduces an American soldier in Spain in this opera performed in French. Opens Jan 27 and runs to Feb 27: Jan 27, Feb 2, 5, 9, 11, 17, 20, 23 and 27 at 7:30 pm, Jan 30 at 4:30 pm, Feb 7 and 14 at 2 pm. \$68-\$321. **Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts** 145 Queen W. 416-363-8231, coc.ca.

COME TUMBLING DOWN by Blain Watters (Theatre in the Red). Deception and emotional baggage burden a couple who met on a blind date. Opens Jan 26 and runs to Jan 30, Tue-Sat 8 pm. \$15. **Lower Ossington The-**

atre 100A Ossington. 416-915-6747 ext 222, theatreinthered.com.

DIXIE'S TUPPERWARE PARTY (Living Arts Centre). A trashy ex-con in a trailer home pitches plastic products to the audience in this solo comedy. Opens Jan 27 and runs to Jan 31, Wed-Sat 8:30 pm, Sun 7 pm, mats Wed and Sat-Sun 2 pm. \$30-\$45. 4141 Living Arts, Mississauga. 905-306-6000, livingartcentre.ca.

FESTIVAL OF ORIGINAL THEATRE (Graduate Centre for Study of Drama at U of T). The colloquium and festival features lectures, panels and evening performances on the topic Performing Space/Space In Performance. Jan 21-23, performances Thu and Sat 8 pm. Shows \$5 or non-perishable food donation; panel discussions free. **Robert Gill Theatre** 214 College. 416-978-7986, graddrama.utoronto.ca.

GYPSY by Arthur Laurents, Jule Styne and Stephen Sondheim (Theatre Unlimited). This musical is based on the memoirs of bur-