

Sex and the Serial Killer

With *Unidentified Human Remains*, Canadian playwright Brad Fraser uncovers contemporary dating games.

by Gerard Raymond



Carol Rosegg

Michelle Kronin and Lenore Zann in *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love*.

“I WANT TO SHAKE THINGS UP,” declares 31-year-old Canadian playwright Brad Fraser. The management at the Orpheum Theater, where his new play *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love* is housed, posts a warn-

ing alerting audiences to nudity, strong language, and adult situations in the play. And for good reason, too. Buck naked characters engage in explicit gay, lesbian, and straight sex. They also abuse each other, mentally and physically.

Fraser's play focuses on seven people in Edmonton, Canada, a city with a population of half a million and the highest per capita rate of violent crime in the country:

David (Scott Renderer): A gay, 30-year-old waiter who had a brief stint as a television actor in Toronto.

Bernie (Clark Gregg): David's best friend, who is unhappily married and cannot stay away from other women.

Kane (Michael Connor): A 17-year-old busboy who thinks he's straight but who becomes infatuated with David.

Candy (Lenore Zann): David's one-time lover/current roommate who hates her job as a book reviewer.

Jerri (Michelle Kronin): A lesbian who falls in love with Candy at the gym.

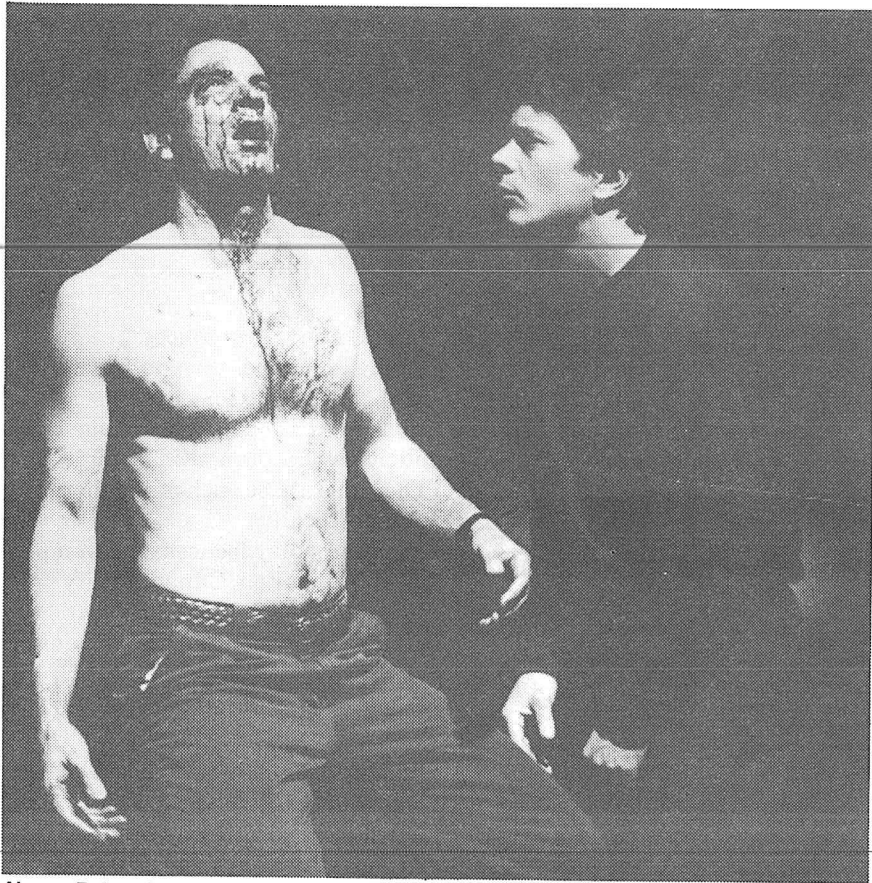
Robert (Sam Rockwell): A bartender who wants to have sex with Candy.

Benita (Kimberley Pistone): A prostitute who has psychic powers and a propensity for relating lurid tabloid stories about violent crimes.

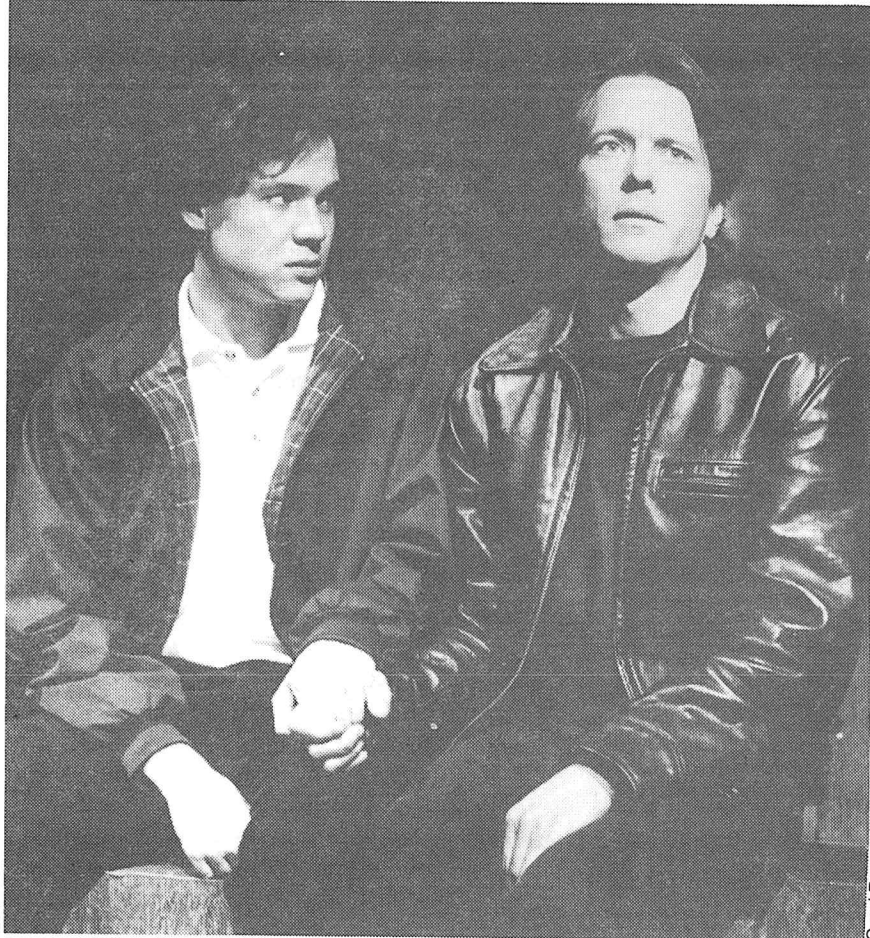
“The whole show is about people being unable to have satisfying relationships,” Fraser explains. “They are dishonest and they misrepresent themselves to others.”

Fraser says the characters have a vision of love that is totally out of sync with their experience. “It's a template in their heads that their parents, society or their Christian upbringing has imposed on them. And quite often—certainly in my case and that of a lot of people I know—the template is in direct contradiction to how we actually feel and what we actually want to do.”

And if life in Fraser's world is not
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Above: Robert McCaskill (bloodied) and Scott Renderer in the Chicago production of *Unidentified Human Remains*. Below: Michael Connor and Scott Renderer in *Unidentified Human Remains* at the Orpheum, off-Broadway.



complicated enough with the desire for sex in the age of AIDS and the need for love, there's also a serial killer on the loose. His presence adds a nervous edge to the revolving door sex lives onstage.

All the characters in *Unidentified Human Remains*, regardless of sexual orientation—or disorientation—are in the same boat. “The kind of violence people subject themselves and others to in the name of love doesn't have any barriers,” observes Fraser. “It seems that every group wants to claim their own pain, but I think we all suffer the same things in different degrees. That's why I wanted to write about individuals and not about role models or representative icons of any constituent group.”

Fraser, who is gay himself, has experienced the central character's (David) search for sex and relationships, and his inability to reconcile the two. Like David, Fraser moved back to his native Edmonton after living in Toronto. Edmonton had been a thriving town in the '70s during the height of the oil boom, but when Fraser returned the city was in the throes of a depression. He started writing *Remains* in 1985, basing it on the lives of old friends he hadn't seen in years. His straight friends, he discovered, experienced the same problems as his gay ones.

“I didn't want it to be the kind of show where people sit around and just talked about their feelings,” says Fraser. “I wanted it to have much higher stakes than that.” The murders of a number of young women in Edmonton at the time he was writing “twigged into” what he was trying to say about the “internal violence” of his characters. “The serial killer really was the catalyst for a lot of the action in the play, and gave it a thrust, urgency.”

Although he did a lot of research on serial killing—America's Ted Bundy was his most notorious source—Fraser was more interested in writing about the people who knew or slept with a serial killer, rather than the psychology of the killer himself. “Trying to explain how I, or perhaps you, would react to discovering that someone we know is a serial killer is, I think, far more interesting than the atrocities which we have been read-

ing and seeing so much about.”

The serial killer also provides a chilling metaphor for the danger that is part and parcel of any sexually active person's life today. You don't know what you are going to get when you take someone home—a sexual killer in the guise of a mass murderer or a deadly virus. Setting off for a night in the bars and anonymous sex in the park, David shouts, “I have a blind date with destiny!”

A playwright since he was 18, Fraser believes that his previous plays were really exercises leading up to *Unidentified Human Remains*. “I don't feel I really knew how to write until this play.” He cites Tennessee Williams, whom he regards as the “greatest playwright since Shakespeare,” as a major influence in his work. “I'd like to think that if Tennessee was starting to write plays now he might be writing something more like I'm doing now,” Fraser states. “What he did in his genera-

tion was unheard of in the theater and very shocking to a lot of people.”

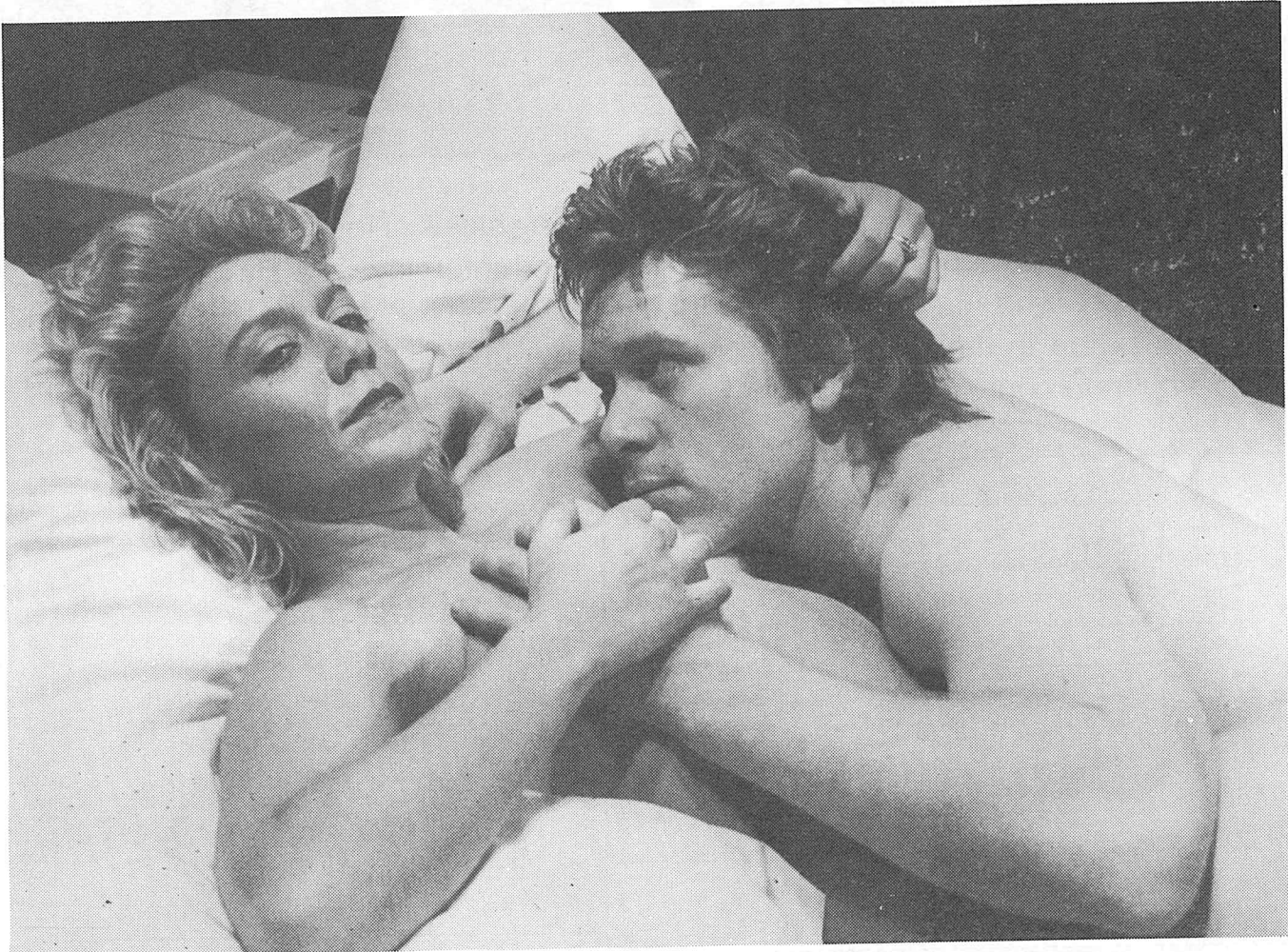
Unidentified Human Remains is also very much of product of new Canadian writing. “I think Canadian theater is more about things happening and not about people talking,” Fraser identifies with new Canadian writers who are “trying to evolve a

new art” by mixing theatrical conventions with cinematic and poetic conventions. “I want to get lots of people into the theater. The number of people who went to see *Terminator 2* should be able to see a play for the same price and for the same reasons, but get something completely different.” □

Director Derek Golby

English director Derek Goldby (best known in New York for his 1968 Tony-winning production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*) caught one of *Remains*'s several Canadian productions and wanted to direct the play. “I thought it was unlike anything I had seen,” Goldby recalls. “This is a play which seemed to deal with ordinary people's sexual problems in a way which was non-intellectual and totally unpretentious. It's visceral, funny and shocking—in a good way.”

Fraser is aware that his play is open to the charge of being sensationalist, some critics even called it pornographic. “A lot of moments in the play are meant to be jolting,” he acknowledges. “I think theater really works when there is a strong element of fear involved—fear of not knowing what is going to happen next.” In Chicago, where the play received its American premiere under Goldby's direction, the more shocked and outraged the mainstream critics were, the better it did at the box-office.



Lenore Zann and Tom Hodges in Chicago with *Unidentified Human Remains*.

Carol Rosegg

ism of the people who hold power. The mystique of the director in our century has created an environment in which people want desperately to believe that what Artaud recommended, what Reinhardt recommended, is morally right. I don't believe that. I believe that artists should be judged by the quality of their ideas. And it is patently obvious to me from the work of most of the American directors I know that they could benefit from feedback, if they would only listen, from somebody who reads a bit more than they do. It would make their work better. But because they all have God complexes or Artaud complexes, they all believe that it has to come from one person—it has to come from them, one person, or it's not a pure art work.

Now you and I both know that nothing good ever happens in the theater unless there is someone who's in charge, who has ultimate authority. I have no argument with that whatsoever. I'm not saying there shouldn't be directors. But to me, most of our directing is stupid. It could be better. It is guilty of the most heinous oversights that anyone could point out, not just a trained critic, but anyone who went to graduate school and who encountered a few of the things a director just doesn't have time to read and see. And I'm not blaming the directors for not being more educated than they should be; sometimes it's just a question of time, given all the grant writing and so on. But given the *idiocy* of so many of these decisions that you see onstage there is just a patent need for somebody else in the equation who can come in and say, "You know, six other people have directed used that same reading of that Ophelia line in the last three years. It is really overdone, clichéd, has the following implication, which is just offensive to women, and maybe you should think about reading it some other way."

Every regional theater in America has a dramaturg, and yet there is no shortage of stupid productions. Is a dramaturg really the answer?

Call these dramaturgs up and ask them how they're treated. They do not get listened to. I worked with one director at Yale Rep who would take my notes and crumple them up in front of me and throw them into the

garbage can. It happened to me at the Yale School of Drama where the guest directors are supposed to be master teachers in this field.

What is really happening in most of these theaters that have deigned to hire a dramaturg is that the dramaturg writes program notes or does public education. They need to be creative collaborators in the rehearsal process. The problem is that we have almost exclusively a directing population of little Napoleons, little monomaniacs who go around serving up their unmediated (unmediated by other people) vision of what a good show is. The David Greenspan pieces are a perfect example of this, just flouting the opinions of other people as if the flouting itself proved his artistic prowess. Call the person what you will—play doctor, literary manager, in-house critic, dramaturg—collaborative feedback in the theater has been around forever. The absolute autonomy of the director has come full-circle in this century to being responsible for enslaving the theater to old ideas. I do not believe in the absolute authority of the director *a priori*, maybe because I'm in the business of judging productions afterwards.

You're 32. Do you plan on writing criticism all your life?

I don't know how many years I have in me. I go to the theater at a pace that would kill a lot of others. And yet, because I go to Germany often, I feel I'm regularly refreshed by a certain kind of production that keeps me believing that I do serve a high art.

You're never going to see that kind of production here.

Maybe not, but I'm an American and I have to admit that. And as Richard Foreman said, even though you're an intellectual, who is always a pariah (and doubly so in the theater), you eventually have to come to terms with the fact that you're an American—unless you want to become an expatriate—and somehow find a niche for yourself. And my way of finding a niche for myself is to try and be an odd peg at the *Voice*. To try as much as I can not to fit and keep on wiggling and struggling against what I perceive is just expected of me from the culture industry that the *Voice*, unfortunately, does represent. □

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