

Prospecting for gold on theatre's fringe

By Robert Crew Toronto Star

Doing the rounds of Toronto's fringe theatres is something akin to being an old-time prospector. You plod through the steamy (concrete) jungle to pan for gold, occasionally running into strange, wild-bearded natives. There are hours of frustration, even boredom, but one day you may hit the Comstock Lode.

I finally struck it rich the other night at the Theatre Centre at 666 King St. W. — a place that, perhaps unfairly, is not prominently marked on most treasure maps. Here, Thieves' Theatre is presenting *The White Whore And The Bit Player* by Tom Eyen, author of *Women Behind Bars* and the current Broadway hit *Dreamgirls*.

The White Whore is a remarkable play; it's experimental in the right way, testing and stretching the limits of what can be done on stage.

A woman is in the process of hanging herself from a cross in her room at a mental hospital. In the 10 seconds it takes her to die, she relives key episodes of her life in a series of flashbacks. The two characters on stage, the Nun (Audrey van der Stoop) and the Whore (Gabriele Schafer), are both facets of the same person, enabling Eyen to probe the supposed paradox of woman's nature — the whore/sex performer versus the nun/bit-part player.

To tackle this concept (not an entirely new one) in dramatic terms is ambitious enough. But Eyen seems to be saying more: The world thinks of this woman as a whore, while she imagines herself as nun-like. How

did this come about? Are there judgments to be made?

Her mother killed herself and, rejected by the world, the little girl was put into a convent, to be imbued with Catholic dogma and with guilt. The climactic cry to her mother to save her from falling (death) becomes, perhaps, a despairing plea to humanity as a whole.

Under Tanuj Kohli's taut direction, Schafer and van der Stoop switch from role to role with dizzying versatility. This is an acting partnership, with Schafer in particular showing fine range and control.

A rich vein of theatre indeed.

A little paydirt

Then, on other evenings, the prospector may just hit a little paydirt — at 296 Brunswick Ave., for example, where Mercury Theatre is performing a valuable service by reviving plays all too rarely seen in Canada. Max Frisch's *The Firebugs*, which opened last Tuesday, falls right into that category.

Frisch is an important Swiss playwright with a depressing message. The world is in moral decline, he argues, and people are encouraging evil — social, political, nuclear — by their passive acceptance of events.

The epitome of this moral flabbiness is Gottlieb Biederman, the central figure in *The Firebugs*. A rich, ruthless businessman, he actually invites two arsonists to stay in the attic of his home. Biederman, an Everyman figure, "dreads action more than disaster" and desperately wants to be seen as a broad-minded man with a well honed sense

of humor. So he cosies up to evil, giving them the matches to complete the job.

Written in 1958, *The Firebugs* still has a contemporary feel, whether you subscribe to Frisch's heavy pessimism and mid-European angst. And despite a singing Greek Chorus of firemen, Mercury's production becomes submerged in the gloom-and-doom ideas the play is putting across. Almost all the acting is heavy-handed; only D. D. Kugler, as the campy butler Hans, shows the occasional lightness of touch the whole evening desperately needs.

Adapted and directed by Jack Langedyk, *The Firebugs* will run for three weeks.

Fool's gold

Finally, though, every prospector has to beware of fool's gold; Jayzel Theatre's *Bycykla* (at Theatre Passe Muraille until July 24) is not so much theatre as a "happening." But why did it have to happen at all?

The most remarkable thing about the show is the set — the press release calls it "an environment" — built from 200 bicycle wheels and 50 bike frames. Performers Mary Hawkins, Stephen Mackay and Andrew Scorer rush around, climbing on the "environment" and clanging bits of bike together more or less rhythmically. They also spout a great deal of nonsense, with a chunk from I Corinthians thrown in for good measure.

The hour of bike-worship has one amusing line, one cute sight-gag and one pleasant song. The rest is tedious self-indulgence.