

## The life of Byron

*Bob McGranahan shines in Romulus Linney's portrait of a truly fascinating man at ART. Storefront's winter season opens with updated Oedipus set in working class London.*

BY DOUG MARTIN

The only reason to see "Childe Byron" at Artists Repertory Theatre is Byron himself, but that is still a pretty good reason. Not much really happens in the play and the resolution is melodramatic and predictable, but it does give a charming look at the character of a truly fascinating man. George Gordon,

*Theatre*

Lord Byron, was born into an impoverished branch of a British noble family in the late 18th century, and only succeeded to the family title after the death of a great-uncle and the more immediate heirs to the barony. He had a clubfoot and a beautiful face, was notorious for his promiscuity (with both sexes), became Britain's literary Arch-Romantic, then died at the age of 36 in 1824 while subsidizing and training troops for the Greek war for independence (where he is still honored as a national hero).

Bob McGranahan really becomes Byron. McGranahan is, I think, the finest actor in Portland today; everything he does and says on stage he believes totally. Even in Byron's more florid verse he is completely immersed; its meaning is so deep for him that it becomes so for the audience. He is witty and charming and alive.

But the script is not so good. Romulus Linney the playwright, has built the story around Ada Augusta, Byron's daughter, who never knew her father. Ada's mother hated Byron and forcibly separated from him when Ada was only a week old. The play takes place on Ada's deathbed (she also died at 36), where she is trying to reconcile the horrible things her mother told her about her father to the man she knows from his writings. She is trying to find out if this man who has had such a great effect on her life really cared about her and why he abandoned her.

We know at the beginning how she is going to resolve her dilemma (Byron is just too fun to be around for her not to love him), and the ending is teary and tedious. Ada's is really the toughest role in the play, but it is overdone and loses all the best lines to Byron; Diane Olson is not up to it. She does not make Ada into a real person, we can never forget that this is an actress, whereas we never even notice McGranahan is an actor, he is just Byron.

The supporting cast, playing variously those in love with or those who loathe Byron (not a moderate sort of man), are quite good. Particular praise must go to Gwynne Warner, who commands the stage whenever she enters, and to Will Weigler. He is excellent as Byron as a very young man, and there is a scene between Byron and a choirboy (Weigler) that is one of the tenderest (though regrettably brief) male love scenes I have ever seen.

Even with its faults, "Childe Byron" is worth seeing for some fine performances

and for the exposure to Byron. It will probably make you want to go out and read more. It did for me.

Steven Berkoff's "Greek," at Storefront Theatre, is unlike any piece of theatre I have ever seen. When I first started reading it I was not really sure that I thought it was a good play. But it steadily held my interest (when I took a brief look at it at bedtime [2:00 a.m.] I did not put it down until my eyes were burning an hour later and I decided it was time for sleep), and as I finished it I was more and more intrigued.

Rosalie Brandon, the director for this Northwest premiere, describes the play as a totally new form of theatre. Berkoff combines many different forms of performance art into something totally his own. The basic structure is akin to Greek tragedy, but the language is variously modern street-talk and romantic poetry (with a few twists), and the action runs the gamut from mime to burlesque. Brandon has assembled a very experienced cast for this show; Vana O'Brien, Ted Roisum, Keith Scales, and Dee Dee Van Zyl; and she says that the play has been a new experience for all of them, each rehearsal is a new experiment and a new discovery.

The story is a reworking of the Oedipus myth in modern working class London, Tottenham to be exact. Oedipus is perhaps the most important, certainly the best known, of the Greek myths, because its themes of patricide and incest have always been at once both shocking and widespread, and Berkoff uses them in a somewhat different way, (his final resolution is not Sophocles').

Many people will probably find the language shocking, but it is really no worse than the speech of the people it is portraying; hang around on the bus mall a few hours and you will probably hear worse. Berkoff uses the language to a purpose. When the speech is at its ugliest he is using it to point up the ugliness of much of our present society, and when the speech turns lyrical he is trying to show that love can help to solve the problems we face. He uses the texture of the language (vowel and consonant sounds and rhythms) to reinforce the moods that he is trying to create.

The point that Berkoff makes with this story is that by taking what seems to be the complacent "safe" paths in our lives, we are actually allowing the decay that is all around us to happen, and we then try to ignore it by immersing ourselves in TV or whatever. He is not telling us what to do, only that we must do something; we must be aware of our surroundings and try to make an impact where we think it is needed. Brandon says that the play is "insistent on life," that it calls for vitality over safety.

In Brandon's view, art's major function is to try to understand the context of the planet, to assess what is going on and to respond. Naturally any work of art is then going to be very subjective, but the mark of success in this regard is whether people

strenuously agree or disagree with its viewpoint. If it can make people open their eyes and see what is around them, then it is good art, and I think this play can do that. Not everyone will like this play (though it was very successful in London and Los Angeles but flopped in New York). But then, most plays that "everyone" likes I find rather boring. Whatever "Greek" turns out to be, I do not think it will be boring.



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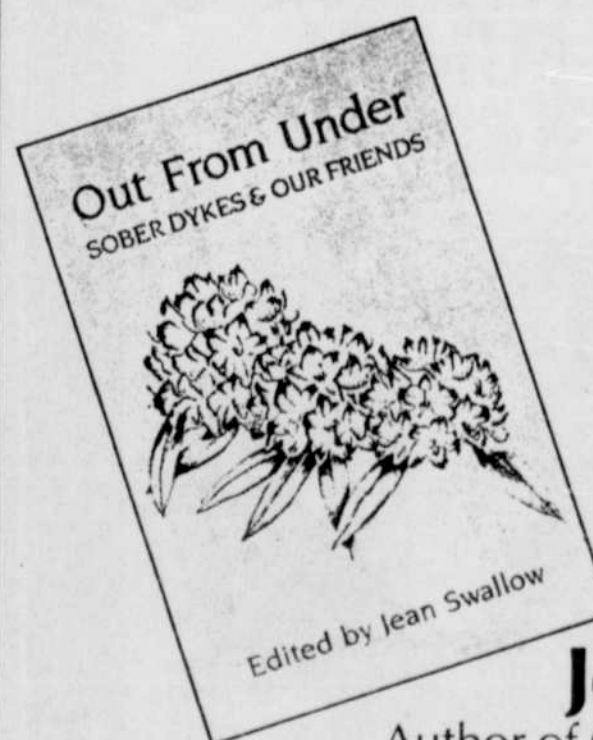
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Author of *Out From Under: Sober Dykes and Our Friends* and *Leave a Light on for Me*

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