

A glass that's more than half full

THEATRE

The Optimists

★★★

Directed by Rachel Ditor
Written by Morwyn Brebner
Starring Scott Bellis, Jillian Fargey,
John Murphy and Anastasia Phillips

BY MICHAEL HARRIS

Near the finale of Morwyn Brebner's brilliant new comedy, a young bride-to-be named Teenie melts onto an overstuffed chair in a Las Vegas hotel room and announces that enough's enough, she wants to talk about "something serious."

Out the window we spy the trashy signage of the MGM Grand and remember that in Las Vegas, everything we thought was trivial is now serious business. Painfully, the reverse is also true: What we believed to be serious (marriage, say, or love) is suddenly trivial.

The Optimists is the story of two lovers — Teenie and Chick — who have landed in Las Vegas for their shotgun wedding. "We thought we'd do it before breakfast, and then go to Denny's." For the course of the play, however, they only flop around their hotel room getting drunk and pissing each other off.

The Las Vegas wedding is inadvisable for several reasons. First, Chick (an overly gruff John Murphy) is a compulsive gambler trying to break his habit. Second, Teenie (played exquisitely by Anastasia Phillips) is a creepily sweet bundle of nerves who shouldn't be picking out her outfits, let alone a husband. And finally, there is the looming problem of emotional (and actual) infidelity, as threatened by their tag-along friends, Doug and Margie.

What makes Brebner's play so achingly funny, and simultaneously profound, is that none of these hurdles are overcome by the time the actors take their bow. People are messy, Brebner suggests, and they make do. They craft love from unheroic materials, marry for impure reasons. What's more, in *The Optimists*, they drink like fish and munch on Spitz seeds. Deal.

Certainly director Rachel Ditor deals with *The Optimists* handily. A frenetic intelligence reigns as the onstage lovers jab and parry. It's all contained in one Las Vegas suite, but somehow things don't turn into the dyspeptic sitcom that threatens to take over.

Teenie and Chick's friends, who have marital problems of their own, up the ante of the doomed sensation that creeps over things. Jillian Fargey is fragile and intelligent as the walking power-suit Margie and Scott Bellis makes the most of a quiet part as her cheating husband Doug.

"I can't stand this!" Teenie shouts, all of a sudden pulling off the impossible — turning manic comedy into a heartbreaking epiphany: "We're not ladies. We're not gentlemen. Our lives are impossible!"

Chick knows full well that he's a slob and a wastrel. "Can you imagine?" he coos to Doug after yet another drink. "That she would love me? That she would kiss me?"

Whether last week's Valentine's Day treated you well or left you spelunking in the freezer for Häagen-Dazs, I urge you to see this play.

It will revive not only your faith in love, but also love's faithful sidekick — sweet umbrage.

The Optimists runs to Mar. 3 at the Granville Island Stage, 1585 Johnston St. Tickets are \$25 to \$36.50 at 604-687-1644.

Special to The Globe and Mail



John Murphy and Jillian Fargey in *The Optimists*: funny and profound.



OR GALLERY

Derek Brunen excavates a six-foot-deep cemetery plot: 'We're socialized to avoid contemplating death.'

VISUAL ARTS DIGGING YOUR OWN GRAVE

BY DANIELLE EGAN

Sitting on the floor of the Or Gallery, I've spent about 45 minutes watching *Plot* — a six-hour and 15-minute video of Vancouver artist Derek Brunen digging his own grave — when a morbid sense of despair sets in.

Brunen has already excavated about five feet of the six-foot-deep plot at Mountain View Cemetery. Occasionally, he wipes his brow and glances at the camera, which only heightens the uncomfortable feeling that I'm a willing participant as he digs himself deeper into the hole.

Then, Mountain View gravediggers appear to check his progress and mug at the video camera. Their walk-on relieves the build-up of tension — not to mention of dirt — since Brunen takes one of many cigarette and water breaks to chat with the gravediggers about technique and equipment. After they leave, Brunen returns to the task.

The sun does a cameo just as the artist walks into the dark room of the gallery, in the flesh. He sits down beside me to discuss *Plot*.

"When I was at [Emily Carr Institute], I started collecting clichés on scraps and in notebooks," Brunen explains. "I was also thinking philosophically about suicide and death as a continual life process rather than as a binary opposition to life. But we're socialized to avoid contemplating death. Our society prescribes an ideal lifestyle, a sort of American dream of social pressures, including imperatives of how not to kill yourself. I was thinking about recreating suicide scenes, then this cliché of digging your own grave came up. What would happen if I tried to realize that cliché to affirm the presence of death in our daily existence?"

Brunen expected logistical troubles in pulling off the work. But the manager of Mountain View Cemetery, Glen Hodges, was receptive; he even offered to lend him a plot free of charge that had been dug up for a film about 15 years earlier.

"They probably thought I was nuts," Brunen says, and laughs. He questioned his own sanity periodically, as well as his physical stamina — particularly in the most taxing and final hour of digging, which could also be a symbolic archeological dig into clichés of the suffering, alienated, starving artist.

This 33-year-old artist hasn't exactly been toiling away in obscurity. A founding member of the lively artist group Inter-Mission, he has exhibited at Third Avenue Gallery, Western Front and CSA Space, and has a day job doing graphics work in the basement of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Next, he will show in the windows of the Contemporary Art Gallery, starting March 30.

"But the creative process is ex-

treme," Brunen says. "I'd have panic attacks and anxiety, particularly when I was in the depths of trying to invent something. I always wind up at a sort of void, a ground zero."

"Other issues come in, like the evolution of the spectator, subjective taste, what it takes to get recognized. The pressure isn't new, but since the birth of modernism, the avant-garde and academic work, I think it's become more acute. But I always want to appeal to as wide an audience as possible."

Plot is striking because it's thematically rich, yet easy to grasp. Even so, it's worth parking yourself in front of the screen for a while because the bond between artist and viewer gets increasingly dramatic, provoking a greater appreciation of art's importance in affirming life.

Plot runs until March 3 at the Or Gallery, 103 - 480 Smithe St., 604-683-7395.

Special to The Globe and Mail

Sudoku ©Puzzles by Pappocom

		2	9			6		
	9	7						3
			7	3				8
	5	6			4	7		
	1						5	
		8	6			3	2	
6				4	7			
1						4	8	
		9			3	5		

Fill in the grid so that each row of nine squares, each column of nine and each section of nine (three squares by three) contains the numbers 1 through 9 in any order. There is only one solution to each puzzle.

Solution, tips and computer program at www.sudoku.com

Yesterday's solution

7	4	9	2	1	6	8	3	5
1	6	5	7	3	8	2	9	4
2	8	3	4	9	5	1	7	6
5	1	7	9	4	3	6	2	8
8	2	4	6	7	1	9	5	3
9	3	6	8	5	2	7	4	1
3	5	2	1	8	9	4	6	7
4	9	1	5	6	7	3	8	2
6	7	8	3	2	4	5	1	9