

# ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

## Anger makes serious point

Theatre Kingston covers all its bases in incisive physical comedy

### Theatre Review

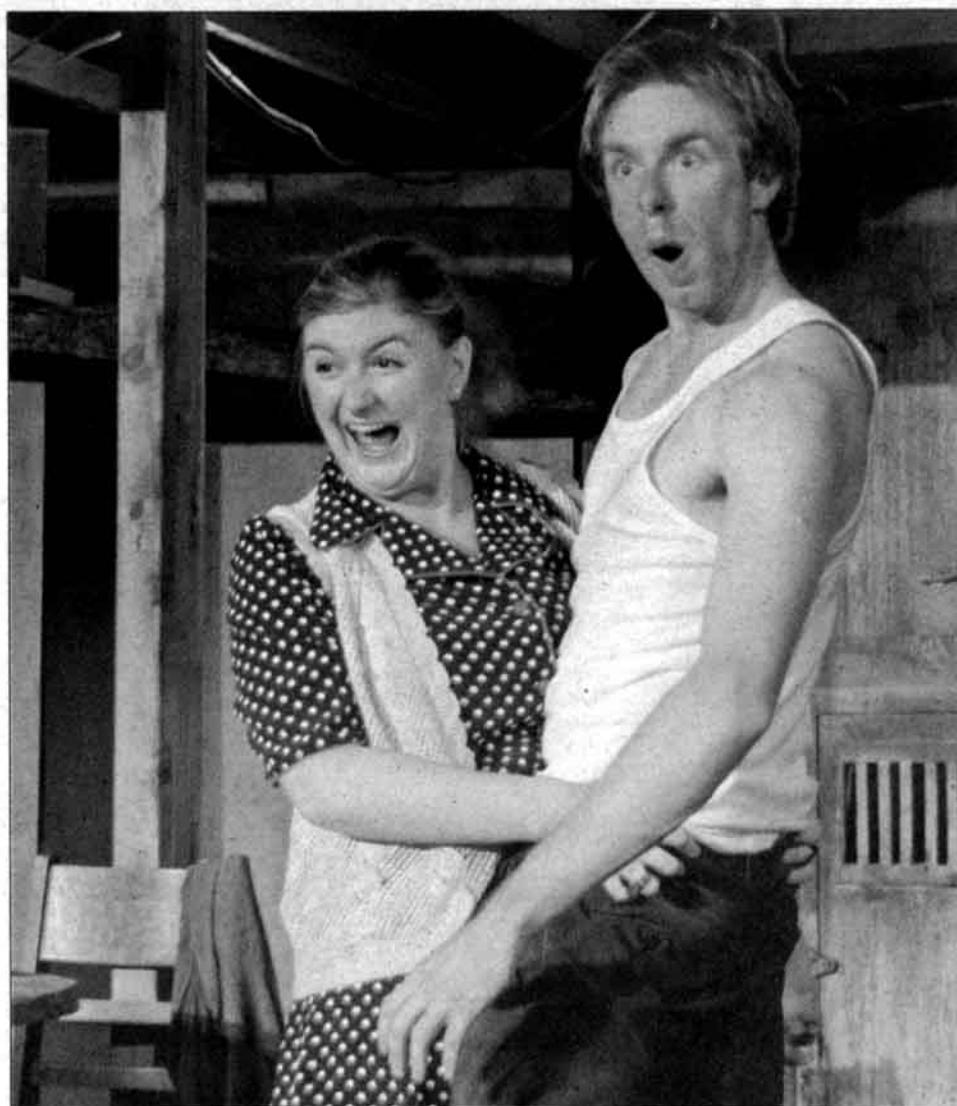
***The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine* @ The Wellington Street Theatre until Oct. 28**

BY MEGHAN HARRISON  
A&E EDITOR

Theatre Kingston's production of *The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine* tries to be many things at once: a broad, clowning physical comedy, a light-hearted but incisive satire of romantic relationships, and a wrenching marital drama. Surprisingly, it succeeds on all counts.

Robert Morgan, Martha Ross and Leah Cherniak's two-person play concerns a newlywed couple, the titular Ernest (Ryan Howard Clement) and Ernestine (Megan Deeks), who move into a basement apartment to begin their life together. In close quarters, their irreconcilable differences begin to emerge, and their inability to communicate with each other makes their individual frustrations escalate to hilarious and eventually disastrous levels. Performing scenes from their marriage together, as well as delivering monologues and dialogues directly to the audience, the disconnect between Ernest and Ernestine's feelings, actions and what their spouse believes is happening is always painfully apparent to the audience.

Clement and Deeks both do fantastic work as Ernest and Ernestine, absolutely committed to even their most physically ridiculous scenes—including a series of



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\*\*\*\*\* Please see Ernest on page 14. Megan Deeks and Ryan Howard Clement have excellent chemistry. \*\*\*\*\*

## Ernest explores dysfunction in close relationships

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tableaux depicting increasingly ludicrous sexual positions—while displaying excellent chemistry and timing. Their incredible naïveté at the story's outset, as they share their reasons for being in love with each other while shamelessly mugging for the audience, makes them just irritating enough for their early conflicts to be satisfying to watch. Still, they're likable enough for the audience to be seriously invested

in them by the time they begin to really hurt each other.

The entire play happens in Ernest and Ernestine's kitchen and stairwell, which also includes a temperamental furnace. Dan Rider's basement apartment set looks ready to win a decade's worth of Golden Cockroach awards while slowly crushing the optimism out of its tenants. Its wooden beams are discoloured, the sink is flaky and grotty and the three flights of stairs

out of the apartment are a death trap in mismatched paint.

These stairs also give Deeks some wonderful business in several scenes, especially the three in which she wails and stomps her way out of the apartment in the morning. Deeks's performance throughout—but especially here—is actually exhausting to watch and goes a long way toward explaining Ernest's inability to deal with Ernestine, which is crucial since Ernest will require loads of sympathy in the last scene. Deeks's only mistake is to maintain too much of Ernestine's exaggerated movements and reactions through the play's conclusion. Director Kim Renders has given both actors excellent guidance at calibrating the peaks and valleys of their individual anger—the repressed Ernest is most frightening in his physical

and verbal outbursts, whereas the hyperactive Ernestine is most threatening in her silences.

Though Deeks's energy often propels the show, Clement's Ernest is the more complex character. An overgrown boy dressed like a grandpa, with an anal-retentive streak and a hidden tendency toward viciousness, his slow unravelling is carefully paced. From his impromptu Bruce Springsteen airband to his Ned Flanders-like voice, Clement is a joy to watch, and then absolutely compelling when he finally snaps.

Morgan, Ross and Cherniak's script isn't without its flaws. The play's second half turns into more intense, adult material is marked by a completely incongruous avalanche of f-bombs in a confusing scene, made more disorienting when the actors' shouting became

nearly unintelligible at times. The writers also introduce Ernestine's hidden smoking habit early in the play and never return to it, a puzzling misstep in an otherwise streamlined, highly structured plot that returns over and over to the same themes and conflicts. Mundane disagreements—over tea bag storage, whether Ernest is wearing a jacket or a sweater, the proper location for the tissue box, furnace repair—are what drive the couple apart, long before either character can admit to what's actually driving their dissension. When the characters finally do, the playwrights prove to be attentive students of human nature.

*The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine* isn't for everybody—some will find its fever-pitched physical comedy profoundly irritating, and once its frothy first half is over, you won't exactly leave the theatre feeling secure about your immediate social circle. But as an exploration of the claustrophobia in any close relationship, whether between lovers, friends or roommates, *The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine* is far more pointed than its goofy flailing might suggest.

**The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine runs 8 p.m. nightly until Saturday at The Wellington Street Theatre. Tickets are \$22 for adults and \$12 for students and seniors, available at The Grand Theatre Box office or by calling 613-530-2050.**