

Townships week

**the
Record**

Friday, April 3

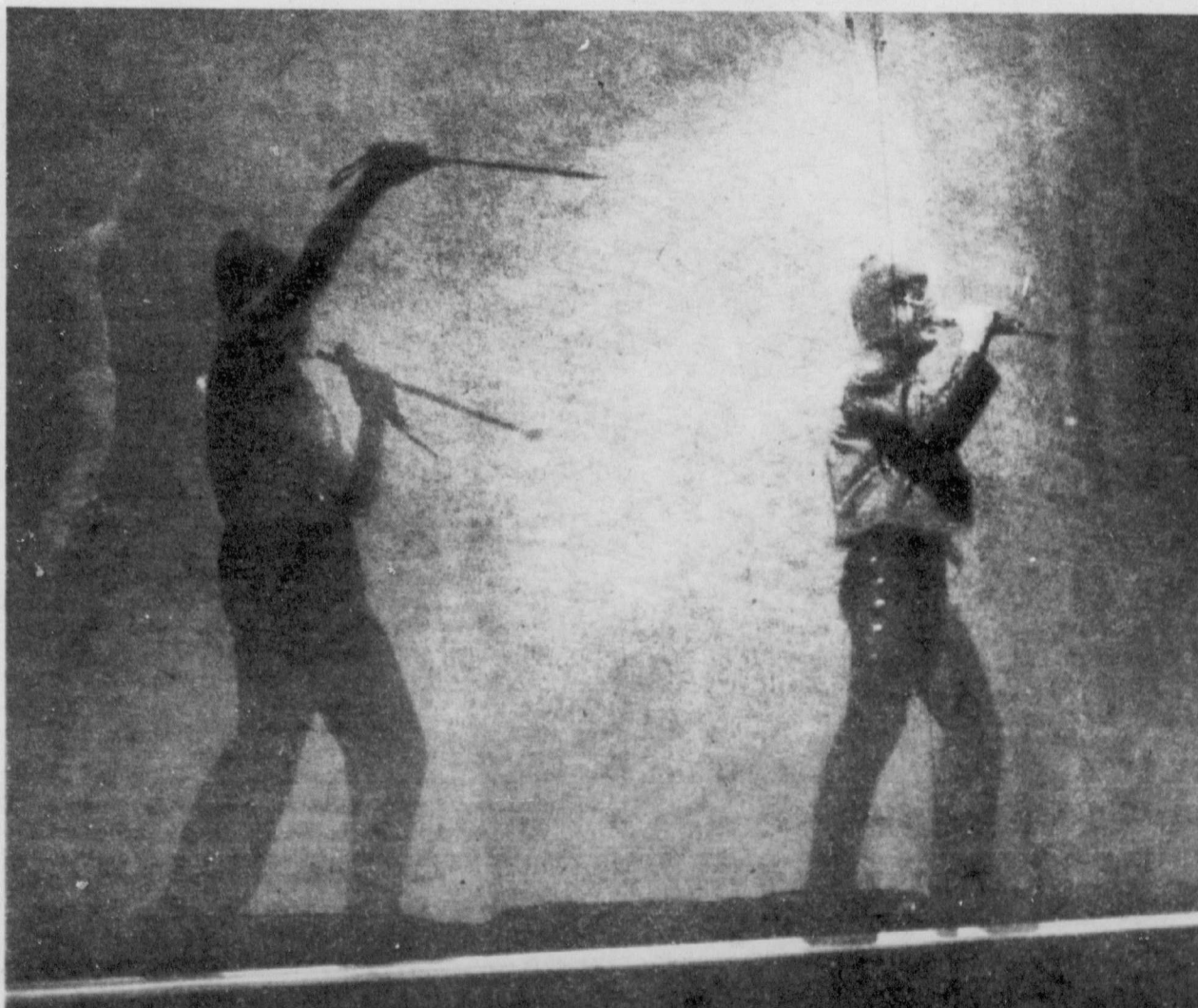


Starmania
Broadway material?



Louise Forestier, waitress at the Underground Café, is Starmania's guide

Starmania: As good as Broadway?



Les Etoiles Noires, above, on the rampage. On the cover, sexy Sadia is violence personified.

Last week in review

By Donnelly

In some ways *Starmania*, seen by Sherbrookers last weekend, is as good as anything on Broadway. The songs became classics even before the rock opera opened in Paris more than two years ago. But the story was sacrificed to the disease which the show attacks, star mania. The Paris production closed after only three weeks and its rehabilitation was a long time coming. Last September, Montreal's newest theatre, the Comedie Nationale produced the "made in Quebec" version under the keen guidance of director Olivier Reichenbach. After a year of reworking the show, lyricist Luc Plamondon felt vindicated by the shower of praise for his baby.

In the Paris production, the directionless director had problems getting the vedettes to act but the Quebec-made show is well-acted and dramatically moving. The best performances were offered: Gilles Valiquette as Roger Roger, the horn-rim spectacled newscaster with greasy, swept-back hair; Sylvie Boucher as a sensuously serpentine Sadia and Louise Forestier as the silently suffering serveuse automate Marie-Jeanne.

Linked by well-integrated recitative, all parts are sung, as is customary in opera. There isn't a spoken line. Each performer met the challenge of Plamondon's quality lyrics and Michel Berger's captivating score. But particularly electrifying was the singing of Forestier (the waitress who guides us through most of the story), Michel McLean (the power-hungry politician Zero Janvier) and

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Starmania: Excellent singing but abysmal dancing

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the incredible, young Francis Martin (the mysterious extraterrestrial).

In Sunday afternoon's performance, Robert Leroux (the punkish Johnny Rockfort) betrayed a hoarse, cracked voice (over-exertion?) but there's nothing wrong with his pipes on the excellent two-record set soundtrack, recorded in Montreal this year.

Production problems still remain. The most glaring is admittedly, a question of taste, or rather style. The costumes are contemporary Parisienne fashions. They may have been in vogue in Paris then, they may still be in vogue in Montreal now, but that doesn't make them any more complimentary to beautiful bodies and, long before 2000 A.D., the time in which Starmania is set, they would definitely be dated.

The second nagging point is a question of standards. In contrast to excellent singing, the dancing was abysmal. The extras shuffled their feet like klutzes in a local disco or mechanically fulfilled the obligations of simplistic, unimaginative choreography. The short, chunky girl who was in fine voice as Stella Spotlight's attendant should not have been forced to hoof with the long-legged. This can only be interpreted as skimping on personnel. For the most part, the principals were no better. Jacques Blais, who played Ziggy, a hipster with dreams of becoming a rock dancing star, can't dance. Nor can Sherbrooke's own France Castel as aging sex symbol Stella Spotlight. Although she could hold her own vocally, Castel's efforts in a paired-up choreography with sexy Sadia only made her look her age. In fact Sadia (Sylvie Boucher) was the only one in the troupe who could cut the rug but, even in her case, some moments seemed forced rather than free-flowing.

The set for Starmania-Quebec is simple but impressive. Two gigantic three-storey walls vee to one side of the stage. Depending on where the light is shining, these walls are either silvery grey, mirrored or transparent, revealing the action on the tiers behind. A steep staircase rises against the broad back wall to the top tier which serves as the domain of Zero Janvier. Raised platforms, balconies and ramps, including a winding staircase and a jutting proscenium dug-out - the underground cafe -

provide all the variety needed for this dynamic show.

Not overdone, the lighting and special effects worked well, especially the exciting climactic scene where searchlights bouncing from one giant mirrored disc to another, entrap Starmania's heroine, Cristal. Periodically illuminated at centre stage is the huge, fish-eye television screen, a vehicle of continuity.

Roger Roger's musical capsule reports from this fish bowl and the musical narrative of Marie-Jeanne, waitresse at the underground cafe, link together the marvellous character-building and theme-developing songs.

The rock opera is populated by archetypal characters. Sadia, "la violence personifiée" is a presentative of pure evil, the brains behind a terrorist group called the Etoiles Noires. She recruits Johnny Rockfort, a neighbourhood tough, who quickly becomes chief and leads the gang on an anarchistic rampage. Meanwhile, in his icy skyscraper, the richest man in the year 2000, Zero Janvier, prepares to announce his candidature for the presidency of the western world as head of the "Parti Pris Pour le Progres". In the underground cafe where the Etoiles hang out, Sadia lines up an interview between Rockfort and Cristal, host of the popular tv show, "Starmania". Cristal and Rockfort fall in love. In Bider-Meinhoff fashion, Cristal joins the terrorists, Sadia, spurned by Johnny, tips off Janvier about plans to burn his commercial complex to the ground and the P.P.P.'s trench-coated gestapo gun down the lovers. With law and order restored to Monopolis, the capital of western civilization, Janvier wins the election.

The stories which intertwine around this main plot are just as important: the waitress' futile love for Ziggy, a homosexual dreamer who sells his soul to become the DJ of Naziland (Janvier's penthouse discotheque); and Stella Spotlight's intended retirement, and suicide when she realizes that she has been used by Janvier for evil ends.

But the subplots could still stand some rewriting. While the superfluous lesbian encounter between Stella and Sadia is given full play, there is barely a suggestion of the important relationship between Janvier and Ziggy.

The philosophic message of Starmania is also disturbing. Forestier's "Le monde est stone", condemning the

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world for its uncritical, stupefied star worship, would make a fitting end to the rock opera. Instead, the last word - or song - is given to an extraterrestrial, exquisitely sung by Francis Martin, a young kid who would have put the young Rene Simard out to pasture. From his other-worldly perspective, star mania is merely the aberration of a primitive people but, in the immensity of the universe, what happens on earth is too insignificant to matter anyway. It would make more sense if this extraterrestrial was future man, the child who emerged from the cosmic egg of Kubrick's 2001 to say that life in the vast universe is so extraordinary and special that together we should work to make it better for all. When, in the grande finale, all of the characters, living and dead, join in chorus, instead of searching the stars for someone who can answer their questions and prayers (another form of starmania, n'est-ce pas?), it would have been more satisfying to reflect the hope that humans can learn to live together in peace on this little rock of ours.

Starmania is potential Broadway material. But translation would be quite a hurdle and cultural transplantation an even greater challenge. Luc Plamondon nurtured his artistic sensibilities in Europe, crowning his studies with a diet of Broadway shows and west coast rock concerts. Starmania is a reflection of these influences, in many ways reminiscent of great hits like *West Side Story* or *Hair* yet, even in style, more operatic, more in the European tradition. Written in France in collaboration with French composer Michel Berger, Starmania is culturally a Quebecois and French mixture. Set unmistakably in Paris and its banlieue nord, many of Starmania's sensibilities are Parisienne but tainted with anglicized, hip North Americanisms. Starmania's dreams and philosophy are purely Quebecois. The spiritual god may be dead, even faith in earthly leaders, but the need to believe in the stars is ever present. Although still running its course in Quebec, the creed of the flower children is passe in the U.S. Caught between two cultural masters at the point of nation-building, Quebec has a hybrid culture which has yet to be explained to our Yanky brothers and sisters. Starmania's adaptation to the New York market would be an impressive feat.

Bloodfire

Jamaican reggae swept into Magog last Sunday with the young, Toronto-based band Bloodfire. With any luck, it won't be the last time live reggae is heard in these parts.

In the intimacy of La Grosse Pomme's core, bodies sardined on the dance floor for an eye-raising view of the five musicians perched in swaying motion on the balcony above. Bloodfire certainly had no trouble energizing the patrons. Their emphasis on good-time dance music was frustrated only by the limited space available in the packed room.

Coming up with familiar numbers like Bob Marley's "No Woman, No Cry" and Jimmy Cliff's "The Harder They Come (The Harder They Fall)", Bloodfire paved the way for easy acceptance of lesser known and self-penned pieces, the most notable being their up-coming single, "Freedom" or "La Liberte", with the repeated refrain in French and English (it actually scanned better in French) "On demande la liberte, on demande tous la meme chose."

Exciting leader guitarist Wally Morgan and nimble Bunny Cunningham on organ and synthesizer added frills to the compelling, characteristically regular, slowed-down beat provided by bassist Clive Ross, drummer Paul Corby and rhythm guitarist Tony Nicholson. More confident than many musicians in the same age range, the Bloodfire rastas had the crowd singing "Everything's gonna be alright" in the second number ("No Woman") with no instrumental accompaniment, just Corby's drumsticks beating out the time.

Dreadlocks swinging, Ross, Nicholson and white soul brother Morgan let the music carry their responsive bodies but the limited space on the balcony stage cramped their choreography.

Happily, this won't be a long-term problem. There's an expansion in the offing. Later this spring, the balcony walls will be torn down for added upstairs space and, in warm weather, the garden doors will open to the summer breeze, a tent-like structure providing protection against the rain.

The best part of Bloodfire's show was their product, live reggae music. Since Jamaica's independence from



Bloodfire had no trouble entertaining the throng at La Grosse Pomme last week.

PHOTO/DON YOUNG