

# THEATER

## The fast track leads to Chicago for British director Steven Rumbelow

By Richard Christiansen

Critic at large

**A**lthough he has been working off and on in Chicago for only two years, Steven Rumbelow already has become a director whose next work is always awaited with interest—and is usually worth the wait.

Rumbelow, 34, first attracted attention here in the summer of 1981 when, under the sponsorship of the Chicago-based Remains Theater, he brought his Triple Action Theatre of England here in two original experimental works, "Curriculum Vitae" and "Ulysses," an adaptation of the novel by James Joyce.

Filled with imaginative streaks of avant-garde theatricality that were far removed from the mainstream of well-made plays on most Chicago stages, Rumbelow's work drew part of its inspiration from the likes of such contemporary European directors as Peter Brook of England and Jerzy Grotowski of Poland.

In "Ulysses," he attempted to fragment time and space on stage to match Joyce's method on the printed page. In "Curriculum Vitae," he staged a multipronged exploration of the nature of art that ranged from fast-talking satire to profound silence. A few months later, a single actor on a nearly bare stage recreated the world of Christopher Marlowe's "Dr. Faustus."

"Moby Dick," an adaptation of Herman Melville's novel and created in a stormy collaboration with Remains, had a triumphant engagement last winter in the Goodman Theater Studio; and "Bridal Polonaise," literally a journey through Rumbelow's impressions of Poland's turbulent past and unhappy present, is currently playing in the Black Bird Theater, a former streetcar barn at 5845 N. Broadway.

The latest Rumbelow work to emerge in the Chicago area is "Diaries of a Madman," based on the story by Nikolai Gogol but incorporating a whole range of 20th-Century madmen, which has just opened in the Practical Theater Company's John Lennon Auditorium, 703 Howard St., Evanston.

Unlike earlier Rumbelow presentations here, which have been reworkings or restagings of his past theater pieces, "Diaries" is a completely new work; and it finds its creator at a relatively quiet and contented time of his hectic career.

Newly and blissfully married, he is also preparing to apply for Canadian citizenship "with all the joys an immigrant to the New World should have." He already is in the early stages of preparation for a Christmas show in Chicago, and he says he has a producer for a play, "The Last Round," to be staged in a boxing ring and with two former world champion boxers as its stars, for Broadway next season.

Born in Bristol, England, in 1949, Rumbelow has been running on the fast track for most of his life.

His mother is a designer who created the costumes for the cel-



Tribune photo by Ron Talley

Rumbelow's latest Chicago collaboration is with the Practical Theater.

ebrated BBC-TV series "The Six Wives of Henry VIII," and his uncle was the head of design at the Bristol division of BBC-TV.

Rumbelow himself started out as a visual artist, studying and then dropping out of the Royal Academy of Art and doing his first piece of sculpture for an official piece of Bristol city architecture. The work attracted sufficient attention to land him a job as art director on a film being made in Bristol, and from there, at 16, he went into work as a stagehand at the Bristol Old Vic. He quickly rose in the backstage hierarchy there. Within six weeks, he recalls, "I was lec-

turing to students who had been studying theater for years."

He spent 14 months as an actor, doing everything from "The Beggar's Opera" to Beckett, with a regional repertory house in Worthing, England; and at 17, he wrote his first television script, called "The Caesars."

"I wanted to do Robert Graves' 'I, Claudius' [later done by BBC-TV]," Rumbelow explains, "but when I couldn't get the rights, I decided to do my own stage trilogy."

He sent the script to Thames Television in 1967, it was accepted and filmed and, Rumbelow says, eventually was seen in 15



Herb Metzler in a scene from "Diaries of a Madman."

countries.

"The television series was no great thing for me," Rumbelow insists, "but after it was sold, offers did come in from the Royal Court, Royal Shakespeare Company [RSC] and National Theatre."

So, at 18, Rumbelow moved to London and worked with an experimental unit of the RSC at the Aldwych Theatre, creating nine productions there in "an intensive educational experience" before he decided to split off and form his own Triple Action Theatre.

Initially encouraged by the British Arts Council, he found that the encouragement came to a subsidy of only about \$2,000; so he plowed all of his own money into the struggling company.

Triple Action—which receives its title from a thesis by the Russian director Meyerhold on "action, reaction and co-action" in the theater—went on to produce still more Rumbelow theatrical pieces in an expanding touring network throughout England. At Triple Action, Rumbelow also directed four award-winning films, turned out in two years on such subjects as Joan of Arc, King Lear and Faustus. Along the way, he worked with a psychologist "to find out more about my own instincts as an artist."

In 1980, with the cutbacks in government subsidy from the Conservative government being felt, Rumbelow and Triple Action took their act on tour to Canada, a journey that he says "was like entering civilization."

It was in Toronto that Rumbelow created "Bridal Polonaise," which was his attempt to bring the Poland he knew through several seasons of theatrical study to a faraway stage in Toronto. To get the piece done, he locked himself in a hotel room for three days, taped together the sheets of paper that came from his typewriter at the time and "extracted the most poignant and repeated statements" for his final script.

"I tend to procrastinate," Rumbelow admits. "There's a fear of not being able to make it, which I finally have to face. On the other hand, that procrastination gives the material time to percolate a little."

In Toronto, Rumbelow's work

was seen by William L. Petersen of the Remains Ensemble, who enthusiastically invited Triple Action to Chicago for the "Curriculum Vitae" and "Ulysses" productions and a series of "leap in the dark" workshops that Rumbelow conducted for actors here.

Unfortunately, the Remains-Rumbelow connection, which had been forged in friendship, was severely strained and finally broken during the traumatic rehearsals for "Moby Dick." Both parties regretted the breakup, but both agree that they were at loggerheads over interpretation of specific segments of the novel. After Rumbelow found the company re-rehearsing one key section, he left the project.

"Moby Dick" nonetheless retained several of Rumbelow's stunning theatrical images and increased his credibility as a director in Chicago.

"Bridal Polonaise," in which rehearsals were marred by serious injury to one of the actresses, nevertheless emerged as a striking theatrical statement, starting off in a Polish wedding and ending in the bowels of the building in a kind of death-camp atmosphere.

For "Diaries of a Madman," Rumbelow used workshop techniques with the spunky Practical Theater to evolve a study of "madness and megalomania all over the place" in our contemporary world.

"I usually work in two ways," the director says. "I either workshop the play and develop it with the performers, or I come in with a finished script or storyboard."

By his own count, this has produced about 100 plays, four movies and the TV series, with more to come as he establishes his North American contacts.

Coming up in 1985, he says, is a trip to Central America to create a magical, mystical project based on a miraculous cure an old Mexican shaman worked after Rumbelow had been stung five times by a scorpion.

Whatever the next project, it is almost certain to offer some surprises. As Rumbelow says, "I usually can get something exciting together that can charge up an audience."