

Tempo

'Ulysses' in Chi-town: English avant-garde

By Richard Christiansen
Critic at large

EARLIER THIS year, a few members of the venturesome young Remains Theater of Chicago traveled up to the Toronto (Canada) Theater Festival and were knocked out of their socks by a late-hour festival performance of the Triple Action Theater of England.

The Remains actors, in a courageous and incautious mood, promptly invited Steven Rumbelow, Triple Action's 31-year-old artistic director, and his small company to come to Chicago for a two-week engagement of their repertory under Remains' sponsorship. Rumbelow accepted, and Monday night Triple Action opened its premiere Chicago run in the Steppenwolf Theater space, 3212 N. Broadway, with Rumbelow's adaptation of James Joyce's "Ulysses." (A second and final production, "Curriculum Vitae," also by Rumbelow, follows on Tuesday evening.)

I was there for the opening, and though my socks remained firmly on my feet, I could see why the Remains actors, with their commitment to experimental theater, were blown away by their new English friends.

THIS IS A very arduous form of theater, which should earn a Purple Heart for the players and, perhaps, a Good Conduct Medal for the audience. It requires keen physical condition to perform, and demands equally keen mental alertness to take in. Casual viewers not willing to sit through 90 minutes of tricky, often baffling theater, are well-advised to stay away.

Triple Action is not out to present a lucid or precise condensation of Joyce's book. Rumbelow's theater piece is as intricate as the book, but it wisely does not attempt to parrot the novel's 700-plus pages. Rather, Rumbelow takes off from the vital spirit of the novel, throwing out surrealistic epiphanies inspired (sometimes quite literally) by the politics, sexuality, learning, sheer cussedness, and Christian and pagan mythology of Joyce's work.

The scenes that will work best for most people come near the end of the production, after a series of now brilliant, now turgid, now vulgar revelations provoked by the novel.

"ULYSSES"

A theater piece adapted from James Joyce's novel and directed by Steven Rumbelow. A production of the Triple Action Theater of England, presented in Chicago by Remains Theater. Opened July 13 in the Steppenwolf Theater at 3212 N. Broadway, and plays at 8 p.m. July 15, 17, 21, 23, and 25. Tickets are \$7. Phone 472-4141.

THE CAST

Molly Bloom	.....	Carole Pluckrose
Dr. Mulligan	.....	Michael Willcox
Leopold Bloom	.....	Julian Richings
Stephen Dedalus	.....	Tim Joyce
James Joyce	.....	Maciej Suszynski

CAROLE PLUCKROSE, tucked into a sheet and blanket hanging from a clothesline, stands bolt upright and delivers, very clearly, a long excerpt from "Ulysses'" famous final soliloquy of life affirmation by Molly Bloom. Gradually, Michael Willcox, one of the actors, who has been pointing a spotlight at her from one side of the open stage, narrows the light's beam until it winks out as she exults in her last "yes." Off to another side, at the end of Molly's aria, Julian Richings, who has taken the role of Leopold Bloom for most of the evening, closes the book in which he has been writing, opens it again, and, moving over to a coffin from which the young Stephen Dedalus (Tim Stone) had sprung, reads, again clearly, from the first page of the novel. He stops *in media res*, takes a long pause, then places a red flower of tribute on top one of the two dozen thin poles that have formed the perimeters of the playing space.

All the actors, except Maciej Suszynski, who has portrayed Joyce, leave the stage. Then the house lights come up, and Suszynski, tapping a cane in front of him, slowly walks out, the blind poet Joyce-Homer removing himself from the stage.

I WISH THE whole evening had been as inventive, as moving, and as *right* as that beautiful concluding segment. Instead, the production, for all its sweat and shout, at times fails to communicate on either an emotional or intellectual level, which is a mortal sin in theater.

This is perhaps a compulsion of some avant-garde artists, but it is also their curse. And, as Remains is currently proving with its own imaginative weekend production of "Book of Splendors, Part II," "experimental" does not have to mean "incomprehensible."