

Ambitious young director moving in from the fringe

By Rob Salem Toronto Star

Two years ago Sky Gilbert's Buddies In Bad Times theatre company was the fringest of the fringe. Now he's about to spend his second summer as an assistant director at the Shaw Festival.

"I guess you could say my career is going very well," Gilbert says. "I just want to get to the stage where I can do my work and have the money to live. This year is the first time I can begin to do that."

Gilbert, whose latest show Pasolini/Pelosi opens tonight at the Theatre Centre, 666 King St. W., has over the last few years been a very productive member of the experimental theatre community, writing and directing such shows as Torch/Song, Cavafy and Murder/Lover.

Buddies In Bad Times, the company he began in 1979, is unique in its approach. Most productions are based on the work of a specific poet, augmented by dialogue and image, and many have a homosexual theme. "Our focus is theatrical poetry," Gilbert says. "Not verse or Shakespeare or something from the 19th century — *modern* poetry, which to me is from 1965 on.

"I think a lot of it cries out for theatricalization. With some of the people I've done, like Patti Smith (Murder/Lover), it's like rock 'n' roll, it's meant to be said. We take that poetry and make it come alive on stage, it's not just people standing there reciting."

More accessible

Pasolini/Pelosi, an exploration of the Italian movie director's life and death through his poetry, is similar to Gilbert's previous productions. He feels that although his work isn't for everyone, it's much more accessible than a lot of avant-garde theatre. "I have a very showbiz mentality mixed in with my big ideals, a very strong theatre sense. I don't like to be bored, as much as I'm into doing the odd and experimental."

His work struck a chord with Shaw Festival artistic director Christopher Newton, who saw Cavafy at the Theatre Centre and immediately hired Gilbert to help direct two of last summer's productions — The Singular Life Of Albert Nobbs (with Newton) and Cyrano de Bergerac (with Derek Goldby). He also did workshops of two of his own plays and another by Mary Vingo.

"Everything just worked out peachy keen," Gilbert says of the Shaw experience. "Christopher and I really, really got along, so



ROM BULL/TORONTO STAR

Going places: Sky Gilbert's latest play, an exploration of the Italian movie director Pasolini's life and death, opens tonight at Theatre Centre. Young director will also be at Shaw Festival

we decided to work again this spring, collaboratively rewriting the script for Tom Jones.

"We started with the music by Edward German, a second-string English operatic composer. No one knows about him, but he's Christopher's favorite. The music is just fantastic, many people will recognize the tunes, but the libretto is terrible. So we rewrote it to try to capture the spirit of the novel.

"I'm also assistant directing on Caesar And Cleopatra and running workshops that will be much more involved than last year's, using the actors who aren't busy at the end of the season, and there are loads of them."

After the summer at Shaw he has two more productions scheduled for his company. "The first is inspired by David Hockney's paintings, using the poetry of Tom Gunn. It's going to all be about boys in swimming pools, because that's what Hockney is about — swimming pools and showers and lawns and art collectors in California.

"And although I haven't got permission yet, I want to do a play about the work of a Canadian poet, E.A. Lacey, who lives in Brazil. Then there's our annu-

al Rhubarb series, short conceptual pieces that are the weirdest of the weird, and Canadian Poetry Onstage. Last year Robert Scott did a piece based on David McFadden's poetry, and this year I'd like to do the entire thing on McFadden's work."

Writes musicals

And as if all this wasn't enough to keep even the most ambitious young director busy, Gilbert also writes one-act musicals as a sideline. "I call them obsession plays," he says. "One, called Boy Sonata, I'm workshoping at Factory Theatre Lab next week, and there's another called Dark Glasses that I'm workshoping at Shaw this summer.

"I'm trying to get people to produce them but it's hard, partially because the material is sometimes gay, but also because people think that since I have my own theatre company I can produce all my own works. I can't really. But my company is the most important thing to me because it's doing what I specifically want to do.

"For me it's heightened language, heightened image," he says.