

# A walk on the wild side

Buddies in Bad Times fetes 25th with remount of Sky Gilbert's *Play Murder*

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ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER

There have been good times and there have been bad times for Buddies in Bad Times Theatre during the 25 years of its existence.

And the play that opens the company's 25th anniversary season tonight at the theatre 12 Alexander St. home, was a good thing — a hit — that came along right after a bad time.

In the months that preceded the opening of Sky Gilbert's *Play Murder* in September 1993, a sustained attack from Toronto Sun columnist Christina Blizard, over the content of sex workshops taking place under the Buddies banner, led to a debate and a vote at Metro Council over the propriety of spending public funds on what Blizard referred to as "live sex shows."

It was one of the last instances of political interference in the dispensing of municipal art grants — a showdown in which Buddies' \$26,500 grant could have been revoked, but was sustained — by a vote of 15 to 13.

So the company's season that year opened on a note of triumph, and it just so happened that Gilbert, Buddies' artistic director and co-founder, had written quite an accessible, no-overtly-political play, a switch from the previous year's work called *Wild Boys*.

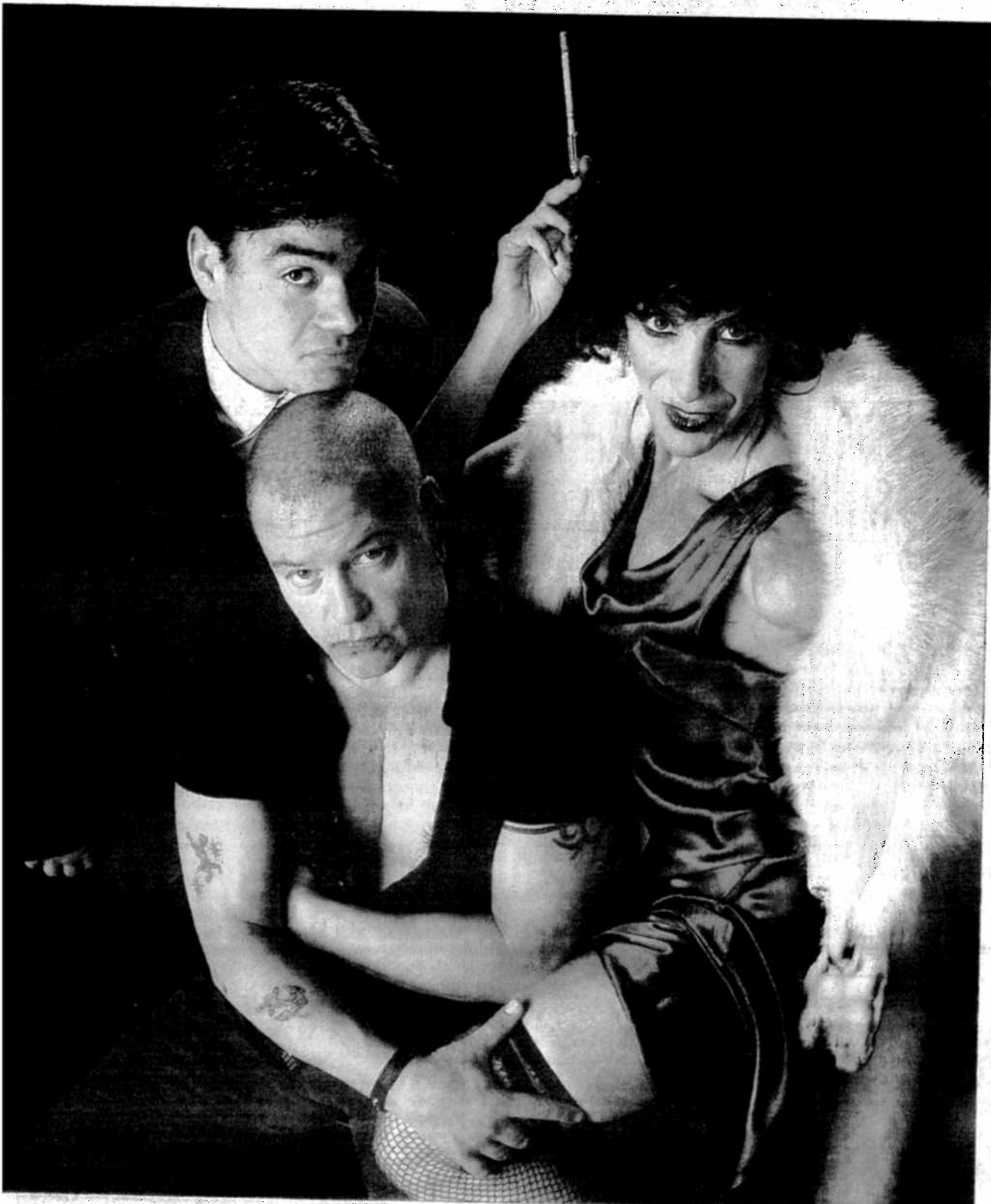
*Play Murder* follows the true story of the 1930s torch singer Libby Holman, who was tried and acquitted for the murder of her husband, the Reynolds Tobacco heir Smith Reynolds.

Billed as a "post-modern bisexual thriller," the play sheds light on Holman's relationship with a lesbian lover and makes a point of commenting on itself as theatre. "I'm tired of being in a homosexual play, performed by homosexuals in a homosexual theatre," announces one of the characters.

In 1993 that line might have been a sly rejoinder to the homophobia the theatre had recently experienced.

By then Buddies had established itself as the largest queer theatre company in North America.

In 1979, when Gilbert founded the company with Matt Walsh, a fellow drama student from York University, and Jerry Ciccoritti, Buddies in Bad Times was a term lifted from the poetry of Jacques Prévert.



BERNARD WEIL/TORONTO STAR

wright Sky Gilbert, seated, is surrounded by actors Jason Cadieux and Ellen-Ray Hennessy for the revival of Gilbert's *Play Murder* at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre.

► Please see Buddies, G10

# Gilbert chose to push boundaries with Buddies

## ► Buddies From G1

Gilbert had not yet admitted he was gay. Ciccoritti, now a successful filmmaker (director of CBC's *Trudeau* miniseries) was a friend of Gilbert's girlfriend. Buddies in Bad Times acquired its gay mandate along with Gilbert's evolution as a gay writer and director.

"There were gay playwrights, but they didn't go around blaring it. I was openly gay in my interviews and the publicity developed around me was because no one else was talking about it. I became a spokesperson, rather unwillingly, for the gay community, and then people in the gay community would get angry, because there was nobody else speaking their mind."

Emboldened by a friend and academic, Sue Golding, who became president of the Buddies board, Gilbert began using the word "gay" in applications to arts councils.

But as Gilbert sees it, Buddies was never subservient to the in-

terests of the gay community. "The choice you had was to be either a more community-oriented, slightly more mainstream gay and lesbian place or be an avant-garde, radical, boundary-pushing place that was gay and lesbian and straight. We chose the second one," says Gilbert.

Buddies became an incubator for the work of playwrights and directors such as Daniel MacIvor, Daniel Brooks, Darren O'Donnell, Sonja Mills, Don McKellar, and Hillar Litrója. It became a home to independent dance artists and a site for cabaret theatre catering to every sexual constituency.

"People thought we were too gay or our doors were closed to straight people," Gilbert recalls. "The opposite was true."

By the time he left the company, 18 years after he'd started, Gilbert had left his stamp on the theatre: It was a place where people were encouraged to take risks, and the more outrageous the better.

Remounting *Play Murder* has been a family reunion for three of the performers in the show. Edward Roy, who reprises his role as detective Slick Shepherd, has had a long association with Buddies and Gilbert, as an actor, director and playwright. For him, Buddies has always been about "going over the top, exploring the edges."

Gilbert's contribution to theatre in Toronto, says Roy, is that of a provocateur. "People always want him to shut up, that's how he made it interesting. Theatre is supposed to be exciting, provocative, illuminating."

Two women whom Gilbert credits with inspiring him to write some of his most outrageous female characters are also in the *Play Murder* cast. Ellen-Ray Hennessy is playing Holman, the role originally performed by Maggie Huculak.

"Sky has always stretched the parameters of our conscious sexual realities," Hennessy says. His female characters, she says, are always an answer to the

question, "why do we have to be shackled and held down? A woman should be able to be feminine and ballsy and wear pants." In contrast to the *Will & Grace* version of gay life, says Hennessy, Gilbert's gay and lesbian characters are not always likeable.

Ann Holloway is once again performing as Blanche Yurka, Libby Holman's drama coach. Gilbert once gave her a role in which she had to have sex with the devil. He knew few Canadian actresses would agree to perform the part.

"I really get his sense of humour," says Holloway of Gilbert. "I like the dangerousness, the risks, and I like those extreme, very demented characters. Buddies gave Holloway a place to develop as an actor as well as a writer. "I wouldn't have had a career without Buddies."

By his own estimate, Gilbert has written more than 40 plays. He's also written several novels, the latest of which comes out this fall from Cormorant Books.

It's called *An English Gentleman*, and it is based on the British author James Barrie. He's also working on his Ph.D. at the University of Toronto. The subject is the feminized men of Noel Coward's plays.

Why write so much? "I get bored easily," is Gilbert's simple response.

"Someone said we're all just writing one big thing and every new work is just another part of it," he says. He's an inveterate researcher of the obscure biographical detail and says he's drawn to historical figures to avoid the overtly autobiographical. "I always have to have another subject to write about, even though I might be writing about myself in disguise."

## Just the facts

**What:** *Play Murder* by Sky Gilbert  
**Where:** Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, 12 Alexander St.  
**When:** Through Oct. 12, Tues. to Sat. at 8 p.m., Sun. at 2:30 p.m.  
**Tickets:** \$10 to \$25, PWYC on Sun. @ 416-975-8555