

Taking dramatic risks

Buddies in Bad Times's Rhubarb! festival allows lucky playwrights to stage experimental work without fear of audiences of three, writes **KATE TAYLOR**

TORONTO

At Buddies in Bad Times theatre, artistic director David Oiyee is going over a script with playwright Greg MacArthur in preparation for its premiere at the upcoming Rhubarb! Festival. "It's like *The Great Gatsby*," says Oiyee, asking MacArthur to weigh the relative importance of two of his characters. "Is this Nick's story or is it Gatsby's story?"

"I'm too young to know *The Great Gatsby*," the 32-year-old MacArthur responds slyly.

Maybe, but he's not too young to know the work of the American experimental playwright Wallace Shawn and his play *The Designated Mourner*, in which three characters are lined up at a table to deliver three separate monologues without ever looking at each other or moving from those positions. Inspired by that play, MacArthur has written a script in which all four characters are on stage all the time yet never interact with each other.

That staging concept is giving Oiyee a headache. He is acting as both MacArthur's dramaturge and his director, and he's got only two more weeks to get this show ready. He can't keep the actors frozen in one position for the entire time because he's working in a space in which the audience will be seated on both sides of the stage. There's got to be some movement or part of the audience will see nothing but backs for an hour.

The play, *Snowman*, features four aimless losers somewhere in the far North who find a prehistoric corpse frozen into a glacier. MacArthur was thinking static poses would reflect the way their lives are frozen; Oiyee is leaning toward slowly moving the cast across the stage, like an encroaching glacier.

"So, is it stylized?" MacArthur asks.

"No, it's naturalistic," Oiyee answers sheepishly, knowing full well that naturalism is the last thing on MacArthur's mind, but they eventually agree the actors will determine just how natural the

movement will feel. After making various cuts to the script, they move into a rehearsal.

There, first thing actor Veronika Hurnik wants to know is why it is that Oiyee is asking her to progress slowly across the stage as she speaks without any motivation for her movement, and the debate begins again.

Discussions like this one are taking place on various stages and offices all around Buddies these days as the theatre gets ready for the 24th annual edition of Rhubarb, a festival of short new plays that opens today.

"Everybody feels free to speak about the work and where it should go," MacArthur says. "It's a chance to experiment within a fairly safe structure."

Safe because Buddies provides dramaturgy for the script, covers the production costs and pays for enough marketing to ensure the playwrights solid audiences, but doesn't invite the critics. For the lucky playwrights invited to participate — and festival director Kelly Thornton received 120 submissions for the 26 spots on her program — Rhubarb is like the Fringe with a safety net.

No artist is going to make money at Rhubarb since actors, playwrights and directors are only paid a small honorarium, but neither is anybody going to bomb in front of

an audience numbering three.

The festival, which was started by various artists and theatres in 1979 and co-produced by Buddies and Nightwood Theatre until 1985 when Buddies took it over, goes beyond the latter theatre's gay and lesbian mandate to include any alternative or experimental work. Five jurors, including Thornton and Oiyee, pick the scripts and then act as the dramaturges. Most of the

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work is only 30 minutes long, but a few playwrights are given hour-long slots. Some of them are veterans — MacArthur reckons that *Snowman* is his eighth Rhubarb show — and many are neophytes.

"There are people who have been around and brand-new baby writers who have never staged a play," Thornton said. "Those are the ones the directors really work on so there are no car crashes. It's

no fun having car crashes at your festival."

Certainly, there have been car crashes over the years, but there have also been notable successes. Rhubarb's alumni roll reads like a Who's Who of Toronto dramatists and the recent graduates are often invited to join the playwriting units of theatres like the Tarragon or Passe Muraille, either to write new plays or work up their Rhubarb shows into longer pieces.

"A lot of artistic directors come out scouting for young talent at the festival. Atom Egoyan, Daniel MacIvor and Judith Thompson have all done Rhubarb shows. It's a gateway," Thornton said. She can count seven of last year's writers who are now working in playwriting units, while MacArthur's 2000 Rhubarb show *girls, girls, girls* was invited to Montreal's prestigious Festival de Théâtre des Amériques last year.

The same small Montreal company that mounted that production for the festival is taking a look at *Snowman* and MacArthur has some other nibbles, but first he's got to see the play on stage and figure out that movement thing for once and for all.

Rhubarb! Theatre Festival runs from today until Feb. 24; Snowman will be performed at 10 p.m. from Feb. 20-24. For information call 416-975-8555.