

what's ON

Rhubarb! festival looks back and forth at once. G8

Martha Wainwright making a name for herself. G3



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Back to the future for Rhubarb! fest

Select old works
join new plays
at Buddies theatre

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CHARLOUZOUNIAN
THEATRE CRITIC

Rhubarb! is going Retro. The annual tonic of fresh and exciting theatre that invigorates Toronto at this dreary point in mid-winter is adding something new this year.

Well, actually, they're adding something old, but it guarantees to make things more stimulating than ever.

After 25 seasons devoted to offering a venue for untried work to flap its creative wings, co-artistic directors Moynan King and Franco Boni decided that season No. 26 was the time to shake things up. Consequently, this year, the mix of 24 productions on view at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre from Feb. 4 through 22 will feature 17 new works and seven retro plays, or works presented in past festivals.

When asked what had prompted this choice, the effervescent King suggested that "it's probably due to the fact that we're in the middle of the 25th anniversary season for Buddies. Everybody here is thinking about the past and the present as well as the future, so it just seemed right that Rhubarb! should be part of the same mix." Once the decision was made to dig into the archives, Boni chose the job of curating the older works, while King took charge of the new.

The more reflective Boni allows that his selections were all pretty subjective. "It's a combi-



Co-artistic directors Moynan King and Franco Boni have picked some new plays and the best of the old for Retro Rhubarb!

nation of what I like and what I think best represented those early years of Rhubarb!"

Both King and Boni feel that the kind of plays Rhubarb! has presented over the past 25 years have changed, not out of a conscious decision on anyone's part, but due to the vagaries of time and space.

"In the early years," recalls King, "the venue kept changing almost every year. We were all

over the map."

"Then we had a period of stability for a while on George St.," adds Boni. "And finally, Buddies got its permanent home here on Alexander St."

King remembers the early years fondly. "My first play was done at Rhubarb! in 1992. It's where I got my start, where I began to find my place in the community, and I still remember that. It's fun for me to be able to

pass that along to the next generation, to get out there and encourage new work."

For Boni, the one thing which has always remained the same about Rhubarb!, and that neither of them would ever dream of changing, is "the element of risk. Any time you get on a stage and throw a new idea up there, you're taking a chance, and we need to get people excited about that."

Not that there's been any shortage of audience members willing to go along for the wild ride. Attendance has always been strong, and King attributes it to the nature of the work on display. "There's a formula to so much entertainment today, but Rhubarb! offers you an opportunity to see something that doesn't always fit those forms."

The sheer mechanics of getting 24 plays into two performance

spaces over a period of three weeks is awe-inspiring enough but it doesn't stop there.

Each week also features special events, like The Under Series (scheduled in Week 2) which promotes the work of young playwrights, and The Independent Theatre Trade Fair on Feb. 15.

This all-day event will offer panels and discussions on top of vital interest to all indie theatre participants, ranging from "Non-Traditional Performance Spaces" to "Show Transfers & Touring."

Boni feels this kind of happiness can be as important as shows themselves. "One of the main things Rhubarb! has provided is a place for independent artists to converge and talk about their work."

To King as well, "there's something about the festival format that encourages artists to get together — with each other, and with the people who see their work."

Rhubarb! also makes it easy for audience members to get maximum bang for their buck. An evening pass lets you choose from up to eight productions available on a given night, a 3-week pass lets you attend as often as you like during the week and a \$40 festival pass lets you sample as much Rhubarb! as you can handle.

King starts to sum it up. "We're offering you variety, surprise...," while Boni finishes "... ideas, lots of ideas."

Or as their slogan this year puts it: "Risk - Riot - Rejuvenation"

Just the facts
What: Retro Rhubarb! Festival
Where: Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, 12 Alexander St.
When: Feb. 4 to 22
Tickets: 416-975-8555 scheduled buddiesinbadtimes theatre.com