

EYE, Toronto
October 12, 1995

BACKSTAGE: IN THE EMPIRE OF THE SUN KING
by CHRISTOPHER WINSOR

It's the drapery that gets me. The folds of cloth so masterfully carved, so precisely shaded. The hang of the garment, perfect. As in Michelangelo's Pieta or Bernini's Blessed Albertoni. Astonishing, how the great sculptors could capture in stone the life of a robe, capture the swoosh it made when the model shifted position. Now that is craft.

Here's another example, from anglo-Montrealer Don Druick's new one-man, multi-character play, *Through The Eyes*. This is the scene in which the Sun King, Louis XIV of France, first encounters Italy's Bernini, whom he's summoned to create his likeness in stone. As with every other scene in the play, it's told through the eyes of the Courtier, a reasonably unassuming hanger-on who's been given the task of translating between them. Here, the craft is Druick's evocative word-painting: "The next ante chamber is small and dim, a single oval window set on high. Crushed together are the most eminent gentlemen in France waiting to greet the glorious Louis. I smile inside. The King is leaning against a window with the First Gentleman of the Bedchamber. The King's bed is on a dais of red damask behind a gilded wooden balustrade, the comers surmounted by white ostrich plumes and egret feathers like jets of water breaking over waves. A cold light pervades the room, the courtyard below full of mist.

"The king prays, his hands are washed, in a gold and porcelain cockleshell he is shaved. Mon Louis puts on his coat, chooses a cravat. Resting his hand on the jeweled hilt of his sword, his other hand idyllic on the knob of his cane, he turns to the Cavaliere. (As Louis) 'So now you are in France, Cavaliere Benino. (As Bernini) 'Bernini. (As Louis) 'Good, very good'"

And so it goes. *Through The Eyes* is the story of this great commission - of how the soul of the Sun King will shine forever through the eyes Bernini will carve for him. At least, that's part of it. More importantly, it's the story of the Courtier and of how his world view shifts as a result of looking through the eyes of Bernini.

"There is a real perfection of fact and metaphor in this story," observes director Brian Quirt. "Such a beautiful dovetail between what we see and what is not actually there. The play demands that we go someplace - the fascinating and ornate world of baroque France - and then takes us there, vividly and thoroughly. And yet the stage is bare. Similarly, the sculpture itself is important to the tale, but it's not the focus. We have elected to make it present, but not visible - to minimize the competition with the storyteller."

They needn't have worried. The storyteller or Courtier, is played by the very capable Julian Richings, who will call upon his considerate stage and screen experience to pull off this difficult and assuredly nomination-garnering acting trick.

“Thrilled” is how the playwright says he feels about Richings carrying the burden of creating the many characters in this show. “When you have an intelligent, insightful actor like Julian working on the project over the course of a year, one who knows the play as well as you do, you’re in good hands.”

To Druick’s credit, he has handed Quirt and Richings a multifaceted and finely polished gem, one honed through nine drafts over the past three years. If it works on stage as well as it reads, it should be a major treat. Then again, Druick has been chiseling away at his chosen craft since the 1960s - an oeuvre that amounts to some 75 plays.

"Rewriting has always been the best part for me, Druick says. "The first draft is very hard, because you’re in a foreign land and you don’t really know where you’re going, or how to read the signs. But in subsequent drafts, you get to know the neighborhood, and pretty soon you’re at home in your own apartment, or at your favourite cafe. As the writer, I really believe in getting the project right before you bring it to the public. I mean, in theatre, how many chances do you get?"

THROUGH THE EYES

Featuring Julian Richings. Written by Don Druick.

Directed by Brian Quirt. Theatre Centre West, 1032 Queen St. W. To Oct. 29. \$5-\$15,538-0988.

Now, Toronto
October 26, 1995

ROYAL RICHINGS
by Jill Lawless

THROUGH THE EYES, by Don Druick, directed by Brian Quirt, with Julian Richings. Presented by Nightswimming at the Theatre Centre West (1032 Queen West). To October 29, Thursday-Saturday at 8:30 pm, Sunday 2:30 pm. \$15, Sunday pwyc. 538-0988. Rating: NNNN

Inspired by an encounter between Italian sculptor Gianlorenzo Bernini and French king Louis XIV, *Through The Eyes* takes a look at the power of art and the art of power. Our tour guide in Don Druick's one-man play is an unnamed French courtier who comes to learn about the pain inflicted by the latter and the solace offered by the former.

As befits its baroque subject, Druick's script is vivid and delicate, a sensitive and sensuous piece of writing alive with colour and texture, its images polished like marble until they gleam.

At times, it glitters a little too blindingly, the bright baubles of detail obscuring the line of the narrative. But for the most part, Druick makes powerful use of detail — this is an opulent, formal and dangerous world in which every small sign is searched for meaning, and the playwright is deft at juxtaposing telling incident and revealing minutiae.

Under director Brian Quirt's quietly shaping hand, Julian Richings — tense and alert as a whippet — gives a skilled performance in a difficult show. Druick has written a large cast of characters, and Richings is not always able to distinguish them sharply, though there is a nice sense of the king, immature with power, and the artist, wise and weary from trying to serve both power and his muse. And Richings pulls off the hardest trick, shifting the play's perspective as the narrator evolves from ambition to disillusionment.

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Theatre Review by Elisa Kukla

THROUGH THE EYES

Featuring Julian Richings. Written by Don Druick. Directed by Brian Quirt. Theatre Centre West, 1032 Queen St. W. To Oct. 29. \$5-\$15,538-0988.

The magic of *Through The Eyes* is that it captures the obscene opulence and the intricate, repressed relationships of the Court of Louis XIV... using only one actor and a bare stage.

Playwright Don Druick based his script on the real encounter between revered Italian artist Gianlorenzo Bernini and the Sun King. Bernini is called to Versailles to sculpt the King's bust. These two greats step on each other's egos, while work on the sculpture crawls along and the court holds its collective breath.

The story is told "through the eyes" of an unnamed courtier appointed as Bernini's translator. He's just a middle-aged, middle-management type of guy, pandering to authority without much in return.

If anyone can play an entire court it's Julian Richings, who gets to showcase here his massive breadth as an actor. Richings' face reminds me of the head of a rubber doll that can be stretched and pushed into any expression — his features actually seem to reshape as he masterfully switches from arrogant king to eccentric artist to subtle gentlewoman.

Druick's script is dense—with lush language and visual imagery. Bonnie Beecher's complex lighting design, glittering on Richings' sequined blue dress, is similarly evocative.

The combination of lighting and language is so dazzling that I initially had a hard time keeping track of all the characters. The second act is cleaner and, I think, deeper. The production values are more subtle, so our attention focuses more easily on developing relationships between the many characters embodied by Richings — and the Courtier's own voice begins to come through.