

# EYE WEEKLY

Of mice and melanin

New play sees something rodent in the state of racism

## PREVIEW

### WHITE MICE

Featuring Bruce Hunter and Stephen Guy-McGrath. Written and directed by Darren O'Donnell. To Nov. 15. \$12/\$15 (Sun PWYC). The Theatre Centre, 1032 Queen W. 538-0988.

BY C.J. O'CONNOR

In sparkly red letters on page five of *The Mother Goose Guide to Theatre Reviewing*, a fundamental rule is inscribed: if three blind mice can sit through your play rehearsal and give a detailed summary, you've failed; if three deaf mice can sit through it and give an accurate account, you've succeeded; and if two dumb mice and a critic named O'Connor can sit through it and then quote extemporaneously from mammoth Commission Reports on systemic racism in the Ontario judicial system, you've written a new play called *White Mice*.

Naturally, the play concerns mice: it's the story of two brothers living together -- in the best fairy-tale tradition -- in one little mousehole in the magical land of Canananada, the happiest, wonderfulest place on Earth. But then they would think that, because these are white mice, unaware of the tortures that privilege spares them in the vast Skinner-box of society.

After a crisis of conscience, the younger mouse sets about opening the little pink eyes of his brother through debate... after debate... after debate. Those of you not currently hiding up a tree may want to know *White Mice* isn't the cutesy, Beatrix-Potter-joins-the-NAACP confection it could've been -- not when its facts and arguments are drawn from alarming racism reports, not when its creator is the author of such light entertainment as *Who Shot Jacques Lacan?* and especially not when its roots run so deep.

"I was in a relationship with a person of color," explains Toronto writer/director Darren O'Donnell, gazing steadily through austere spectacles, "and racism came



Stephen Guy-McGrath(left) and Bruce Hunter get twitchy in *White Mice*

to the forefront. We talked about it a lot; I learned a lot. I also made a lot of mistakes. After handling those with my lover at the time, I'd find myself getting into discussions with other white people about those same things."

"I was," he smiles faintly, "on a bit of a mission, but I started to find very similarly structured, faulty arguments coming from them: defending European expansion, who's the first world, who's the third world ... all that stuff is shot through with fucking holes."

O'Donnell's prime ordnance is (deep breath) the 1995 *Report of The Commission on Systemic Racism in the Ontario Criminal Justice System*, and his play's debate-like structure often catapults huge, verbatim boulders of the tome into the dialogue. *White Mice* includes live ambient-hop (courtesy of Murr of Da Grass Roots), the comedy value of grown men sporting mouse whiskers and '70s pimp slacks from Samuel L. Jackson Designs and a surprise plot hook which your correspondent swore not to reveal under threat of rodent violence. But the play's "two mouse, all dialectic" approach does make it a mite... didactic.

"It's not all like that," O'Donnell protests. "You do see a lot of who these mice are, what they do on a daily basis. The didacticism is just because people have so much anecdotal 'evidence' to back up their racial views, and I wanted to give them information that was straight from those reports.

"For instance," he explains, "I cite Ward Churchill at the University of Colorado, who's found quotes in *Mein Kampf* where Hitler comes right out and says his inspiration for [the Holocaust] was what people here had done to the native peoples. That Canada is the living embodiment of Hitler's dreams is a fact, but I tell it to people here and they just go, 'No, no ... it's not like that at all!'" "All right, but why plant these realities in made-up "Canananada?" Why "Ontariario?" Why mice?"

"It's a joke," O'Donnell says simply. "It's as if these topics are too hot to handle without some distancing device. But then it's such a transparent device that I'm calling attention to the fact that if we can't discuss this honestly... all right, we're gonna talk about it as though [we're] mice. If I kept talking about 'white people,' it wouldn't have that comic effect that lets people actually listen to what's being presented."

O'Donnell laughs, briefly and efficiently: "It's a tool to get people to shut up and listen."

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