

# A feminist expose of film noir

The Edmonton  
Journal  
Nov 18/89

LIZ NICHOLLS

Journal Staff Writer

## Edmonton

The women are powerful, sexy, dangerous. Sirens, in a word. And the men they entrap are doomed.

This is the male fantasy that populates the seamy, steamy world of film noir: it's not exactly a genre to gladden the feminist heart.

And that's why the bet was so disconcerting, and so intriguing. "David Rimmer bet me I couldn't write a film noir from the woman's point of view," says Gyllian Raby, whose play *The Treacheries of the Blue Angel* (opening the Northern Light season Friday at the Kaasa) suggests she won.

"So many treacherous women whose only power is sexual; they devour, they kill. . . . I squirmed for a long time," laughs Raby. The result was "a film noir that comments on itself — an expose, a spoof.

The immediate inspiration for Raby's tenth play was the striking difference between Josef Von Sternberg's 1930 film *The Blue Angel* (which launched Marlene Dietrich as a major international star), and the novel on which it was based.

The title character of Heinrich Mann's *Professor Unrath* is a corrupt, tyrannical small-town schoolmaster. "For 1910, the novel is liberated in the way it looks at

women, romance, love," says Raby. In *The Blue Angel*, however, the professor is recast as the victim of a femme fatale, the lethally seductive cabaret singer Dietrich brought so memorably to life.

The film noir ingredients are there in her video musical, says Raby — "the manipulation of men by women and vice versa, and the decadence of it all." But "each participant of the deathful love triangle has a point of view, a through-line." Which makes *Treacheries* both more democratic in spirit than its film noir progenitors, and more self-critical.

Raby is intrigued by the stylistic evolution of the form from early German expressionism through contemporary TV (she uses *Miami Vice* as an example). She admits to a profound ambivalence about the expertise with images: "I've always loved film noir, and been deeply disturbed by it." What appeals to Raby: "the high drama, the high contrast between light and dark, its visual virtuosity. And as an artist, I appreciate the level of the craft."

Because the show is in a sense about images, and the men who manipulate them (including the arch-manipulator of them all, Andy Warhol), the video sequences in *Treacheries of the Blue Angel*, which were shot in

September in Calgary by Gary Bruckner, aren't peripheral. "The screen is part of the story," says Raby. "We're very overt about it." On the screen is played out "the film-maker's interior landscape."

The fusion of video and live actors is tricky. Not the least because, as Raby points out, "it's the nature of perception that the eye is naturally drawn to flickering screen images" in preference to live performers. The show comments on this hierarchy: at one point an actor says "thanks, watch me. I'm real."

Raby's preference in creating any show is to collaborate with a team — here a designer (James Andrews), a composer (Jan Randall), and a video director (Bruckner). What happens is a pooling of resources and ideas: "We discuss, we argue, we talk to each other until we know exactly what we're each after. And we always end up agreeing." Bruckner, for example, wanted "to make a comment on music video, to spoof the soft-core aspect." And the way this idea rubs against the themes Raby herself wants to address adds to the complexity of the show. "I've gained so much from the insights; it's made the piece so much richer."