

Entertainment

PLUTOCRATS OPENS SEASON FOR NORTHERN LIGHTS

TOTAL THEATRE USHERED IN

By JOHN CHARLES

Three men in protective "spacesuits" open a floor grate in a huge steamy, white-lit storage room, as an ethereal choir soars. Stumbling about in slow-motion, they toss cannisters of radioactive plutonium to each other, until a lid comes off and clouds of white powder engulf them.

That's the striking opening moment of Northern Light's season-opener, *Plutocrats*. With it, new artistic director Gyllian Raby inaugurates an era of total theatre for the eye and the ear.

Eye and ear — fine, but what about the mind? The question, as raised by this less-than-fresh Paul Goetzee farce, is how much food for thought results if the play itself isn't so hot.

Jack (Robert Astle) works at the plutonium plant while wife Kath (Christine MacInnis) takes care of their baby and explores her former self as a servant during London's 17th-century plague years.

Jack has seen visions of nuclear disaster since he was a baby, and now that he's been exposed to plutonium he declares himself "not contaminated, but initiated. I'm in the priesthood of the End," he prattles ecstatically.

Jack's company decides to get rid of him, just as he's stealing the special stuff to give to Arabs and Mormons (honest!). And his employers' machinations are paralleled by the 17th-century rat-catcher (Frank Manfredi) who's building bigger and better rats so he'll stay in business.

Goetzee's script is sometimes clever, and sometimes just trying to be clever. Although theatre is usually far ahead of Hollywood in daring ideas, it's not the case with this play, in which comic insights and a slapstick approach to apocalyptic situations add little to Kubrick's 1964 film *Dr Strangelove*.

Fumbling Arab terrorists with English-language problems? A nuclear corporation called Sunnydale? No, this is not risk-taking theatre.

Raby's staging of the whole work as farce — rather than just the truly farcical scenes — means that moments which might work in other styles come off simply as failed comedy. Thus Astle's euphoric style makes him seem a cheerful dope with a big vocabulary, rather than something more enigmatic and central.

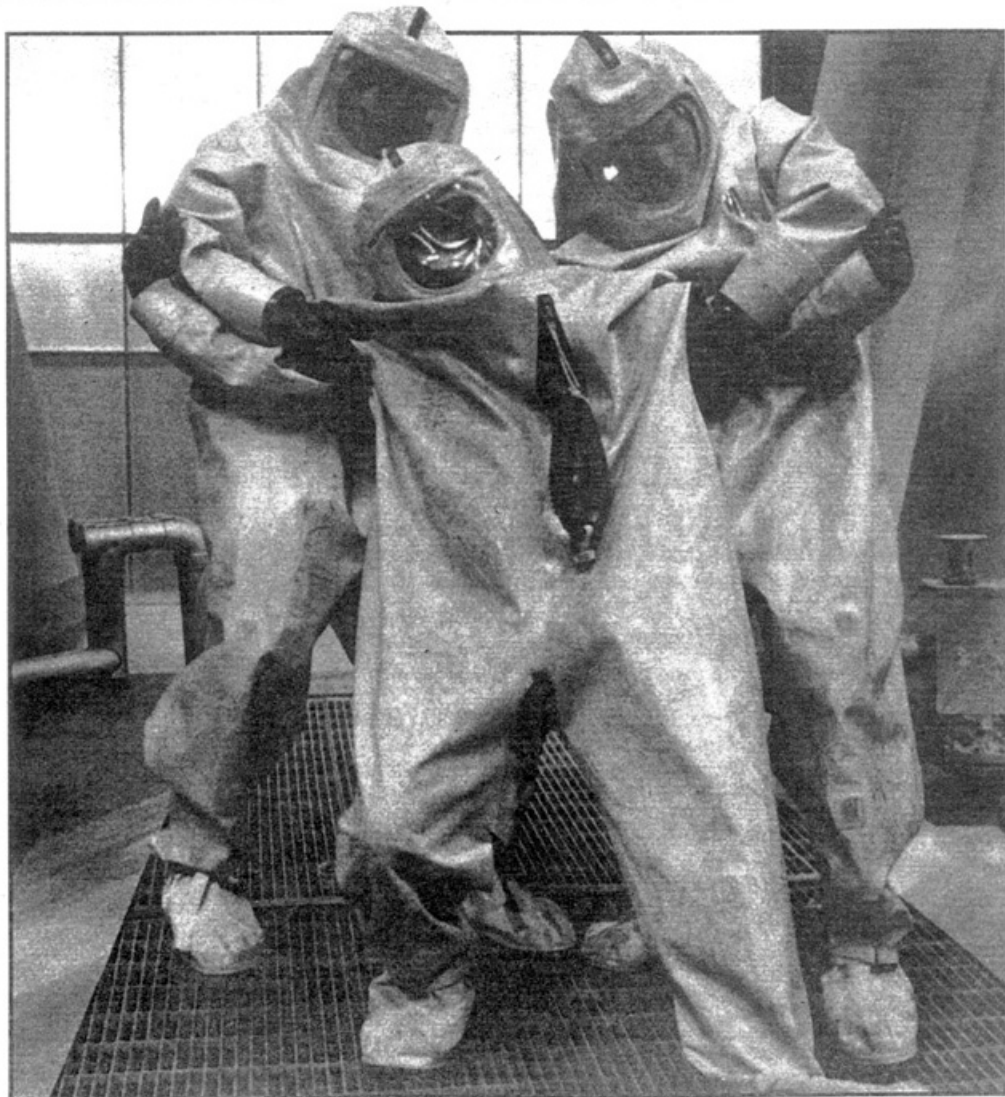
Raby's composer, David Rimmer, occasionally engulfs whole scenes with music which smooths over the actors' lively interaction. A trio of telephone connivers, for example, is great to look at, as memos rain down on actor Blair Haynes' head — but you can't hear the lines.

It's like a rock video, in which the barrage of words doesn't matter because we're being told just one thing. Such staging is a true talent, but risky for a literary text like this one.

Still it is a visual success. Doug Paraschuk's big set is a riveting image, and the pipes which run all over the storage room become desks and chairs — the deadly furnishings of our world. Morris Ertman's subtle, varied lighting makes the set to look new every five minutes. Adding to the vibrantly theatrical feeling is Rimmer's often haunting music.

Raby gets a fresh, lovely performance from MacInnis, and a hilarious one from Yves Mercier. The whole cast, including John Rivet, Pamela Haig and Alison Wells, is dynamic.

Plutocrats is at the Kaasa Theatre through Oct. 16.



—Photo by Doug Shank

Frank Manfredi, left, and Yves Mercier, right, give Robert Astle a hand in Northern Light's *Plutocrats*.