

Theatrical gems mined well off the beaten path

By Vit Wagner Toronto Star

When the inaugural Fringe of Toronto theatre festival was launched on the weekend, all bets were off as to whether the risky event would be able to generate either audiences or quality.

A mere three days into the three-week program, which continues today on three fronts in the Bloor-Bathurst Annex area, organizers have to be encouraged by what they've seen.

In addition to an opening weekend that yielded several sold-out shows at the Poor Alex Theatre, 296 Brunswick Ave., the festival has already uncovered some theatrical gems.

While Gwendolyn, a professional stripper and sometime prostitute, created the loudest buzz with *Merchants Of Love*, her gutsy, soul-baring look at psycho-analysis, other less sensational but equally noteworthy productions and performances have emerged.

Difficult role

One of these is Linda Prystawski's compelling performance in the *As Fast As Betty Should Rise*, David Demchuk's forthright and disturbing examination of child abuse and incest.

The program notes, which indicate Prystawski's acting experience is limited, don't do anything to prepare you for the young actress' assured and exact handling of a difficult role that covers the full gamut of emotions.

The play basically is structured as a series of monologues during which three sisters — Addie (Pamela Eddenden), Vera (Norah Grant) and Betty (Prystawski) — recall their childhood experiences in a monstrously patriarchal household.

Addie and Vera set the scene with different perspectives on their father's habitual sexual molestation of Betty. Although Vera seems better able to confront the history of this abuse than Addie, neither sibling really understands how emotionally scarred her sister is.

Sally Han has smartly directed Demchuk's taut drama, maximizing the emotional impact while giving voice to the play's humor and hope.

But it is Prystawski (also scheduled to appear in a Fringe production of Arthur Kopit's *Chamber Music*) who mines the complexity of a character who, although abused, is so much more than just a victim.