

Vive l'Empereur Montreal Star 19 June 69

Absurd exercise on paper becomes intriguing on stage

By MARTIN MALINA

JEAN MORIN'S "Vive l'Empereur," which opened last night at the Théâtre de Quat'Sous, is a more interesting play than it may seem on paper.

It has a plot of sorts. A decrepit old woman (Denise Proulx) and her niece (Christine Olivier) await the return of the woman's husband (Jacques Desnoyers) who, 20 years earlier locked himself in the bedroom to become an elephant, and her son (Jean-Louis Millette), for the past three years a hermit in the barn. The two women watch TV (mostly Guillemain lecturing on Napoleon) and feed themselves from an automatic, oversized, frequently out-of-order sandwich dispenser.

In fact, everything in their sparsely furnished house is oversized. The table, the chairs, the television and flower pot are all 3 or 4 times normal dimension, and the women exist among them like Gulliver in Brobdingnag.

The men return. The son, wearing an "genuine" bi-cornered hat from Napoleon's wardrobe, struts and poses, his right arm ostentatiously hidden within the lapels of his coat, and plans a fool-proof invasion of Moscow (with hydrants on street corners and fire extinguishers in every house!). His father's 20-year exile also comes to an end, but the only thing the old man has to show for it is a mop of white hair and a twitching tail.

Doting Mom has made a match for her son with his cousin Crassebure, who confesses her love for him, but this Napoleon is an awkward suitor and muffs his chance. He tells Crassebure she is ugly — "charmante mais laide" — abuses his mother and crawls back into his mouse-hole of fantasy. My

son the Emperor is nothing but a sexless coward. In the end he does make an impassioned attempt to right matters but this time it's the women's turn: they promptly escape into their respective rooms.

This is "Vive l'Empereur" on paper, an absurd exercise in theatrical metaphysics. On the Quat'Sous stage however, the piece takes on intriguing aspects of an intellectual puppet show. We derive childlike pleasure from watching things work, from discovering by ourselves the rules and logic of Morin's fantastic world. (Isn't that, too, what fascinates us in Ionesco?) The sight of chairs 15 feet high and a man with the tail of an elephant is as unavoidably amusing as a chimpanzee on skates.

But there's more to "Vive l'Empereur" than simple spectacle. Morin is a Quebec playwright and though he has blown-up the faults in Quebec society to "absurd" proportions, they are still readily recognizable. We can identify among Morin's puppets such familiar citizens as the day-dreamer of military and sex-

ual glory, the hen-pecked husband, the housewife on a TV-dinner diet, etc. The targets of the playwright's attack are what he considers Quebec's matriarchy, the emasculation of the male and his puerile retreat into fantasy and violence, and the resultant breakdown in communication between the sexes.

That his message comes through clearly at the Quat'Sous has much to do with Paul Buissonneau's inspired direction. Buissonneau has handled the talented players with intelligence and they respond like racehorses to his gentle whip. Jean-Louis Millette is particularly brilliant in the title role, though Denise Proulx is nearly as successful as his whining mother.

The sets and costumes especially important — have been designed with great invention by Germain. The father's long underwear, the son's Napoleonic get-up, the springy, rubbery elephant tail, the giant rocking chair — some of Germain's creations are so amusingly clever they practically steal the show.



"L'EMPEREUR" — JEAN-LOUIS MILLETTE