

# FESTIVAL ANTIGONISH

*'How it Works is pure joy for Maritimers'*

## MacIvor's work 'blazingly brilliant'

By Stephen Pederson • Halifax Herald • August 27, 2005

Cape Breton playwright Daniel MacIvor is always writing about compassion. His theatre is the **theatre of compassion**. Always, somewhere in his scripts, you find **The Catcher in the Rye**.

In that famous 1951 novel by J.D. Salinger, the adolescent boy, Holden Caulfield, mishears the lyrics of Comin' Thru Th' Rye (Robert Burns) as "If a body catch a body, comin' thru the rye." Burns wrote: "If a body meet a body coming thru the rye, If a body kiss a body, would a body cry?"

Locked in himself and refusing adulthood, which he despises, Holden imagines children playing without a care in a field of rye, saved from falling over a cliff by the Catcher - saved, that is, from growing into adulthood.

Brooke, the teenage daughter of Al and Donna in MacIvor's new play, *How It Works*, which opened at Festival Antigonish's Bauer Theatre on Wednesday night, is similarly alienated. Emotionally wounded, parents divorced and not talking to each other, shuttling between them, stealing from them, sinking slowly into the quicksand of drugs and oblivion - hers is **a common tale, a sad tale** made even sadder in the oft telling of it.

But MacIvor **connects his wounded hearts to the power human beings have**, if they know how to access it, to make each other feel better. His Catchers are **compassionate**.

Brooke, played with **qualified resentment and angry distrust** by Margaret Smith, knows she is locked in herself. But part of her longs to be free while the rest of her fights off the attempts of Al (Brian Heighen) and Donna (Kathryn MacLellan) to find out what went wrong, what changed her at the age of 11 from a happy, witty, ironic child into a bitter adolescent disgusted by irony.

Al is beginning to date again. He meets Christine (Mary-Colin Chisholm), whose perpetual grin and witty directness gets him and Donna talking to each other about Brooke.

"I'd like to take her on," Christine offers. Unable to help their daughter themselves, they agree.

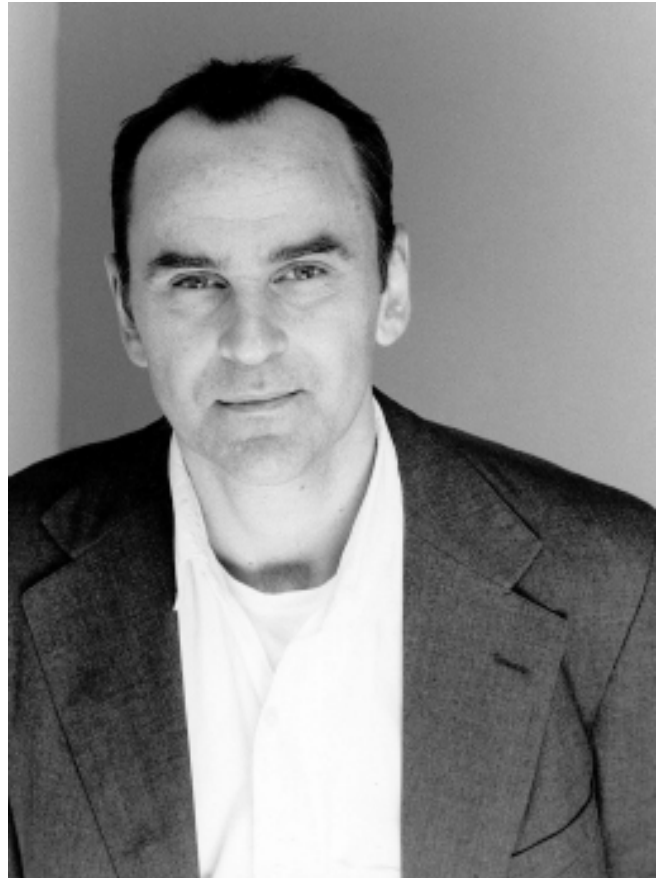
"I was stuck in myself," Christine tells Brooke. "Nothing can hurt you. I know what it feels like when someone says I love you."

"Don't shrink me," Brooke orders.

MacIvor unfolds this situation in bits and pieces, **layers of information exposed in short scenes**, each layer taking you a little deeper into the story as it winds back and forth.

The plot is simple, not particularly original. But the treatment is **blazingly brilliant, full of surprise, wit and post-modern consciousness** - the characters know the situation is cliché, and that only deepens their ironic, and comic, despair.

Heighen as Al, a cop, regards himself sardonically. He, of all people, has



Cape Breton playwright Daniel MacIvor

case files of people like he and Donna and Brooke. MacLellan as Donna remains as friendly with her ex as possible given the irresolvable lump of guilt and frustration, acknowledged, but not understood, which has driven them apart.

Chisholm as Christine is **as fresh as a sea breeze**. Unlike the other characters, she knows herself, though, like them, she has an ironic appreciation of how aspiration, energy and action drive you way off target in the game of your life.

**How It Works is pure joy for Maritimers**. The irony is the same kind that drives **Bette MacDonald**. It can't be described more specifically without spoiling the play. **If you go, you will know what I mean**.

But I can tell you that MacIvor's skill as both writer and director is subtle, his dialogue **clever, witty and pared of excess**, and just watching his self-conscious characters unwrap his new play is **sheer theatrical delight**, even though, since it is a workshop, the actors were not yet off-book on opening night. It could not have mattered less.

867 • 3333

1 • 800 • 563 • PLAY

WWW • FESTIVALANTIGONISH • COM