

Durban theatre needs an injection of originality and flair

THEATRE

Humphrey Tyler

It is sad that at the last moment the Durban Actors Co-operative company announced it would pull out of its production of *The Lunatic, the Lover and the Poet*, leaving the Studio Theatre in the Playhouse building presently dark and miserable. The reason given was that there was simply too little advance public interest in the show and hardly any ticket sales. It was an astonishingly abrupt decision, and seemingly premature, especially considering the coverage the show received at the weekend.

But the company, which is unsubsidised except by the members' enthusiasm (and courage and faith in their work), said it had been put in a position where it could not afford to risk losing money.

The show that should have been, consisted of excerpts from Shakespeare plays, and with this exuberant company presenting them and with Garth Anderson as the director, there is no doubt the production would have been anything but "boring culture".

Was it simply that there had been too little publicity? There was relatively little heard about the show before it was summarily cancelled. Did PROs need, for a start, to barrage schools, say, with injunctions to arrive en masse for the edification of their pupils? Maybe.

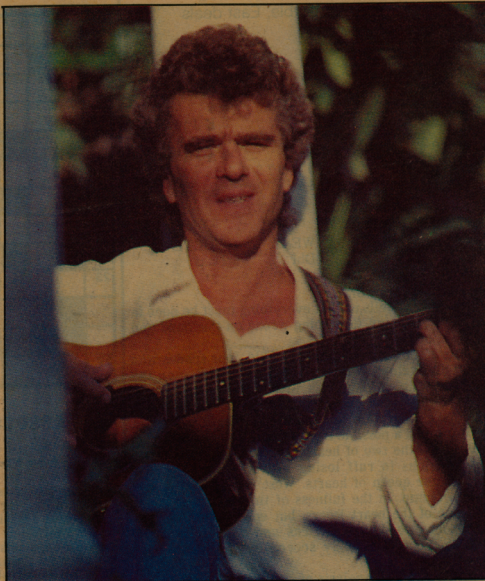
The cancellation is another setback for the Playhouse's image as a centre for excitingly produced intelligent drama.

Looking back on the year, here really has not been much drama of great consequence. Some of the shows have been very poor and badly lacking in originality and theatrical flair.

You miss *Frank 'n Stein*, the years-ago Nicholas Eisenbogen *Nativity* with the Three Wise Men walking on-stage on motorcar hubcaps and the angel Gabriel wearing tennis rackets for wings, not to mention some occasionally almost harrowing experimental theatre in the Loft.

Also, the Playhouse has missed out on some productions that have been hits in every other important centre, and then some.

For example, Lara Foot's



The man who made *Master Jack* has been persuaded to make a comeback this year at the Standard Bank National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. He's Durban's David Marks. He will be singing six new and six older songs chosen from compositions during his 30 years in the music business. He will perform nightly in the Settlers' Inn Cabaret Room with Allan Judd.

production of the homegrown play by Pam Sue-Grant and husband DJ Grant, *Take the Floor* (which, by the way, will return this year to Grahamstown for the Standard Bank National Arts Festival where it premiered last year, and where it will no doubt make a packet) has not even shown in Durban.

The reason given is that it is "too expensive". Yet the organisers of the Hilton Festival managed to secure the production last year for the Hilton Theatre and even at modest festival ticket prices it turned a profit. (It was virtually sold out just a few hours after booking opened.)

And Andrew Buckland, one of the country's foremost performers (and creators) filled the remote (but nonetheless capacious) Hilton Theatre on a separate occasion but failed to be drawn to Durban. Surely he could have been given a week in the Loft, at least.

More recently, the *Buddy Holly Show* (produced by the Pact drama company, not the Playhouse) showed it can pay to be daring. It was expensive and ambitious, but it made a profit in Durban nonetheless, packing the cavernous Opera Theatre in the Playhouse building night after night. Is the Playhouse adventurous enough in its own right?

Perhaps the forthcoming Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice rock opera, *Evita* (which has such heart-throb hits as *Don't Cry for Me, Argentina*) which opens in the Opera next month, will indicate again that it pays to take chances in showbiz. It is a Playhouse Musicals production. Bookings are already beginning to look impressive.

The show stars one of Durban's favourites, Brenda Radloff, and Lykele Temmingh is

...director.