

Solange De Santis

The "Queen City" On Stage

By Solange De Santis

If you wanted to pick an American city to celebrate on stage, you might not, perhaps, think immediately of Buffalo, N.Y. Nicknamed "The Queen City," it was once one of the wealthiest communities in the United States – a centre of industry, shipping and electrical generation. Now, its name mostly surfaces in news stories of economic setbacks and apocalyptic snowstorms.

"Living here, especially lately, is like looking at a chart with all arrows pointing down," wrote Buffalo News columnist Donn Esmonde at the beginning of 2003. The Buffalo Sabres NHL hockey team is in a deep financial hole, Internet provider Adelphia reneged on a corporate-headquarters promise and the city is projecting a budget deficit of \$28 million.

"This town is beleaguered," said Gavin Cameron-Webb, the courtly, British-born artistic director of Buffalo's Studio Arena Theatre. And yet it is 40-year-old Studio Arena, the area's main regional theatre, that is taking the concept of "region" seriously. In the last five years, it has produced five new plays set in Buffalo and written this new focus into its mission statement. Several of the plays were commissioned by Studio Arena, including *City of Light*, by Anthony Clarvoe, adapted from a novel about the 1901 Pan-American Exposition. The theatre and the city celebrated the exposition's 100th anniversary in 2001 and the show was a sellout.

While not quite a century old, Studio Arena has deep roots in Buffalo. In 1927, a now-defunct community theatre group called the Buffalo Players decided it needed a school and founded the Studio Theatre School. Play production also developed at the school and, in 1965, it opened a professional theatre called Studio Arena Theatre. The school still exists and is a major part of Studio Arena's mandate, offering education to professionals and amateurs. Studio Arena has occupied its current quarters – a renovated, modernized former night club – since 1965.

When Cameron-Webb arrived at Studio Arena a decade ago with 20 years' experience as an actor, director, teacher and artistic director, staging plays about icy western New York was not on the top of his agenda. His initial desire was "to engage our audience," he said. "I wanted them to be more active participants, so we did *Miss Evers' Boys*, about medical experiments on blacks in Alabama, presented in a non-realistic way, with speeches to the audience, that brought the audience in," he said.

Its programming had always been a mix of new plays, classics and popular fare, and Cameron-Webb said the "Buffalo focus" evolved gradually. "I decided to do an international season in 1993-94 and follow it with a "coming home" season," said Cameron-Webb. A play called *Over the Tavern*, set in "the Pazinski apartment, above Chet's Bar & Grill, Buffalo, 1959," came over the transom, he said. The play chronicled the life of a turbulent Polish-Catholic family in a setting achingly familiar not only to playwright Tom Dudzick, who was born over a bar in Buffalo, but to much of the audience.

"Sitting in the audience the first night was a revelation, an astonishing feeling. The first scene is a nun teaching a catechism class. It's hard to describe the feeling, but it was clear we were talking about a collective experience. There was a recognition, an amazing sort of buzz. It was palpable," said Cameron-Webb.

Dudzick's working-class setting was nicely complemented by the other "coming home" play, *The Snowball*, by Buffalo-born A.R. Gurney, known for his examination of upper-middle-class WASP culture, said Cameron-Webb. While Gurney's play "did okay," said Cameron-Webb, *Over the Tavern* took off. The playwright's father had been a well-known local politician and that fact was reflect in media coverage. The theatre mounted a lobby display of photos of Buffalo neighborhoods.

Even patrons who'd never bellied up to a Buffalo chicken wing or a beef on weck (roast beef on a roll) related to the play. Audre Bunis, a member of the theatre's board, said the play helped her understand a friend. "I know a gal whose father did have a tavern and they lived over it. When she would talk to me about incidents that happened there, I could relate to it," she said.

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Word of mouth was phenomenal, Cameron-Webb said. The theatre received calls from patrons who'd seen the play and from people who hadn't seen it, asking if it would be staged again. "We did something we'd never done. We revived it the next season and it sold twice as many tickets. Then we did it a third season and it sold twice again as many tickets. It was the first notice that we could engage an audience with their own stories anchored in this community," he said. (Although there are dissenters. When asked if plays about Buffalo were important to him, subscriber Carl Maier, interviewed at another show, replied, "Nah, I'm not that provincial.")

The theatre decided to commission Dudzick's next play and he decided he wanted to write a Pazinski family trilogy, said Cameron-Webb. Parts two and three, called *King o' the Moon* and *Lake Effect*, were staged in 1999 and 2001. Although both plays were popular, the theatre took a bad hit when the last eight performances of *Lake Effect* were canceled in December, 2001 due to an enormous, week-long – yes – snowstorm off Lake Erie. "We had to refund \$85,000," said executive director Ken Neufeld, who arrived at Studio Arena in 1999 following several years as producer and general manager of the Gateway Theatre in Richmond, British Columbia.

In 1999, the novel *City of Light* was published, and Cameron-Webb saw his next Buffalo play in it. Set in 1901, the year President William McKinley was assassinated at the Pan-American Exposition, Lauren Belfer's book depicted Buffalo at the height of its power and wealth. It became a national best-seller and a local obsession, and Cameron-Webb commissioned a dramatization from Clarvoe.

There was huge interest in the play's world premiere, part of centennial celebrations that include street fairs, a parade and historical tours. Opening night took place on Sept. 14, 2001, just three days after the terrorist attacks. A gala dinner went forward, but with prayers and moments of silence instead of congratulatory speeches, said Neufeld. Nevertheless, the run was completely sold out, he said.

Last year, A.R. Gurney's latest play put his native city squarely in the title. *Buffalo Gal* starred Broadway favorite Betty Buckley as a star who returns to hometown Buffalo to appear in a production of *The Cherry Orchard*.

The "Buffalo plays" have been such a hit that last year, Studio Arena developed a strategic plan and mission statement that included a pledge to "present vibrant and entertaining plays that examine the issues, events and common experience of our region."

Neufeld pointed out that Studio Arena, which operates on an annual budget of about \$5 million, is dependent on a higher proportion of ticket sales – 67% -- than the average theater of its size in the U.S. – 55%. "We don't have many Fortune 500 companies here and only medium-sized foundations. You've got to make sure you are selling tickets," said Neufeld.

The theatrical landscape is remarkably competitive, he said. There are 16 theatre companies in town – road house, amateur, university and professional. Buffalonians often head to New York City (an hour away by plane) to see Broadway shows, or drive 90 minutes to Toronto for original theatre or touring productions (currently, *Mamma Mia!* and *The Lion King* are running). In summer, Ontario's two major classical theatres – Stratford and Shaw – are within easy driving distance. "If we can say, 'here's something new and it's about this region,' you can get a fair amount of buzz going," said Neufeld.

"The tone (from theatregoers) is 'how great that somebody is telling our stories,'" said Cameron-Webb. "It's going back to the fundamental principle of theatre itself. It anchors the theatre within the community and acknowledges that this is their theatre. It creates a sense of pride and creates a sense of history and in the end creates a stronger community – but not, of course, to the exclusion of all else," he said.

The 2002-2003 season included *A Streetcar Named Desire* (the last offering in a five-year Tennessee Williams retrospective) and Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, the modern Canadian play *The Drawer Boy*, a musical about Alberta Hunter called *Cookin' at the Cookery*, and regional-theatre favorite *Shear Madness*.

The one offering that hit close to home for Buffalonians was a new comedy called *Shooting Craps*, by Tom Dulack, whose *Breaking Legs* was a hit at Studio Arena two years ago. Although the setting isn't specifically Buffalo, it was described as "a depressed industrial town in

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the Northeast,” which was close enough. The town’s female Italian-American mayor, desperate for re-election, wants to promise the voters that the town will get a gambling casino. But casinos can only be located on Indian land and there’s none around. The mayor’s minor-Mafia relatives dig up an “Indian” who might be able to apply for the casino license, but he turns out to be a fraud.

In recent years, Buffalonians have been debating whether to allow casino gambling in order to revitalize the downtown. *Shooting Craps*, which mostly avoided the deeper questions surrounding gambling in favor of kitchen-sink ethnic jokes, sustained middling reviews and lukewarm box office.

Some of the “Buffalo plays” have grown very long legs. *Over the Tavern* has gone on to about 20 professional productions throughout the U.S. and Cameron-Webb is actively seeking story possibilities in this unlikely place. He’s discovering that the closer you look at Buffalo, the more intriguing things you find.

“I’m working with a local playwright about Mark Twain’s time in Buffalo when he was an editor of the Buffalo Express newspaper. We have a fabulous first draft of a new play, *While We Were Bowling*, by Carter Lewis. I want to do something about the Underground Railroad, which ended in Buffalo. I’m looking at a story about (novelist) Taylor Caldwell, who lived in Buffalo. And there was this really interesting court case in the 1960s involving behavior that was less than ethical on the part of law enforcement ...”

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