

# 'Birthday' Twists Sense Of Time

A Review

By ELIZABETH LEE

Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday dear . . .

Whoever you are, your birthday is more likely to be disappointing than happy according to the latest Synergetic Theater piece, *Birthday*, premiered last Thursday in Duke's Page Auditorium

Presented with Suzanne White Manning's *Private Lives*, *Birthday* is the best collaboration to date of Ms. Manning, dancer and choreographer, and David Manning, writer. *Birthday* also highlights the considerable design talents of Susan Settergren in an interesting, often haunting examination of the day with which we measure the passing of our years.

**THE 50-MINUTE** work flows at an uneven pace, much as lives do, sometimes comfortable, sometimes not. The slow beginning, with simple repetitive movements by the dancers, held me an unwilling captive, yet had the quality of memory or of the slow, steady beating of a heart which marks time even when the conscious mind will not.

Ms. Manning fools with our sense of time. She likes to really slow things down, refusing to succumb to what is a constant cultural pressure to speed things up. David Manning refuses to have anything to do with time at all—and so his constructions, verbal and otherwise, often have a strange, out-of-synch quality. Cause and effect, for example, are little used because they must function in a before and after environment which Manning enjoys repudiating.

**SO THE** retarded Billy Ryan never grows any older, stops having birthdays and becomes pure being. The girl Astra begins as a baby, achieves puberty, matures and ages, then regresses back to infancy and splashes serenely in her tub.

These two, played with complete abandon by Bryce Wagner and Anne Deloria, were accompanied by three other characters whose pretensions to normalness were also minimal. Mrs. Ryan, played by Ms. Manning, has stayed in the time frame established by Billy's retardation and has no interest in celebrating birthdays, though the others try to draw her in. Even her name is a trick played on those who assume it indicates a moment in time when she moved from the single to the married state. Not so, her story asserts. Mrs. is her given name.

**THE MANNINGS**, their dancer/actors and their designer/builders, including Jay Gill as prop builder, are adding and subtracting at the same time in an attempt to multiply the effects of their vision. The tight clarity of Ms. Settergren's sets and costumes is a welcome dimension and helps the audience focus on the meaning of the whole. Ms. Manning pares movement until it becomes a subtle indicator of mood rather than an overtly expressive medium. Writer Manning has here created his characters out of a few carefully chosen fragments of their lives.

The performers become these characters, but then shed their roles to speak for themselves. Jack Arnold recalls his young son's birthday parties: all those streamers to keep the kids happy. "Maybe that's what I missed, the streamers." For Marjorie Scheer, her tenth birthday remains a day of disappointment. "It snowed and my grandparents couldn't come."

Out of real lives come the created ones in *Birthday*. A see-through bathtub, a mobile present, words floating in space and a thoroughly delightful, wildly diversified sound score exist with a real flounder, caught by Billy with a real fishing rod, and real singing of that familiar birthday song. Happy Birthday to Synergetic Theater and may it have many more.