

# Friedman breaks new ground in puppetry

By Tony Jackman

**DRAME EN COULISSE**, a puppet comic opera by Gary Friedman. Presented by the Royal Puppet Company. (Lunch-hour, Stage One, The People's Space).

Gary Friedman's debut production after his return from a year in France reveals a new inventiveness and tongue-in-cheek wickedness which is most appealing.

*Drame en Coulisse* (Backstage Drama) is pretty much adult fare. Children might, for example, be a little surprised at puppets strangling one another!

But it's very funny in parts, too. The story, or rather situation, reflects Gary's own experiences with the string puppet, and his rebellion against it. In a sense, Gary breaks new ground by taking a couple of swipes at the traditional use of puppets.

It's mainly in French, with key words or phrases in English to aid comprehension of the story. Gary wrote and presented it in France as part of his puppetry course. The story is also contained in the programme, and read out by Gary before the show, so there's really no way one cannot understand the story, even if one doesn't

speaking a word of French.

Columbina makes her first string puppet only to have it smashed to pieces by angry husband Arlequino, who detests the artistic, poetic string puppet, and loves the more political Punch and Judy. The same scenario is repeated after she repairs it.

Gary, featuring string, rod and glove puppets, has incorporated three sets of different scales into his show, with an additional shadow puppet scene performed behind a lighted screen. The production is clearly a showcase for his puppeteering

talents and what he has learned overseas.

After Arlequino has broken Columbina's string puppet for the second time, Gary moves to a smaller set — a theatre booth. "Inside" the theatre, Arlequino calls Columbina to play the Punch and Judy. She does, after which she comforts her string puppet. Arlequino beats her and, finding himself alone, settles down to sleep.

Now Gary introduces the nightmare of Arlequino, effected by the shadow puppet scene and strobe lighting, culminating in the phantom of the theatre asking Arlequino "where his cruelty lies" — in

his sex or in the baton with which he beats Columbina and her string puppet.

He awakes without his baton and with a new personality. And now he communicates directly with the puppeteer in a scene rather like a sinner asking God for forgiveness.

Friedman was a little nervous at the opening performance, but nevertheless executed a clearly demanding show with aplomb. The use of sound and lighting was well observed, and the show as a whole was highly inventive and, as such, a treat.

Puppetry as an art form is underrated in

this country, and underserved so. This show reveals the versatility of the medium, and the fact that it can be entertaining for adults.

See it. It runs from 1.10 pm daily and closes on Friday.