

## THEATRE



Trudie Lee photo

Douglas MacLeod, left, as the coach, Stephen Spender as Jacques Plante and Dani Moon as Jacqueline.

# Lunchbox scores with sweet comedy

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CALGARY HERALD

**G**ood news, theatre fans. After several unsuccessful shots on goal this season, Lunchbox Theatre has finally scored with its latest play, *Jacques Plante and the Parkdale Knitting League*.

Paul McLaughlin's comedy/drama is a sweet, affecting little piece about a Toronto housewife's unrequited love for the great goaltender, which touches lightly but poignantly on fan worship and gently punctures the macho aura surrounding Canada's national sport.

Hard to believe it, but Plante was once called a coward for being the first NHL goalie to insist on wearing a mask ("smart" would be a more suitable epithet). But then Plante never did fit the old he-man image of a hockey player; he had asthma and allergies, he wrote poetry, and — most damning of all for a jock in the 1950s — he liked to knit.

It's that last attribute which makes Jacques (Stephen Spender) the object of affection for Violet Henderson (Barbara Gates Wilson), a hockey widow living in the Toronto neighbourhood of Parkdale who finds herself romanticizing about the Canadiens' netminder as she sends him endless fan letters and knitting patterns.

Violet (who describes herself as being "plain as the day as long") is stuck in a typical dead-end

marriage with a hockey-mad hubby (Doug McKeag) who feels uncomfortable expressing his love for his wife and sneeringly refers to Plante as a "French fairy."

The play follows Violet and Jacques' parallel lives until he joins the Maple Leafs in 1970, allowing her to finally meet the man of her elaborately knitted fantasies — only to have them unravel.

## REVIEW

■ Jacques Plante and the Parkdale Knitting League, by Paul McLaughlin; a Lunchbox Theatre production, directed by Bartley Bard. At Bow Valley Square today to Jan. 29. Tickets: \$9, \$8.50 seniors. Box office: 265-4292.

■ Rating:  
★★★½  
out of five

The show has some melodramatic lapses and scenes that look as if they were lifted from those earnest Heritage Minutes the Comedy Network loves to spoof. But much of McLaughlin's writ-

ing is funny and accurate and Violet's Harlequin-style fantasies about her suave Jacques are a delight.

That may be due in large part to Wilson's sympathetic performance as Violet, at once girlishly goofy and touchingly sad. McKeag is also bang-on as her frustrated all-Canadian husband and the pair age convincingly.

That last can't be said of Spender's pretty-boy Plante, who also suffers from a thinly applied French accent. But he's appealing early on as a sensitive young loner and his scenes with Wilson click.

Dani Moon supplies the missing Gallic flavour as Plante's Quebecois first wife and European last wife, while a crusty, fedora-crowned Douglas MacLeod brings an air of old-time hockey to the roles of coach, sports reporter and announcer.

The limited action sometimes betrays the fact that the play has done double-duty as a CBC Radio drama, but its series of short scenes skate along swiftly under Bartley Bard's expert direction.

Witek Wisniewski also rises to the occasion with a hockey-arena set that smoothly incorporates the Canadiens' dressing-room and Violet's kitchen.

Ultimately, McLaughlin's show doesn't quite measure up to Ken Brown's *Life After Hockey*, so far the best play on the subject, but it's certainly not for lack of charm.