

ENTERTAINMENT

Stage trip to Foggy Bottom is delightful

By STEWART BROWN
The Spectator

NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE — And now for something completely different.

For its winter season on home turf in the cosy Royal George, Theatre Beyond Words, with the help of Vancouver's Coad Canada Puppets, has collectively concocted an imaginative and fascinating entertainment.

The intriguingly-titled *Night Train To Foggy Bottom* is a delightful journey through a dream-world of surreal whimsy and fantasy as a sculptor creates the girl of his dreams who comes to life.

That's the basic storyline, but like almost anything this admirable company offers, surprises in content and style pop up continually. And that's what makes *Night Train To Foggy Bottom* such a treat. There's no time to be bored because you're never quite certain what will happen next.

Night Train To Foggy Bottom casts artistic director Harrow Mascow as a curious sculptor named Thadius Steerpike and sends him on a series of fantastical adventures as he rides a subway through the night to a mythical stop called Foggy Bottom, as good a name as any for this hazy, dream-reality world. Mascow is an ace at playing this kind of open, unsuspecting Everyman role and such is his miming talent that he quickly draws an audience's empathy to his own reactions at what life — or the stage manager — will next throw his way.

In *Night Train To Foggy Bottom*, it's an entertaining array of hand, shadow and stick puppets, mime, extraordinary masks, exquisite costuming, cartoon slides,

WHAT: *Night Train To Foggy Bottom.*
WHERE: *Royal George Theatre, Niagara-on-the-Lake.*
WHEN: *Now through Dec. 30.*
TICKET INFO: *416-468-2151.*

home-made sound effects and a range of lighting, all painstakingly keyed and choreographed to an effectively chosen range of classical, jazz and folk music.

Some moments are particularly inspired. At one point, Mascow's Thadius is entertained by an elegant strip-tease performed by a mirrored commode to the strains of *Makin' Whoopee*, that gives new meaning to the term "chest of drawers."

The commode, in fact, gives berth to a Thadius Steerpike baby doll and that's another bright spot

in the proceedings, as this mini-Mascow, balding, with sideburns, re-appears in several scenes.

Scenes vary from miniatures to a grandmother with a huge nose; from a Victorian parental parade with a mechanized, life-sized Momma doll to a couple of comic encounters with a trio of masked extra-terrestrials.

Good too, are scenes in which a mound of sculptor's clay takes life as a statue. And time — in the form of a winged clock — really does fly in this show.

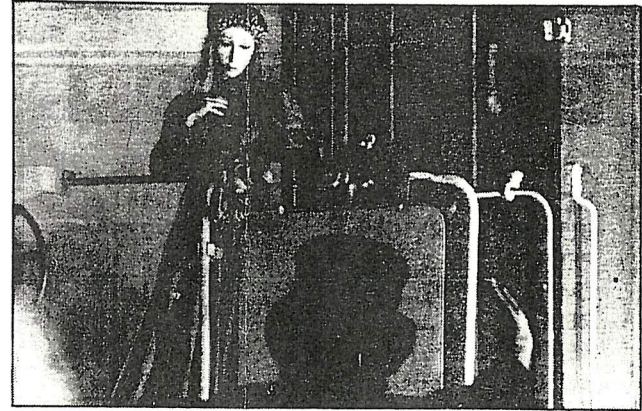
I'm not convinced every episode melds into a dramatic theme, other than that life is unpredictable and so are Thadius' adventures. Shows by Theatre Beyond Words — this one aimed at adult audiences from teenagers on up — sometimes become a cluster of mimed variety acts. Some of the episodes here — the lute serenading by Thadius of a maiden fair, an art-gallery lecture — are stretched a tad long.

Still, Theatre Beyond Words

generally provides inspired variety. If your notions of mime are trapped in that imaginary room old-time mime artists were continually trying to escape, then you are in for an eye-and-mind-expanding experience with *Night Train To Foggy Bottom*.

It's a collective triumph, so collective kudos should go the way of director Robin Patterson, performers Maskow, Suzanne Merriam, Terry Judd, Charles P. Schott, Melinda Little; puppeteer and animator Luman Coad and wife Arlyn, who designed masks and projections; costume designer Warren Hartman, technical wizard David Satterthwaite, and whoever chose the terrific music.

In addition to *Night Train To Foggy Bottom*, which continues most weekends and some Wednesdays and Thursdays, Theatre Beyond Words brings back those lifesized cartoon favorites, the *Potato People*, in the comic adventure, *Double Play*, for younger viewers Dec. 9, 16, 27, 28 and 30.



□ *Night Train To Foggy Bottom*: Packed with surprises.