

Moonlight Productions Inc.
Presents:

a tidy package

Researched, Written, & Performed by

**Amy House
&
Berni Stapleton**

Directed by
Lois Brown



With the assistance of
Human Resources Development Canada
Women's Program/TAGS

The Canada Council
Canada/Nfld. Co-operation agreement
The Nfld. and Labrador Arts Council.

Women offer fresh view of plight on The Rock

A Tidy Package

When: Through March 10, 8 p.m.

Where: NAC Atelier,
333 King Edward Ave.

Tickets: \$16, at NAC box office;
at Atelier box office a half-hour before
curtain; or, with surcharges, through
TicketMaster (755-1111)

By Janice Kennedy

Citizen theatre writer

A Tidy Package, the unique slice of Newfoundland life that opened Monday at the NAC Atelier, has three remarkable things going for it.

One is Grace Patey, the ultimately indomitable wife, mother and former fish plant worker portrayed by Amy House, one of the play's authors.

Another is her sister Sarah Nolan, the wounded widow and fellow former fish plant worker portrayed by Berni Stapleton, the play's other author.

And the third is that spirited, buffeted part of the country the women call home, Newfoundland itself. A play about the ocean-bound province is not novel on its own; what gives *A Tidy Package* its original edge is House and Stapleton's particular take on it.

Set in an unnamed outpost on The Rock, the two-act play gives a human face to the cod moratorium announced by Ottawa four years ago. The play uses fresh eyes to examine a community

experiencing the death of its traditional way of life. Rather than looking predictably at the experiences of the sea-going men, it offers a glimpse of two women's lives turned upside down.

Having lost their jobs at the fish plant, Grace and Sarah must deal with unemployment, with the social turmoil of a community where too many suddenly idle men have too much time on their hands, with the joke of "re-training" programs (like a hairdressing course for half the women in the tiny community). The play is a wry and ironic twist on the attitude Grace says is common to the rest of Canada, the complaint about "the goddam Newfoundlanders down there with their hands out again."

Theatrically, *A Tidy Package* is flawed: slow-moving in spots, now and then a static exhibition of overlapping monologues. But none of that matters in the face of the women's dynamic performances.

House brings a warm and feisty sense of caring to her Grace, spitfire and hugs all at once. As Sarah, for whom the moratorium has come just a shade too late (her husband was lost at sea just before its announcement) Stapleton is a moving portrait of woundedness.

The play is not a comedy, not by a long shot (even though House and Stapleton have other lives as stand-up

comics, and their Grace and Sarah characters were originally created for a routine they did together in pre-moratorium days). But there is a sound sense of comic relief, and there are some genuinely funny lines.

Overall *A Tidy Package* is serious, grim even. And while the ending suggests a glimmer of hope, it is hardly joyful. But the play is filled with rare insights not normally part of the Central Canadian perspective.

Early on, there is a picture of life in the hell of fish plants: the long hours, the cold, the shooting pains up the legs, the icy fingers, the clinging smell — even the quirky, almost perverse, pride possible in work accomplished with quick small hands.

There are the bitter references about international marine politics, the over-fishing by "the Russians or that French crowd... I'm surprised there's anything out there in the ocean for the foreigners to suck up."

There is the reminder for non-Newfoundlanders of the unique rhythms of language common to that part of the country, the words dipped in lyrical sweetness, the words edged in sharp colors. Where else does a woman end a debate with her sister by saying, "You'd argue the arse off a cast-iron skillet, you would."

What *A Tidy Package* does most and best is the thing it sets out to do. It of-



— Wayne Hiebert, Citizen

A TIDY PACKAGE: Play looks at death of the fishing industry on The Rock through the fresh eyes of two women whose lives are turned upside down. Berni Stapleton and Amy House (in curlers) make the story remarkable.

fers a sharp and bittersweet sense of the emotional confusion that has been the inheritance of Atlantic communities still reeling from the end of a way of life. It paints in vivid colors the details of devastation writ small and individually human.

Riding the pendulum swing, the sisters move between despair and cautious hope, resigned fatalism and stubborn determination. They lament the disappearance of the past even as they curse it.

They look to the future with the kind of restraint, even fear, that can only

come of living in communities where hope has for too long been a luxury.

For a variety of reasons having to do partially with national concern, and more importantly with shared humanity, *A Tidy Package* is essential viewing for Canadians from away.

"Nobody cares about us," says Grace wistfully about the rest of the country. "We're just a big joke — a big joke in a nice tidy package."

That may be the one line in this new exploration of an old dilemma with which outsiders may disagree.

A Tidy Package deserves a worldwide audience

By JOHN HOLMES
Special to The Telegram

In *A Tidy Package*, Amy House and Berni Stapleton skilfully bring home to the rest of us the intimate personal distress of the victims of the cod moratorium.

What a pity that the Hon. Brian Tobin did not take this play with him to the United Nations in New York and to European Union headquarters in Brussels.

Then all those theory-obsessed bureaucrats would be made to understand unequivocally what happens to people when an apparently infinite resource disappears through national greed, leaving thousands of hardworking families at the mercy of other unenlightened bureaucrats.

A Tidy Package has been seen in many parts of the province during its recent tour, but surely to those audiences House, Stapleton and their director, Lois Brown, were preaching to the converted.

Its true value as a message will be realised when the mainland tour becomes a reality. If there is any problem about the funding of such a tour, the provincial government must include the play in its propaganda campaign.

There can be no better way to make the rest of Canada, and the United States, aware of the disaster that has occurred here.

Surely then the essential need for immediate worldwide legislation will become crystal clear. If not, similar problems —

and they exist on every fishing ground — will become just as terminal as ours.

Stapleton and House not only act in this moving and funny play. They gathered their material as the crisis developed, visiting the fishing communities, talking especially to the fishermen's wives and the fish plant workers.

Then, with dramatist Kent Stetson, they wrote the play creating, as a program note puts it "the characters of Grace and Sarah, two fictional characters who link reality to creativity."

It is a play that everyone will remember and ponder about.

Moonlight Productions gratefully acknowledges assistance from Human Resources Development Canada, Women's Program and TAGS.

Also the Canada Council, the Newfoundland Arts Council and the Canada/Newfoundland Co-operation Agreement.

A Tidy Package continues at the LSPU Hall this week, and will be videotaped by the CBC for later broadcast.

See you at the show!

A Tidy Package delivered again

By MARK VAUGHAN-JACKSON
The Evening Telegram

House and Stapleton are back by popular demand.

The play 'A Tidy Package', written and performed by Newfoundland acting partners Amy House and Bernie Stapleton will be performed again, this time at the Delta Hotel and Conference Centre in St. John's April 12-13.

These two extra performances come in the wake of a highly successful six-night run at the LSPU Hall which ended April 2.

In fact, it was the success of the play that led to the two extra nights at the 300-seat capacity ballroom at the downtown hotel, House said.

"They were selling tickets for standing room only. People were coming in and standing in the back of the hall and sitting in the aisle to watch the show," House said.

This is just another example of the warm reception the play has had, a success House said they didn't really anticipate.

"We originally had planned to do a national tour but we didn't know it would receive the success it has, and the national attention," she said. "We've already done (CBC) Morningside and a couple of national radio interviews and stuff. We've actually had calls from the Northwest Territories and other theatres across the country that already want to book it."

A Tidy Package tells the story of two sisters in outport Newfoundland, each wrestling in her own way with the destruction of their way of life wrought by the fishery collapse and northern cod moratorium. Desperation, anger, grief and even wry humor are blended in the production.

After several years in the making, including extensive input from hundreds of Newfoundland women who made their living directly from the fishery, House and Stapleton began a provincial tour of the play in October 1994.

House said the play will continue on the road later this year, probably with another provincial tour

aimed at some larger population centres this time, as well as a national tour later this fall.

06766001The play was also taped by CBC-TV at the LSPU Hall late last month for the eventual broadcast of an edited version on the CBC network in September. House

said based on the filming of the production they also hope to produce a video of the show for sale.

Tickets for the two shows at the Delta Hotel are \$15 and are available from Allan's Video locations. Showtime is 8:30 p.m.

A small window into the shattered core of a rural society

By MARK VAUGHAN-JACKSON
The Evening Telegram

Three months after the fish plant closed and her job evaporated, Sarah Nolan sits about her house still wearing her plant uniform.

As she sits and smokes, she talks to her husband, even though he drowned months ago when his fishing boat went down. On the coffee table the insurance cheques for him and his boat gather dust under coupons, flyers and a pile of his NCARP cheques.

Sarah Nolan is a character in a play, but her fictional situation has real life parallels in many a Newfoundland community devastated by the cod crisis.

Sarah and her sister Grace Patey are the characters played by Newfoundland actors Berni Stapleton and Amy House in their play, *A Tidy Package*.

Presently on the last leg of a 23-community tour of the province, *A Tidy Package* is the result of years of research and countless interviews with women like Sarah and Grace, women who saw their lives, and those of their families and communities turned upside down when the fish went away.

Stapleton and House call this "a play about two ordinary women living ordinary lives until their world collapses. They were fish plant workers who were the invisible core of the community until the tidal wave of the moratorium swept in . . . this play offers a small window into a shattered home, where two fragile hearts look for a way to survive."

The play was almost doomed before it was finished, thanks to a CBC TV report in April that said Stapleton and House were using the government funding they received to write a

play "poking fun" at fish plant workers.

Stapleton and House maintained throughout that is blatantly untrue.

"I think with the problems before anyone knew about the show and its misrepresentation before it was ever produced, we're just gloating with the show," House said. "Our ultimate revenge is the show."

The so far overwhelmingly positive audience response is gratifying both as recognition of their work and as a recognition of the desperate situations of the those affected by the fishery crisis as displayed onstage, they said.

"I feel a tremendous emotional gift from the audiences and from the people (we talked to) who come to see the play, because they feel very encouraged and buoyed by the fact that this is going to play across Canada," Stapleton said.

"They see it as an accurate reflection of their lives and their situation today . . . They would like to feel a sort of camaraderie with the rest of the country. Up to now we know they haven't been getting that kind of support at all."

"The women and people that we talked to in research for this play, the gift that we get is that they come to us after and thank us," House said. "Actually there were a couple of women who came up and said 'there was times when I was Grace and times when I was Sarah' and that's a great compliment to us."

The play's dialogue deals with almost every aspect of how the fishery disaster has affected fishing people: The boredom — "I've got so much to do today, I don't know where to start. I think I'll start with Channel 7."

The retraining schemes — "You can't

retrain Grace, you'll retrain yourself right out of the fishery." "How can I retrain myself out of nothing."

Retraining for jobs that aren't there — "Where in the name of God are we going to put 37 hairdressers?" "In Church, praying for a job."

The anger and tension — "You're having some sort of a breakdown Sarah, but that's OK, half the Harbour's running on tension."

The dialogue is often funny, but the two actors are the first to point out it is a bitter-sweet, ironic humor based on the real life challenges and desperation of people trying to make a living after their livelihood is gone.

So far the play has been well received by the audiences, both as a humorous piece and as an accurate summing up of what effect the moratorium is having on Newfoundlanders, they said.

"The tragedy is that the play is about the subject matter that it is," Stapleton said.

The next step is taping the play for CBC TV early in the new year, as well as extending the provincial tour and then hopefully a national tour.

From an audience standpoint the show was enjoyable for several reasons.

"We really enjoyed the show. It's too bad there weren't more people here," audience member Gloria Cole said.

Though she and her friend Theresa O'Reilly came to the show because they are fans of Stapleton and House's work, they left feeling somewhat saddened by what they saw.

"It's a good show, you can see what's going on in the communities, what's happening to people," O'Reilly added. "It's a true story."



Berni Stapleton (left) and Amy House performing their play *A Tidy Package*.

Both women, neither of whom are connected to the fishery themselves, said they left the play with a little more understanding of what people directly affected by the moratorium are going through.

While Cole said she knows there are gaps in the government relief programs, she said the play was a good way of showing people are hurting, through no fault of their own, because their livelihood is gone.