

# ENTERTAINMENT

## 'Sexual gothic': playing for laughs

It was not surprising that an overflow crowd turned up Tuesday night for *Sexual Gothic: Dramatic Readings Of The Sensuous And Macabre*, at Hart House Theatre in the University of Toronto.

None of the writers featured — Barbara Gowdy, Susan Swan, Eric McCormack — have quite the drawing power of John Irving, whose reading at Convocation Hall last night was also sold out. But it would be hard to come up with a more arresting theme.

Professional actors did most of the reading, while the authors, interviewed on stage by director Isaiah Sheffer, introduced their works.

Sheffer told the audience, quoting Swan, that the evening was part of a Canadian literary movement "to write more boldly and adventurously on matters

### Books

Philip Marchand



provocative, sensory and openly erotic."

According to the florid program notes, sexual gothic is "a new literary genre," "an inventive form of expression propelled by an author's strict attention to a character's need for self-assertion through sexually charged behavior and circumstance which appears ... grotesque and bizarre."

Actually, "sexual gothic" is a clever phrase invented by Susan Swan to get media attention, and more power to her.

One thing the evening dem-

onstrated was that it is very difficult to play "grotesque and bizarre" sexual behavior on stage for anything but laughs. Gowdy and Swan, for example, dressed up as prostitutes — Gowdy wore a dominatrix's pair of black, high-heeled vinyl boots reaching halfway up her naked thighs, and Swan wore the tight, black, skimpy dress of a street-walker.

They might have done more justice to the concept of "sexual gothic" and been more subversive of the concept of sexual restraint if they had dressed up in exaggeratedly demure outfits.

The lone male, Eric McCormack, who also happens to teach at the University of Waterloo, wore jeans and a sweater — which signifies nothing except the profound resistance of male writers and academics in general to the idea of wearing stylish

clothes of any sort.

When asked by Sheffer if his story was part of this new literary movement, McCormack replied, "All I can say, really, is it took a lot of arduous research on my part."

I think the answer was supposed to be funny, juxtaposed as it was to matters erotic, but it had a genuinely Canadian ring to it.

The actors, on their part, presented the material very well, except for the actress who read Barbara Gowdy's story in an exaggerated, breathless manner. This was particularly unfortunate, since Gowdy's story, "93 Million Miles Away", about a woman who suffers a bout of exhibitionism, is a remarkable work. It is a story that is going to be heavily anthologized in the future, and not just in collections of "sexual gothic".