

By JEFF MAHONEY

The Spectator

TORONTO

Charly Chiarelli's father used to check his fly and brush his fingers through his hair whenever the phone rang, as though preparing himself for company.

The first time Charly and his brother played the stereo they bought with money saved up from selling *The Spectator*, their father stared into the turntable, his face almost pressed against the record, as though he were staring into a well.

And when the music stopped, he kept gazing at the machine, saying, "Tanka you. Tanka you."

"He was our pa, the extra-terrestrial," says Chiarelli, laughing with his throaty, booming laugh, as he rehearses his one-man play *Cu'Fu* at the Artword Theatre in Toronto.

Cu'Fu? (So who did it?), written and performed by Chiarelli, compresses his Sicilian-Canadian experience growing up in Hamilton in the '50s and '60s into a series of family vignettes, woven around the death of his father.

It is by turns achingly tender and deliriously funny, with the versatile Chiarelli jumping in and out of several skins during the play's hour-and-45-minute running time.

One moment he is his blustery, aggressive brother; the next, his rock-solid immigrant mother; and the next, his perplexed, comical father. Then, of course, he is himself, at various ages.

In one magical scene, he illustrates his mother's ability as a "reader of faces."

"She knew at the market who to buy from. 'You buy sausages from the man with the head that listens,' she would tell us."

Once, in the grocery store, she and two of her boys reached the cashier when Mamma discovered her purse missing.

"She went back through the whole store looking into people's faces. Then, in one aisle, she stopped a woman," and here Chiarelli goes into his mother's Sicilian, alloyed with snatches of broken English, as she confronts the woman about her purse.

"She's blocking the woman's cart, and the woman is saying, 'Get out of my way, you crazy wop,' and we are trying to pull her away, saying, 'Momma, maybe it's not her.'"

But then, with the reflexes of a cat his mother plunges her arm into the woman's handbag and pulls out the purse.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT: *Cu'Fu* (So who did it?), Charly Chiarelli's one-man play

WHEN: Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m., and Sundays at 2 p.m., until the end of October.

WHERE: Artword Theatre, 81 Portland St., #201. Phone number - (416)408-1146.

WHO: Charly (Caolgero) Chiarelli (writer and actor), Ronald Welts (director) and Judith Sandiford (designer).

HAMILTON ENGAGEMENT: *Cu'Fu* will be staged in Hamilton at the Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, 51 Stuart Street, on Saturday, Nov. 9 at 7.30 p.m.