

# Serious comedy cures the summertime blues

By ERIC PETERS

The Farmington Players' summer stock production at the Barn Theatre is a rather impressive effort. Eschewing the more usual light nonsense theatergoers tend to see during the vacation months, the Players have launched a serious adult comedy-drama by Mark Crowley called *The Boys in the Band*.

It is a play about the complex emotional lives of eight homosexuals. *Boys in the Band* effectively raises questions about the social and personal problems of a lifetime spent adjusting to a condition of sexual deviance. It attempts to answer some of them. It is also a voyeur's eye view of an inner circle of "friends and lovers" in a world one can never see without becoming a member and never hear of but by its innuendo or ridicule.

In addition to the characters' attempts at self-adjustment, there are continual positions for power and submission. This competition theme is best described by borrowing from another source. A homosexual in Ingmar Bergman's film *Face to Face* describes his life: "In our cruel market, deviants is total and competition ruthless."

So it is with the *Boys*. The field is wide open and governed by the most fickle moods and shifting sets of rules.

THIS PHENOMENON is capitalized in a party game sequence which serves the pur-

pose of a "play within a play" structure. Michael to serve his own ends, he wants to manipulate and degrade the others.

In the game, each is to telephone the one person he has "truly loved" and announce that secret passion, thereby stripping away layers of affection, acidity and self-repression.

Ironically, it calls upon each person to put on an act before the others. The end result is to bring the game's inventor to the brink of despair and to restore faith, understanding and self-realization to his object of destruction.

The setting of the play is Michael's (Ralph Rosati) New York apartment. He has invited some friends, "the same group of friends" he used to celebrate Harold's 32nd birthday. First to arrive is Michael's lover, Donald (Steve Zygmunt), who drives up for weekend trysts.

Michael has a weakness for expensive sweaters, jet travel, alcohol and Bette Davis movies. Donald is a near recluse who reads books and scrubs floors in a room above his parents' garage.

Larry (Phil Embury) and Hank (Philip Schmitt) comprise another couple, but one with a stormier relationship. Larry loves Hank in his own way, refusing to be monogamous. Athletic and conservative Hank, a schoolteacher with a wife and two children, lives with Larry and loves him with a jealousy which makes him stalk and the other's philandering. To further complicate matters, there is something between Larry and Donald about which they are very coy in front of others.

Emory (Rick Thayer), funny and pathetic, a blatant promiscuous, flouting lary is described as being "like a butterfly in heat." He is the object of most of the sarcasm and aggression. He is the ass who persists in referring to everyone with feminine pronouns. He lacks the dignity that the others are striving to attain as if their lives depended upon it. Emory is the image of the homosexual most held by the world, one which the others would like to see abolished.

Bernard (Jerry Jackson) is an odd man out, not only because he is single but also because he is black. Everyone but Emory treats lightly with Bernard and in one confrontation with Michael, we learn why. Of everyone in the "band," Bernard seems most ashamed of revealing his own secrets. When he is goaded into telephoning his only true love, he is riddled with regret afterwards.

Harold (John Bruning) is the birthday boy. He and Michael are the centers of group activity. He is single and duly receives as a birthday gift a "midnight cowboy" (Larry Stern) who is "dumb but beautiful." Harold is obsessed with himself and his appearance. He complains about his weight and complexion, but overalls and exaggerates his pocked skin by using tweezers to remove his facial hairs.

Harold is the reason for the vigorous get-together of old and new friends, but one individual arrives who is unexpected and certainly out of place. He is Alan (Jack Grulike), an old college chum of Michael's who may or may not be aware of Michael's condition.

Alan has come to town distraught over his impending divorce from wife Fran. He is labeled "super straight" and the partygoers are given instructions of lay low until he leaves. Unexpectedly things take a nasty turn and Michael, in an alcoholic fury, plots to draw Alan into a web of self-destruction and to crush his illusions about normalcy and decency.

*Boys in the Band* is about the struggle of homosexuals to emerge from the darkness of shame and secrecy. The characters grapple with a conundrum about themselves without a key, eluding explanation. It is also about individuals struggling with their emotions and problems.

Where the play delivers into the former, it is fascinating in its strange and awful deviation from the norm. Where it deals with the latter, it is a subject of universal application and sympathy.

By no means an outstanding play, *Boys in the Band* is an interesting, funny and intelligent one. It is definitely an adult

play in both theme and language, but it is a play well worth seeing, perhaps because there is far too little of this kind of drama available.

All cast members turned in good performances with special praise going to Ralph Rosati as Michael, the only man who really doesn't want to be what he is. Rick Thayer as the exhibitionistic Emory who exemplifies the classic "pansy" and John Bruning, as the homely Jewish narcissist who is the only match for Michael.

Direction, very good overall. As with Tim Pheney in his first effort. As with all Farmington Players' productions, attention to details was outstanding, from the set design right down to the dinner served and eaten on stage. So, in all, Farmington audiences can expect another good production from the Players.

## OU improves festival area

Oakland University has selected an architect and approved a \$145,000 project budget for a major landscaping and capital improvements program at the Meadow Brook Music Festival.

The Board of Trustees at its Aug. 9 meeting approved Eckhardt, Gramm, Young and Associates of Farmington Hills as project architect. The board authorized President Donald P. O'Dowd to seek and accept low bids for the projects up to a maximum of \$145,000.



From left, Philip Schmitt, Jack Grulike, Ralph Rosati, Rick Thayer, Jerry Johnson and Steve Zygmunt perform a scene from the Farmington Players' presentation of the *Boys in the Band*. The comedy-drama explores the fears and frailties of a group of homosexuals.

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