

Critic's viewpoint

Lively co-stars in 'I Do! I Do!'

By ETHEL SIMMONS

As the (mostly) loving couple of "I Do! I Do!" at the Botsford Inn Dinner Theatre, Phil Marcus Esser and Nancy Gurwin are a spirited pair. Esser, in his first primarily dramatic role, as Michael, is an engaging performer, big and bold. Ms. Gurwin is less than timid as Agnes, the wife who shares his bed and board through 50 years of marriage.

Both have singing voices that are pleasures to hear. Esser, who has played many clubs around town and starred as "Jacquet Brel" at Mercy College Dinner Theatre, is expressive in his lyrics, strong in his vibrato. Ms. Gurwin, who has portrayed a range of comedy leads in dinner theater productions and done musical shows, has a vigorous, throaty sound in her songs.

THE CO-STARS sing out each word with clear enunciation, and you don't miss a line of the appealing lyrics in the melodic score.

Book and lyrics are by Tom Jones and music by Harvey Schmidt, those gentlemen who wrote the fantastically successful "The Fantasticks."

In Act I, Esser delivers the number "I Love My Wife" with enthusiasm and conviction, as he tells of the attraction his wife holds for him. Things take a turn for the worse after a few years of wedded bliss and

two babies—a son, followed by a daughter—when husband and wife compare notes in "Nobody's Perfect."

This is a rip-roaring number in which they describe each other's bad habits the chews in his sleep, she can't keep a checkbook straight. They really tear into each other, letting it all hang out, before they make up.

THE ACTION of the show is told mainly in song and three numbers that follow in rapid succession to conclude Act I are "It's a Well Known Fact" (he's now in his 40s and thinks he's in his prime, while she's going over the hill), "Flaming Agnes" (where she gets a chance for revenge by breaking out of her housewifely bondage), and "The Honeycomb Is Over" they agree.

Actually Ms. Gurwin appears most in her element as "Flaming Agnes," being a gutsy performer who is more like the daring, widowed Agnes than a retiring wife.

The stage set is the bedroom, entered by the fourposter, for the entire two acts of "I Do! I Do!" A few changes of pace are provided by having the couple come down the aisle from the audience, for their wedding day and for their daughter's wedding. Ms. Gurwin does most of her costume changing offstage, while Esser seems to do most of his on. They're



Newlyweds Michael (Phil Marcus Esser) and Agnes (Nancy Gurwin) settle down in their own fourposter. (Staff photo by Harry Mauthe)

generally dressing for special occasions, which find him in a morning suit. Her dresses, said to include authentic old costumes, are not as figure-flattering as they might be, appearing to be somewhat baggy.

Until the couple apply make-up late in Act II, we're supposed to just imagine them growing older. The costume changes help establish this aging, as Ms. Gurwin's dresses go from old-fashioned styles to modern.

Esser, with his mustache and beard, is able to sustain an illusion of various ages better than Ms. Gurwin who, with her short blonde hair, looks as if she just came off the tennis court, despite being dressed in period costumes.

IN ACT II, the songs assume a poignancy in "Where Are the Snows?" "What Is a Woman?" and "Roll up the Ribbons." These remind you of the passing years and tell how husbands and wives see themselves and each other as their lives change. There are comic interludes, too, as in "When the Kids Get Married," a number where they pull out all their dreams, his including a violin and

hers a saxophone which they hope to have time to play, someday.

Ms. Gurwin got a big hand when she actually did play the tune they sang, complete with jarring wrong notes.

Another high spot of fun in the show is provided when you could see they were wearing taps on their shoes, but where could they dance? Esser ripped back the carpet and they tap danced on the floor of the stage. "I Do! I Do!" is directed by Edgar A. Guest II and wears the mark of his guest, Martin Mandelbaum as musical director. David Brian as choreographer and Michael Goodman as producer also contributed nicely to the theatrical package.

THE SATISFACTORY buffet dinner preceding the show offers a choice of relish-raw vegetables, fruit cup, tossed salad, fried chicken and rice, beef stroganoff, green beans, roll and butter, and small fruit tart. Cocktail service is provided before the show and during the intermission. Diners go to the buffet one table at a time to avoid congestion.

Hamill to skate

Dorothy Hamill, reigning queen of the ice, who performed before millions at the 1976 Olympics, will open an eight-day engagement at Detroit's Olympia on March 15.

Showtimes are 7:30 p.m. week nights, noon, 1 and 8 p.m. Saturday and 2 and 6 p.m. Sunday. The show runs through March 22.

Ms. Hamill's career all started because she wanted to learn to skate backwards, when she received her first pair of skates as an eight-year-old, at Christmas.

Twelve years later, the Riverside, Conn., girl has captured the Olympic Gold Medal and World Figure Skating Championship, signed for television specials—one to air March 2 on ABC, and is the box office smash of the Ice Capades, following the lead of Sonja Henie, Karen Magnusen, Peggy Fleming, and Janet Lynn. Tickets are on sale at the Olympia, Montgomery Ward stores, Olympia Travel (Birmingham) and Windsor Arena.

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