

5 actors rate as champs

By ETHEL SIMMONS

Review

First-rate performances of flesh-and-blood men make "That Championship Season," at Meadow Brook Theatre, a high point in local professional theater.

John Ulmer has directed an intense, fast-moving production of Jason Miller's triple-prize-winning, three-act play. The second act brings over with emotional revelations, but the first and third act also sustain the drama with taut vitality.

Meadow Brook has assembled its own championship team, in a cast where each performer successfully develops the character he portrays.

The drama is about winners and losers at life. Four state champions in basketball and their coach, 20 years later, see that championship as the pinnacle of their lives.

OUTWARDLY, three of the four buddies are still winners. One is the mayor of the town; another a junior high school principal and the mayor's campaign manager; the third a businessman with a suit, who is also backing the mayor financially.

The fourth is an acknowledged loser, a tragic alcoholic who has abandoned everything but the bottle, and periodically gets pulled back from the gutter by his responsible brother, the school principal.

The scene is set at the coach's house, in the Lackawanna Valley. The

coach is now in his 60s, but he still has fire in his eye when he gets together with his "boys."

The silver loving cup, with their names engraved on it, stands on a corner table in silent tribute to the past. Nothing has changed, says the coach, except the date.

But as the drama unfolds, we discover the facades, failed dreams and hopes of these victors of yesterday. The dialogue is powerful, with many of the finest, most ironic speeches going to the coach.

EACH ACTOR, however, has a chance to shine individually, holding the stage for his impassioned plea.

This is a drinking party, primarily, with everyone reaching for the whiskey bottle, or a can of beer. Action is not just a rehashing of the past, however. The drama is fluid motion, shifting alliances, as the men plot their own successes along with the mayor's bid for reelection.

Phil Vincent, as Phil Romano, who inherited his father's money and can buy his way out of anything but boredom, handles the swagger with bold assurance. He has a strong, exuberant scene which gives insight into Phil's emptiness.

Eric Tavaris is Tom Daley, the alco-

holic, who seems to diminish before our very eyes. He makes us see the man's fading strength, as the evening wears on with the drink gradually taking control.

Tavaris develops nuances in this role and even does a breathtaking fall down a flight of stairs with realism and skill. He gets many of the laugh lines in the show and is comically sardonic in a low key.

A LITTLE SMIRK that plays about his mouth seems overdone, however, creating uncertainty as to whether the character is amused, or Tavaris is laughing at his own lines.

Frederick Ainsworth is James Daley, Tom's brother, the educator. This carefully executed portrait is of an upright, disenchanted "good guy" who always played by the rules, at least outwardly.

Richard Jamieson comes on with believability in the early scenes, as the mayor, George Sikowski, who is a bit of a buffoon. His scenes are explosive ones, but the characterization seems to lose focus as George is intimidated by the other men.

Joseph Warren is superb as the Coach, who wraps up the excitement, capably pep-talking them, cajoling them, lambasting them.

"Time does strange things. It's high tide before you know it. High tide!" he shouts in anguished warning.



Eric Tavaris (left) and Frederick Ainsworth share sorrows in "That Championship Season."

Meadow Brook has recommended the play for adult audiences. The dialogue is frank, with four-letter words and phrases in keeping with the kind of talk that would pass between these guys.

"That Championship Season" continues through Dec. 3 at Meadow Brook Theatre in Rochester.



'Horseman' takes new approach to classic western

These have been lean years for westerns, as film makers search for a solution to the difficult problem of presenting the traditional motifs of the western (lawmen vs. outlaws, ranchers vs. homesteaders) in ways that will be acceptable to sophisticated, contemporary audiences.

Now we have two western movies appearing within the same month. "Coin South" used the bare-dirt comic approach. It exploited the humorous potential of grubby work, gross people and survival through a kind of rascally shrewdness.

On the heels, or hods, of "Coin South" is "Comes a Horseman" (PG), with a totally different approach, one based on romanticized realism.

The film was written by Dennis Lynton Clark who was born and raised on a ranch in Montana. His script emphasizes the awesome and terrifying beauty of the land that demands so many sacrifices from those who love it.

SET IN MONTANA in 1945 (although most of the location shooting was done in Colorado), "Comes a Horseman" is the story of small ranchers struggling to hang onto their land against the pressures of cattle barons and oil companies.

James Cagney is a returning World War II veteran who buys a piece of high valley grazing land and is immediately beset by hard times. He throws in his lot with neighboring rancher Jane Fonda and her grizzled ranch hand Dodge (Richard Farnsworth).

From one season to the next, they are able to round up just enough cattle to make the mortgage payment and stave off a takeover by power-mad cattle baron Jason Robards, who would like to own the whole valley.

Jane Fonda etches another remarkable characterization as Ella Connor, a proud and fiercely independent rancher. She can't smile, can't be tender, can't give an inch because the struggle for survival is too intense to permit such luxuries.

Cagney manages the delicate feat of projecting sincere and likeable male strength without sexist dominance. The most surprising portrayal though comes from Richard Farnsworth who plays Dodge. Farnsworth has been a Hollywood starman for most of his life. He has hardly ever recited more than a line of dialogue.

THERE IS AN uncanny naturalism about him. He looks like one of those weathered, self-of-the-earth people from an Andrew Wyeth painting. His voice, inflections, movements are just right. It's the kind of honesty that post-war Italian directors achieved when they used non-actors for major roles.

All this is brought together by Gordon Willis' photography which gives impressive visual impact to Clark's screenplay. It is the great strength in a film that is not without its problems.

One of these is the obscure nature of Ewing, the cattle baron played by Jason Robards. Ewing is vaguely defined and enigmatic. We are unprepared and unable to accept his actions at the film's end.

Another problem is the ending itself which condescends to the shoot-em-up mentality. It's an unnecessary finale in a film that has already made its point, eloquently.

Glimpses

NEW RELEASES

THE BIG FIX (PG). Another fetching performance by Richard Dreyfuss who plays a former college activist turned private eye.

BLOODBROTHERS (R). Hard look at lives of two blue-collar brothers whose macho values affect their families.

BOYS FROM BRAZIL (R). Quality cast with Gregory Peck as arch villain distinguishes film of Ira Levin's novel about fiendish plot by Nazi criminals in South America.

DEATH ON THE NILE (PG). A highly decorative and entertaining film of the Agatha Christie mystery with Peter Ustinov as Hercule Poirot and a large, splendid cast.

GIRL FRIENDS (PG). Melanie Mayron and Anita Skinner star in Claude Weill's directorial debut that focuses on marriage versus career.

GOIN' SOUTH (PG). Fine character study by Jack Nicholson in adventure that proves there's still hope for the Western.

INTERIORS (PG). Woody Allen's serious film explores the tensions within a family where neuroses and artistic sensitivity dominate their lives.

NATIONAL LAMPOON'S ANIMAL HOUSE (R). Outrageous and raunchy comedy about life at Delta Fraternity House, the bottom-of-the-barrel fraternity on a small college campus in the early '60s.

SEPTEMBER 30, 1955 (PG). Richard Thomas stars in wistful reminiscence of the '50s set at time of James Dean's death.

SOMEBODY KILLED HER HUSBAND (PG). Silly comedy-mystery as Farrah Fawcett-Majors and Jeff Bridges search for the somebody of the title.

UP IN SMOKE (R). Dope jokes from Cheech and Chong who celebrate the weed in their usual gross manner.

A WEDDING (PG). All the action takes place in one day as director Robert Altman dissects "the last of our country's big rituals."

WHO IS KILLING THE GREAT CHEFS OF EUROPE (PG). Comedy-mystery with George Segal as fast food franchiser and Jacqueline Bisset as master dessert chef.

MOVIE RATING GUIDE

- G General audiences admitted.
- PG Parental guidance suggested. All ages admitted.
- R Restricted. Adults must accompany person under 18.
- X No one under 18 admitted.



Private investigator Moses Wine (Richard Dreyfuss) enjoys a light moment with Lila Shea (Susan Anspach) in "The Big Fix."

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