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Getting Around By ETHEL SIMMONS

Partners take chance on trade publication

West Bloomfield actor Ron Merkin and Birmingham theater technician Bob Campbell are co-publishers of a new trade paper called Audition Detroit.

The two men are putting together the third issue of the monthly, which should hit the newsstands around mid-November. The first issue of Audition Detroit, aimed at the entertainment and media production industries, was 12 pages; the October issue was 24 pages. "We'd like to keep it at 24," Merkin said.

Audition Detroit tells what's happening in stage, dance, music, and action, film, video, TV and radio. Articles are all by professionals in their fields.

Explaining how the partners decided to put the publication together, Merkin said, "We wanted to find out where the work was ourselves. The other way was by word of mouth. Now we've got a centralized organization."

CRITIQUE The first issue of Audition Detroit, he said, "More information, more auditions, more graphics and photographs, better use of white space" were to be included in subsequent issues.

Area theatergoers saw Merkin perform in Meadow Brook Theatre's recent production of "The School for Scandal." "My role was listed officially as 'Charles' best friend.' It's an extra role, but I had lines and got to sing."

Merkin's co-publisher, Campbell, has worked at Meadow Brook Theatre and Southfield Repertory Theatre. He has been a stage manager, company manager and filled other behind-the-scenes roles.

The target audience for Audition Detroit is estimated at 100,000, based on membership in professional unions in the performing arts, as well as nonunion professionals, performers in community theater and others.

PRICED AT 75 cents, Audition Detroit is available at Metro News on Maple and Telegraph, Bloomfield Township; Eyebrows on Northwestern and Orchard Lake Road, West Bloomfield; and Paperback Unlimited, Nine Mile and Woodward in Ferndale, among area locations.

"We need the support of the industry," Merkin said. For information about yearly subscriptions, call the Audition Detroit offices at Eleven Mile and Coolidge in Berkley at 544-7440.

"OH CASHABLANCA" is the opening show in Michigan's first dinner theater series offered by season's production. Performances begin Friday and Saturday, Nov. 9-10, at Mr. Mac's Stables, a Macus restaurant in Dearborn.

Russ Harvey of Ortonville wrote the book, music and lyrics for 12 songs in the original musical, which will have its world premiere at a Theatre of the Arts production.

A former Rochester resident, Harvey is a salesman for a kitchen design firm and still works in the Rochester area. "Oh Cashablanca" is the third show he has written.

"Oh Cashablanca" was written especially for dinner theater. It is Harvey's first show in the professional area. "I decided dinner theater was a good forte in the Detroit area," he said. "No writers were writing for dinner theater. Sometimes shows seem to be Broadway vehicles restricted."

The title "Oh Cashablanca" is a takeoff on Humphrey Bogart's film classic "Casablanca." "The Cash" has nothing to do with money but refers to Bogart's lips.

THE SHOW is being promoted as "the musical Bogart never made." Harvey said, "It's a combination of a number of the movies he made, especially 'Casablanca' and 'The Maltese Falcon.' Both were excellent movies. I felt a spoof was in order."

Del Howison of Birmingham stars as Sham (a lipped "Sam") Shovel, a "private ear" who uses listening devices. One of the songs in the show is "Sham, the Private Ear Man."

Performances of "Oh Cashablanca," with a cast of seven, continue Fridays and Saturdays through December. For details about the dinner theater series call Theatre of the Arts headquarters in Troy at 649-0903.

ON STAGE, the yet-unpainted set has been constructed for the Birmingham Theatre production of "The Gin Game." In the theater, workmen are recovering and reassembling any of the seats that needed repair.

Floor-level box seats, at either side of the theater, have been installed; these had been planned by Fuller and Deeb before the theater was leased to the Nederlanders.

Soon all will be ready for the Birmingham Theatre's first production of the season under operation by Nederlander Theatrical Enterprises. "The Gin Game" starring Larry Gates and Phyllis Thaxter opens Tuesday, Nov. 20, and will run through mid-December.

Rehearsals for "The Gin Game" began in New York three-four weeks ago. Mindy Farbrother, stage manager for the Birmingham Theatre, has been working with the production in New York.

The Birmingham Theatre will build all its own sets for the season's shows, which include Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap," the Tony Award winning "The Elephant Man," and a comedy, to be announced.

DEBORAH HAZLETT is costume and set designer for "The Gin Game." The theater's staff also includes Jerry Janestick, lighting designer, and James Ray, master carpenter.

According to Bonnie Garvin, public relations director, many of the staff are young people under 30.

Stage manager Ms. Farbrother and designer Ms. Hazlett both have worked on shows at Detroit's Hilberry and Attie theaters.

Young master carpenter Ray "has trained with the finest set designers in the country," Ms. Garvin said.

"People are on their own, but under the auspices of the Nederlanders. Harry Nederlander is in charge of daily workings of the Birmingham Theatre. He is in his office in the Birmingham Theatre Building every day."

GENERAL MANAGER is Charlotte Lally, who has worked with Harry Nederlander for many years. House manager is Edward Townley of Birmingham, actor and a freelance theater critic for the Observer & Eccentric.

Decision on shows and casting for the Birmingham Theatre production are being done out of the Nederlander offices in New York. Rehearsals will begin in New York, with performers ready for technical run-throughs when they arrive in Birmingham.

"The Gin Game," which has ended its Broadway run, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1978. A bittersweet comedy by D.L. Coburn, it

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Vonnegut satirical comedy starts slow but finishes fast

By CHRISTINE BURKLI-BERY

After a warm-up first act, the Student Enterprise Theatre (SET) production of "Happy Birthday, Wanda June" turned out to be a real play.

"Happy Birthday, Wanda June," a three-act satirical comedy by Kurt Vonnegut Jr., opened Friday in the Barn Theatre, Oakland University. The play will be performed again Friday-Sunday, Nov. 9-11 and 16-18. Curtain time is 8:30 and 6:30 p.m., Nov. 11 and 18; 8:30 p.m. Nov. 9, and 8:30 p.m. on Nov. 16.

Originally titled "Penelope," "Happy Birthday, Wanda June" is about a modern hero who, unlike Odysseus, becomes "obscure" and "comical." Randall Forté is the director of the SET production.

Some of the cast, particularly Garrett Albright as Harold Ryan and Karen Swantek as Penelope Ryan, had opening night jitters. Albright, an OU graduate from Royal Oak, stumbled on his lines a few times. Ms. Swantek, a senior at OU who appeared in "West Side Story" and "Godspell" at the Barn, froze her character.



Harold Ryan (Garrett C. Albright) is a macho hunter and Penelope Ryan (Karen L. Swantek) is his wife in the Student Enterprise Theatre production of "Happy Birthday, Wanda June."

Review

FORTE PERCEIVES Penelope as always being sympathetic or sexy for someone else. This is the traditional female role which Vonnegut wanted to criticize. Ms. Swantek never allows her Penelope to grow although the character does change in the play. Penelope eventually becomes secure enough to feel for herself and consequently leaves Harold.

Ms. Swantek is more natural in her acting when Penelope first sees Harold after eight years. In a state of shock, she rejects Harold's commands for affection and tells him, "My mind is blown."

Albright plays out the hero image superbly. His voice is booming and masterful. His mannerisms — strutting around with hands on hips and making flamboyant gestures — are typical here.

At the end of Act I, Harold says, "There is no question as to whose home this is... whose son this is, whose wife that is." At this point Albright is into his character, portraying a man who treats people like possessions. Then in act III, when he admonishes everyone else for treating possessions like people, one is really able to feel how absurd this hero is.

Mel Gilroy is Colonel Loosleaf Harper, Harold's sidekick. Gilroy's performance is overblowing with feeling. He shows the often confusing emotions of an unwilling hero who dropped the bomb on Nagasaki during World War II.

GILROY is a great storyteller, especially when explaining his reasons for dropping the bomb. Even his "I dunno" tells exactly what he's thinking. He really doesn't know and that is real life. Krystyn Loucks plays the part of Wanda June, the girl run over by an ice cream truck and sent to heaven.

Krystyn is 10 years old and attends Hickory Grove School in the Bloomfield Hills School District. She

appeared in "South Pacific" and "The King and I" among others.

Krystyn does a fine job of playing a fun-loving, innocent girl. She delivers her lines with confidence. Her expressions — wide eyes and broad smile — give away the lightheartedness of a "sugar and spice and everything nice" girl in heaven.

Matt Tomlanovich and Bill Horwath as Herb Shuttle and Dr. Wordley, Penelope's two suitors, clearly show the different attitudes society has toward heroes. They are a delightful contrast to each other.

Horwath's nervous gestures are a little too much in the first act, and often his voice is so low it can't be heard. But, the last scene, where he begs Harold not to kill him, is exceptionally well done.

IT IS A DIFFICULT scene but Horwath brings it off with grace. The effect on the audience is stunning. The audience is totally involved.

The sets, heaven and the Ryan home, are designed by Thomas Aston and Jerry Back. Back's home set is excellent. It fulfills the expectations of a legendary hero's home.

There are carabao and ram heads and an animal hide on the walls. The chairs and couch are made of leopard skin and leather. Around the room are hung weapons: swords, guns and an ax. The set is roomy and the actors move in it comfortably.

The heaven set isn't the usual clouds, angels and golden gates, but Vonnegut's vision of heaven isn't usual. Aston's heaven, set on top of the Ryan home, is scantily decorated with flower pots and leafy, flowing vines. The set is scattered and makes the action taking place there scattered.

Thirty minutes before each performance, beginning at 8 p.m., the history of the Meadow Brook estate, particularly the Barn, is explored with a slide presentation. The concept of using a barn for a theater is different and it is interesting to find out how it all began.

'Prisoner' done with great polish

By BARBARA MICHALS

In their current production of Neil Simon's "The Prisoner of Second Avenue," the Farmington Players have achieved a theatrical tour de force.

Review

Ralph Rosati and Judie Tibbitts, the lead players, are so skillful and so polished they may be setting new standards of excellence for community theater. While the supporting players are generally competent, they are no match for the professionalism of the leads.

Director Nancy Harrower has done an exceptionally fine job of moving the main scenes along at a brisk and pleasing pace. Only the little between-scene sketches in front of the curtain break the smoothness of the show and do not contribute effectively.

"The Prisoner of Second Avenue" continues at the Farmington Playhouse on Thursday-Sunday, Nov. 8-11, and Thursday-Saturday, Nov. 15-17. Curtain time is 8:30 p.m.

"PRISONER" is a tragicomedy about a New York City couple facing a serious mid-life crisis. Mel Edison (Rosati) is a 47-year-old ad executive who suffers a nervous breakdown after losing his job. While Mel is struggling to recover, his wife Edna (Ms. Tibbitts) experiences a similar crisis.

The Edisons' problems are attributed to their demoralizing urban environment. Their dissatisfaction with their expensive high-rise apartment on Second Avenue mirrors their general anxieties.

Nothing seems to go right for them — the air-conditioning freezes them out of the bedroom, the toilet won't stop flushing, the walls are cracking and the neighbors are noisy and rude. On top of all that, they can still smell

the garbage and hear traffic noises on the 14th floor, the superintendent is never around when he's needed, and burglars clean out the apartment in five minutes flat.

Is this material for a comedy? Neil Simon strongly suggests that laughter may be the best — and perhaps the only — medicine for our times.

AS EDNA, Ms. Tibbitts does an especially fine job of capturing the voice inflections and mannerisms of a Manhattanite. Though she strives to maintain stability and reasonableness while Mel flounders in despair, it is not surprising that she, too, eventually succumbs to a massive anxiety attack.

Rosati's expressive face reflects Mel's confusion and weariness. When Mel's nervous breakdown is at its worst, Rosati resists the temptation to convey his distress for laughs. Both Rosati and Ms. Tibbitts are totally convincing in their characterizations and flawless in their delivery.

Of the supporting actors, John Powers is the most effective as Mel's brother Harry. He, too, does a good job with the New York inflections. Kind-hearted Harry wants only the best for his brother, even though he is still jealous of Mel having always been the family favorite.

Joyce Moore, Kathleen Monticello and Susan Redmond are amusing as Mel's three widowed sisters who are more expansive with their tears than with their checkbooks. Ms. Moore (Pearl) is the most believable of the sisters, while Ms. Monticello (Pearl) uses facial expressions to good advantage.

As the radio announcers in the between-scene interludes, John Knock and Steve Kachmarczyk give tenuous performances, but the fault is at least partly in the script.

Don Briggs has designed an especially handsome set for the Edisons' apartment, and all other technical aspects of the show are in keeping with the high caliber of the performers.

Mindless fun sparks 'Exit the Body'

By GAY ZIEGER

No one can foretell the composition of a given audience nor predict what will spark the chemistry between player and viewer. Perhaps it is this unknown that adds to the mystique of the theater that makes it so immediate, so magical.

That elusive element was present in Saturday night's performance of "Exit the Body" by the Will-O-Way Repertory Company. The audience accepted the unacceptable, applauded the implausible and embraced the impossible.

They laughed when the players floundered about in the dark with flashlights, walking backwards into each other, and when the actors said, in response to a neighbor's "Yoo-hoo!" things like, "Sounds like a bog at mating time." Pure "Petitotian" stuff, but it elicited a positive response.

Performances of the play by Fred Carmichael continue Fridays and Saturdays at 8:30 p.m. at Will-O-Way. Apprentice theater in Bloomfield Township.

Review

early theater. It has not a shred of sophistication, sometimes bordering on being plain stupid. It tells of a writer of sexy mysteries who, along with her city-smart secretary, seeks respite in the country for a month. She rents a house with an unheated porch, one where the previous renter has been murdered, the jewels have been hidden.

This house comes complete with a special closet containing a secret door leading to a library. Most of the action centers around this closet which, during the course of the play, yields up assorted bodies.

The bodies evoke screams, the audience jumps, and everyone is happy. The play is blatantly manipulative and no one minds a bit.

Credit for this must go to the director, Celia Merrill Turner, and to the cast, which outshines the vehicle. The casting of the two main characters was effective.

Betty Hancock as the author displayed self-assurance, confidence and warmth. One would like to read her novels. She was witty and her rendition of "The Raven" in mellifluous tones was a highlight.

Serving as a perfect foil, Eileen T. Weiss was quick and sprightly. One familiar with this company might see a "Taming of the Shrew" residual in this performance, but after awhile her stridency was tempered. She managed to convey the secretary's sardonic quality without losing the necessary element of femininity.

A STRONG THIRD character was played by Robert Rucker, taxi driver, deliverer of manure and local constable, who incarcerated prisoners in his bathroom — out back. Rucker elected to have a kind of laid-back, understated, Vermont delivery, much to his credit. He came across as a man of few words spoken often, a combination that seems contradictory but somehow works.

His counterpart was the town's real estate agent, Sheila T. Weiss. Ms. Weiss

succeeded in conveying a slightly innocent, fresh, open-faced quality. She truly seemed enamored of square dancing and excited at the prospect of having the noted author's face appear on cans of locally produced sap at the yearly festival.

Another duo provided comedic adeptness. Linda Silverstein as the housekeeper, shivered and quaked nervously, showing real understanding of a person in a frantic state. Her boyfriend, a petty crook who follows an instruction manual, was played well by William Spearman.

His tough-guy, Brooklyn dialect could use some polish, but even that became tolerable.

Elaine Keimert, Buzz Turner, Harry Gesund and George Martin all had small roles, but they added nicely to the general tone set by the main characters.

"Exit the Body" might have been more suitably titled "Exit the Mind." It is not substantive theater but somehow it chills and amuses. Subsequent performances will be presented on weekends through Nov. 17.

"EXIT THE BODY" is a return to