

Area dinner theaters offer lively music



Nancy Gurwin as Fanny Brice enjoys a romantic interlude with Joe Lannen as Nick Arnstein in the Nancy Gurwin Production of the Broadway musical hit "Funny Girl" at the Paradise Dinner Theatre.

Everything's tops at 'Funny Girl'

By GAY ZIEGLER

Once in a great while, very rarely, it all comes together. A perfect dish magically emerges from the diverse ingredients boiling in the cauldron. So it was Saturday night at the Paradise Dinner Theatre's presentation of "Funny Girl." The evening was outstanding. The Nancy Gurwin Production of "Funny Girl" continues Fridays and Saturdays through New Year's Eve.

The ambience of the restaurant, while never objectionable, has improved 73 percent. The service, still dignified and courteous, seemed less hurried.

This is due in part to the switch to buffet style which allows for self-timing. There was the opportunity to have two leisurely drinks, talk and speculate about the crowd.

IT WAS OBVIOUS that the group was congenial, chatty and ready for a good time.

The trip to the salad bar, and later to the dinner trays, was quite an experi-

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ence. The fare, though ranging from mediocre to quite good, was abundant, and those partaking were allowed unlimited visitations.

There was a pleaser for every palate, whether the person be a gourmand (liver stroganoff, ringed salmon pate, meatballs in wine sauce, an Italian sausage dish), a vegetarian (myriad salads — potato, jello, cole slaw, vegetable, fruit) or an eater of light entrees (fried fish, ham, chicken). There also were assorted cheeses, breads, relishes — a true groaning board.

And then there was the play. Edgar A. Guest III, director, and Nancy Gurwin, star, have put together a class A production. From the first toe tap to the last crescendo, the audience is captivated.

The show is vibrant, alive, pleasing to the ear, and tickling to the funny

bone. Not for one moment could Ms. Gurwin, as Fannie Brice, be accused of "doing" Barbara. If anything, she perfected the Streisand interpretation by being less strident.

Her timing, her stage movements, her music, her line delivery, made everyone aware of her talent. She was the show.

BUT SHE WAS BACKED by one heck of a cast. After a while every face elicited a warm feeling from us. Some parts were small, but all exuded energy. The dancers for example, needed to recreate a Ziegfeld Follies production on a 12 by 19 1/2-foot stage — and they did it. They did it without making us feel cheated by the necessary scaling down. They gave us big time in a small space. All the grandeur was there.

The supporting actors played off Ms. Gurwin and showed a real affinity for each other. Irene Jordan, as the ultimate Jewish mother, showed strength and pride and humor. She was a real presence on the stage.

The trip to the salad bar, would-be-suitor, Dennis East, gave a performance

which did not once lapse into all-too-easy self pity. One wished that he had not been thusly thwarted, and he danced superbly.

Ms. Gurwin's dream man, Joe Lannen, looked and acted as a dream man should. He was tall with big features and had an air of elegance and suavity. At first his voice didn't match his appearance, but when called upon to be angry, he was grandly so.

A real trouper in the area, Dike Dwelly, with 40 years of theater experience behind him, played Flo Ziegfeld with a combined hauteur warmth, probably epitomizing the man himself.

LILAH MILLER, as Mrs. Straksh, the poker-playing friend of Mrs. Brice who thought the good life was having a husband and a good butcher, added even more fun to the show. In all, the evening was most satisfying.

"Funny Girl" ends its stay New Year's Eve with a big "See Out the Old" celebration, complete with champagne, hats, and favors, and a dance orchestra afterwards.

'Cashablanca' has bright pace

By ERIC PETERS

"Oh, Cashablanca" is the delightful season opener for Theatre of the Arts dinner theater subscription series at Mr. Mac's Stable, Dearborn.

It is a comedy of Humphrey Bogart movie clichés set to music, a certainly amusing, often funny, entirely entertaining device written by Russ Harvey, directed by Greg Tatum and produced by Mike Kite.

A solo piano plays in the darkened, candle-flickering restaurant. One could be in the disreputable Cafe Continental. The fun that follows is like a reflection in a rough-cut glass, a sentimentalized, somewhat softened picture of the immortal film genre of Bogart, Greenstreet, and Lorré.

"Oh, Cashablanca," continues Friday and Saturday evenings through Dec. 29 at the Matus restaurant in the Parklane Towers.

The show is a mishmash of spoof and satire, at worst half-baked and lumpy. At best, it is full of word play and puns, colored with a sprinkling of off-color innuendo, a dash of slapstick, a splash of wisecracking banter.

INDEED, there are times it nearly verges on thoughts of the "Goon Show" (that British radio madhouse which showcased Peter Sellers and Spike Milligan). Here the madcap is well toned down and tempered by a generous load of romantic affection for the Bogart "style."

There is a marvelously indecipherable plot, well in keeping with most of Bogie's real reels. Frequent descriptive forays into Bogie's exotic past — somehow holds the whole tenuous creation together.

It is true, the songs are a mile west, the dancing mostly mock revue, but a varied mix of musical periods matched to an eclectic storyline and some awfully clever lyrics display an obvious pool of talent in the person of Russ Harvey who did all three: music, book and lyrics.

Not, however, without the collaboration of pianist and musical director Rebecca Wheeler and a very good cast.

ACTION BEGINS in the seedy office of Sham Sovel (pronounced Shovel, as in Spade). Del Howison is our hero, a milder, mellower Bogart decked out in T-shirt, suspenders and shoulder holster.

Sham deduces his clients' problems by the way they knock at his door. Despite his proclivity for shrewd psychological insights, he fails at first to distinguish between one dame and another, between this story and all his other stories. Mistakenly we wait for a time if Sham is really up to unraveling the clues which fall into his lap, as he is

always being distracted to excavations of his past adventures.

In this instance, two women are looking for a two-faced crook who is the image of the positive and negative in his own dual nature. He, in turn, is hunting a valuable bird, the Mongolian Manglee, which just naturally contains a fabulous gem. And away we go.

"Oh Cashablanca" is amusingly self-deprecating, with attention to the presence of the audience. It is updated to current times, yet firmly rooted in the celluloid past.

Bogie's famous lip, as mimicked by the other characters, is an enjoyable gimmick, and Sham is himself given to some Bunkerque malapropisms, perhaps acquired over the years from his dim "shidekick" Pedro Lorry. Dave McDonald plays the doglike second fiddle, bearded like a second Fidel, dressed like Pancho Villa in sombrero and a bullet belt filled with lollipops.

Mysha, a stunning German "shpy," is Laurie Wilking whose wonderful stage presence endows that mysterious lady with measured grace and elegance. Ravishing and inimitable, this most stylish and subtly seductive of heroines has worn Sham in her heart ever since they last parted at the mist-shrouded airport at Cashablanca. She means to have him or else.

Carol Jayne is the tough treacherous Leila White, a Shelley Winters with Mae West delivery. She epitomizes the big-busted, bleached blonde broad with all the sincerity of a gun runner's moll. Leila, like Mysha, tries to seduce Sham into her employ in a search for that bottom line of the criminal underworld, one Sidney Schnodgreff.

SCINODGREFF is a decidedly bizarre vision, a half-demented figure done up by Greg Tatum with gusto, brashness and bravado. The villain comes complete with a terrific deontological laugh and physical fits, which remind one of a Dr. Strangelove sans wheelchair.

When he is on the stage, he sweeps everything before him including the plot which is mostly his task, in occasional lucid moments, to unwind.

Paula Kline does a simply splendid array of characters, most deliciously as the cigarette girl, Ricki, with an adorable nasal twang in her voice. She is a scrumptious bit of crumpet with the longest legs in the Northern Hemisphere dangling beneath the shortest skirt in the West. Ricki is the penultimate soda shop waitress.

Ms. Kline is also a quirky wire-tapper, called Maybelle Mawbellah, who has lived for seven years behind Sham's sofa without his realizing it; and an automatic ticket dispenser which plays a key role in resolving the crime.

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'Gypsy' makes the most of small stage, big talent

By BARBARA MICHALS

Boasting a cast of 15 and lots of razzle-dazzle, "Gypsy" is currently running Friday and Saturday evenings in a dinner theater format at the Pontiac-Bloomfield Sheraton Motor Inn.

It's an impressive achievement, combining some outstanding talent with an amazingly skillful utilization of a small stage.

The minuscule platform stage in the center of the Sheraton's main dining room seems ideally suited to a two-character play rather than a full-scale musical complete with a tap-dancing chorus.

Somewhat Margie Montross, the show's director and choreographer, manages to keep everything running smoothly and the cast members from tripping over one another.

"GYPSY" is one of those happy musicals where both the songs and the story hold up well to repeated viewings. Based on the memoirs of stripteasee Rose, though, is on Gypsy's mother Rose, the epitome of the pesty backstage mother.

Ann Lynas is a dynamic Rose, belting out the Julie Styne-Stephen Sondheim songs as if they were tailor-made for her. She is simply marvelous with numbers like "Small World, Isn't It," "I Had a Dream" and "Every-gone Gypsy Rose Lee, the play traces Gypsy's somewhat unhappy childhood. An eventual rise to stardom. The real

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thing's Coming 'Up Rose." Her acting ability is equally top-notch.

Through some very rough times, Rose's indomitable spirit holds together the ragged little vaudeville troupe featuring her two young daughters. A frustrated performer herself, she foists her own aspirations onto her daughters, whose lives she wants to control relentlessly.

As Louise, the awkward, untalented girl who turns into Gypsy Rose Lee, Susan Powell is also outstanding. She handles herself well in such musical numbers as "If Mama Was Married" and "Let Me Entertain You," her voice progressing from shy and sweet to polished and powerful as Gypsy gains more confidence in herself.

With subtle gestures and facial expressions, Ms. Powell is especially good at conveying the young girl's heartaches and longings.

LINDA BERGLER does a fine job as June, Gypsy's younger sister who is favored by mama because she is blond and the prettier and the more talented of the two girls. She is still playing "Baby June" when she is well into womanhood, finally eloping to escape from her mother's domination.

Jack Gardner is appropriately sedate and rock-steady as Herbie,

Rose's boyfriend who takes over as manager of the family's vaudeville act but never really succeeds at managing Rose. Gardner is a little awkward in his few musical numbers, but he is a convincing actor, radiating the warmth and love that Gypsy so badly needs but doesn't get from her mother.

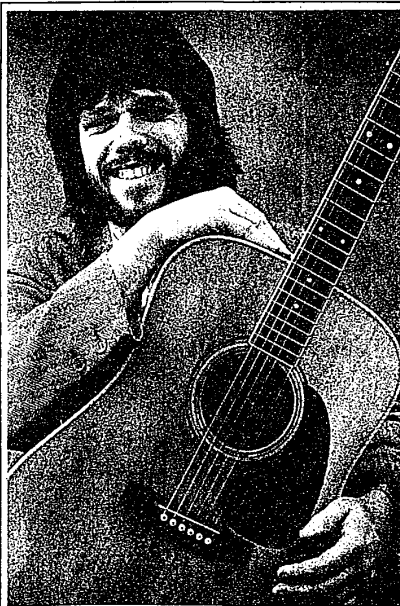
All the supporting players make strong contributions. Barbara Rosalik is particularly appealing as Tessie, the kindly stripper who befriends young Gypsy and teaches her the tricks of the trade. Duane Shaw and Mark Hummill show their versatility in a multiplicity of character roles.

Ms. Montross and assistant choreographer Chuck Thompson do some slick things with their talented tap-dancers. In fact, everything about the production is slick.

Costumes are lavish by most community theater standards, and the many costume and scene changes are accomplished swiftly and smoothly. Lighting is used effectively, and entrances and exits are graceful despite the obstacles of dining tables.

THE PRE-SHOW dinner features a pleasant choice of five entrees: prime rib of beef, breast of chicken Kiev, flounder stuffed with crabmeat, veal parmigian, and shrimp Polynesian.

Dinners include tossed salad, rolls, baked potato, vegetable and dessert. Only Saturday night's rather tasteless cherry tarts lacked the showmanship that marked the rest of the evening.



Tom Lee is one of the performers who will appear in "Love the Children," a benefit concert at Friday's. (Staff photo by Dick Kelley)

UNICEF benefit slated

Tom Lee, songwriter who wrote "Love the Children," will be among the entertainers appearing in a benefit for UNICEF from 7:30-10:30 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 9, at Friday's in West Bloomfield.

The "Music for UNICEF" concert with comedy is being called "Love the Children," after the song title.

Also performing will be Phil Marcus Sauer and Rose Rizzo. Comedy Comics who will appear include Eddie Jaffe, Sheila Kaye, Mark Kornhauser and Mark Sweet.

Friday's is located at 4305 Orchard Lake Road in the Pine Lake Mall. All tickets are \$5. Further information is available by calling Friday's at 851-2522.

THE SONG "Love the Children" ("To this old world/the children bring/ life to hold song to sing/love is born/it's happening/love the children") was written after seeing "all the love my mom gave to raise my brother, who is 8 years old," according to Tom Lee.

Lee comes from a family of five boys; his parents live in Bloomfield Hills. Currently he is performing, playing guitar and singing, at Piker's in Rochester and Shady and at Friday's. "I do folk, a lot of original material, standards, a little rock and roll, ballads, sea shanties, Irish songs and pop tunes," he said.