

# Avon Players grows with expanding community

By DONALD V. CALAMIA

If a community's growth and increased demand for services can be paralleled by the rapid development of its amateur theatre, then the Avon Players has established itself at the forefront of the '80s.

"The goal of the Avon Players," said the group's Vice President of Communications, Hank Liese, "is to provide quality entertainment to a community that is demanding it more and more."

Ten years ago we had to practically give our tickets away, and today we have people becoming members just so they can get season subscriptions to our show, which are now at a premium. It's a sign in the rise of community theatre's popularity as well as a signal of the phenomenal growth of the Rochester area."

Currently, the Avon Players sell 1,000 subscriptions each season, which

accounts for about three-quarters of the total seating capacity for each of its productions.

INCORPORATED IN 1947, the players performed its shows in various schools throughout its first 18 years of existence. Then, in the fall of 1965, the Avon Players Playhouse was opened for business.

"The players decided it was finally time to have its own theatre," Liese said, "and the community responded to that need. The city sold bonds towards building the theatre, and we think it's one of the finest in the state."

The playhouse, which stands on Washington Road, has its A-frame shell built by a professional contractor, but the insides were finished by dedicated members. The playhouse boasts a 140-seat house, a spacious lobby, extensive sound and lighting equipment, dressing and rehearsal areas, and plenty of fly-space above the stage for scenery.

**'An interesting chemistry exists between the young and the old in our group, as the older members have become our teachers. We're learning the trade from the old-timers while we are introducing new ideas to them.'**

—Hank Liese of the Avon Players

Currently, the Avon Players has 325 members, of which 100 are active.

"Most of our members come from Oakland and Avon Townships and the City of Rochester," said Liese, "but we also have members in Southfield, Berkley and Troy. In fact, many of the older couples who have moved away to such places as Florida have retained their memberships with the group."

Linda Harris, vice president of finance for the last four years, said, "Our group, like all community theatres, has a good cross-section of people

from all walks of life. We have doctors, lawyers, teachers and outworkers in the group, all of whom have an avid interest in being involved in theatre."

According to Liese, the players are experiencing an influx of younger members who are bringing new ideas into the group. "An interesting chemistry exists between the young and the old in our group, as the older members have become our teachers."

"We're learning the trade from the old-timers while we are introducing

new ideas to them. Both are necessary for our survival."

"Of course, some 20 and 30 year veterans are still active with us, but many of them want to rest. They deserve to sit back and enjoy what they've built up over the years. It's now up to the younger members to carry on the traditions."

The Avon Players is an informal group, the two vice presidents agreed, with members who are friendly and always outgoing. The social element of the group, they insist, is vital to the group.

"My wife and I met most of the people we know in Rochester through the players," recalled Liese. "The social activities are our drawing power."

Several pot-luck dinners are held each year to which all members are invited. After the dinner is finished, company business is discussed and special entertainment is presented.

"OUR MOST RECENT pot-luck dinner was unique," Liese said, "as it was the first in a long time to feature a theme. Everyone came dressed up in circus garb and we were entertained by clowns, jugglers and even a tap-dancing elephant. Everyone had a marvelous time."

The group also puts on an annual Christmas party and avails itself each year to help raise money for worthy charities through benefit performances of shows.

"Working towards that final goal of putting on a good show is what has developed within us is not just to be on stage. A good portion of the group loves to work behind the scenes and works harder than anyone else. The whole group's strive towards perfection is what we're all about."

"Like many others," Mr. Harris said, "being on stage is not my thing. I'm one

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## Pianist discovered again, making music at the Hilton

By JIM WINDELL

People have been discovering Jimmy Dixon for many years.

He has been a regular along with his trio at the Troy Hilton's Haymarket Lounge for six months. Dixon was just what Denis Frey, food and beverage manager of the Troy Hilton, was looking for.

When Frey, a Birmingham resident, took over the hotel and restaurant complex, he found that the business had lost a lot of local trade and seemed to be catering to mostly out-of-town businessmen.

"Jimmy Dixon," Frey said, "was part of what we tried to accomplish here." That, he goes on to explain, is a friendly, warm atmosphere with quality entertainment.

Dixon's friend and manager, Seymour Schwartz, comments that Dixon "fits this room perfectly."

WHAT CUSTOMERS at the Haymarket Lounge discover is a friendly, gracious man behind a 50-year-old Steinway piano in the center of the intimate lounge. Dixon is the focal point and sets the tone for the amiable setting with both his personality and his piano music.

Friendliness with the customers is as easy for Dixon as his broad grin and the delicious melodies that glide smoothly from his fingertips.

The Steiway is symbolic of the darkened atmosphere and the particular ambience sought by Frey. The piano possesses one of the most richly resonant sounds you are likely to hear in a lounge piano. It is kept well-tuned, and this pleases Dixon, a pianist with a long classical background prior to his jazz career.

Starting out as a classical musician



**JIMMY DIXON**

fashion. The theme dissolved into an improvised middle section and then returned to the melody. "I try to make the tunes flexible to the point where they are recognizable," he said with a broad smile. "Then I go into my contemporary bit before I pull it all back to where we began."

Helping him do that are two long-time associates. Bass player Billy Durell, who plays an electric upright bass, and sensitive drummer Donald Webb. The trio plays together on Friday and Saturday nights, while Dixon plays solo piano Tuesday-Thursday from 6:30 to 11 p.m.

AS A HIGH SCHOOL student, Jimmy Dixon had a woman piano teacher who taught him in the styles of one of the most genteel swingers of the modern jazz pianists. Teddy Wilson, with his prematurely grey hair and his courtly manners, was a favorite with the Benny Goodman bands of the '30s

and later became the father of the jazz-tinged cocktail pianist. He was also a deft pianist with a polite and propulsive style.

It was this style that Dixon learned. He also has some of the suavity and color of Wilson as both a pianist and as a personality.

In the last 15 to 20 years, Dixon has played at so many Detroit and Dearborn piano clubs and lounges, the list reads like a history of fine Detroit nightspots: Airport, Hilton, Sheraton, Boardwalk, Ralph's, Bourbon Street, Diamond Jim's, Golden Lion, Left Bank, Town Pub, Adam's Body Shop, Wonder Bar.

He also has appeared on records behind musical luminaries like Eddie Jefferson, Mahalia Jackson, Stevie Wonder and The Supremes. In live dates he played behind Joe Henderson, Al Hillel and Dakota State.

When Count Basie brought his band in for the Detroit Institute of Arts fall fund raiser called the Bal African, Jimmy Dixon was the intermission pianist filling the Count's seat on the piano bench.

Dixon's experience as a lounge pianist is wider than just Detroit. In the '60s, like many another jazz pianist, he headed for New York. "My main intention is going to New York," Dixon said, "was to be able to work constantly and with some well-known musicians."

IN HIS YEAR in New York, he achieved some solid success that would have been sufficient for many another pianist. He had the best of the club dates and for a year played no only at the Copacabana but alternated at the noted Village jazz club The Cookery.

This wasn't what he wanted. "I got

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## Charming play needs substance

By ETHEL SIMMONS

Although "A Summer Remembrance" is not without charm, the drama by Charles Nolte at Meadow Brook Theatre gives us little reason to really get involved in the lives of its participants.

The world premiere production continues through Feb. 24 on the Oakland University campus near Rochester.

Everyone in the cast performs in fine ensemble fashion, to recreate the events of a late 1930s summer spent by an elderly doctor and his wife — the grandparents — their daughter and son-in-law and children, bachelor son and male cousin.

Then there are the neighbors, a spinster teacher, who also is one of the summer people, and a farm woman and her teenage daughter, who works as a maid for the doctor's family.

Booth Colman is especially warm and appealing as Doctor Washburn, who relaxes center stage on a chaise longue reading the newspaper and spouting poetry. The doctor seems a fine old gent but perhaps a bit boring with his constant recitation.

THOMAS HANELINE is Ollie, their son who has not yet taken a wife, although he is paired in summertime activities with the schoolteacher, Rose Buckley, played by Gisela Caldwell.

Ollie's predicament, of coming to terms with himself, his dreams and his goals, is only one of several crises resolved that summer.

Shy and stodgy Ollie recognizes his limitations in giving and receiving love. He's a "very private person," he says, and goes on to tell some of his anxieties about physical

contact with the opposite sex.

Haneline manages to convey these feelings, sharing his character's truth, making Ollie win our sympathy and understanding.

A ROMANCE that develops between Rose Buckley and Tom Denfield — the cousin who has returned after traveling abroad and keeping a journal — is supposed to come as a surprise, and it does, without much clue as to how the two ever became attracted to each other.

Peter Galman as Denfield has a disappointingly lackluster daydreamer to portray. In his first scene, Denfield comes on like gangbusters, however, and we expect he may be the play's central character. Then he very nearly disappears, suddenly re-emerging.

The part of Rose Buckley is well handled by Ms. Caldwell, who gives the character a certain quality.

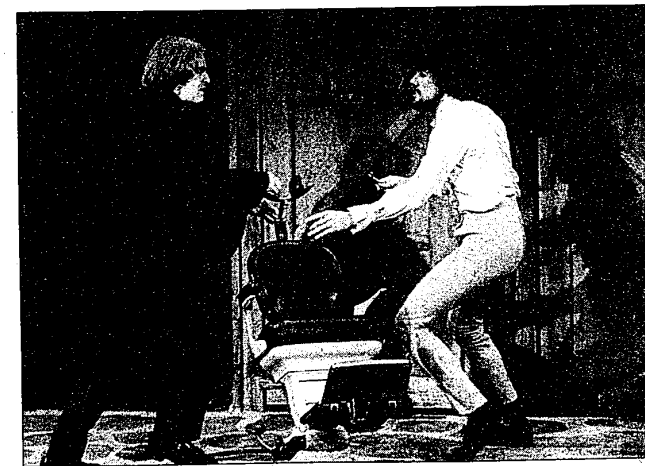
As ever, Meadow Brook Theatre's artistic director, Terence Kilburn, succeeds in creating a mood of gentleness and calm, amid the setting of a Midwestern, lakeside summer home.

But the undercurrent — perhaps a dark, brooding portent of war — is mostly missing, both from the plot and the interpretation.

High point of the play comes in act two, when Doctor Washburn, in a sudden reversal after drinking, rambles on about his personal fears and the danger of imminent war.

THIS SCENE had the audience

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**A plot with teeth in it**

Christopher Howe (left) of Rochester and Peter McBryan of Grassie Pointe Woods engage in a merry chase, as the novice doctor tries to pull the patient's tooth, in Neil Simon's comedy "The Good Doctor." The play will open the winter season for the Oakland University Theatre Arts Program on

Thursday, Feb. 7, on campus near Rochester. The Simon script is a collection of scenes either adapted from or suggested by the stories of Anton Chekhov. All performances in the three-week run are held in the Studio Theatre of Varner Recital Hall. For ticket information call 377-2000.

## 'Sleuth's' 2 combatants not powerfully portrayed

By MATT GERSON

Anthony Shaffer's barbed, witty and urbane mystery, "Sleuth" is being performed in a 50-dinner theatre production by the Theatre of the Arts company at Mr. Mac's Stable in Dearborn.

This play, with its sharp as rifle-shot dialogue, demands two high-powered actors who can run the gamut from subtle mutual disdain to intelligent repartee, to increasingly more primitive, unlimited gamesmanship.

It features, ideally, two basically differing personalities of distinct social classes, who yet, finally, share the capacity for the vulgar, when their basic longings toward one another are exposed.

Unfortunately, Don Johannes as Andrew, the renowned mystery writer, lacks the cold, calculating, barely concealed vengeful rage essential to his role.

ERIC M. JOHNSON as the "half Italian, half Jewish, but born in England" Milo, who is after Andrew's estranged wife, also doesn't really convey the common-born man, who has fought his way up to having his own modest business. His peculiar, high-pitched accent also doesn't help.

Johnson never seems to react with

as a "cookie" that he "wants to have and ignore," like any other "right-thinking, insecure, deceitful man."

This last phrase neatly encapsulates his sense of self-worth. But when Milo starts tearing up Andrew's former wife's clothes during the "robbery," Andrew's real feelings about the whole intricate set-up come through.

We get only a glimpse of a hoped-for combativeness underneath the polished exterior of Andrew, when we first see him. His furrowed brows and goatee, silk robe, bowtie, frocked silk shirt — make him appear almost Satan-like. Adorned for the "education" of an unwitting disciple.

But Andrew is pallid, lacking a sting, with his succession of unsparring comments about womanhood, subtle sneers at Milo's ancestry "from Genoa to England in one generation," and only weakly contrasting the gap of culture and breeding Andrew-sees between them.

MILO, IN HIS blue blazer and white chinos, gives one the image of someone who does, indeed, travel — particularly in the god weather areas. Otherwise I don't quite see the reason for him wearing wide pants to a rather formal meeting.

Particularly with a man whom you

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