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(F710)

Amateur comics work hard for laughs

Story and photos:
JIM WINDELL

"My name is Joe Allison," the comic begins as he steps up to the microphone on the low stage of the Comedy Castle in West Bloomfield. He looks around at the audience, gets his anxiety under control and starts throwing out jokes he has been continuously refining for almost a year.

Telling the audience of some 150 people that he works in a mental job cleaning toilets at a radio station by day, Allison quips, "Sort of commedium by day, comedian by night." He gets some chuckles.

Reaching in his duffle bag, he hauls out a set of Army fatigues. "My designer said I should buy these; they're the latest things." He waits for a few seconds for that to sink in and says, "I paid a lot of money for them. But if I had waited, I might have been able to get them free — along with a free tour of Iran."

Now more noticeably relaxed, helped along by a receptive crowd, Allison moves into some newer material: "Imagine a comedy team of Cheech and Carter." He waits as the audience is anticipating a routine, and a heckler makes a remark.

"What's the matter," Allison snaps at the heckler. "You don't like Cheech? You don't like Carter? I see, you don't like me." That gets a bigger laugh than the impression he does of a Cheech and Carter comedy team.

This is the way it goes every Wednesday night. Wednesdays are Amateur and Regular Night at Comedy Castle in Friday's restaurant in the Pine Lake Mall on Orchard Lake Road. The Comedy Castle gives all comers, rank amateur or seasoned professional, 10 minutes on Wednesdays to try their hand at being a standup comic or to rehearse new material.

Joe Allison has been enduring these 10-minute ordeals for months. "I've come here every Wednesday night for seven months," the personable Allison said after one of his routines. He thinks he's almost ready for a weekend spot. Already, he has been emcee on Wednesday.

Mark Ridley runs the Comedy Castle as a concession within Friday's. "The whole idea," Ridley said cheerfully, "is to promote comedy and allow comics an opportunity to perfect their craft while learning from established comedians."

Ridley first began toying with the idea in late 1978, thinking about a comedy workshop modeled on the idea of the Comedy Store in Los Angeles. He started one such workshop in another area restaurant and moved into Friday's in mid-1979.

"The people have taken to this idea like flies to honey," Ridley said. There are capacity crowds most nights, and generally around 20 comics who want to do their 10 minute act between 9 p.m. and midnight on Amateur Night.

"IT CAN BE A VERY SWEATY 10 minutes," Ridley said, based on his own experience. He also remembers Joe Allison's first night on stage.

"At first, Joe turned beet red and only managed about two minutes up there." He smiled at the memory. "He's progressed since then into quite a good comedian." Ridley is reading Allison for a 20-minute warm-up spot on the weekends. That's when the nationally known comics come in and local talent gets a crack at putting some life in the audience.

Comedians who have made a beginning at the Comedy Castle are now making names for themselves in other parts of the country. "Sheila Kay, a female comic, is now working out of the Comedy Store in L.A.," Ridley said.

Agents come in to the Comedy Castle looking for up and coming talent. "At first," Ridley is now able

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Joe Allison tosses out a punch line at the Comedy Castle's Wednesday Amateur Night.



Other aspiring comics appearing Wednesdays include (from left) Gary Thison, a writer-comedian, who takes a relaxed approach; Walter Poss, who does a comic character, the Reverend Dollar Profit; and Leo Dufour, a Canadian who uses his height as part of his comedy routine.

Critics eye theatrical productions

'Kiss Me Kate' filled with life

By HELEN ZUCKER

The Birmingham Village Players Production of "Kiss Me, Kate," directed by Richard E. Charlton, overflows with vitality.

Cole Porter's music and lyrics are the stuff of magic, and the orchestra, conducted by Martha Welton, does Porter justice. The drum-work and the mellow sax alone are worth the price of admission.

"Kiss Me, Kate" runs through March 23. A benefit performance, sponsored by the Oakland County Friends of Welfare Rights, will be given at 8 p.m. Thursday at the playhouse, corner of Chestnut and Hunter.

Despite uneven casting, there are brilliant cameo performances, plus a sense that the cast is having a good time, which sends the audience home on a wave of good feelings.

DEL MOORE'S terrific voice and acting ability carries her easily through the double roles of Lilli Vanessi, the divorced star who winds up with her ex-husband, the producer, and Katharine, in "The Taming of the Shrew."

Shakespeare and Cole Porter are a dynamic combination, and Ms. Moore knows it. Ms. Moore's rendition of "I Hate Men" is very funny. She bangs her drinking mug in precise time and does it so emphatically one expects the wooden table to give way beneath her.

Ms. Moore is capable of carrying a show alone. Lord, what a voice! Sue Beck is cheeky, flirty and very good as Lois Lane, the cheerfully materialistic chorus-girl-on-the-rise. Ms. Beck shines, singing, "I'm always true to you, darling, in my fashion."

And her clear voice singing, "Why Can't You Behave?" to her gambling boyfriend, is a pleasure. So is her performance as Bianca.

Don Jackson as Bill Calhoun, the laid-back, gambling hooter who brings the gangsters calling on Fred Graham, producer of "Taming of

the Shrew," is loose-limbed and clearly at home onstage no matter what he's doing.

JACKSON is acting on half a cylinder, but he's so engaging, it doesn't matter. Jackson sizes in "It's Too Damn Hot." So do all the dancers in this sexy number.

Ben Sulitz and Jim Masters nearly steal the show as stylized "Damon Runyonesque" gangsters who arrive to collect 10 grand from producer Calhoun. Calhoun has forced an L.O.U. with Graham's nature. Sulitz and Masters get better and better as the evening progresses. Hanging around the theater, the gangsters pick up "kullback."

They show up as guards, in both senses, standing at either end of the stage, during the play — innocuous Shakespearean guards and, simultaneously, lethal fellows making sure that the star and the producer don't run off with "the 10 Gs." "Brush Up Your Shakespeare," the duet between the gangsters, is one of the high spots of the night. Sulitz and Masters are clearly escapes from "Guys and Dolls," and the finale belongs to them.

Jim August is absolutely lovable as Baptiste, Kate's worried father, and as Harry Trevor, an unassuming actor with a toothache. August is a natural; his face is so hang-dog appealing, he spreads joy whenever he appears.

Ben Benson does an admirable job in the play's toughest role. As leading man, Fred Graham, actor, producer and writer and as Petruchio, Kate's suitor, who rises to the challenge, Benson speaks his lines with force and wit.

BENSON is a focused actor who wisely sang his best number, "I've Come To Wive It Wealthily In Padua," in Rex Harrison-speaking style.

At Ratcliffe as Harrison Howell, the aging Washington dignitary who naps often, eats borscht at the White House and wants to marry (Ms.

Vanessi, turns in the most delightful performance of the evening. Ratcliffe grins like a cheshire cat, calls his secretary to "itemize" his wedding amongst his "Monday engagements," looks so absolutely right, he's hilarious.

He's the soul of Southern complacency. "Ah call mah home 'Contentment,'" he says with a grin — as Graham subtly describes a day of deadly boredom and cancels out Howell's marriage.

Art Underwood as the stage manager turns in a sober performance. Dressed in blue custodian clothing, Underwood appears in time to remind people that "curtain time" is drawing nigh, as if to tell actors who were about to take off for the nearest looney bin that more important business is at hand.

Ruth Seranian as Hattie, Ms. Vanessi's maid, is suitably harassed throughout. Chuck Peace is fine as the leonine doorman. Wally Walker is good as the ubiquitous Paul, an old trusted hand. Tom Kolodziej is believable as the obdurate cable who wouldn't leave without payment.

DANCERS KAREN BAYEKIAN, Beth Boynton, Dee-Dee Johns-Charlton, Brian Cloutier, Diane Evans, Don Schore and Wally Walker are lively and elastic. Choreographer Dee-Dee Johns-Charlton has done a neat job with many of the numbers, especially with "Too Damn Hot" and "Brush Up Your Shakespeare." I want to commend the blocking, which is exceptional. Specialty dancers Carol Burton, Diane Lodewyck and Tom Schneider add spice and finesse.

The chorus sings lustily. Joyce Cloutier is a snappy messenger. Sandra Perkins and Winifred Crakel are properly bemused as Doctor and Nurse. Bill Haycock, a subtle actor, is an adept Gregory.

Set design by Barbara Underwood and John Lorne is imaginative. The painted walls (hard to do) are particularly good. Costumes by Margaret Remondino are well thought-out.

By GAY ZIEGER

"A rose can grow out of a dung hill; a child can escape the trap of ignorance and poverty."

This is the central theme of Paul Zindel's "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds" as perceived by Director David Stevens in the Student Enterprise Theatre production at Oakland University.

Performances of "Marigolds" continue Friday-Sunday and March 29-30 in the Studio Theatre at Varner Hall on campus near Rochester.

Director Stevens adds in the program notes that the play forces us to ask why lives are wasted. Answers

are hard to come by, but there is merit in just the questioning.

In the play, death, hopelessness and despair predominate. The plot revolves around a woman whose youthful aspirations were crushed by an ill-considered marriage; a daughter on the brink of mental collapse who flaunts sexuality and who lapses into hysteria and ruthless cruelty; another slightly out-of-step daughter whose ludicrousness draws jeers at school, yet shows potential for flight from enslavement; and a feeble home-care patient.

IT IS A STORY OF victims and near victims, a grim story. Audiences crave productions that

leave them humming or smiling. Nobody likes to feel uneasy. But "Marigolds" is enriching, giving a sense of lives in which niceties are unknown, theater dates are not the norm.

If it is a play that deserves attention. And the handling of it at the Student Enterprise Theatre is of high quality.

As Beatrice, the destructive-protective mother, Nancy M. Bright is supreme. She understands pathos. She is at once hateful, yet tender. When she threatens to chloroform the pet rabbit, she does so with chilling conviction.

When she nurtures or recognizes an inflicted hurt, she brings tears. (Continued on Page 5D)

Story of victims deserves the telling

Performers excel in anniversary show

By DONALD V. CALAMIA

Playwright William Inge might have been proud of the Southfield Civic Theatre's 25th anniversary production of "Bus Stop," presented last weekend at the Southfield Parks and Recreation building auditorium.

Though fine direction by Tom Emmott and set design by John Puchalski helped make this the Civic Theatre's best show in quite some time, it was the highly talented and versatile performers who made this show succeed.

Opening the show were Margaret M. O'Donnell and Karen Sallen, portraying the two women who run the bus stop in which a group of travelers are stranded. The contrast between the two characters was well defined by the actresses from the moment the show opened.

Ms. O'Donnell, who played restaurant owner Elma Duckworth, was quite convincing as a mature woman of the world. Though not much

older than Ms. Sallen in real life, Ms. O'Donnell conveyed the care and concern Elma has for her young waitress, as only an experienced woman could.

EVEN MORE CONVINCING, though, was Ms. Sallen, whose innocent and naive Grace Hoyland lit up the stage with her wide smile. Her trust and youthful enthusiasm helped enlighten every scene in which she appeared.

Bill Marschner, on the other hand, relied upon his physical appearance to convey the essence of Sheriff Will Masters. A sturdily built man with deep-set eyes, Marschner underplayed his dialogue while he utilized his slow, steady strides and piercing gazes to define his character and his relationships to the others in the bus stop.

Adding a classical touch to Dr. Gerald Lyman, Whit Vernon turned what could have been a typically lecherous drunk into a classy, yet

troubled, wanderer who manages, at least this once, to overcome his attraction to young girls. Vernon's deep, lyrical voice was used to its fullest throughout the show.

HE PLAYED WITH EACH syllable as carefully as could be, so that everyone in the audience not only heard what was being said but also understood the exact meaning he was trying to bring out.

Chuck Springer was the energetic cowboy who romances his women as forcefully as he herds his bulls. He portrayed his character with just the right amount of childishness mixed with his macho image to become a rather confused lover. Though a little stiff at times in movements, Springer portrayed a Bo Decker who came to grips with his emotions. Springer gave a rather satisfying performance throughout the show.

S. Craig Collicott portrayed Bo's ranch assistant and confidant, Virgil. (Continued on page 5D)

review