

'Celebration' embraces existential viewpoint

By MATT GERSON

A message in the Theatre of the Arts playbill, from Director M.J. Klier, urges the audience to "come share and celebrate with us life, in hopes that it can be lush and full."

This musical "Celebration," through April 20 in dinner-theater format at Mr. Mac's Stable in Dearborn, is strange, gripping, exuberantly acted, yet depressingly stripped-to-the-bone.

It explores man and woman's fondest but crassest dreams. Its values are the most unsparring "existential" this reviewer has encountered in a musical, at least since "Cabaret."

The rather murky defined time-period isn't pre-Blitz Berlin of the 1920s, but our own, uneasily similar time. Self-obsession, narcissism, cheap thrills and groping for slithering, ambiguous values that elude us.

The book and lyrics by Tom Jones evoke symbols and acridly work over many of the pipe dreams we all succumb to. We meet characters like a hardened, smugly knowing, former priest, Potemkin (Aaron Hunt), who now feels at home with thievery and doing "magic tricks," like "sawing real women in half — real sawing, 23 of them so far."

THIS SINISTER manipulator of events sports a devilish beard and gaze, a credo that "the world's in a mess — so what? Because God is dead and it's not my problem."

Then there's a girl named Angel (Paula Kline), who wants to be a "big success in Hollywood." She'll do just about anything — striptease at private parties, mold and primp-up her body, to avoid a career "as a grey little secretary all my grey little life."

Old Mr. Rich (John Bruning) is bedecked in silver-tinted tuxedo, dollar signs on his tails, but covered with wrinkles and straw-whisker hair. He's made his fortune on "women's fancies, artificial limbs and fake flowers" — a true greedy child of the 1970s.

There's the orphan (Michael Stopczynski), a lost gardener, hand-

review

some, clean-cut, a lover representative of sunshine, nature, goodness and growing things. He, too, is a victim, an innocent, set-up for hurt by the cold, indifferent and mean forces in the world.

He's laughed at and vilified by the others, including the Revelers — a trio of white-face, painted, human-looking (but what are they really?) shadowy figures in the background of the action. They dance, sing and sting — flinging the Orphan around the stage during the "city" setting of Act I.

THEY EXIST TO follow, anonymous look-alikes, symbols here of mass-man's morality. "Let the other guy help out — I'm gonna have a good time."

All the preceding descriptions, hopefully, give some idea of the principals parading around this bitter, no-nonsense play. Yet, somehow, "Celebration" is full of a joie de vivre energy in the performances, throughout its sad, dangling-on-the-edge quality of story and music.

Again, director Klier describes the play as an event, a "primitive experience," and perhaps that's the key meaning: just to allow its totality to awaken our senses and make us think. Still, its elements are uneasily merged. We are thrown headlong into expectation of a grim, nastily, unusually gritty and profane unfolding of life's dilemmas. This is hardly the stuff of most musicals or dinner-theater fare.

At rare times, it's as if Jones and Schmidt (who also collaborated on the "Fantasticks") pull back from this uneasily swallowed scenario of desperation and groping to remind us in song that there's also "love" out there.

THESE EMOTIONAL transitions are too jumbled, laddled on too transparently, to keep the audience from acute indignation, perhaps. Even Schmidt's, uplifting, sweet music can't

paper over the cracks.

The ensemble acting of this Theatre of the Arts troupe is excellent, particularly given the stresses and changes demanded here. But the play itself is, well, like the overly well-done prime rib this reviewer had for dinner.

Filling, tasty, yet leaving us some what dry-mouthed, with an aftertaste and needing to reach for some wine, to sweeten things and get our voice back.

It's a rich "wine" of intellectual and emotional content, but conveyed in an almost assaulting style of shock waves, that push us away. The totality is of vivid, fleeting images of impact.

It's like getting a multi-layered cream pie "thrown smack in our face from God," as a recent movie described death. We react, but finally more with a response of stunned confusion, than to the play's content.



Award winners

Sheryl Krause of Oak Park (center) and her brother Alan of Birmingham walked away from the Furay Festival of Theatres with awards for best supporting actress and actor in community theatre. The two won the honors with a scene from the West Bloomfield Family Players production of

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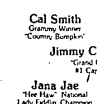
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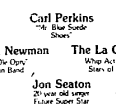
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