

Play 'Arsenic' keeps spirits up

By BARBARA MICHALS

Insanily runs in the family; it practically gallops. That's how Mortimer Brewster describes his family to his fiancée, and thus aptly sums up the spirit of "Arsenic and Old Lace."

The Farmington Players' production of the Joseph Kesselring comedy is rollicking good fun and boasts some fine performances.

"Arsenic and Old Lace" continues its run at 8:30 p.m. Thursday-Sunday, May 15-17 at the Farmington Playhouse in Farmington Hills.

The whimsical Brewster sisters live in a quaint Victorian house in Brooklyn in 1940. Aunt Abby and Aunt Martha (Nancy Harrower and Kathleen Monticello) are two kind-hearted old ladies who perform innumerable acts of charity, including poisoning lonely old men who come to rent their spare room.

THEIR NEPHEWS are also an odd lot. Teddy (Ira Purchis) is convinced that he is Teddy Roosevelt and perpetually charges up the stairs as if they were San Juan Hill.

Jonathan (Stu Orman) is a fearsome fellow who has killed a dozen people around the world and is always on the run from the law.

Only nephew Mortimer (Stephen Kachmarczyk) has the semblance of normalcy, but he has the dubious distinction of being a drama critic by profession.

"Ah, well," sighs Aunt Abby by way of apology to her disapproving clergyman, "someone has to do it."

The trouble develops when Mortimer accidentally discovers the body of his aunt's latest victim and learns what they've been up to. While he's searching for a way to extricate them and put the blame on Teddy, Jonathan shows up with a body of his own to dispose of. Bedlam quickly ensues.

Nancy Harrower and Kathleen Monticello do a fine job as the pixilated aunts who like to mix a little arsenic in their homemade elderberry wine.

Ms. Monticello excels at comic mannerisms and facial expressions, while Ms. Harrower's mincing gait and unruffled calm enhance her characterization. Both actresses are convincing despite their poor make-up; they just don't look old enough.

AS TEDDY, Purchis is simply bulky. His costuming and mannerisms are perfect, and he is particularly good at recreating Roosevelt's toothy grin. Teddy lives with his aunts and obligingly buries their "yellow fever victims"

in the Panama Canal locks he digs in the cellar.

Orman does a masterful job as Jonathan, though he, too, has to overcome bad make-up. Jonathan has supposedly been transformed to look like Boris Karloff by his drunken plastic surgeon sidekick, and the running joke is that he gets highly agitated whenever this resemblance is mentioned. Orman's make-up is rather gruesome but in no way resembles Karloff.

Nevertheless, Orman's commanding voice manages to make one and all shiver in their shoes, and he does lumber with the grace of Frankenstein's monster.

As Mortimer, Kachmarczyk displays a fine sense of comic timing and also makes good use of facial expressions. Finding himself surrounded by loonies, he can't believe he isn't just dreaming the whole mess.

Doug Buckley is a stand-out among the fine cast. He plays the drunken Dr. Einstein, Jonathan's accomplice. Dr. Einstein covers in constant terror of Jonathan, and he finds the goings-on at the Brewster house more than his poor added brain can handle.

BUCKLEY'S DELIVERY is strongly reminiscent of Peter Lorre in the *Rosie* role, but Buckley's performance seems innately clever, not merely imitative. He stays in character right through the curtain calls.

Romayne Kachmarczyk is cute and breezy as Elaine Harper, the sweet young clergyman's daughter who is engaged to Mortimer. Her rolled hair and chic suits help capture the '40s flavor of the black comedy. Stumbling into the Brewster bedlam, Elaine is like Alice in Wonderland.

Ed Keller's Officer O'Hara is hilariously oblivious to the chaos around him. When he discovers Mortimer gagged and tied to a chair, the frustrated playwright is delighted to have a captive audience and never suspects that anything is amiss.

Don Newman is amusingly uncouth as the Rev. Dr. Harper, a friend and neighbor of the Brewster sisters.

George Uridge and Erik Carlson are two other tumbling cops, and Dick Coe is only slightly more astute as their superior. Coe also doubles as Mr. Gibbs, a near-victim of the deadly elderberry wine. Winton McCall is convincing as Mr. Witherspoon, the elderly gent who comes to take charge of Teddy.

Under the direction of Bill Salisbury and his assistant, Sharon Kolbasa, Farmington's production of "Arsenic and Old Lace" is a fine-tuned comedy, deftly-paced and totally captivating.

Actress returns to stage in Will-O-Way production

By ETHEL SIMMONS

Although she studied for a career in the theater, Maureen Feder found the life of a struggling actress was not for her.

Ms. Feder said she switched from the "dream world" to the "real world," becoming an advertising sales representative. She works in the Birmingham office of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

Now, for the first time since 1974, she is performing again, as co-star in the Will-O-Way Repertory Company production of "Stop the World, I Want to Get Off!"

The show opened April 26 and continues through May 24 at Will-O-Way Apprentice Theatre, 775 W. Long Lake Road, Bloomfield Township. She appears in performances this Friday and Saturday and the closing weekend, May 22-24. Understudy Lee Rosender plays the weekend of May 16-18.

"Stop the World," which Ms. Feder calls "an Anthony Newley ego trip," is musical comedy mime, with Ralph Viau in the leading role of Littlechap.

Ms. Feder plays the women in Littlechap's life — his wife Evie; also Anya, Ise and Ginnie. It's a tough show to do, singing, dancing and performing, with quick scene changes into the different roles.

"I do four characters, four different dialects and four different mannerisms," she said. Ms. Feder is Littlechap's English wife. "I age with her." She is also a Russian, a German maid, and an American saloon singer, whom she designates as the audience's favorite.

She does a Marilyn Monroe, from New York, as the latter character, Ginnie. In her professional career, she was always cast as the dumb blonde. Her extensive dance training and quality of humor both were assets in portraying these sexy creatures.

Ms. Feder did a lot of musicals on stage, where her dancing was always highlighted. At Will-O-Way, her part in "Stop the World" relies largely on musical numbers that include songs for her.

She has a low range. "This show is in my key," she said. "I feel so secure with it. I think a very good voice is coming out of me. Everyone is astonished."

AT ONE POINT during the luncheon interview, she said reflectively, as she took a puff from her cigarette: "I'm shocked. No one would be as shocked about this performance as I am. When you're a performer in your back bedroom as long as I have been!"

In 1971, Ms. Feder did contemporary comedies and dramas in ensemble work with professional Hollywood actors at the Oxford Theatre in Los Angeles. In 1974, she last performed on WXYZ-TV's "Morning Show" co-hosting for two weeks with John Stueck.

"I did not have any training at earning a living," she said, recalling her attempts to learn another field after abandoning a theatrical career.

"I didn't have a fulltime job until I was 26 years old. I'm proud of earning a living."

She was able to move into the rigors of "Stop the World" because she kept up her dream work.

"I'm always in and out of dance class — jazz primarily. I've been making it like a hobby. My big bedroom is like a dance studio, where I work out two or three times a week.

"In my apartment, I would sing full voice when my neighbors weren't home."

NOW A RESIDENT of Cass Lake, Ms. Feder was raised in northwest Detroit. Her parents sent her to dance school with the best teachers both locally and abroad.

Her family provided all the creature comforts and she was an achiever, to whom things came easily. She studied ballet in New York, London and Paris.

Because of her ability and self-discipline, Ms. Feder said, she was pushed too fast and ended up with her left leg "breaking in different areas and growing into my hip."

"When I hurt my leg," she continued, "the only place to study was Will-O-Way. Thank God!" She was a student at Will-O-Way on and off from the ages of 12 to 17.



Maureen Feder has studied in New York City with internationally known drama coach Uta Hagan and in the Birmingham-Bloomfield area with Will-O-Way's Celia Merrill Turner.

"I'm shocked. No one would be as shocked about this performance as I am — when you're a performer in your back bedroom as long as I have been!"

— Maureen Feder, starring as Evie, in "Stop the World"

A friend, an attorney, began to study acting at Will-O-Way last year, and she attended one of his shows and a party afterward.

"DO YOU REMEMBER me?" she asked Celia Merrill Turner, who then and now is director of Will-O-Way. "Celia clasped my hand," Ms. Feder said.

Mrs. Turner remembered her well, and asked her to try out for "Stop the World" when the show was cast.

Ms. Feder has much praise for Mrs. Turner's ability as a drama coach. "She knows her stuff. I'm impressed. I'm more impressed now because I know what's being done."

Ms. Feder added, "I think she has the finest group of young people in a theater I have ever worked with."

Prismatic Band offers too few good moments

By JIM WINDELL

The up and coming Detroit-area Prismatic Band had a live recording session Monday night at the Birmingham Theatre, but the evening was far from successful.

Prior to the concert, Carol Ann Payne, doing public relations for the band, promised, "Stars are going to burn that night." Bob Talbert called tickets for the event the "hottest tickets in town."

So how come people fled at intermission to the Midtown Cafe for drinks, some failing to return? Or that one man tried to give away tickets to the concert in front of the theater and at the Midtown and couldn't find any takers?

Perhaps the energy the Prismatic Band seems to feel from its usual audience was reciprocated back to the larger part of the audience Monday night. Maybe the problem is more fundamental.

THE PRISMATIC BAND has been around Detroit for three years and has built up a fair-sized following by playing regularly at such spots as Cobb's Corner and the Delta Lady. The band also has been tapped for such prestige gigs as opening shows for Stanley Clarke and Jean Luc Ponty at Masonic Temple. Last year, Prismatic released its first album and a couple of singles which have attracted more fans.

The band's music is multi-dimensional, featuring chunks of jazz,

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rock, Latin and show music with a great portion of it improvised. Nominal leader Mike Colone thinks the band could have commercial value but at the same time insists they never conform. "We are out to break the myth," he has said, "that you can't do what you want to do."

What Prismatic apparently wants to do is blend rock, country, jazz and Latin music into a prismatic sound that will communicate real, basic energy to a new fan — one who can appreciate it's musical blending of philosophy and vision.

Unfortunately, sometimes some rather mundane things get in the way. Like disturbing feedback difficulties which frequently marred the first of two 45-minute sets. Then, there is their amplified volume, which is appreciated by many of their younger fans but send the older ones, more interested in saving their hearing, to the back of the auditorium.

As Prismatic alternated between throbbing Latin-influenced improvised rock/jazz and old-fashioned rock 'n' roll in the first half, there seemed little symmetry and continuity.

NOT THAT THERE weren't some exciting moments, like David Reinsteil's engaging sax solo during "Explain Away" or the texture and

contrast of a tune that was referred to as a "drum vibrational song" or the strong bit of truth of their street-wise "Streetcorner Song."

But not enough good moments for a band that says it is ready to hit the big time.

The encore number, strangely enough, further emphasized basic problems. Ending the second set with a couple of tasty rock 'n' roll numbers ("Mammamia Rock" and "Refugee"), the tape machine was turned off and they gave the audience "Lukadat." This encore piece was described by guitarist and pianist Mike Colone as a "club piece, like we do at Cobb's or the Delta Lady."

"Lukadat" had the rhythm, energy and tightly organized ensemble sound that has brought Prismatic its following. It seems rock 'n' roll stars the greatest audience response. Show and production numbers that feature Penny Kuypers dancing in body tights and synthesized space sounds don't make it.

Sometimes multi-dimensional is not best. The word prismatic can refer to brilliant as well as "to break up." The Prismatic Band might be better off thinking uni-dimensional and maybe not straying too far from its roots.

Truth and energy can come through a band with cosmic pretension and eschat philosophy. It can even come through good old rock 'n' roll. Prismatic seems to like that better anyway. At least the band sparkles when playing it. Just like a prism.



Prismatic Band members are Penny Kuypers (center) and (clockwise from bottom) David Reinsteil, Roberto Kuypers, Joe Barus, Tom Kalep and Michael Colone.