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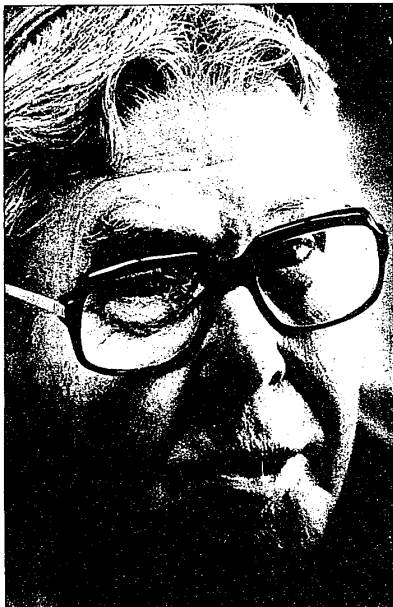
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Role of Grandpa Vanderhof completes actor's transition

Story: ETHEL SIMMONS
Photos: DICK KELLEY

Harry Ellerbe's whole life changed when his face "fell to the floor with a bang."

Looking at Ellerbe, you still see some of the pixie quality that made him an eternal juvenile actor, playing Ethel Barrymore's 18-year-old grandson on stage when he was actually 35.



Harry Ellerbe went from playing juveniles to old men almost overnight.

Today, Ellerbe is much more comfortable in roles such as his present one, as Grandpa Vanderhof in the Meadow Brook Theatre production of the classic comedy, "You Can't Take It With You."

His performance is a highlight of the show, which completes a five-week run Sunday on the Oakland University campus near Rochester.

"It's a part that fits me. The old poop is eccentric, and so am I," Ellerbe said, in an interview last week in the Meadow Brook Theatre offices.

Ellerbe was anxious to talk about his career and didn't even bother to remove his raincoat during the interview and while the photographer snapped away.

"I WAS MENTALLY not attuned to playing old men," he said, explaining that when the transition finally came, it was difficult for him.

"The role of Grandpa in 'You Can't Take It With You' is the most marvelous thing I've played," Ellerbe said. "Grandpa has a foolish for going to college commencements.

On opening night, I felt I was getting a diploma for being an old man."

He eagerly set forth his narrative, pausing willingly to answer any questions. After the interview, Ellerbe handed over two neatly typed pages of copy. Basically, it was a well-written, first-person chronology of his growing old in the theater.

It makes sense that Ellerbe had his story all written down. He's been working on a book for the last eight years, one he claims he is in no hurry to finish.

Titled "I Bow to the Ladies" (he's looking for a publisher), the book "is not about me. It's about what happened around me," he said.

He admits that the market is overflowing with performers' autobiographies.

"I don't have any illusions about it. I don't force it. One yesterday was I able to write down a thing about John Barrymore."

BARRYMORE AND Ellerbe were not appearing in the same play but were in theaters next door to each other in New York. Ellerbe said that he and Barrymore's daughter Diana had become great friends.

"I wrote about his last opening night," Ellerbe said.

Ellerbe has been coming to Meadow Brook Theatre for 10 years, and George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's Pulitzer Prize-winning comedy "You Can't Take It With You" is his 13th play there.

Before working at Meadow Brook, he said, he spent 30 years as an actor in New York.



Ellerbe is happy with his comedy role as Grandpa Vanderhof.

"As a young actor, physically, I never seemed to change," he said.

Looking so young and playing youthful parts "was a lot of work for me. I had a lot of close friends who had aged properly."

"Suddenly this change came." After his instant aging, the actor found his career "was at a standstill for quite a while."

Gregory Peck, a friend of Ellerbe's, came to the rescue by casting him as Edward Chamberlyn in T.S. Eliot's "The Cocktail Party" at a summer theater in LaJolla, Calif.

Ellerbe's next break came when Terence Kilburn, Meadow Brook Theatre artistic director, hired him to play the father role in Eugene O'Neill's "Ah, Wilderness!"

"I FELL IN LOVE with the theater and the audiences. I hinted and begged to come back. I've been coming back for 10 years," Ellerbe said.

Last October, he played the role of the crippled ranch hand with the dog in the Meadow Brook Theatre production of John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men."

Ellerbe would rather play comedy than serious drama, however. "I prefer comedy. It's harder and it's very satisfying. To deliver a line (Continued on Page 5D)

At civic theater

'Godspell' keeps to the original

By DONALD CALAMIA

Closing the Southfield Civic Theatre's current season is a hilarious and finely tuned production of the popular musical "Godspell" by John-Michael Tebelak and Stephen Schwartz.

Performances, held in the Southfield Civic Center's Parks and Recreation Building, continue through this weekend. The curtain rises at 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday and at 2 p.m. Sunday.

Based on the Gospel according to St. Matthew, "Godspell" chooses to tell its simple parables through the use of such theatrical conventions as mime, improvisation, charades, music and dance. In short, "Godspell" takes its messages and simplifies them into witty and humorous vignettes to which everyone, Christian and non-Christian alike, can relate.

While many directors have recently chosen to alter the show's basic premises in several local productions, director Barbara Oleszczuk has wisely decided to stick with the creators' original concepts.

JESUS STILL wears a Superman T-shirt, and the other performers are dressed in multi-colored clown costumes. Action takes place on a children's playground.

Of course, Ms. Oleszczuk has updated several of the scenes into the 1980s. Miss Piggy makes an appearance, as does Joe Gideon of "All That Jazz." For nostalgia buffs, Ms. Oleszczuk has included the Mouseketeers and Elvis.

What makes this show really work, though, is Ms. Oleszczuk's highly talented and versatile cast. It is obvious from the show's start that the performers are perfectly in tune with each other. In fact, it is suspected each performance is fresh and unique from all others, as witty ad libs are tossed about at a truly remarkable pace (and with an equally impressive success rate, too).

Most directors would likely sell their souls for an ensemble company such as this.

The only things missing are emotional subtleties within each of the characters. The genuine love, concern and care for each other, which should build from the show's start, are not present throughout much of the first act.

"DAY BY DAY," the show's finest number, should break down the stage's invisible fourth wall and draw the audience into the show as active participants. Instead, in this production, the song elicits little response.

It is not until the second, highly dramatic act that the performers reveal their inner workings. The applause at show's end is deservedly long and loud; it could have been longer and louder.

Leading the cast as Jesus is Michael Stopczynski. A highly talented man whose slender body and expressive face are well used in each scene, Stopczynski excels in several physical comedy routines and numerous dance numbers.

Though lacking the warmth and fatherliness in the first act that are generally associated with the role, Stopczynski's strong vocal qualities and good comic timing are his true assets.

Daniel Plets as John the Baptist/Judas provides several of "Godspell's" most wonderful moments. WRIF radio's Jim Johnson and the Morning Crew would surely be pleased with Plets' impersonations of their Rocky and Bullwinkle and Popeye characters, while Dick the Bruiser would love Plets' "baby" imitation. And Plets' Yogi Bear to Mike Krieger's excellent Boo-Boo is a show-stopper.

Returning to the Civic Theatre's stage after last year's smashing performance in "The Apple Tree" is the superb Jane Shaffmaster. Portraying the Vamp, Shaffmaster sensuously struts her stuff throughout the show.

THOUGH SHE occasionally steals a scene or two from the other performers.

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Comedy offers lots of laughter

By MATT GERSON

Director Paula Kline has helped her performers in the Theatre of the Arts Production of "Same Time, Next Year" capture the lighthearted, yet affecting comedy with gusto and plenty of laughs.

The production is presented through June 21 on Fridays and Saturdays at Mr. Mac's Stables in the Parklane Towers in Dearborn.

Bernard Slade's "Same Time, Next Year" features Mary Bremer and Greg Tatum as Doris and George, yearly bedmates who rendezvous at a guest cottage in northern California between the years 1951 and 1975.

It is only when circumstances in the play (deaths of a spouse, a son) dictate a change in the emotive tone to a note of somber reflection that this presentation leaves something to be desired.

GREG TATUM seems weak when he tries to shift gears and bring their romantic and familial discussion into the wider realm of the world—particularly the Vietnam War.

His toothy smile and devil-may-care eyes have set up such a strong funny-man character that the change to poignant sorrow and anguish doesn't come across like it should.

Mary Bremer's Doris has no such profound moments. Even when her husband, Harry, has a heart attack, she steadfastly believes, "Women admit to rottenness better than men. We're more pragmatic."

The production moves along nicely in its chronological action through the use of musical songs of each era (1950s to mid-1970s). The songs skillfully signal changing styles and attitudes of this long span of time in two person's lives.

The first meet by chance at a bar, where George spots Doris alone and sends her a steak (he's a real romantic) and then "toasts her with a piece of meat still on his fork."

review

By JIM WINDELL

Mary Liz Larin and Dave Mason strummed their guitars in front of a sparse weekend audience. Ms. Larin sang a song written by Joni Mitchell and Mason stood rather stiffly with a slight frown on his face.

Together they are known as Larin and Mason, and at that night they were performing at an area nightclub with their usual collection of pop songs done in a quietly effective way on acoustic guitars.

Following her vocal, Mary looked at Dave and with a playful punch reminded him to smile. He responded with a sheepish grin.

Later, in an interview, Mason said that he forgets he is on stage. "I concentrate on the music and I frown."

"So I blow in his ear or punch him to tell him to loosen up. I try to keep it light," the Larin half of the duo said.

"There are a lot of ways in which we are opposites," Mason said. "But . . ."

" . . . we are alike in that we are both totally dedicated to our music," Mary said, finishing the thought.

Talking with Larin and Mason, a good-looking young couple gradually gaining a solid reputation as entertainers in Oakland County, is like talking with one person. Their friendship and compatibility is evident as they finish sentences for each other.

"We are a team," Ms. Larin said. She grew up in Birmingham and now lives in Rochester. "It's a very supportive relationship that Dave and I have."

Together for only 10 months, they have performed at the Midtown Cafe, the Meeting Place, the Wagon Wheel Saloon and the Way Station. They will return to the Midtown in Birmingham on Thursday for a three-night engagement.

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Larin and Mason learning how to be a team on stage

THEY MET when both were guitar teachers at a music store in Birmingham. "I really liked Dave's playing," Ms. Larin said, "and I think he saw some potential in me."

Prior to working with Ms. Larin, 24-

year-old Mason played electric guitar in groups like Airtight, the New Detroit Ensemble, and the Marcus Belgrave Jazz Quintet.

Ms. Larin, a 1979 graduate of Seaholm High School, started playing

the guitar as a student at Our Lady Queen of Martyrs elementary school in Beverly Hills.

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Mary Liz Larin and Dave Mason are playing their acoustic guitars and singing through Saturday

at the Midtown Cafe in Birmingham. (Staff photo by Mindy Saunders)