

'Morning's at Seven'

'Homespun' drama staged in winning way

Performances of "Morning's at Seven," comedy by Paul Osborn, continue through March 20 at Meadow Brook Theatre on the Oakland University campus near Rochester. For ticket information call the box office at 377-3300.

By Helen Zucker
special writer

Meadow Brook Theatre's production of Paul Osborn's comedy, "Morning's at Seven," is well-cast and nicely acted by a troupe which seems to understand what the word "homespun" means.

The claustrophobic feel of small-town life in 1922, when people sat on their porches and commented on their neighbors' riding into town to go to the movies, is beautifully rendered. There isn't a bad performance in the lot.

The pacing is a bit slow, but then again, this play doesn't exactly ask for fast-track thinking, so maybe director Terence Kilburn has a reason for not speeding things up. The slow feel of life in this town where sons don't leave home until age 40, where spinsters hang around in their married sisters' houses years after they should've left, where hardly anyone seems to understand how children get born, soaks into the viewer and makes us believe that there's just as much insanity in small towns as in big cities.

THIS IS A COMEDY so no one winds up insane, but for my money, this play belongs to Carl Bolton, endearingly played by Phillip Pruneau. Carl has "spells" that no one understands, especially his wife, Ida.

Mary Benson as Ida, with her waddle-walk, her rosy cheeks, her round specs, her possessive nature, her cries of "I don't even know what he means by the fork!" is quite wonderful. But it's Pruneau, leaning his head against a tree, against walls, asking, "Where am I?" or "Where did I branch off? Why aren't I a dentist?" who touches the heart.

Carl is a good builder and plumber.

review

The pinnacle of his ambition is to be a dentist, but that's quite beside the point. Carl is a wonderer, a man shut up early in a very limiting environment.

Jeanne Arnold also turns in a touching, excellent performance as Esther Crampton, the long-suffering wife of a professor who considers everyone in the world "a moron." That includes the college president, so David Crampton gets fired; and it includes Esther's family, so she is ordered to not visit them, or "move to the second floor permanently."

Esther visits her family anyway. She's wonderful to watch basking in the sun and giggling with her gaggle of sisters.

JOHN ROBERTS is funny as David who discovers he needs his "moron." Thom Haneline is very fine as the stolid Homer who finally decides to marry "nice Myrtle Brown." (If she hadn't got pregnant, he probably would've left the 12-year engagement stretch to forever.)

Homer wakes out of his trance and has a "spell," doing a wonderful imitation of his father leaning his head against a tree.

Homer grows when he begins shouting about "his house." He's had the house sitting empty for five years. Fortunately his aunt, "nice Cora," wants it badly enough to rent it from Carl.

She thinks her younger spinster sister is having an affair with her husband. All these "nice people" think terrible things about each other while constantly hugging, quilling, looking like butter wouldn't melt in their mouths.

Harry Ellerbe, a superb actor, hasn't enough to do as Theodore Swanson, but whenever he speaks or moves, his timing and pitch are a cut above the rest.

ROSLYN ALEXANDER has the hardest role as Aeronetta Gibbs, the



Phillip Pruneau is Carl Bolton and Mary Benson is his wife Ida in "Morning's at Seven" at Meadow Brook Theatre.



and, though she seems to have enough spunk at the end to tell Homer to, "Stop your discordant acts."

Maureen Steindler is dandy as Cora, rising to determination at the end, and she gets her home along with Theodore.

THE SET BY Peter Hicks is terrific. Those identical frame houses, porches, backyards — maybe that's why I felt crazy as the play progressed. The light work by Reid G. Johnson is brilliant. The sky changing between the alley separating the houses was riveting.

Costumes by Mary Lynn Crum were amusing. Oh, those 1922 house dresses! Jeanne Arnold manages to look elegant no matter what she's wearing.

This production should be a crowd pleaser.

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