

'Mrs. Markham' delivers an abundance of hilarity

Performances of the Theatre Guild of Livonia-Redford production of "Move Over, Mrs. Markham," English farce by Ray Cooney and John Chapman, continue at 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday and May 6-7 at the Guild Playhouse, 15138 Beech Drive, just south of Five Mile Road, Redford. Admission is \$5. For reservations call 522-1528 between 10 a.m. and 10 p.m.

By Bob Weibel
special writer

Watching the Theatre Guild of Livonia-Redford's "Move Over Mrs. Markham" is akin to watching a juggler, whose act includes keeping a number of dinner plates spinning atop long, whippy poles.

A catastrophe appears imminent at every turn. But, of course, the impending mishap never occurs. We know how it's going to come out — the fun is in watching them do it. And so it was for the opening-night audience, as a talented and energetic cast treated it to an evening of hilarity.

The playbill describes "Move Over, Mrs. Markham" as "a naughty English comedy." It's essentially a farce, which means that one can expect an emphasis on amusing situations, with a generous sprinkling of double-entendre, quick exits, unexpected entrances, mistaken identities and a variety of contrived surprises.

When entering the theater, one's eyes are immediately drawn to an impressive and elegant set with pinkish-salmon walls and ornate accent stripes. It's the Markham's posh upper flat over their printing establishment.

SET DESIGNERS Dave Tucker and Paul Metz, with help from Art Redford and Bob Evans, have created an absolute gem with great attention to detail. There are six doors and two windows (perfect for surprise entrances and quick exits).

One side of the stage is the living room with a plush couch and the other side is the bedroom. And guess what dominates? That's right, the bed. But not just any bed. This is a big, round bed. What else would you have in a "naughty English comedy"? Try a bedroom door with real louveres, through which women's underwear is passed! But I'm getting ahead of the story.

We learn early in Act One that a whole lot of people want to get into the big round bed. And seldom with the right partners. Therein lies the fun as the characters plan, plot, lie, scheme and conspire to make it into bed — everyone, it seems, except the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Markham (at least together). Nobody succeeds, of course, at least not under the conditions imagined. I mean, four is a crowd, right!

The first schemer is Alistair Spewlow, an interior decorator who is harassed by Markham as he attempts to redo the apartment. Alan Madeline played Spewlow with a great sense of frustration and displayed a nice feel for comedic timing. He has eyes for the Markham's live-in maid, performed with saucy innocence by lovely Roberta Pullum.

They plan a rendezvous on a night when the Markham's will be out. But, alas, theirs is not the only rendezvous in town — or indeed in the Markham's bedroom.

MR. MARKHAM's business partner, Henry Lodge, convinces him that he should be allowed to use the apartment to meet a girlfriend. Garth Williams played Mr. Markham with a reserved, mechanical style, which was more effective later when he impersonated the butler.

John Hall's dapper good looks served him well as the rough Mr. Lodge. His girlfriend, Miss Wilkinson, was played by Karen Labitt. Her strikingly good looks and flair for comedy, especially in compromising situations, were most enjoyable. Miss Wilkinson and Mr. Lodge never quite get together. There are complications.

It seems that Mrs. Lodge, played with skill and gusto by Mary Lilburn, has convinced Mrs. Markham to let her meet her lover, Walter Pangbourne. Bob Closson as Pangbourne turns in an absolutely sterling performance. He understands the style of farce. Although his character is outrageous, to him it's normal.

He never adds artificial business — even when he is in his little bowler hat and full dress coat, minus his pants. Only the audience sees humor in his predicament.

Susan Sooni, as Mrs. Markham, is also very good as she attempts to sort out the lovers, would-be lovers and herself (she too gets involved in an illicit boodler scene).

INTO THE midst of this frenzy comes Ma Smythe, played brilliantly by Diane Kremser. Her intoxicating giggle and perplexed view of things were delightful. It turns out that Ma Smythe is against sex (wouldn't you know it) and is an author in search of a publisher. She also would like some peasant under glass, but gets a surprise goose, which is by far the funniest moment of the evening.

Eventually, everything is sorted out. Ma Smythe even returns for an "after" scene, and learns that the butler did it! Well, sort of. The director of "Move Over Mrs. Markham" is Dave Tucker, who certainly knows how to entertain an audience. The audience was advised to come prepared to laugh. And it did. A lot.

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