

'Blithe Spirit' still has life

Performances of the Birmingham Village Players production of Noel Coward's "Blithe Spirit" continue through Saturday at the playhouse on the corner of Hunter Boulevard and Chestnut Street, south of Maple Road, in Birmingham. For ticket information call 644-2075.

By Barbara Michaels
special writer

One husband and two wives — both of them residing under the same roof equals a sure-fire formula for laughter. As presented by the Birmingham Village Players, Noel Coward's "Blithe Spirit" is an appealing classic comedy. In this case, one of the wives isn't really all there because she's ectoplasm, a ghost of her former self. When novelist Charles Condomine (played by Tom D'Agostino) invites a spiritualist to his home to gather research materi-

review

al for a book, his deceased wife, Elvira (Lynne Martney), unexpectedly materializes. Having an extra wife around the house complicates his life considerably. Second wife Ruth (JoAnn Britton) has trouble coping with a ghost only her husband can see or hear. Getting Elvira to dematerialize proves a formidable task.

Carol Hodges is wonderful as Madame Arcati, the whacky medium full of eccentricities too numerous to catalog. Decked out in some outlandish get-ups, Madame Arcati is prone to crashing over backwards when in a trance, leaving her old-fashioned, high-top boots pointing straight up. Hodges

plays the role with an easy grace that never needs to strain for laughs.

LYNNE MARTNEY's Elvira is a mischievous sprite who takes full advantage of her position to make both Charles and Ruth wiggle uncomfortably. She's not always a blithe spirit, though, turning petulant whenever she doesn't immediately get her way. Martney's voice inflections and body English nicely capture Elvira's mercurial moods.

As Charles and Ruth, both D'Agostino and Britton put great energy into their acts, but the result is too heavy-handed. There's too much bluster to show Coward's dry wit to best advantage, and the couple lack the casual sophistication one expects in Coward's upper-class characters. Britton does a fine job of conveying Ruth's vexing frustrations, though.

In supporting roles, Vince Dunn is credible as Charles' physician friend, while Joan Reddy is weak as the doctor's wife. Mary Bala is amusing as the overzealous maid.

At Saturday night's performance, minor line flubs were contagious, but the players made graceful recoveries each time.

Director Rose Mary Schneider keeps the show moving smoothly. Bruce Thompson's set design is handsome, and the props and special effects people do a terrific job of hurling objects through the air with gleefully ease.

The costumes by Mary Jane Snow and Margaret Nonclieu work well — kooky for Madame Arcati, sophisticated for Ruth and ethereal for Elvira. The make-up committee wisely chose pallid gray for Elvira, creating an effect that is other-worldly but not grotesquely pale.



In 'Hourglass'

Kimberly S. Newberry of Southfield is Mama and Jeffrey E. Williams is Clifford in the Studio Theatre production of Robert Alexander's "The Hourglass," at 8 p.m. Dec. 8-10 and 15-17 and 7:30 p.m. Dec. 11 and 18 downstairs at the Hillberry Theatre at Wayne State University in Detroit. The play revolves around an old woman's obsession with a unique mantel decoration and the family tensions this causes. For ticket information, call 577-2972.

Knowledge of chemistry helps

As wine consumers become more curious, winemakers attempt to increase the information they provide about the wine in the bottle, usually on the back label of more select wines.

One item that is increasingly mentioned is the pH factor present in the wine. Struggle with me here for a few paragraphs, and you'll have a bit more insight into wine chemistry as well as command a toast with which you can amaze your friends.

The term pH is a chemical abbreviation of the number of charged hydrogen atoms (ions) in wine. These ions come into wine in the natural acids found in grapes. In no sense are they additives. They result from the acids that mix in the juice following the crushing of grapes. Some of the hydrogen will pull away and become "free." The measure of the free ions is pH.

The resultant positive charge is measured on a 0-14 scale, wholly acid being 0, wholly alkaline being 14. (Water is neu-



wine
Richard Watson

tral at 7.) Wine is, of course, acid and its pH runs from 3 to 4 only. The lower the pH number, the more hydrogen ions in the wine.

THE LEVEL of free ions in a wine significantly affects its stability, life, color, aroma and flavor. The higher the total grape acidity, the more ions available and the lower the pH. Low pH is 3.0 to 3.5, high is about 3.5 to perhaps a 3.8 level.

While these differences seem numerically small, their effect on wine is substantial. Disease-producing organisms do not grow at all between 3.0 and 4.0, making wine a very safe thing to drink. And wines of low pH need less sodium dioxide, used to inhibit bacteria growth and to prevent oxidation and/or

deterioration. Malo-lactic bacteria do not grow well in low pH wines, so when this secondary fermentation phenomenon is not wanted, in fresh and light wines, a low pH factor helps. In reds, where malo-lactic fermentation (secondary) is often wanted, higher levels of pH are desirable, say the 3.4-3.7 range.

Wines with higher pH tend to have bitartrate crystals, those harmless white objects often seen in cold-stabilized chardonnay. Higher levels also affect color, especially noticeable in the blue, more purple hues.

AND BROWNING in white wines (oxidation) will occur more slowly

with low pH, keeping the wines younger looking and fresher tasting. Aroma also is affected, low levels giving off berry-like smells and the higher producing the deeper, more darker, more complex attributes of red wines especially.

Now to the translation of all this where it counts, in the selection of a bottle of wine for immediate consumption or a case for laying away. A chenin blanc with a reported level of 3.16 will tend to be crisper, lighter and demand quicker drinking than one that comes in a 3.37.



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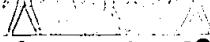
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Weill songs recalled in 'Labor of Love'

Continued from Preceding Page
lose it but gets the best laughs when the cast laughs at itself and the play.

THE QUALITY of acting in "Scapin" is excellent. Jeff Nahan plays the lead as the manipulating scamp, Scapin. Nahan comes closest to cap-

turing the instinct for the inane when he launches into a joyous bit of silliness by singing French nursery songs while his employer lies trussed in a sack at his feet.

Stereotyped casting was the expected style in Mollere's day and director Laurie Logan's casting is adept.

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