

Meadow Brook captures fine quality of 'Heiress'

Performances of "The Heiress" by Henry James continue through Sunday, March 18, at Meadow Brook Theatre on the Oakland University campus near Rochester. For ticket information call the box office at 377-3300.

By Cathie Breidenbach special writer

Meadow Brook Theatre's production of "The Heiress" is true to the genius of Henry James. The drama rises above drawing-room melodrama to tell a tale rich in the psychology of what shapes character. The play by Ruth and Augustus Goetz is based on James' 1880s novel "Washington Square." "The Heiress" is an entertaining period soap opera complete with an autocratic father, young lovers planning a midnight elopement and a widowed aunt who feels their romance. Father has money, lots of it, and he threatens not to will it to his daughter, Catherine, if she marries her chosen young man. Throw in a consumptive cough to heighten suspense and Meadow Brook has an engaging, if frivolous story. Thanks to James' understanding of the complexities of human motivation, "The Heiress" rises above the soap bubbles to tell us something about love and cruelty, loss and vengeance.

SET AMONG proper New York society, "The Heiress" describes the genteel world of the rich in 1850. It's a time when ladies' voluminous skirts swayed in wire-rigged gracefulness and when society prized beautiful women as ornaments. Costumes for Meadow Brook's Washington Square ladies are sumptuous and lovely. Catherine, a plain girl with an unflattering severe hairdo, is a misfit. With the exception of her needlework, she falls miserably in the ladylike social graces. She's too shy to chatter with feminine charm to attract an eligible gentleman, and she's much too honest to flirt coquettishly. Linda Gehring plays Catherine with a breathless earnestness. Her matchmaking aunt, admirably played by Jillian Lindig, delights in romance. Maureen McDevitt, who plays Catherine's twittry bright cousin Marlow, is the beauty who's everything Catherine's not. These ladies balance the grave Catherine and her father and give a liveliness to the drawing room drama that's directed with stylized reserve by Terence Kilburn. As the poor, strug-

review

gling widow-in-a-bonnet, Bethany Carpenter projects such honesty that the character doesn't seem like the stereotype it could so easily be.

Catherine falls in love with Morris Townsend, a handsome bachelor with no income. She's smitten by Morris as much by his good looks and smooth talk as by the fact that he's the first man to pay her amorous attention.

PETER GREGORY Thomson strikes a delicate balance in his portrayal of Morris as an honest, charming gold-digger. Even as we dislike him, there's something winning about the man who openly aspires to the good life on thirty thousand a year.

Dr. Sloper objects to the match, of course, because he sees that Townsend is a selfish, opportunist after Catherine's money. The truth of that fact outweighs any regard for Catherine's feelings and for the possibility that Morris may be her last chance for happiness.

The doctor is a respected, rigid man. Donald Symington plays him with appropriate wooden propriety as he constantly compares Catherine to her

mother who died in childbirth. The daughter never measures up to the remembered perfection of her mother and her father never lets her forget it. Austin Sloper never lets his only daughter with insensitivity bordering on cruelty. If he is a callous hypocrite who pretends parental love, he is also a man wounded by loss.

When Catherine realizes that her father doesn't love her, in fact dislikes her and finds her boring, she begins to change. Gone is the obedient, docile young woman.

THE PLAY pivots on Catherine's metamorphosis. She dares to deny her father and risk for love. If the plot sounds like a Harlequin romance, trust Henry James. His characters step beyond the simplicity of melodrama.

Two years later when Morris returns to talk of love and promises, a new Catherine greets him. Is she a free woman, liberated before her time, or a woman shackled by the emotional and psychological chains of her past? In the final memorable scene, she shows she's made of sterner stuff than either Morris or her father ever suspected.

second runs Tom Panzenhagen

"Plan 9 from Outer Space" (1956), 7:05 and 10 p.m. today at the Punch & Judy Theatre, 21 Kercheval, Groesse Pointe Farms, phone 852-7363, \$3. Running time 76 minutes. Touted far and wide as the worst film of all time, "Plan 9" actually may be one of the funniest films you'll ever see — unintentionally funny, to be sure, but funny all the same. Veteran vampire Bela Lugosi died during filming and was replaced by the producer's dentist. From their performances, all the actors could be dentists. The sets are unbelievable, the costumes cut-rate, the plot — loosely concerned with grave robbers from outer space — outrageous, and the dialogue as campy as it gets. So take a drive to the Points. You won't be disappointed.

On the same bill: "It Came from Hollywood," the somewhat disappointing tribute film that features clips from Hollywood's worst movies, including "Plan 9 from Outer Space." Rating: \$3.

"Treasure of the Sierra Madre" (1948), 7:10 and 9:30 p.m. today at the Washington Theatre, 226 S. Washington, Royal Oak, phone 541-0082, \$2.50. Running time 126 minutes. Humphrey Bogart steps out of character as Fred C. Dobbs, a mild-mannered, slow-witted prospector in this engrossing John Huston film that co-stars Huston's father, Walter, Tim Holt, Bruce Bennett and Barton MacLane. The emphasis is on the unexpected in characterization and plot,

with a wonderful screenplay by John Huston propelling the action merrily along. The Hustons, incidentally, both won Oscars for the film — John for his screenplay and Walter as best supporting actor. Rating: \$3.40.

Footnote: The Washington recently kicked off a series of films featuring favorite Hollywood stars and directors. Friday through Thursday, March 8, three Alfred Hitchcock films, "Rebecca," "Notorious" and "Spellbound" are scheduled, and films of Tracy and Hepburn, James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson are on tap for future weeks. For a complete schedule call 358-0934.

"The Warriors" (1979), 7:30 and 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday at Cass City Cinema, 4605 Cass at Forest, Detroit, phone 832-6309, \$2.50. Running time 94 minutes. Surreal is the word for "The Warriors," but that's not to say it's arsy or

WHAT'S IT WORTH?
A ratings guide to the movies

Bad	...	\$1
Fair	...	\$2
Good	...	\$3
Excellent	...	\$4

high-brow. To the contrary, it ought to appeal to "Dirty Harry" fans every where. But there's another level to "The Warriors" that Clint Eastwood films seldom approach. While it's visually stunning and pulsatingly paced, there's also more to "The Warriors" than meets the eye. Michael Beck stars as the leader of a New York City youth gang on the run with his comrades from every other gang in the Big Apple. The director is Walter Lang. Rating: \$3.

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