



Tina Howe's "Painting Churches" continues Tuesdays-Saturdays, with two shows Sundays, through Jan. 27 at the Birmingham Theatre. For ticket information call 644-3533.

Marian Seldes' dynamic performance as Fanny is the heartbeat of the Birmingham Theatre's production of Tina Howe's tender, pithy and funny play "Painting Churches."

The drama revolves around Gardner Church, a brilliant Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, who grows senile, and his wife, Fanny, and daughter, Mags, who must cope with the doctor of aging.

Fanny lives in reality and carries on with hyperactive cheerfulness. She's funny, acerbic and utterly human. Seldes' general splendid energy as Gardner's eccentric Bostonian wife. It is she who sees the pitiful hilarity in their situation, who remembers the grandeur and passion of their lives and who refuses out of love and pride to give up and let everything fall apart.

GARDNER CHURCH is an elegant, silver-haired poet laureate who recites snippets of poems with impassioned enthusiasm until his mind trails off into distraction.

He drops his coat in the middle of the floor like a school boy and "loses" the ice cubes in the kitchen until his wife

must about "Yoo-hoo" to bring his brain to focus on present reality.

Gardner is a man diminished by senility, yet Donald Sprotling's fine portrayal of him paints the essential dignity and intelligence of the man despite lapses into vagueness and child-like dependence.

The play takes place amid the chaos of cartoons and clutter as Gardners pack to move from their Boston family home to smaller, less-expensive quarters on Cape Cod. Their artist daughter, Mags, comes to help pack and to do what she's always wanted to do, paint their portraits.

Kristin Griffin as the daughter has a life of her own in New York and knows her parents as she thinks they are, which is the way they were when she was younger. She shows up once a year for a visit. On this visit she notices with surprise that her father's hair has gone grey.

"WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?" her mother demands. Mags tries not to notice his creeping senility, but her mother won't let her ignore it.

Fanny must, as always, anchor her ailing husband and daughter to reality. She demands of her daughter, "What can you give him from yourself that costs you something?"

Director Andre Errotte and author



Cathle Breidenbach

Howe wisely refrain from sentimentality. "Painting Churches" is a moving, funny play with delightful visual wit, as when Fanny and Gardner wrinkle poses of art masterpieces — Gardner languishing dramatically in Fanny's lap as they ham up Michaelangelo's "Pieta" or standing side by side with four faces and a salad fork mimicking Grant Wood's "American Gothic."

It is a play rich in language as Gardner rolls out stanzas from Yeats, Frost, Roethke, Dickinson and Grey — eloquent words about endings. Even the family parakeet spouts Grey's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard."

The director occasionally overdoes some of the humorous situations as when Gardner trails through the room dropping pages of his manuscript like a dazed Hansel dropping breadcrumbs, nevertheless the humor works.

And the comic irony is at moments hilarious as when Fanny sits wearing nothing more than her slip and a scar-

let flower teetering on top of her head and nonchalantly tells Gardner how silly he looks wearing layers of old coats and umpteen the dangling round his neck. The Churches are such strong and original people that they seem not at all contrived but supremely real.

ALL THREE babble on without listening to each other and live in separate worlds of their own making, yet their shared history and sense of family bind them.

And how will their daughter paint her parents' portraits? As they were — a splendid patrician picture of success, or as they are — an incongruous senile poet and his wife struggling just to survive the ravages of age? Where is the reality?

It is the question the play addresses with sensitivity and touching dignity. "Painting Churches" can join "On Golden Pond" in the annals of theater that speaks with honesty about growing old.



Goldie Hawn finds herself in some unlikely circumstances in "Protocol." Top: an emir is enamored of Goldie. Center: Limo's passengers meet a loggy Goldie. Above: Goldie walks a long way for a camel.

the movies  
Dan Greenberg

Politicians, media are Goldie's targets in satiric 'Protocol'

"Protocol" takes aim at the media, politicians and everybody's funny bone. It successfully scores a number of bullseyes.

Picture, if you will, Sunny Davis (Goldie Hawn), a cocktail waitress at Lou's (Kenneth Mars) sleazy Safari Club. The girls wear outlandish costumes while serving. The emir suit is the worst and it falls to the gal who comes late to work. That's usually Sunny, whose broken-down old car is far from reliable.

But Sunny is a salt-of-the-earth, straight-shooting, honest gal with loyal friends, including the two guys she's living, not loving, with and her co-workers at the Safari Club.

In a humorous coincidence, Sunny saves a Middle-East emir (Richard Romanus) from an assassin's bullet, which lodges in Sunny's derriere. Sunny and her derriere become the objects of a great deal of attention.

WOULDN'T YOU know it: the U.S. Government wants to build a military base on the emir's real estate, the emir develops a romantic interest in Sunny, whose new-found celebrity the media exploits, while the politicians scurry around looking for the edge to turn a deal. The emir's rival body-man, Nawaf Al Kaber (Andre Gregory), helps out and the merry chase is on.

All these folks, kind and gentle or otherwise, come in for a great ribbing at the hands of scenarist Buck Henry ("The Owl and the Pussycat," "The Graduate" and "What's Up, Doc?").

Under the tight direction of Herbert Ross, whose credits since "Funny Girl" are truly too numerous to mention, Hawn gives a very funny rendition of the gal who can't say no — to the truth.

A host of fine characterizations make "Protocol" work well. The crew from the State Department's Protocol Office — whose job it is to convince Sunny to be nice to the emir — is led by Mrs. St. John (Gall Strickland), who plays it as prim and proper and uptight as possible. When, in Sunny's words, Mrs. St. John "gets busted in a bar brawl," the contrast of character and situation couldn't be more comic.

There's an interesting satiric overtone, also a bit confusing, which hints at a resemblance between Mrs. St. John and Nancy Reagan. One point in particular evoked some of the political barbs at the President and his age-bearing problems. "He's probably asleep anyway," notes one of Mrs. St. John's assistants, whose maneuvering seemed to be at a more significant level than one might expect of the Protocol Office.

MRS. ST. JOHN'S assistants were so well-characterized as the moonamical, nameless, faceless and bumbling bureaucrats whose only mission in life is political success (whatever that means) that they shall remain nameless here.

The major barbs in "Protocol," however, are reserved for the media and the ways in which it, particularly television, exploits celebrity and the viewers' passion for the latest, most sensational images.

Many have justly criticized the media for "creating" personalities and events by overfocusing on minor incidents. "A snowflake was reported hovering over I-698 this morning. Here's a report from our weather helicopter on the scene."

Throughout "Protocol" the media's exploitation of personality is neatly satirized. To the film's credit, the satire goes beyond the rather easy jokes about news reporting and deals with the structure of broadcast journalism and the format of print media.

Naturally, a successful comedy must have love. That element is introduced by the State Department's Middle East Desk chief, Michael Ransome (Chris Sarandon), who quietly plays out the role of a divorced, career diplomat affected by Sunny's straightforward honesty beneath her tacky exterior. It turns out that her exterior is only tacky amidst the phony slickness of Washington's political scene. That has an impact on Ransome.

THE FILM should end with Sunny's statement to the Senate Investigating Committee. It is a statement that nicely sums up the better aspects of American democracy and has the ring of Jimmy Stewart in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." But, as with any good thing, "Protocol" plays the string out too far and the final sequence is gratuitous.

'Painting Churches' is a treasure

what's at the movies

AMADEUS (PG). Superb rendition of Mozart's life with Tom Hulce and F. Murray Abraham. Directed by Milos Forman.

BEVERLY HILLS COP (R). Eddie Murphy is funny but Detroit comes off second best in this cop show.

BREAKIN' 2 (PG). The TKO crew from "Breakin'" does it again.

BROTHER FROM ANOTHER PLANET (Unrated but probably PG-13). Humorous and clever, as black extraterrestrial slave escapes and lands in Harlem. Marred by murky conclusion.

CITY HEAT (PG). Clint Eastwood and Burt Reynolds combine forces as a cop and private eye in this free-wheeling film set in 1933 Kansas City.

THE COTTON CLUB (R). Splashy but disappointing epic about Harlem nightclub during Prohibition. Richard Gere, Diane Lane, Gregory Hines and good supporting cast. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola.

DUNE (PG-13). Cast of thousands in epic flick based on Frank Herbert's sci-fi classic. Okay but disappointing.

FLAMINGO KID (PG-13). High school graduate's

summer vacation before college. A very busy summer, with Matt Dillon, Richard Crenna and Jessica Walter.

THE GODS MUST BE CRAZY (PG). Nomadic tribesman discovers Coke bottle and believes it's a magic talisman. Comedy from South Africa.

JOHNNY DANGEROUSLY (PG-13). Honest John Kelly joins the underworld and becomes Johnny Dangerously. With Michael Keaton, Joe Piscopo, Maureen Stapleton and Dom DeLuise.

MICKI AND MAUDE (PG-13). Dudley Moore winds up in trouble with Amy Irving and Ann Reinking. Directed by Blake Edwards.

PINOCCHIO (G). Disney's animated feature about a wooden puppet who dreams of becoming a real boy.

PROTOCOL (PG-13). Goldie Hawn as Washington, D.C. cocktail waitress who gains international attention, with Chris Sarandon.

RUNAWAY (PG-13). Action pic set in near-future with dedicated cop and the usual evil genius. Tom Selleck and Cynthia Rhodes.

SWANN IN LOVE (R). Jeremy Irons and Alain Delons star in the screen adaptation of Proust's

"Remembrance of Things Past" directed by Volker Schlöndorff.

MOVIE RATING GUIDE  
G General audiences. All ages admitted.  
PG Parental guidance suggested. Some material may not be suitable for pre-teens.  
PG-13 Parents are strongly cautioned to give special guidance for attendance of children under 13. Some material may be inappropriate for younger children.  
R Restricted. Under 18 requires accompanying parent or guardian.  
X No one under 16 admitted.

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