

'Going to See the Elephant' needs stronger focus

The Michigan premiere production of "Going to See the Elephant," presented by the Actors Alliance Theatre Company, continues at 8:30 p.m. Fridays, 5:30 and 9 p.m. Saturdays and 6:30 p.m. Sundays, at Lyceum Theatre in Southfield. For ticket information, call the box office at 642-1326 2-9 p.m. Fridays-Sundays.

"Going to See the Elephant," the season opener at the Actors Alliance Theatre, is a pitiful gift from the heartland that is at times moving and at other times lacking in integrated focus.

The play speaks with an elemental honesty that sticks in memory — a good show with both mind and heart, but far from a great one. The weakness lies not in the generally rock-solid performance by the four actresses who play women on the unforgiving Kansas prairie, nor in Jeff Nahan's controlled directing.

The play was developed in 1982 by six women at the Los Angeles Repertory Theatre. Six authors, including Nahan, wrote the play.

An explanation of the title of this *lyric in four voices* explains the theme as well. "Going to See the Elephant" refers to the quest for adventure and the price people pay for following visions and hungering to see strange wonders.

"IT'S A VISION that keeps you alive," says Ma Wheeler, the tough homesteader and self-taught doctor who is the chief defender of "pure human curiosity." "You gotta keep turnin' the pages," she says as she makes plans to move on to Colorado.

With her homespun sleeves rolled up

on muscular forearms and her outstretched eyebrows set for survival, Beverly Markowitz Baunoch as Ma seems capable of turning back any marauding wolves or Indians that get in her way.

Her daughter-in-law, Sara, the pregnant earth mother, has no yearnings to wander. She just wants to get the washing hung, the cow milked and the children raised; she's the Martha to Ma's Mary.

"The world might as well end 40 miles down the road," she says.

Annette DePetrus plays Sara as a woman who endures like a tree rooted in the wind-swept land. Sara may lack curiosity and refinement, but DePetrus makes us respect her as a survivor with a strong core of human decency.

Then there's Eta, a neighbor who's half woman, half child. She's a wounded bird who's paid the price of going to see the elephant. Wendy Susan Hiller lets anxiety from Eta's dark past emerge as fluttery distraction and childlike hyperactivity. Except for a bit too much nervous wiping of her hands, Hiller's Eta comes across as a touchingly genuine lost soul.

Mrs. Nichols is the fourth voice in the quartet. She's an Eastern intellectual, an idealist on the rebound from a Transcendentalist. That's what went wrong when the Utopian community she and her husband joined failed from disease and hunger. Her ineffectual husband lies offstage groaning as Ma doctors his fever.

IN HER REFINED way, Mrs. Nichols loathes the brutal land that has taken her son, shattered her dreams and made her see her husband as a weakling. So much for going to see elephants. They're brutal uncivilized beasts. Mary Bremer as Mrs. Nichols admirably reins in her character's



Cathie Breidenbach

emotion and lets it out in small painful snatches so it can't get loose and carry her beyond reason.

Four women dominate the stage in this play, but there are powerful players in the piece that the audience never sees.

There's the land — harsh and beautiful with renegade Indians, locusts,

vines and ruthless winters. However, beautiful and spacious the Kansas prairie must have been a few years after the Civil War, it was still a lethal place that killed or destroyed anyone who wasn't strong.

God is another unseen player. He created the glories of the prairie; it is He who gives life and takes away

again, and the humans in the piece are bound either to fight His mastery as Mrs. Nichols does or to accept His will as Sara does.

Men, the other half of the human race, are unseen but not absent in "Elephants" and the verdict on them is mixed. Mr. Nichols is certainly a wipe-out and if we take Ma's word for it, her husband was a bit of a scoundrel. Not so the absent Josh, Ma's son and Sara's

husband. He's a survivor, a strong man they depend on.

The play is feminist only in that it speaks with the voices of four women who tell how it was for them back in 1871 when Kansas was a raw land fit only for the strong. And what of the theme? Surely the hunger for adventure and the need to follow dreams is a human yearning. Both men and women reap the glory and both pay the price.

God is another unseen player



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upcoming things to do

OUTDOOR CONCERT

"Thriller," a show presented by a 14-piece group, will be offered on last "Summer Nights" Concert of the season from 5:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. Friday, Sept. 13, poolside at the Troy Hilton Inn. Featuring song and dance, "Thriller" is a tribute to Michael Jackson, Lionel Ritchie and Prince. This will be the last Summer Nights party. There will be no cover charge for the evening, sponsored by radio station WNIC.

FALL TERM

Open registration for fall term '85 will be 2-8 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, Sept. 14-15, at Will-O-Way Apprentice Theatre in Birmingham. Classes in acting, directing and improvisation will begin Saturday; Sept. 21. Children's classes are available Saturday; adult evening classes, Sunday-Tuesday. For further information, call 644-4418 or drop by the acting school's new location at 2253 Cole.

CHAMBER WINDS

The Detroit Chamber Winds will perform at 8 p.m. Friday, Sept. 20, at the Wallace F. Smith Performing Arts Theatre on the Oakland Community College campus in Farmington Hills. The concert will follow an optional pre-performance dinner at 6:30 p.m. prepared by the Culinary Arts Department. Tickets for the dinner/concert combination are \$18.50 per person. Tickets for the concert only are \$9 per person. Senior citizens will receive a \$1 discount. For reservations, call the box office at 471-7700.

LOVING CUP

Danny, Marlene, Steve and Bret, who comprise the Loving Cup, perform Tuesday-Saturdays through Sept. 28 at Sassy's lounge on the main floor of the Southfield Holiday Inn.

CARILLON RECITAL

John Harvey, carillonneur of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, will present two 30-minute concerts at 10 a.m. and noon Sunday, Sept. 15, at Kirk in the Hills on W. Long Lake Road in Bloomfield Hills.

FILM SEASON

Two film programs at Oakland University have announced their fall 1985 schedules. The Student Program Board offers Weekend Films at 3, 7 and 9:30 p.m. Fridays and 3 p.m. Saturdays at 301 Dodge on campus near Rochester. All showings are \$1. The season opens with "Teachers" on Sept. 13-14. Other September films include "The Natural," Sept. 20-21, and "Country," Sept. 27-28. Cinematheque film series presents films at 7 p.m. Saturdays at 301 Dodge Hall. Admission is \$1. The series opens with "Reverend Madness," including two shorts, "Mindscapes" and "Doonesbury," on Sept. 21.

'CHAPTER TWO'

Neil Simon's bittersweet comedy "Chapter Two" will be presented at 8:30 p.m. Friday-Saturdays, Sept. 27-28 and Oct. 4-5, and 2 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 29, at the Birmingham Village Players playhouse at the corner of Finley, Boulevard and Chestnut Street, south of Maple Road, Birmingham. Tickets at \$5 for adults and \$4 for students are available at the door. For reservations, call 644-3075 anytime.

Steve Camp will give a Christian music concert at 7:30 p.m. today at the Allen Park Municipal Auditorium.

CHRISTIAN MUSIC

Steve Camp, Christian music star, will appear in concert at 8:30 p.m. today at the Allen Park Municipal Auditorium, south of I-94. Paul Ruchl of Dearborn will be the warmup artist. Tickets at \$8 are available at local Christian ticket outlets and at the door.

VICTORY CONCERT

The Men's Glee Club of Wayne State University will present a Victory Concert at 8:15 p.m. Friday, Sept. 13, at Orchestra Hall in Detroit. It will be recorded as a part of the glee club's 1985 record album. The Men's Glee Club won the world championship in the male choir division of the International Musical Eisteddfod in Llangollen, North Wales, this summer. General admission tickets are \$5; students and senior citizens, \$3. For more information, call WSU at 577-2618.

BENEFIT CONCERT

Second Self, Sky Boy and the Missing Links will appear in a benefit concert Friday, Sept. 13, at St. Andrew's Hall in Detroit. Doors open at 9 p.m. and patrons must be 18 or older to enter. All proceeds go to benefit Wayne State University radio station WAYN. Advance tickets at \$3 are available at the WSU Bookstore and at it's the Ritz in Birmingham. Admission is \$4 at the door. For more information, call 577-4200.

OAKWAY SYMPHONY

A "Spanish Spectacular" will be presented by Oakway Symphony at 3 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 29, in the Activities Center at Madonna College in Livonia. Performing with the orchestra will be Maria Del Carmen and the Grupo Espans. Making his orchestral debut is violinist Patrick Foley playing the "Symphony Espagnol" by Lalo. Admission is \$7 for adults, \$4 for students and senior citizens. A Spanish meal will be served at 5:30 p.m. in the Madonna College Dining Hall. Dinner tickets are \$7.50 for adults, \$3.50 for children under 12. For reservations or ticket information, call 591-8056 or 524-3313.

Information for the upcoming calendar may be submitted to Ethel - Simonson, Entertainment Editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. Mailing address is: P.O. Box 503, Birmingham 48012, or 36253 Schoolcraft Road, Livonia 48150. Entertainment events should be open to the public. Preference is given to information about residents of, or events within, the circulation area of the 12 Observer & Eccentric newspapers.

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