

'Angel Street' still has breathtaking suspense

Performances of the Meadow Brook Theatre production of "Angel Street" continue through Sunday, Jan. 26, on the Oakland University campus near Rochester. For ticket information, call the box office at 377-3300.

By Cathie Breidenbach special writer

Meadow Brook's intriguing production of "Angel Street" by Patrick Hamilton sets up mysterious questions in the first few minutes, and George Guitto's expert portrayal of Mr. Mann-

ingham makes us wonder just how bad this dislikeable man really is. Is he merely an autistic Victorian husband who enjoys lordly it over his distraught young wife, or is he a man who indulges in a more calculating brand of evil? Perhaps a man with a grisly murder in his past?

Director Terence Kilburn succeeds in maintaining tension throughout by using the departures and anticipation of the returns of Mr. Manningham to keep the audience on edge in this mystery thriller that Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer made famous in

the 1943 film, "Gaslight." Bethany Carpenter as the hand-wringing, insecure Mrs. Manningham convincingly vacillates from start to finish. The Victorians believed women were frail creatures with weak nerves, weaker brains, and who knows what else that was weaker than that of man.

Director Terence Kilburn plays a Victorian woman, an easy victim of her husband's campaign to unhinge her sanity.

THE REALITY that her own mother died insane and that Mrs. Manningham is isolated at home by frailty and husbandly decree feeds into



Cathie Breidenbach

her nervousness and furthers her husband's plot.

Enter the breezy, comfortable Inspector Rough who brings a whiff of humor and a welcome lightness into this ponderous household of unhappiness. Richard Easley's pleasure as the inspector in search of evidence to confirm his suspicions. He's on the trail of a man who

years ago murdered an old lady to get nine priceless rubies.

But is the inspector to be trusted, sneaking in the way he does without search warrant or the trappings of authority? He totes a flask and lip-plies on the job, and he even dares to offer strong drink to Mrs. Manningham. Is the already-confused Mrs. Mann-

ingham's dalliance with the flippant maid, Nancy, played with appropriate sexy sass by Liz Zwickler, is one confirmation that this upright gentleman may not be so righteous after all.

Barbara Barringer is fine as Elizabeth, the housekeeper, a pliable woman who just wants to do right by whichever person is talking to her at the moment. She's certainly no help in resolving the question of who speaks truth.

CHARGES OF murder and madness are serious business and Director

Terence Kilburn wisely keeps "Angel Street" just this side of melodrama — except once when the lustful groping and clutched between Nancy and Mr. Manningham comes so melodramatic as to be silly.

The set by Peter Hicks is splendid, appropriately ponderous with a Victorian mix of pattern and bric-a-brac. It's imposing — at once grand yet attentive to the smallest detail — the kind of set that Meadow Brook does so well.



Uneven musical opens theater's new home

Performances of the Will-O-Way Apprentice Theatre production of the musical "Once Upon a Mattress" continue at 8:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays and 4:30 p.m. Sundays at the theater in Birmingham. For ticket information call the box office at 644-4418.

By Cathie Breidenbach special writer

Will-O-Way Apprentice Theatre christened its new building in Birmingham with the musical comedy "Once Upon a

Mattress," a mixed production saved by three crackjack performances. Eileen Weiss is unequivocally wonderful as the bumptious princess who proves her refinement when a "plea" under 20 mattresses discombobulates her royal sleep.

Francine Hachem as the loud-mouthed queen mother and Marie Seafone as the wistful lady-in-waiting turn in excellent performances in this Broadway hit that Carol Burnett brought to TV many seasons ago. Last spring Will-O-Way moved from the little the-

ater on Long Lake Road that has been its home since the 1940s. The decor of the old place could be described as struggling-artist threadbare. The aura of Will-O-Way hasn't changed at the new location. The struggling-artist ambience remains, and the Will-O-Way Theatre and School for the Performing Arts still runs on heart and augments its skimpy budget with donations and grants.

At the Birmingham address, 2253 Cole Street, not far from the Birmingham Ice Arena, the decor offers no trills beyond the necessities of a stage, a curtain, and seats for the audience. The Will-O-Way staff and players make up for the scruffiness around the edges with their obvious enthusiasm.

THROUGH THE years now-great players like George C. Scott and Lilly Tomlin, plus a host of other known and still-struggling performers, have played the Will-O-Way stage on their way to the big time.

Director Celia Merrill Turner reminisces, "Will-O-Way began in Bloomfield in an old apple storage building. Now we're in a converted warehouse in Birmingham." Some things don't change.

"Mattress" is the first production at Will-O-Way's new location. Behind its opening lies a complicated story of postponements, something like playing a board game and landing on more than a fair share of spots that say "go back three spaces."

It took many months to bring the renovations up

to the exacting standards of the Birmingham building inspector and the fire marshal. During those months "Mattress," scheduled to open in June, was postponed several times, forcing changes in the cast, as players returned to college or work.

The reshuffling of the cast exacts its toll on the production. Some of the supporting players seem to walk through their scenes looking like new recruits. In fact, several aspects of the production have a last-minute feel to them.

THE MEDIEVAL costumes by Helen King are very good, but many haven't been altered to fit the players wearing them, and the crudely constructed set lacks polish, even taking into account Will-O-Way's obvious shoestring budget.

Enough about the scruffy edges of "Mattress." At the heart of the play is Eileen Weiss who could almost singlehandedly carry the show with her Carol-Burnett-style comic mastery. She uses every detail to advantage, down to the least little burp and hiccup, and her rubber face is howlingly funny.

She has excellent help from Francine Hachem who plays to perfection the shrewish, dotting mother of the prince and from Marie Seafone, tenderly flirtatious and

fine as the lady-in-waiting in love with Sir Harry (Dave Koch).

The men are outshine by the women in the play, but Tony Casarta does a creditable job as the simple young Prince Dauntless, as does Wally Sum-play as the simperon king with an eye for the ladies.

Sharon Thomas on piano provides musical backup and director Celia Merrill Turner's fine sense of staging comes through in the debut at Will-O-Way's relocated theater.

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