

# Production has good balance

Performances of the Will-O-Way Repertory Theatre Company production of "The Gingerbread Lady" by Neil Simon continue through Saturday, March 8, at Will-O-Way Apprentice Theatre in Birmingham. For ticket information call 644-4418.

By Bill Bowles  
special writer

Balancing a story of lost hopes and wasted lives with quick-witted repartee is no easy task, but in the Will-O-Way production of Neil Simon's "The Gingerbread Lady," the job is performed eloquently.

Starring in the title role is Francine J. Hachem as Eva Mera, an aging second-rate nightclub singer whose falling battle with alcoholism forms the play's central action. Hachem's dynamic performance carries us with her on a series of pillaged highs and hung-over lows.

Returning home to her Manhattan apartment after a 10-week hiatus at an alcoholic rehabilitation home, she is left to the job of piecing together the fragments of her shattered life. She is welcomed home by two dear friends, Jimmy and Toby, whose own deep-seated neuroses shed an ominous dark

## review

cloud over the delicate prospects of Eva's battle with the bottle.

Jimmy (Dennis LaLone) is an aging homosexual queen, who is an actor still waiting for his big break. Toby (Eileen T. Weiss) is a Grand-Rapids-bred pseudo-socialite whose obsession with her negligible beauty is matched only by her childlike helplessness.

LA LONE IS superb. His effeminate mannerisms create pockets of unexpected humor and his quirky self-styled brand of neurosis add credibility to his unintentional dependency on the feeble Eva.

Weiss is competent as Toby. She thickens the gloomy atmosphere with a curious persona of self-absorption which is simultaneously funny and frightening. Weiss' languid movements and monotone voice effectively convey a woman hopelessly lost in the loneliness of her past.

The characters in "The Gingerbread Lady" are the most depressing of Simon's canon. Unlike the fiery "The

Odd Couple" which was rich in dialogue, "The Gingerbread Lady" is reliant on the psyche of the characters to pull its weight.

At times it seems as if Simon is trying to bring a touch of Tennessee Williams to his work. Like when Eva pairs herself with a mooching rootless boyfriend who takes the first convenient opportunity to blacken her eye. Her boyfriend, Lou Tanner (John Freeman), is only a more gruff example of the type of friends Eva chooses.

Jimmy and Toby unconsciously overburden Eva with their own problems and it doesn't take long before Eva is drinking again. Freeman is adequate as Eva's boyfriend, an attractive tough-talking "musician" whose voice is of such a strong nasal quality, that he sounds like he is talking through a sweat sock.

THE LONE "healthy" character in "The Gingerbread Lady" is Eva's daughter Polly (Catherine Miranda),

whose bright-faced innocence and supportive presence has little effect on Eva's gravitation toward self-destruction. Miranda is passable as Polly but she wears a constant smile, which is hardly believable in the strained presence of these haywire characters.

Ultimately Simon fails in his attempt to bring out the darker sides of human nature and combine them with his catty, often superficial humor. The strong points of "The Gingerbread Lady" however, are reason enough to see the play.

Director Celia Merrill Turner manages to emphasize the sensitive helplessness of lost souls in an indifferent and often savage world. She blends the often awkward humor as effectively as possible.

Turner's set is fine and so is Bill Anagnos as Manuel, the delivery boy. In the few second Anagnos was on stage he exuded a hot Latin machismo — a welcome breath of spunk, an element which would have been welcome in Simon's often pale dialogue.



Sally Field stars as Emma Moriarty, a divorced mother who moves to a small Arizona town, where she runs a horse ranch and falls in love with the local pharmacist, in "Murphy's Romance."



the movies  
**Dan Greenberg**

## What's so special about this tiresome romantic comedy?

Everybody seems to be going gaga over "Murphy's Romance" (PG-13), but I thought it was a rather dopey romantic comedy that was short on comedy and so obvious in its romance that it got boring.

Emma Moriarty (Sally Field) shows up in Eunice, Ariz., with 12-year-old son Jake (Corey Haim) and the idea that she's going to support the two of them by boarding and training horses.

Naturally the bank won't lend money to an unattached woman. Eunice was a town that Gloria Steinheim and Bella Abzug missed on their last ERA tour.

Meanwhile, in town, away from Emma's floundering ranch, Murphy Jones (James Garner) is an offbeat, iconoclastic pharmacist who is recovering from the great trauma of his wife's death.

THE THING IS that what passes for radical behavior in Eunice (and in "Murphy's Romance") is pretty sappy in this day and age. In short, Garner is saddled with an actionless role. Confined behind a soda fountain dispensing chocolate phosphates and avoiding wry aphorisms just isn't Garner's metier.

In "Murphy's Romance," Garner has neither the script nor the talent to overcome the "Rockford" stereotype as a pleasant cynic who has seen it all and deals with life's foolishness by action and acerbic comment.

In case you didn't guess, the Widow Moriarty intrigues him and he climbs out of the despair of his widowerhood to begin courting her and winning over her son. Naturally, her no-good ex-husband Bobby Jack (Brian Kerwin) shows up to cadge a few meals and regain her love and affection.

The limited conflict and energy that arises out of this situation is a slight stress on the boy. Jake is taken by Murphy's overtures for, as every widower knows, the way to a woman's heart is through her kid's affections. But the problem is, Jake likes his dad, too.

The major climax between Murphy and Bobby Jack comes at a party Bobby Jack threw in spite of his ex-wife's reluctance. It really is a non-party, with Bobby Jack continually taking booze from the kitchen cupboard to a crowd sitting around in a terminal stupor. Their loss of sensibility is from boredom not booze. The audience probably gets the same feeling.

DURING THIS exciting party, Murphy and Bobby Jack have words. James Garner wins the rhetorical battle, barely, but Bobby Jack gets to sing a folk song. On the whole, it is a party well-missed. Bobby Jack is clearly the villain, however, because he sings to some cute young blonde.

Well, it is so simple-mindedly obvious that Emma prefers Murphy and wishes her ex-husband would leave. But the plot structure is so limited that Emma is constrained from kicking Bobby Jack out because the boy likes him.

Where was he all those years she was bringing up baby? Ridding his motorcycle and dealing blondes. It's difficult to believe she let him stay the first night, let alone weeks and weeks.

Her tactic, then, is to entice Pharmacist Jones with her cooking. Conveniently, he is boarding his horse at her ranch and has convinced the townsfolk to board theirs.

Every evening after he stables his horse, she invites him to dinner so he can make her ex-husband jealous. Of course, in the best tradition of modern feminism, the Widow Moriarty is proving her independence and modernity in the kitchen.

Enough said. This is a dippy, boring and overly obvious film, which won't challenge your mind or your sensibilities. Don't bother, for even the most devoted Garner fans will wish he was back in his tank.



James Garner is pharmacist Murphy Jones, who vies with Moriarty's ex-husband for her attentions.

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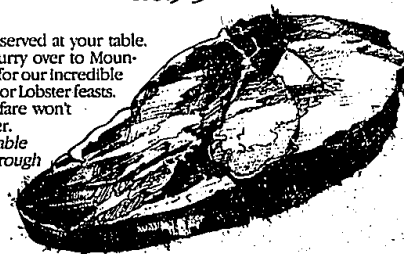
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