



Gay Zieger

## Musical goes up but then falls down

Performances of the Avon Players production of the Neil Simon/Martin Hamlisch musical comedy "They're Playing Our Song" continue through Saturday, May 17, at the Avon Players Playhouse in Avon Township. For ticket information, call 656-1130.

By Gay Zieger  
special writer

Avon has ended the season with a Neil Simon musical comedy that is two-thirds bang, one-third whimper. The last few scenes survive only by riding the swell of the first ones, which are just splendid.

Karen Elliott-Upchurch and Jeff Upchurch are ideally paired, as I thought back in December of 1984 when she was plain Karen Elliott. They met when she was cast as Sister Rita, he as the accused priest, in the players' production of "The Runner Stumbles," an unsatisfying little drama.

This time they found a medium that is nearly equal to their talents. They play words and music people, songwriters, both neurotic, uncertain, vulnerable. We see a little of ourselves in each of them.

Karen is a physical actress, thrusting her whole body into each line, without a hint of overstatement or inappropriateness. We are sorry when her character gains success, poise, maturity and a few full hair/wig. But she turns from mediocre songs into real treasures with her clear, strong voice and her expressiveness.

JEFF'S ROLE CALLS for a

more subdued rendering, but he too recognizes the importance of movement, of modified business in theater. He does not go beyond the bounds of what seems natural to him, however.

His exasperation, frustration, anger and love are conveyed beautifully in his face and voice. His '60s-style falsetto singing is a special treat.

Their real troubles start in bed and, strangely enough, so do those with timing and the play in general. The second act just isn't as interesting, perhaps because romantic, sexual tension is replaced by real tension. Still, the audience remembers the earlier belly laughs.

Gay Pitman Zieger used to bus into New York at 5 a.m., line up at the box office for 10 a.m. standing-room-only tickets to the latest Broadway hits. That was when she was a kid.

Since 1976, she has been a freelance newspaper, drama, film or book critic, and a college writing instructor. She also writes feature articles as a freelancer and teaches composition at Wayne State University, though this semester she is on leave to write a centennial history of the Boys Republic in Farmington.

Because she is moving to Gainesville, Fla., this will be her last review for the Observer & Eccentric. Zieger has been reviewing plays for the O&E since 1977.

## Actress cleverly plays smalltown girl

Performances of "Romantic Comedy" by Bernard Slade continue through Saturday, May 31, at Will-O-Way Apprentice Theatre in Birmingham. For ticket information call 644-4418.

Bernard Slade's "Romantic Comedy" is a witty, modern love story that's a delightful vehicle for Eileen Wells' broad comic style, a style that relies as much on body language as it does on the clever script.

She plays Phoebe Craddock, an unsophisticated Vermont schoolteacher who becomes the writing partner of the celebrated playwright Jason Carmichael. She'd like to be more than writing partner and so would he, but the timing's invariably off. First he's married to someone else; later she is, and it takes them 14 tender, funny years as good friends to get the timing right.

The name Phoebe Craddock sounds like that of a hokey, small-town girl, and Wells plays her that way when she first shows up at Jason's New York townhouse. She's an always-a-bridesmaid sort of person who buttons her raincoat, off-kilter, fidgets and stands pigeon-toed when she's embarrassed, and screws up her face to show every passing emotion. Wells' Phoebe is endearingly inept and unsophisticated but underneath is a talented, self-aware, earth person who wears well.

Time tempers her awkwardness, but her warmth and unpretentious honesty remain with her through the 14 years it takes to bring Phoebe and Jason romantically together.

DENNIS LALONE as Jason Carmichael holds his own as the vain playwright who is both egotistical and charming, a man with enough



Cathie Breidenbach

presence to balance Phoebe's uninhibited style.

Francine Hachem makes her directing debut in "Romantic Comedy" and shows promise, with an ability to enrich a production by being a stickler about details without losing sight of the overall picture.

The good supporting cast includes Shirley Brewer as Blanche Dailey, Sally DuBats in the double role of ambitious wife and seductive actress and John McCormick as Leo the

tough journalist who marries Phoebe.

Eight people pulled off this production. That includes cast and crew. They did a fine job of it, which proves that talent and dedication can carry a production despite constraints of time and money.

Cathie Breidenbach of West Bloomfield has always loved theater. A former high school English teacher, she works in public relations, advertising and as a freelance writer.

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