

Theater foresees a season with 'no duds'

By Ethel Simmons
staff writer

The Birmingham Theatre's 10th anniversary season gets underway in mid-September, and Harry Nederlander, who runs the theater, believes it will be a special one.

Of the shows to be produced for the new season, he declares, "I would say, offhand, there isn't a dud in the bunch." Six productions, as usual, will be offered. "Five of the six are new shows that have never played here," Nederlander pointed out.

Only the musical hit "Sweet Charity" has been seen before in metropolitan Detroit. The other attractions are three comedies, "The Nerd," "Broadway Bound" and "I'm Not Rappaport" — all of which are still touring; the musical classic "Company," and a play with dancing, "Stepping Out" — which is playing on the coast.

Georgia Engel, who was George on TV's "Mary Tyler Moore Show," stars in "Sweet Charity," the season's opener. The production be-

gins a five-week run Wednesday, Sept. 14. The other shows all will run a minimum of five weeks, except for "I'm Not Rappaport," scheduled for eight weeks.

"We cast and rehearse them as any Broadway show. There's no difference in the quality than any touring production," Nederlander said. Shows for the Birmingham Theatre are cast and rehearsed in New York before coming to the theater, where there are more rehearsals before opening.

EACH SHOW opens with preview performances. "Every theater that produces shows has previews," he said.

Nederlander talked about the new season, sitting behind his big desk in his spacious office, on the second floor of the building near the theater that houses the Birmingham Theatre offices. He said they are expanding their office space on that floor.

The Birmingham Theatre and Detroit's Fisher Theatre are the local theaters operated by the Nederlander Organization, whose theatrical empire spreads throughout the coun-

try. With its 34-week season, the Birmingham Theatre has more plays than any other facility in the Detroit area, Nederlander said. He said subscription sales this season are around 10,000, "as good or better than last year." Attendance at the theater is 75 percent of capacity, he estimated, and the theater plays to more than 300,000 people each season.

Although the theater is in the heart of Birmingham, showing by residents hasn't picked up through the seasons. "There's no change in attendance from the Birmingham area," said Nederlander, who has often said he wished more local people would take advantage of having a legitimate theater in their midst.

LAST SEASON the Birmingham Theatre presented three musicals, "42nd Street," "Promises, Promises" and "Girl Crazy," and three comedies, "Biloxi Blues," "Social Security" and "Doubles."

"One of the shows was only a sub-par," he admitted. He declined to say which one, for the record, but

"Doubles" is generally acknowledged not to have been as successful as the others.

George Gershwin's musical hit "Girl Crazy," starring Lorna Luft, closed the season. "I personally thought it was our best effort," he said. The Nederlander Organization has optioned the show for Broadway "It's under consideration for the future."

Ticket prices will remain about the same this season as last. Broadway show tickets are now running about \$40-\$45. Tickets to the Fisher are in the \$30s, tickets to the Birmingham in the \$20s.

In putting together a show, "Our initial thrust is to get the best quality we can possibly afford, even if we're going to pay what we think we can pay," Nederlander said. The Nederlander Organization, which originated in Detroit, maintains offices in New York for the Birmingham Theatre, "ultimately, for scouting and producing the shows for Birmingham," he said.

JAY BROOKS, who works for the

'We cast them and rehearse them as any Broadway show. There's no difference in the quality than any touring production.'

— Harry Nederlander

Nederlanders as producer in New York, is part of the ad hoc committee that picks the shows to play the Birmingham Theatre. Once the new season gets past the first couple of shows, committee members from Birmingham and New York start putting together lists of shows and stars for the next season.

The Birmingham Theatre usually closes down in July and August, and that's when refurbishing may occur. This season, there will be a full-scale renovation over the next few months, with the lobby and ladies room newly redecorated. "It will be done by the first of the year. It's

going to be very spiffy," Nederlander said.

The theater continues to serve liquor, the result of a hard-won effort to obtain a liquor permit from the city. "It's an amenity that you have to have. As a profit center it isn't," he stressed. Liquor is served from a lobby bar 30 minutes before the show and during intermission.

Asked to comment about Livonia's Omni Theatre, which folded in the middle of its first performing arts season earlier this year, he said: "It was poorly financed. I applaud their effort. It was a tough break. I feel sympathetic."

Program surpasses expectations

By Avigdor Zaromp
special writer

"The Greatest Hits of All Time," is the kind of title that tends to turn off classical music purists and attract those who like the lighter touch. In programs of this kind, musical and artistic mediocrity are often the rule.

Therefore, it was a pleasant surprise to discover that it is possible even for a light, entertaining program to be designed in good taste. Conductor Richard Knapp, together with the Meadow Brook Festival Orchestra, presented the program with insight and imagination, proving that art and entertainment need not be incompatible.

The Meadow Brook Festival Orchestra consists of some of the best area musicians, mostly from outside the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. The fact that several DSO musicians were strategically scattered among the players helped, of course. But the quality of the rest was such that the total sound was impressively professional.

THE LASER LIGHTS and sketches on the screen above the orchestra were among the gimmicks that were perhaps crucial in attracting the large crowd that filled the lawn and practically the pavilion.

However, these special effects



Avigdor Zaromp

complemented the music, with only minimal distractions. In the case of the Pachelbel Canon which, in my opinion, is one of the most banal and monotonous works ever written, these displays were a vast enhancement, beyond Pachelbel's wildest unimagination.

Other works on the program offered some significant content in spite of their light nature. The musical peak of the program was reached when pianist David Syme was the soloist in Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue." It is easy to dismiss the popular work as trivial and inconsequential when listening to an average performance. But Syme, who in addition to having impressive technique is capable of producing a most refined tone quality, brought life and substance into this work. Syme has studied with Mischa Kottler, who is famous for his tone quality and high artistic integrity. In this performance, Syme made every phrase count.

Kapp preceded each selection on

the program with a short lecture about its background, coupled with some amusing anecdotes. Some of the selections are longtime favorites associated with TV programs — the Rondeau by Mouret, better known as the theme from "Masterpiece Theater," and Rossini's "William Tell" Overture, the last portion of which was the "Lone Ranger" theme.

The latter provoked some spontaneous sound effects from the audience.

Other popular selections were by Copland, Rimsky Korsakov ("Procession of the Nobles"), Borodin (Scherzo and Nocturne from String Quartet No. 2), Barber (Adagio for Strings), Ponchielli ("Dance of the Hours") and Bizet (from "Carmen" suites).

NO PROGRAM of popular hits is complete without Sousa. However, instead of the characteristic marches, which make him into a

stereotype, the work on the program was the little-known orchestral work, "Dwellers in the Western World," consisting of three movements describing the Red Man, the White Man and the Black Man.

Even though this music isn't profound, it offered something different. Following a long applause, Kapp and the orchestra performed a rather lengthy movement from a work by Gershwin as an encore.

Even the best planned popular program is unlikely to produce converts to serious classical music on a massive scale. But this program demonstrated that a meaningful dialogue between the classics and a vast segment of our community is possible. This step, while in itself insufficient, is an important link toward the goal of building a more steady classical audience.

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