

Avon's opener is a stand-out

Performances of the Avon Players production of "Something's Afoot" continue through Saturday, Nov. 12, at the playhouse in Rochester Hills. For ticket information, call 656-1130.

By Frank Hursley
special writer

Avon Players has raised the curtain on its 41st season with a splendid mounting of the musical farce "Something's Afoot." This is no gentle mounting, for all the stops are pulled to allow a lively, boisterous production that is also a comedic spoof of Agatha Christie's "Ten Little Indians."

James McDonald, David Vos and Robert Gerlach teamed on the book, music and lyrics, gathering a collection of British types and setting them down as guests in a country estate on an island in the Lake Country of England.

A violent storm seals the island, and no one can decamp until the waters reside. In honest Christie fashion, the scene is set for mayhem, and the guests fall victim to an unknown mastermind devilishly causing one body after another to be toted to the library for storage.

A marvelous set is vintage Christie for country-house entertainers. Embellished as it is with stout English paneling, fireplace, family por-

trait, armor, ascending staircase and sherry decanter, the effect is so pleasing that a weekend stay would not be unthinkable. Such a notion would be inviting except we soon learn that elements of the set, although appearing properly innocent, "do in" various of the guests assembled. For example, a telephone belches a deadly gas.

THE PLAYERS MANAGE this romp so efficiently that it would not be surprising if they had also arranged the opening night mist as well as the pattering rain on the playhouse roof as a complement to the atmosphere of mystery and murder.

Linda Shepherd as director and Karen Elliott-Upchurch as choreographer effectively teamed to pace the players through sprightly capers and amusing scenes. They grace the production with imaginative attention to detail, and hardly a moment is lost in limbo. Competition between the music and dialogue does allow incoherent moments that are dis-

The ensemble as a whole pays close attention to classic, well-cultured, British types, and each character stands out individually.

Frank Hursley of Birmingham, a sales engineer by profession, is a longtime theater buff.

Performances of "The King and I" presented by the First Theatre Guild continue through Saturday at Knox Auditorium of the First Presbyterian Church in Birmingham. For ticket information, call 681-0189 during the day.

By Helen Zucker
special writer

The First Theatre Guild production of "The King and I" is ambitious, to say the least. It takes great energy to engage 57 cast members, four musicians and a large technical crew.

Good will, eager troupers and enthusiasm were on hand last Sunday evening, even though everyone involved had turned up for a 2 p.m. performance for senior citizens and the night's three-hour show was the second that day.

With the best of intentions and the most willing crew aboard, the First Theatre Guild has simply bitten off more than it can chew. The result is an uneven production.

Clark and Mary Fry are to be commended for creating set designs with little more than painted backdrops, a throne, a few pillows and sheets. And Gloria Roberts deserves credit for whipping up ingenious costumes out of yards of colorful material, leopards, strings of pearls and

review

what-nots.

BARBARA ANNE GOWANS' wonderful masks nearly steal the show. "The Small House of Uncle Thomas" ballet is the best part of this lengthy Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, and everything that's charming about this production culminates in Susan Doer's wicked Simon LeGrue, Kim VanSullichem's Eliza, the chorus and the dancers in their masks, running about on the ice. The freezing river in the ballet is imaginatively done with the help of dancers waving a long bedsheet and slowly drowning in its folds.

Phyllis Meyers as Anna Leonowens, the exuberant widow who goes forth to teach Western ways to the wives and children of the King of Siam, overwhelms the rest of the cast.

Meyers can sing. Is at ease on-stage, and she seems to be stage managing the entire production with one hand behind her back while everyone else appears to be struggling to remember who they are.

Young Brian Eder as Crown Prince Chulalongkorn is the only

match for Meyers. Eder exhibits stage presence and a strong voice and carries himself like a royal scion. I wished he had more to do than the "Puzzlement" reprise with Louis Leonowens, who is likably played by Bryan Kaufman.

Eder takes over the stage when he tells the royal household to quit bowing at the finale.

JOHN ROBERTS' imposing presence, bare chest and sense of humor carry him through the demanding role of the despot who rules Siam with an iron will and intellectual curiosity that proves his undoing. Perhaps no one can compete with a king who Yul Brynner has made so thoroughly his own, but Roberts put up a good fight.

Betsy Evans is quietly dignified as Lady Thiang, the lipolcing head wife. Evans does a sad rendition of "Something Wonderful" that tells us more about the culture of Siam and the role of women than the rest of

the play does. John Picha brings his pleasant tenor to a moving rendition of "We Kiss in a Shadow" and "I Have Dreamed." As Lun Tha, the star-crossed lover of Tuplim, Picha seems totally lost except when he's singing. As Romeo, he simply doesn't play.

Jennifer Passer is cheerful as the doomed Princess Tuplim. Passer is at her best standing at the side of the stage reading "The Small House of Uncle Thomas" from a roll of parchment during the ballet. As Juliet, Passer simply doesn't play either.

John Lowery does his best to bring strength to the role of the Kralahome, the Siamese version of a prime minister who tries to obey his king and juggle court matters at the same time.

The rest of the cast and all the wives, children, slaves, priests, deckhands and dancers do their uneven best.

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