

Performances of "Oh, Kay!" continue through Sunday, Feb. 4, at the Birmingham Theatre. For ticket information call 644-3533.

Irrepressible Gershwin songs and dazzling dance routines make "Oh, Kay?" at the Birmingham Theatre a guaranteed cure for the post-holiday blahs. The show is pure infectious fun, so energetic it should be bottled as a tonic.

Co-produced with the Birmingham Theatre by the Goodspeed Opera House of Connecticut, which specializes in breathing new life into vintage musicals, "Oh, Kay!" is beginning its national tour here before eventually heading for Broadway.

The 1926 musical had its setting moved from the original Long Island (a la *Gatsby*) to Harlem (a la the Cotton Club) and given an all-black cast. The transformation works beautifully, suitable to the jazzy score and the music-hall-type humor that pervades the dippy plot.

Kay (Pamela Issacs) is a nightclub singer at a Harlem speakeasy who becomes entangled in the club's attempt to hide its latest shipment of contraband booze from a police raid. Somehow the stuff gets stashed at the mansion of wealthy playboy Jimmy Winter (Ron Richardson), who happens to have fallen in love with Kay years ago and has been seeking her ever since.

IN THE MEANTIME Jimmy has required at least one wife too many (a long story). The comedy ensues as he tries to unsnarl his life, Kay tries to eliminate her competition, and the bootleggers try to protect the booze from being discovered. In between, the kids from the club drop in to dance up a storm.



Barbara Michals

Richardson and Issacs make an enormously appealing couple, as good to look at as they are to listen to. Richardson doesn't really get a chance to demonstrate the vocal depth and power of his Tony-winning performance in "Big River," but he's believable in the role and handles the ballads with ease.

Isaacs, who reminds one of a young Lena Horne, has a fine comic flair as well as vocal strength. Besides being flirtatious Kay, she poses as a meddlesome maid and a Latin bombshell, changing vocal inflections convincingly.

While Richardson and Isaacs delightfully croon "Someone to Watch Over Me," "Do, Do, Do" and several other less familiar but equally lovely tunes, it is the dancers who really energize the show. Led by the talented Stanley Wayne Mathis and Marion J. Caffey as the song-and-dance team who own the Harlem club, the ensemble's frenetic footwork leaves the audience nearly as breathless as the dancers.

"Clap Yo' Hands," "Fidgety Feet" (exuberant Charleston) and "Show Me the Town" allow the dancers to strut their stuff to Dan Siretta's wonderful choreography. Siretta also conceived the new version of the show and handles the musical stag-

SURELY THE MOST lovable

character in the production is Her-
mar Augustus Cooper as Shorty, the
head bottlelegger who poses as Jim-
my's butler to keep an eye on the
hidden booze. With his merry eyes,
pudgy figure, and droll delivery,
Cooper manages to make the creaky
vaudevilian jokes work without un-
due camp. He is a constant delight
whenever he appears, and happily he
appears a good deal.

Brenda Pressly is convincing as Jimmy's stodgy fiancée Constance and Alexander Barton is imposing as her even-straighter-laced father, the Rev. DuGrass. One wishes his grand operatic voice could be utilized more. Mark Kenneth Smaltz is both menacing and amusing as the ever-darkening authority figure.

Judy Dearing's costumes and Kenneth Foy's sets, especially the stunning red-hot opening drop, are first rate. Director Martin Connor's pacing and Ted Koclotek's musical direction also are flawless.

Odd surges in the theater's sound system were a minor nuisance at last Wednesday night's performance. The audience was already humming familiar tunes with the overture and needed no reminder to "clap yo' hands" at the finale.

Barbara Michaels teaches high school English in Southfield. A theater critic for the last 15 years, she is an inveterate playgoer who regularly catches up on all the New York productions.

Performances of "Dial 'M' for Murder" continue through Sunday, Jan. 28, at Meadow Brook Theatre on the Oakland University campus near Rochester. For ticket information call the box office at 328-2200.

The staying power of some old chestnuts defies analysis. "Dial 'M' for Murder" playing at Meadow Brook Theatre is an old mystery from the early '50s that unaccountably gets reviewed from time to time.

Old plays can be timeless -- or they can be simply outdated. About the only timeless elements in Meadow Brook's largely capable production of "Dial M" are the oriental rugs in the classic set designed by Peter Hicks.

Yes, there's a kernel of cleverness at the heart of Frederick Knott's tale which mystery buffs will appreciate. The puzzle lies not in figuring out the usual "who done it," which the audience knows early on, but in piecing together how the good inspector stumbles upon the truth.

And, yes, the acting in the production directed by Terence Kilburn is competent — if dispassionate. Dry British civility keeps characters on a tight emotional rein. Even the murderous husband makes convivial cocktail conversation and calls his wife "darling" while he plots her demise.

TOM SPACKMAN plays Tony, the calculating husband and ex-tennis-ace who has expensive taste and dwindling funds. Spackman does a credible job in the shallow role, but a few seasons back when he played Richard III at Meadow Brook, he was brilliant. As Richard, he was a villain you loved to hate. As Tony,



Cathie Breidenbach

he's a cardboard bad guy, a man who seems to feel little emotion and inspires only bland reactions.

In fact, the whole production seems singularly dispassionate, lacking the pulse and fire of the darker emotions that usually spawn murder. Presumably Tony is greedy and jealous, but both his greed and his jealousy seem like required motives for murder rather than real emotions.

In a play with a love triangle, as well as an adulterous affair and a con man with a seamy past, not to mention a murder, a horrible miscarriage of justice and an impending execution, nobody gets particularly upset. Such lack of passion goes beyond even legendary British upper-class reserve.

James Anthony who plays Max, a TV mystery writer, projects a convincing naturalness in his acting. Maybe it's because he plays an American that he seems less civilized-at-all-costs and more down to earth. Even so, he's almost as low key as the English pair, Tony and Margot.

Before the play begins, Max and

Margot end a love affair with a decision not to see one another. When they meet again one year later, there's no lingering electricity between them, no ambiguity and no suppressed regrets. Love that logic can so easily kill seems a bland emotion. Leslie Lynn Meeker plays a charming Margot, a smart woman-blinded by her husband's duplicity because she needs to be a good wife. ...

Paul Hopper as the constable and Geoffrey Beauchamp as Captain Leggate turn in credible supporting performances, but John Hayllas as Inspector Hubbard remains the most engaging character in the play. He actually has a personality and a quirky way of seeing life. Inspector Hubbard gets to deliver the only real joke in the play. That lowly, solitary moment of outright humor emphasizes the emotional monotone pervading Meadow Brook's competent, but cerebral production.

Cathie Breidenbach of West Bloomfield teaches college writing classes and works as a freelance writer.

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