



(O70)

Entertainment

Keely Wygonik editor/953-2105

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Blue skies JET soars into its 3rd season

Performances of the Jewish Ensemble Theatre production of "Crossing Delancey" continue through Oct. 6 at the Aaron DeRoy Theatre at the Jewish Community Center, 6000 W. Maple Road in West Bloomfield. For tickets, call JET at 788-2900, visit any Ticketmaster outlet or call 845-6666.

By Cathie Breidenbach
special writer

ARTISTIC BRILLIANCE alone can't keep a theater afloat in the turbulent waters of modern American arts, especially in Michigan waters made more treacherous by cutbacks in arts funding.

The Jewish Ensemble Theatre of West Bloomfield, one of metro Detroit's newest professional theaters, knows theater is a business as well as an art.

Critics can acclaim productions, and praise for JET's productions to date has been generous, but unless a theater fills the house regularly, builds a subscription base, and makes wise business decisions, the stage lights are destined to dim.

WITH TWO successful seasons under its belt, and the business acumen to keep the momentum building, JET is opening its third season this week with the romantic comedy "Crossing Delancey."

The New York hit pits a contentedly single, modern Jewish woman against her meddling grandmother, and a professional matchmaker who conspires to pair her with a bachelor in the pickle business. The warm-hearted comedy abounds with wacky characters.

Sylvia Kauders, who created the grandmother in the original New

York show recreates her role in JET's production.

SUBSCRIPTIONS HAVE tripled since the theater opened its doors in February 1990 in the 180-seat auditorium of the Jewish Community Center on Maple Road in West Bloomfield, said James August, a founder, and immediate past president.

That first year, subscriptions started at about 300; this year they top 900.

He cites "A Rosen by Any Other Name," last season's closing show about a boy preparing for his bar mitzvah, as an example of how JET's following is growing.

The show sold out a number of nights; its run was extended two weeks, and numerous non-denominational school groups attended.

"It was a cross-cultural experience they could relate to," said Evelyn Orbach, JET's artistic director. "The whole genesis of the theater was to share the Jewish experience with a broader audience," adds August.

"THE FIRST year, buying a subscription was an act of faith because we had no track record," said Orbach. Before they committed to create JET, founders Dorothy Gerson, James August, Bryant M. Frank, Mary-Lou Zieve, Sol Wiseman, Henrietta Hermelin, Irving and Babs Protetch, and Evelyn Orbach commissioned a market feasibility study to assess whether the Jewish community would support a new theater. The mandate was clear — Yes, the Jewish community would welcome a theater provided it was a thoroughly professional venture and provided productions that had a recognizable Jewish content. In theater, the word "profession-

al" connotes more than top-notch productions; it means that an agreed-upon percentage of cast and crew in each production will be members of the professional union, Actors Equity.

JET INCORPORATED the community mandate into a mission statement that reads "plays must be by Jewish playwrights, and/or on Jewish themes, and/or of interest to Jewish audiences."

Orbach points out that "the 'and/or' in the statement is very important," because it gives the theater flexibility in selecting the season of four plays plus, each spring, a festival of staged readings of new works in progress.

JET's play reading committee uses the mission statement as a guideline when it reads 60-100 new plays per year and selects four to be included in the festival.

The committee also makes its way through 150 plays, and recommends about 30 as possibilities to include in the season of full productions.

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Thom Galasso, Sylvia Kauders, Liz Weiss and Carol Leimert in a scene from "Crossing Delancey" at the Jewish Ensemble Theatre.

"We wanted to be not just a terrific professional theater providing theatrical entertainment. It was important to be a platform, a sounding board for new voices and new ideas, to facilitate the development of aspiring playwrights as one way to contribute to the community as a whole," said Frank.

A JET subscription package includes tickets to the spring festival of staged readings. Last year, 500

hundred people who aren't season subscribers attended staged readings and Talk Back sessions between the audience, playwright, and actors after each reading.

Comparing JET to other, established professional theaters in the area, Orbach said, "they have the administrative machinery already in place. We're still building our machinery. For the first two to three years we were using start-up energy and money from the Fisher Founda-

tion (which funds new enterprises)."

JET's third season promises challenges as the new theater comes of age. New staffers will be hired to carry the increasing administrative workload as the theater moves to become financially self-sufficient.

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

'Lend Me A Tenor' is entertaining



Mark S. Carley

Performances of the Birmingham Theatre production of "Lend Me A Tenor" continue through Nov. 3. The theater is at 211 S. Woodward, Birmingham. For ticket information call the box office at 644-3333.

Ken Ludwig's "Lend Me A Tenor" is one of the most ingenious farces in recent memory. The Birmingham Theatre opens its 1991-92 season with a raucous version of this hilarious play.

While the production certainly leaves the audience laughing, it does suffer a bit from an overly frantic pace and tendency to try to hit the audience over the head with every punch line. In the process, some of Ludwig's delightful script gets lost.

THE CURTAIN opens on a lavish art deco hotel suite in 1934 Cleveland. There, the general manager of the Cleveland Grand Opera (Barry

Nelson), and his long-suffering assistant Max (Larry Cahn), eagerly await the arrival of Tito Merelli, the world's greatest tenor, for a one-night-only appearance as Otello.

When Tito (II Stupendo to his legion of fans) does show up he quickly becomes massively indisposed (or worse). In a frantic effort to save the evening, the impresario and his sidekick cook up a plot to impersonate the star.

WITH ONE big case of mistaken identity and a set that includes no fewer than six doors, the comic antics start flying at a breathtaking pace.

The star of the show, though you'd

never know it to look at the program or read the press releases, is clearly Larry Cahn in the demanding role of Max.

Cahn takes this bullied assistant manager and transforms him from a whiny nebbish into a dashing ladies man when he impersonates the great Merelli at the last minute. Cahn's performance is energetic, endearing, and features perfect comic timing.

POPULAR STAGE and film star Barry Nelson is also excellent as the totally befuddled and somewhat amoral theater manager, Saunders. He is an unabashed cad who will do anything to save his hide or a buck, but you can't help love him for his cunning and energy.

Ron Holgate, creator of several memorable Broadway characters, plays the egotistical, womanizing and child-like Tito with great bravado and a thousand comic facial expressions.

His character suffers a bit, though, from a fairly lame Italian accent and a tendency toward overkill on

the punch lines. Chasing (and being chased by) this confused trio is a quartet of lusty ladies. Denise LeDonne is Maggie, Saunders' daughter and Max's sometime fiancée. She wants to have a fling before settling down and gets her chance when she falls into the arms of the man she thinks is II Stupendo.

TITO'S WIFE, Maria, is played with Italian sass by Marsha Waterbury. She walks out on the great tenor when he ogles one too many bosoms and sets off the evening's disastrous chain of events.

Jane Connell plays Julia, the chairman of the Opera Guild, a dizzy and slightly horny old lady. Suzanne Dawson is Diana, the local soprano and Tito's co-star. In a hilarious scene of misunderstanding, she lets Tito know that her greatest assets as an entertainer lie somewhere south of her vocal cords.

The cast is nicely rounded out by Larry Balken as the hotel bellhop and opera wannabe.

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