

Entertainment

Keely Wygonik editor/953-2105



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Lucky draw

First-rate directing in 'The Gin Game'

Performances of the Meadow Brook Theatre production of "The Gin Game" continue through February 2 on the Oakland University campus in Rochester Hills. For ticket information call the box office at 377-3300.



Cathie Breidenbach

DIRECTOR TERENCE KILBURN infuses Meadow Brook Theatre's production of "The Gin Game" with innumerable touches that heighten the humor and grant the characters in the bitter comedy a quirky, believable humanity. Take Weller Martin, the 70-some year old man who plays gin runny with Fonsia Dorsey on the porch of the rundown nursing home where they live. In the span of two acts, Weller and Fonsia play unpeeled hands of gin and peel away the veneer of conventionality that explains events in their lives. The gin game of the title stands as metaphor for life. Does luck determine who wins, or is it skill? When they first begin to play, Weller emphatically tells Fonsia, "Anyone who says gin is nothing but luck doesn't know what the game is all about." Then he loses, hand after hand. Weller tries strategies, spying on her cards, and superstition to win.

He changes chairs, invents a ritual of licking his thumb and forefinger and wiping them on his shirt before each deal. Nothing helps. Fonsia skunks him game after game.

HE GETS mad, thumps his cane, dumps the card table and retaliates by exposing Fonsia's lie about why her son never visits. Can people totally blame bad luck, fate or mere happenstance for the pattern of their lives?

Can Weller and Fonsia attribute their failed marriages, Weller's business partnership, or the fact their children never come on visiting day solely to bad luck? Or does the blame lie elsewhere? Closer to home?

The Meadow Brook production presents this comic drama with wonderful balance. Director Kilburn tempers the bitter battle between Weller and Fonsia with humor and a measure of kindness in the midst of



Jeanne Arnold and Eric Tavares star in Meadow Brook Theatre's production of "The Gin Game" now through Sunday, Feb. 2 at the Meadow Brook Theatre on the campus of Oakland University near Rochester. Tickets available at the Meadow Brook Box Office, 377-3300.

conflict. Kilburn has Weller put his sweater around Fonsia's shoulders to ward off the chill. That's a small directorial decision not in the script, but one of many that create the balance and mosaic of detail in the fine Meadow Brook production.

THE SCRIPT for the 1978 comedy

by D.L. Coburn puts words in the characters' mouths, but credit for the gestures, inflections, and superb comic timing belong to Director Terence Kilburn, to Jeanne Arnold as Fonsia, and especially to Eric Tavares who makes Weller a multi-dimensional, difficult yet fascinating

man. Weller's peppery vocabulary rivals Mayor Young's; he throws tantrums, cheats at solitaire if nobody's looking, and wins us over with his feisty integrity.

Jeanne Arnold's able and ladylike portrayal of Fonsia Dorsey doesn't quite match Tavares' benchmark

performance, but it comes close in this richly human drama that's biting yet tender, angry yet warmly funny.

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

He has 'Abba Dabba Honeymoon' with stage

Performances of the Birmingham Theatre production of "Babes in Arms" continue through Feb. 2. For ticket information call the box office at 644-3533.



Barbara Michals

Multitasking Carlton Carpenter, currently appearing in the Rodgers and Hart musical "Babes in Arms" at the Birmingham Theatre, can reflect back on 60 years in entertainment and the arts.

Starting at the age of 4, when he earned \$10 for singing "When You and I Were Young, Maggie," with another youngster, Carpenter has sung, danced and acted in a multitude of Broadway shows, off-Broadway productions, road companies and regional theater, plus performed in two dozen films and over 6,000 radio and television shows.

In addition, he has directed, earned two gold records, published several novels, and been a regular contributor to two mystery magazines. There's another mystery novel in the works in his computer,

and when he's home in Pine Island, upstate New York, he performs a cabaret act two nights a week.

WHILE CARPENTER readily admits he never became a big-name star, he said he was "blessed with one job after another, and never knew how hard it was for other actors to get work."

For which of his many achievements would he most like to be remembered? "I just want to be thought of as a working pro," he said.

Actually, Carpenter is best-known for his recording of "Abba Dabba Honeymoon" with Debbie Reynolds. They sang it in a 1950 movie that has since been retitled for the song, then

reprinted it in the film "That's Entertainment." Carpenter earned a gold record for "Honeymoon" and for "Row, Row, Row" from the same original film.

Carpenter said he cannot account for the huge and lasting success of "Abba Dabba Honeymoon." It was written in 1915, and was a popular hit in the 1920's. But he does take credit for picking the song out of a stack of period music under consideration for the film. He said he still receives royalties from the song, which is often included in collections of songs with "silly lyrics." Invariably, he still gets frequent requests to perform it in his cabaret show.

Raised on a Vermont farm, Carpenter said he became interested in show business because a neighbor had a daughter who was an actress. At nine he was a magician touring New England, "but I wasn't very good," he said with a warm grin. He also traveled with a carnival before landing his first Broadway role while still a senior in high school.

CARPENTER RECALLED that in those days "I didn't know any better than to just knock on stage doors and ask for a job. I'd been in love with the theater ever since I took an old dress of my mother's and draped it over a cord table to make a curtain."

Like Val, the young song-writing theater apprentice in "Babes in Arms," Carpenter said he has written songs all his life. He wrote, orchestrated, and produced his first show while a junior in high school and got suspended from school for a week for having girls appear in bathing suits.

In 1943, Bennington, Vermont, had not yet caught up with the world," he said with a chuckle.

Carpenter's Broadway debut in 1944 was in the first show produced by a young lawyer named David Merrick. Later Carpenter had a long association with Merrick when the actor was featured in various companies of "Hello, Dolly!"

He particularly enjoyed playing Cornelius to Mary Martin's Dolly when they toured Asia prior to the company's London run.

Carpenter joined the Birmingham production of "Babes in Arms" at the invitation of James Janek, one of the executive producers of the Birmingham Theatre. They first became friends 40 years ago in a stock production of "Mister Roberts," but this



Michelle Blakely, (left) Carlton Carpenter, Lucille Naar in the Rodgers and Hart musical "Babes in Arms" at the Birmingham Theatre.

is the first time they have worked together since then.

In "BABES" Carpenter plays Seymour Fleming, a mean-spirited skiffint who tries to wrest a Cape Cod summer theater away from the founder's daughter and threatens to fire anyone who dares oppose his judgment. Carpenter said that in summer stock he's worked for a few cheapshots like Fleming, but he doesn't really see the character as a villain because he's played with a comic flavor.

"This is probably the smallest part I ever played," Carpenter said, "but you don't have to have a big part to get caught up in the rapture of the theater. I think Randy Skinner, the director, is a genius, and the young performers in this show are so talented that when I stand in the wings and watch them sing and dance every night I get tears in my eyes."

Barbara Michals is a retired Southfield English teacher. A theater critic for the last 17 years, she is an inveterate playgoer who regularly catches up on all the New York productions.

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