

THEATER

Stage "Laura" lacks the appeal of famous movie

"Laura," continues at the St. Dunstan's Theatre Guild of Cranbrook 8 p.m. Friday, Jan. 24-Saturday, Jan. 25, at the church, 400 Lone Pine Road, West Bloomfield. \$12; \$10 seniors and students. (810) 644-0527. BY JON KATZ, SPECIAL WRITER

"Laura," the 1944 movie thriller classic starring Gene Tierney, is given an enthusiastic treatment by St. Dunstan's Theatre Guild. The live version changes the title character so drastically, however, that it becomes less a Whodunit and more a Whoarewhodunit.

The film's doe-eyed, innocent Laura Hunt, whose favor men clownishly crawled over to win, is replaced by a male-bashing juggernaut, who "collects" men

and proudly uses the b-word as a self-description. When she's asked, "What is it about you that makes men go nuts over you?" she can only think, "Yeah, really."

The hauntingly beautiful image of Laura's portrait stares down at us at the opening curtain (accompanied by a vocal version of the film's memorable theme), as Special Investigator Mark McPherson sullenly ponders how and why she was murdered there in her own New York City apartment.

Enter the suspects: Danny, the teenage neighbor who's smitten with Laura and her collection of jazz records, not necessarily in that order; Waldo, the acerbic writer, who took her under his wing; Shelby, the would-be fiancée with too many holes in

his alibi; and Danny's mom, who goes over the top because Laura turned her kid on to Benny Goodman and Jell-O.

OK they all had motives for doing her in with a shotgun blast to the face that rendered the body unrecognizable. Now, as our hero is advised, "To solve the puzzle of Laura's death, you must first unravel the mystery of her life."

Kendall White is billed in the program as "A Girl" needlessly, since her identity is revealed so soon into the show. She's trapped by a script that requires her to play a totally unempathetic victim, but she does so confidently, with a "don't mess with me" front that's more Lauren Bacall than Gene Tierney. Rotating her

best expression for the end, as if leaving the door open for a "Laura II."

Paul A. Gillin humorously struts his pompous Waldo Lydecker around as a walking "Bartlett's Familiar Quotations," and can be forgiven for frequent opening-night tongue trips over his long-winded verbosity. David Peckens, as southern rascal Shelby, pounces into his door-slaming exits. John Irvine's McPherson is right out of the Dan Aykroyd School of Jack Webb Impressions, convinced that squinting and eyebrow-raising makes for a tough cop.

It's Peggy Lee's maid Bessie who works hard for and gets all the laughs, although playing her Irish in mid-40s New York may not quite work with a line like, "I

was brought up to spit whenever I saw a cop." If movies are to be believed, all cops back then were Irish (McPherson?).

In his St. Dunstan's directorial debut, Joshua S. Dawson gives us a taut mystery with twists and turns aplenty. The overall effect is diffused with contemporary wardrobe and hairstyles on most of the men, too-predictable expressions of surprise and a Shelby who looks like he got his

marriage license before his driver's license.

Having fallen in love with her portrait, McPherson notes his disenchantment with the real woman: "And then you came alive." One could bemoan the similar fate of a glorious motion picture, with a title character who captured our heart: "And then you became a play."

Jon Katz is a 20-year veteran of community theater stages.

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Ghost play has atmosphere but lacks a good story

"The Woman in Black," continues through Feb. 2, at the Meadow Brook Theatre, Wilson Hall, Oakland University, Walton and Squirrel boulevards, Rochester. 2 p.m. Wednesdays (\$22), 8 p.m. Fridays (\$26.50), 2 p.m. Saturdays (\$22), 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturdays (\$32), 2 p.m. Sundays (\$22), and 6:30 p.m. Sundays (\$26.50). Student, senior and group discounts available. (810) 377-3300. BY BARBARA MICHAELS, SPECIAL WRITER

As a classic ghost tale "The Woman in Black" abounds in mystery, eeriness and foggy atmosphere. The current production at Meadow Brook Theatre also boasts an excellent cast and fine direction.

Adapted by Stephen Mallatratt from a novel by

Susan Hill, "The Woman in Black" ran seven years in London's West End. There are some strong dramatic revelations at the end, but overall this drama is a weak vehicle that seems to take a long time telling its flimsy plot.

Mr. Kippes (Robert Grossman) has rented a small Victorian theater and engaged a professional actor (John Seibert) as a means of finally telling family and friends about his unsettling encounter with a ghost 20 years ago when he was a young lawyer sent to settle an estate in a remote corner of England.

The young actor assumes the role of Kippes, and Kippes fills in as all the other males he encountered in his adventure. Under this far-fetched premise "The Woman in Black" becomes a play-

within-a-play as the audience witnesses the rehearsals for the eventual presentation.

The young Kippes quickly discovers that no one in town wishes to discuss the deceased, elderly woman who lived alone in a large mansion regularly isolated by the flow of the tides. Adding to this mystery, Kippes repeatedly sees the ghostly "woman in black" (Nancy Rominger), a gaunt young lady in Victorian garb. Only when Kippes himself comes close to death does one of the townsfolk fill him in on the story behind the

ghost.

Grossman is a versatile actor who never fails to give an accomplished performance. Here he gets to greatly vary his voice, demeanor and intensity as he portrays a variety of different townspeople as well as the older-but-wiser Kippes.

Grossman's only weakness is as a songwriter, for the original music and lyrics he wrote to open the show are not very impressive.

Seibert is outstanding as the young actor.

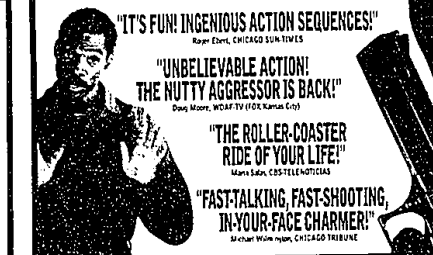
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