

THEATER

Excellent cast shines in high-voltage drama 'I Am A Man'

Meadow Brook Theatre with Plowshares Theatre Company presents "I Am A Man," through Sunday, March 9, at the theater, Wilson Hall, at the University, Walton and Squirrel boulevards, Rochester, 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursday (\$22), 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 MICHAEL

Special, White

"I Am A Man," currently per-

formed at Meadow Brook Theatre, is a high-voltage drama detailing the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike and the honest zeal of their local union president, T.O. Jones.

The professional Michigan premiere of Ann Arbor playwright Oyam Ong's engrossing tale is co-produced by Meadow Brook and Detroit's Plowshares Theatre Company, and the excellent cast combines members of both theaters.

Mostly black, the Memphis sanitation workers toiled for unbelievably low wages under unsafe conditions and with no job security. When they went out

on strike the city refused to accept their union as a legal entity. Enlisting support from national unionists and civil rights activists, the strikers eventually drew the presence of Dr. Martin Luther King. Jr. Only when King's assassination brought national attention to Memphis did the white establishment acknowledge the union and settle the strike (albeit for an absurdly low wage increase).

As Jones, Lou Beaujean, Jr. is eminently believable as a man struggling to keep his dignity intact amid pressures from all sides, both black and white. Earnest and unrelenting, Jones

comes to aid the Memphis strikers. Though Willins is also black, he and Jones come from such different worlds they can barely communicate.

As the double-dealing mayor, Phillip Locker is political slime incarnate yet manages to keep from slipping into caricature.

The always-reliable Robert Grossman is equally effective as the hard-nose New York unionist and the city solicitor increasingly sympathetic to the strikers.

Paul Hopper is amusing as the white clergyman totally enveloped in the black community — the incident that precipitated the strike — is so representative it makes no sense at all to anyone who has not read the program background material.

and Charlotte Nelson as an NAACP secretary. Esau Pritchett

and Michael Jay are convincing as the black militants.

Overall, director Gary Anderson delivers a fine production, although there were several minor line flubs at Saturday night's performance. Reid Johnson's lighting and Peter Hicks' minimal scenery also work well most of the time.

However, an early scene depicting the death of two sanitation workers caught in faulty machinery — the incident that precipitated the strike — is so representative it makes no sense at all to anyone who has not read the program background material.

MOVIES

'Marvin's Room' a tear-filled tribute to reconciliation

BY JOHN MONACHAN
SPECIAL WRITER

When sisters Lee and Bessie are reunited after 20 long years of self-imposed separation, the frozen smiles on their faces speak volumes. Recognition. Shock. Relief. And about a million memories both good and bad. Though there was scarcely a dry eye in the house at the end of "Marvin's Room," there were moments like this earlier on that really hit home. A Hollywood weepie that's equal parts poignant and manipulative, it offers in Diane Keaton and Meryl Streep the best roles on screen for this year.

Adapted by Scott McPherson from his own play, "Marvin's Room" is about family responsibility, love, and at least partial reconciliation.

Bessie, after being diagnosed with leukemia, needs her sister and nephews to get tested as possible bone marrow donors. The request doesn't come easy. Bessie moved down to Florida to care for their bedridden father (Hume Cronyn), who has been dying slowly ever since.

"He doesn't want me to miss a

thing," she tells the compassionate but slightly scattered Dr. Wally (a charming comic turn from Robert DeNiro). Lee, a single mom with a cosmetology degree, has spent the past decade trying to carve out a life for herself while raising two sons. The youngest is a doll, but the oldest (played in James Dean-style by Leonardo DiCaprio) spends his time in a mental institution after burning down the family home.

"Marvin's Room" refers to the father's room, where Bessie makes round-the-clock medication visits and flashes patterns of light on the wall with a beveled mirror — the old man's last remaining pleasure. It's a far cry from the efficient but depressing nursing home that Lee insists Bessie look into.

The acting in the film is every bit as good as you might have heard. Streep's selfish Lee wants you to despise her. Yet, though it's painful to admit, we might relate to her more than Saint Bessie since it's through Lee's eyes that much of the story unfolds. Bessie, meanwhile, might be Keaton's best role ever.

Much of the praise will come from the critics, performing sans makeup, but it's through some inner light that Keaton really shines. You really believe that she has found true love through the care of others.

Director Jerry Zaks tries hard to make us forget that we're watching a filmed stage play. The credit sequence is a marvel, with the camera offering an anti-eye view of Marvin's endless rows of medicine bottles, which look like the towering skyscrapers of Metropolis.

While it uses every trick in the book to wrench a tear, "Marvin's Room" does have one bold scene. Bessie has promised the boys a trip to Disney World and the world's favorite theme park is shown as crowded, hot, and oppressive. Her last sight before slipping into unconsciousness is the stuffed head of Goofy staring down at her.

Sure the acting is incredible. But making a movie for Miramax (a division of Disney) that shows the Magic Kingdom as the hell it sometimes might be "Marvin's Room" most underrated achievement.

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bit of a comedian himself. Krueger wants to break up with his girlfriend, but doesn't know how. Funk offers lines in song, all ending with the words we've all said — "but we can still be friends."

Angela Shelton is the concerned mom, whose son, Theodore, (Rico Bruce Wade) a

straight A student, is failing

"Ebonics." When Shelton tells the teacher Margaret (who is white) that her son is an A student, Margaret blurts out — "Girl you can save your drama for your mama." When the two learn they attended the same college, Yale, they become friends shattering assumptions — black peo-

ple don't go to Yale, and all black people speak black English.

The finale's a sing-along, Irish style, that goes like this — "If you lived in Detroit you'd already be home, so raise up a glass that is filled, the city's improvin' so think about movin' we promise you will not get killed."

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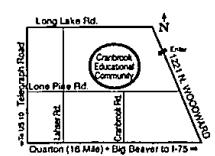
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