

## THEATER

# Ridgedale's 'Wait Until Dark' a fest of shivers

Ridgedale Players presents "Wait Until Dark," 3 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 18, at the playhouse, 246 W. Long Lake, Troy. Tickets \$10 (includes coffee and sandwich afterglow, (248) 988-7049).

BY HELEN ZUCKER  
SPECIAL WRITER

The Ridgedale Players production of Frederick Knott's "Wait Until Dark," directed by Jim West and Debbie Himmelfarb, is strong. The cast of eight and the tech staff give mystery lovers a fest of shivers.

Julie Fuller is wonderful as Susy Hendrix, the 28-year-old blind wife of a photographer in Greenwich Village. Fuller gives us a well-rounded portrait of a woman who has been blind for only a year and is learning to deal with her situation. We can see Fuller wavering between wanting help and independence; between crying as she tries to find things and intelligent indignation.

As her husband leaves to go to his studio, Susy cries out, "You want me to be a blind superwoman!" Before the play is over, Susy's ability to think her way through events turns her into

superwoman. We can feel every step of her terrifying journey. Tom Coffey, who specializes in playing mad creatures, is especially menacing as Harry Roat, the polite killer with a pony tail. The "McGuffin" in this play is a doll, and like everyone else, Roat is looking for it. We know Roat is no ordinary criminal when we see him at the top of the staircase in his black glasses, black leather jacket, black pants and blank stare. Roat calls everyone "children;" he's Charon, come to ferry everyone across the river Styx. When Roat drags himself across the dark floor and grabs

Susy's ankle, it's heart stopping. Michael Jeffries, as Mike Talman, the genial criminal, is splendidly believable, pretending to be an old friend of Susy's husband. Talman is a man we can trust, despite the fact that he owes a bookie who is looking for him. Jeffries makes the role his own.

Scott Joseph as Sgt. Carlino, Talman's sidekick, has great fun with accents. Carlino is a shifty looking number; he opens the play on the right note. When Joseph turns up speaking smooth English as a fake cop, we are not surprised; nothing is

what it seems. Kara Rippelle shines as Gloria, the brat who lives upstairs. As a 9-year-old with an unhappy home and chores to do for her blind neighbor, Rippelle is strong in her refusal and believable as Susy's ally. Of course, she's the key to the doll.

Jeff Jones as Sam Hendrix, the handsome, kind husband who Gloria and Susy adore, is strong in his brief appearance as the man who wants Susy to do things on her own, and as the devastated husband who's afraid

he's arrived too late. Jack Abella and Bob Grimm, as the two patrolmen who arrive after the action is over, look like practiced cops.

Bob and Genie Garner have a field day with the lights; they do a marvelous job, especially with the refrigerator and the timing of blown fuses. The set by Jim West, Mike Flum, Thom Griffen, Stan Lobst, Vicki Hagle, Catherine Mueck, Annette See, Diane Nolan, and props by Ellen Athanas, Pat West, and Ann Rippelle are authentic. Kudos to everyone involved.

# Great cast 'Dials 'M' for Murder' in Avon production

Avon Players presents "Dial M for Murder" 2 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 18; 8 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 22, and 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, Jan. 23-24. The theater is on Tienken Road (1 1/4 miles east of Rochester Road) Rochester Hills. Tickets \$11, discounts for students, senior citizens and groups for Thursday and Sunday performances. Call (248) 608-9077.

BY JON KATZ  
SPECIAL WRITER

"They sure don't make shows like this anymore" said the retiree to his wife as they walked slowly up the aisle. "You got that right, dude" said the twenty-something man pushing past the couple to get to his

car a few seconds faster. What's this? The generations agreeing? Hardly. Their instant reviews of "Dial M for Murder" – the latest remounting of an Avon Players production as part of its 50th anniversary season – are very opposite sides of the same coin.

The 1953 mystery is better known for its big screen incarnation a year later, directed by Alfred Hitchcock and starring Grace Kelly, Ray Milland and Robert Cummings. Apparently, neither version holds up fully to theatergoers of the new millennium who prefer two hours of James Bond pyrotechnics or assorted street types bringing in noise and funk. As Jerry Seinfeld says, "not that there's anything wrong with that."

But for the many fans of "Columbo-style" we already know whodunits there is much to like about "Dial M." Dillon O'Connor plays Tony, the has-been British tennis star who plots his wife's murder for the inheritance. Not a good enough reason? OK, there's also the affair she had a year earlier with an American writer of TV mysteries who happens to be in London.

O'Connor is the coolest of coolies, concealing his stiletto alibi over a year's time. He's smooth, and we truly enjoy watching his story unravel thread by thread. Had the cast taken individual bows instead of a company bow, he surely would have gotten a chorus of boos – and that's a compliment.

Mary Bogrette-Pagnani as Margot is the object of his disaffection. Wide-eyed and trusting, she's held on to one of her paramours' love letters, which becomes her undoing. Bogrette-Pagnani is a versatile performer, equally at home in melodrama and farce and is the only one who apparently felt comfortable using a British accent. She floats through Act 2 in a state of shock, and we feel her pain.

As the American writer, Jeff Stillman offers his five motives for murder: fear, jealousy, money, revenge and protecting someone you love. His white knight rides to the rescue on an ocean liner, rather than a trusty steed, and therein lies the reason the script doesn't hold up a half century later; we're simply

too used to Hercules and Nena flying across the screen doing impossible gravity-defying flips. Max is no hero; he's just this nice guy who discovers that "in stories, things turn out as the author plans. In real life they don't."

Dean Lindstrom's proper Inspector Hubbard carries out his investigation precisely and efficiently, making his catch squirm on the line and comes close to carrying off the show (the character's creator, John Williams, stole the movie and won a Tony award for the stage version). Lindstrom even does Columbo's signature "Oh by the way, there is one other thing." Remember, this play predates the rumpled, trench-coated TV

inspector by 20 years. Joseph Urkhus is appropriately pitiable as the poor soul who's blackmailed into doing the unwitting Margot. Noteworthy, too, are the technical achievements in sound (Mark Hammell), set (Kim Garr) and lighting design (Anthony Sherman).

Stock suspense music played during the action, as well as during scene changes, is either effective or corny depending on how willing you are to "go with it."

Director/producer Debbie Schlutow has crafted an admirable staging of a play that, like an old scrapbook, should be viewed, enjoyed and then put back on the shelf with a smile.

# Meadow Brook's bluesy 'Thunder Knocking' searches for a key

"Thunder Knocking on the Door," a musical written by Keith Glover and directed by Gary Anderson with original music by Keith Glover, Anderson Edwards and Glover continues through Sunday, Feb. 1, at Meadow Brook Theatre, Wilson Hall on the campus of Oakland University, Rochester Hills. Performances 8 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday; 2 p.m. Wednesday, Saturday & Sunday at Tickets \$18-\$26.50 (248) 377-3300, group sales, (248) 370-3316.

BY FRANK PROVENZANO  
STAFF WRITER

There's a reason that the best way to appreciate the blues is to sing about the blues. Talking about how a wrenching melodic catharsis can soothe soulful despondency just isn't half as much fun or nearly as evocative as wailing to the heavens.

In a story about the redemptive power of the blues, "Thunder Knocking at the Door" at Meadow Brook Theatre is a play in search of the right key. As an out-of-tune "blusical" – part musical, part drama – the production suffers from dramatic ambivalence.

The result is that "Thunder" is a hit and miss effort that is both

promising and disappointing. What's good about "Thunder" is very good. Like Keb Mo's bluesy compositions, and performances by the velvety smooth Luray Cooper (Thunder), the irrepressible Keesha Fleth (Gloria), and Marlon Bailey's (Jaguar) comical rendition of "Big Money."

What's not as intriguing, however, are the gaps in the script and the occasional overreaching by a talented cast trying to wring entertainment from a patchwork plot suffering from a lack of focus.

The play about a slick-talking supernatural, Marvel Thunder, who challenges mere mortals to lick him at playin' blues on a six-string, is disguised as a series of love stories.

But genuine love gets bogged down in maudlin and predictable dialogue.

Ironically, the play, written by Alabamian Keith Glover and co-produced by Meadow Brook and Plovers Theatre Company, draws on some fertile ingredients – mythology, love and music.

But at times, the mixture is pure confusion. The hope is that the play will reveal that the genius of the blues lies in a barebones simplicity and tear-the-

heart-open emotion. That revelation, however, is lost in a production that reaches for easy answers and commercial appeal.

Besides an agonizingly soporific opening whereby the cast basically introduces their characters, it takes nearly half of the first act before the devilish Marvel Thunder makes his appearance. Meanwhile, the onstage actors talk and talk and talk. Only the music saves the day.

Leading up to the end of the first act feels like sheer randomness whereby critical time is spent rehearsing the back story and setting up action, rather than moving the story ahead.

Then, shortly after the opening of the second act, the play skitters to a "place where the roads cross" for the pivotal, end-all blues-guitar battles.

On a platform above the stage, a four-piece blues band lays down the groove. Unfortunately, they also serve as a reminder of the "staged performance" below. The mere sight of actors playing at playing the blues is an unfortunate reminder that this is all make-believe.

To say the climax is anti-climatic is like calling the blues

"just a lowdown feeling." In a rush to tie a happy bow on the play, the story rushes to a resolution that might feel right for a TV movie, but not for something as genuine as the blues.

Perhaps more Keb Mo' music

and a story with a stronger main plot, and less competing subplots would help distill the truth behind Glover's clever tale.

Until then, this production of "Thunder" manages to make an ethereal subject like the blues

into an implausible path toward salvation.

That's too bad for anyone who loves the blues. But perhaps proof that when you've got to talk about the blues, then maybe the feeling just isn't there.

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