

THEATER

Simon's 'Laughter on the 23rd Floor' is zany fun

Farmington Players presents Neil Simon's "Laughter on the 23rd Floor" 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays through May 16; 2 p.m. Sunday, May 3 and 10; and 8 p.m. Thursday, May 7 and May 14 at the Players Barn, 32332 W. 12 Mile Road (one-half mile west of Orchard Lake Road), Farmington Hills. Tickets \$8, call (248) 553-2955.

BY BOB WEIBEL
SPECIAL WRITER

Question: Lock a bunch of whacky writers in a room week after week, and what do you have?

Answer: The funniest sketch comedy material in the history of television for the legendary Sid Caesar.

Playwright Neil Simon's nostalgic memoir "Laughter on the 23rd Floor" captures the creative process in "the room" and The Farmington Players have great fun bringing it all to life with style and flair.

The writers (Neil Simon, Mel Brooks, Larry Gelbart, Mel Tolkin, Selma Diamond, Woody Allen, Carl Reiner and others) went on to many successes. The crucible for their achievements was a nonstop can-you-top-this shouting match of one-liners, wisecracks, zingers, jokes and assorted riffs.

Director Brian Tupper does a good job getting his cast to project the zany energy that went into creating two highlights of the Golden Age of Television — "Your Show of Shows" and "Caesar's Hour." Best of all, each is a distinctive character in voice, appearance and mannerisms.

According to Simon, "Laughter on the 23rd Floor" is not a documentary, but an impressionistic comedy. The characters are a

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synthesis. Simon, for example, refers to Sid Caesar as Max Prince.

Marc Rosati (Max) gives a sterling performance with precise comic timing, double takes, clipped speech and hyperactive persona. Max is a talented performer, but troubled imperfect man. He gobbles pills by the bottle, and throws down Scotch by the glass to calm his insecurities. One moment warm, the next fiery, he dominates a room with the strength of his personality. And he certainly gets your attention when he puts his fist through the wall, not once, but twice.

Steve Nelson is pleasingly natural as Lucas in combo of Neil Simon and his brother, Danny! a new fresh-faced writer who doubles as a narrator for the show. Jim Snideeman is a host as Mill, a fuss-budget perpetually on the make. When advised he might save his marriage with a second honeymoon, he responds, "My wife didn't care that much for the first one."

Dennis Brandhead is terrific as Val, a Russian Jew, who somehow overcomes his accent and language difficulties to become head writer (not unlike Mel Tolkin). Hank Bennett scores as an Irish braggart with visions of leaving the show behind for Hollywood (if and when he com-

pletes a script).

Brett Minek plays Kenny, seemingly the only calm rational member of the ensemble (mostly Larry Gelbart, and a little Carl Reiner). Lisa Melinn gives a strong performance as Carol, a politically correct type who insists on being simply a writer — not a woman writer, for which she is willing to be "one of the guys" and tolerate their toilet humor.

Robert Weinstein is hilarious as Ira, an incurable hypochondriac who arrives late every day (a lot like Mel Brooks).

Finally, we have Jacquie Pouillon as the group's dipsey secretary. By some quirk of fate, she reminds one of another 1950s TV icon, the statuette Dugan from Jerry Lester's Broadway Open House (the prototype for The Tonight Show).

Incidentally, if you want to experience the real thing, watch for a 90-minute TV special during PBS fund-raising. Neil Simon and friends regale each other with laugh-a-minute remembrances.



Comedy: Jim Snideeman (left) Lisa Melinn, Marc Rosati, Brett Minek, Hank Bennett and Robert Weinstein star in the Farmington Players production of "Laughter on the 23rd Floor."

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