

THEATER

West End takes 'Sweet, Sassy' look at Christopher Durang

West End Productions presents "Sweet, Sassy & Durang," short plays by Christopher Durang, 9 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays, July 24-25 and July 31-Aug. 1, at the Wunderground Theatre, 110 S. Main St., above ACE Hardware, Royal Oak. Tickets \$12, call (248) 641-1763.

By BRENDIA SMITH
SPECIAL WRITER

"Sweet, Sassy & Durang" offers laughs and provokes thoughts that border on homicidal. The short plays done by West End Productions are written by a gifted, yet slightly twisted, Christopher Durang. Many of

the topics can be considered touchy to some. His sense of humor is extraordinary, leaving one laughing at one of his topics and later wondering why it was so funny then, yet so disturbing now.

The humor of Durang seems to try to push the audience as far as it can go, then farther. A more mature audience would understand the subtle remarks for their full worthiness. To some people, it may be offending. However, not to see the humor in it would be a waste.

Coupled with the hilarious cast, this performance offered audience members a chance to

laugh and sometimes not even know why. While the content of the performance seems to be directed at the twenty-something generation, the more subtle jokes are left for an older crowd.

Imagine Tennessee Williams' "Streetcar Named Desire" placed in the 1990s, throw in some homosexual references, twist it quite a bit, and you come close to a short called "Desire, Desire, Desire."

Many of the shorts are Durang's strange, insightful look at his own thoughts and feelings. The actors and actresses very aptly dove into this bizarre

world of Durang. The shorts were mixed together with some of their own song and dance routines. Don't let them fool you, this wasn't the "Nutcracker." Where on Broadway can you find the song "The Homecoming Queen" where the newly elected Homcoming Queen loses it and blows away half of her class? Not exactly a night at the ballet, but better.

The friendship between the players can be seen on the stage. Each one brought something else to add. Even the stage carried the friendliness of the cast. The small venue offered the players a chance to extend the range of the

stage beyond the audience. Linda Hammell played the opening character, talking to audience members as she walked onto the stage before offering a welcome to the entire audience.

The acting talents of each of the players were superb. Director, choreographer and actress Francine Jo Hachem overdid herself throughout the play; best shown as she left the audience in tears of laughter with her monologue "Jane Doe."

The stage was set with no backgrounds and little props leaving ample room for the audi-

ence to use their imagination. The lack of backdrops left open room to move and flow into the next scene. Clean-up and prop changing was played-off as other skits or dance routines, making the entire show continuous.

The entire show had more impact than one could imagine. The dialogue, players and even the audience added to the strange and demented world according to Christopher Durang. Closeness between the cast members made everyone feel comfortable. Anyone looking for a reason to laugh, or just to contemplate, should look into these excellent performances.

Winning cast celebrates 50 years of Broadway's best musicals

The Gamut Theatre Group presents "And the Winner Is" 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, July 24-25 and 2:30 p.m. Sunday, July 26, at the Theatre Guild of Livonia-Redford, 15138 Beech Daly, south of Five Mile. Tickets are \$10 and available by calling (734) 274-6493.

By BOB WEIBEL
SPECIAL WRITER

The Gamut Theatre Group affirms once again the abundant musical talent in the Detroit area. Gamut's current produc-

tion, "And the Winner Is," celebrates 50 years of Tony Award-winning Broadway musicals. From the rousing opening number "Another Opening, Another Show" from Kiss Me Kate in 1948-49 to the radiant "Circle of Life" from The Lion King in 1998, the show is a winner in every respect.

Valerie Mangrum (Inkster) and Brian Townsend (Dearborn) conceived, staged and perform in this 90-minute non-stop buffet of savory songs. Joining them are Annette Hissong (Westland), Jim

Meade (Ann Arbor), Megan Meade-Higgins (Southfield) and Tom Morgan (Livonia).

Musical director Ken Plotzer (Dearborn), accompanies them on the piano and with computer-aided instrumentation sounding like a full orchestra. Very impressive indeed.

Tying the whole thing together is a history lesson of interesting trivia. Each number is introduced with a brief comment. For example: there were two winners in 1960, "Fiddler" and "The Sound of Music." The movie "All

About Eve" inspired the authors of the 1970 winner "Applause."

Shining most brightly in the galaxy of 60 sparkling numbers are Megan Meade-Higgins and Tom Morgan in "The Phantom of the Opera." The vocals, staging, lighting, and music is mesmerizing. Meade-Higgins shows her versatility with a gusty go at "Cabaret" from Cabaret (1967). And Morgan gives a lovely rendition of "The Impossible Dream" from "The Man of La Mancha" (1966).

Jim Meade delivers a powerful

knockout performance of the song "Glory" from the 1996 Rock Opera winner Rent. And his satirical "One Last Kiss" from Bye, Bye Birdie (1961) is a hoot, especially his Elvis Presley ending.

Brian Townsend has the gestures, facial expressions and vocal inflections of an accomplished performer. He handles different styles with equal aplomb; be it the sophisticated "I Believe in You" from How to Succeed in Business (1962), or a hint of twangy Roger Miller in "River

of Rain" from Big River (1985). Annette Hissong's "Memory" from Cats (1983) is indeed memorable, and she scores again with "With One Look" from Sunset Boulevard (1995).

Valerie Mangrum's appealing style teased us with a short version of "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" from Evita (1980). She gives us the full treatment in "Hernando's Hideaway" from The Pajama Game (1955).

For a winning evening of summer entertainment, don't miss it.

Acting: A young girl is to meet someone with a red carnation at this park bench, but who? Brooke Andres, Don Andres (left) and Dan Dobrovich in "Red Carnations" by Glenn Hughes, one of four one-act plays being presented by the Players Guild of Dearborn.



Groups present plays about love

The Players Guild of Dearborn presents four one-act plays "First Dates and Fickle Hearts," 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, July 24-25, and 2:30 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 2 at its air-conditioned theater, 21730 Madison, (southeast corner of Monroe and Outer Dr.) Dearborn. Tickets \$10, call (313) 661-TKTS. For more information, call (313) 277-5164.

"First Dates and Fickle Hearts" is a collection of classic comedies and farces using eight actors as various characters.

All four one-act plays are funny views on love. The show opens toying with a fickle heart in an Anton Chekov piece known as "A Marriage Proposal."

A reaffirmation of love is humorously discovered in Bernard Shaw's "How He Lied to Her Husband." Memories of first dates will be relived for all in "Red Carnations." The surprise of unexpected love and romance in the most adverse circumstances flourishes in Anton Chekov's "The Brute."

"First Dates and Fickle Hearts" features Brooke and Don Andres of Livonia; Marin Kovac of Plymouth, and Kerry Plague of Canton.

It is directed by Kirk Hass.

Jeff Bartos is assistant director.

Heartland Theatre Company

Heartland Theatre Company will present its fourth festival of original plays - "Playscape '98," Aug. 6-15 at Meadow Brook Theatre. Performances 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, Aug. 6-8; 5:30 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 9; 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, Aug. 14-15. General admission tickets \$15 and \$10, call (248) 377-3300.

This year, Playscape '98 will include a workshop of a new musical - "The Wedding Ring" by Mike Vigonia and Gerry Castle. In "The Wedding Ring" each song of the 18-song score serves as a new round a couple's relationship. Vigilant and Castle are the authors of 12 published plays and musicals.

DESTINATION: CRANBROOK

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Institute of Science
Check out our newly expanded museum and summer blockbuster exhibit, **The Robot Zoo!** Larger-than-life robotic beasts, including a giant squid with 18-foot tentacles, demonstrate how animals function in the natural world. Be sure to join us for grand opening festivities June 13 and 14!

The Robot Zoo is sponsored locally at Cranbrook by FANUC Robotics North America, Inc.

Art Museum
Explore an array of contemporary art exhibitions featuring photography, sculpture, ceramics and more. The museum also offers fascinating tours of historic Saarinen House as well as one of the country's finest outdoor sculpture collections.

Cranbrook House and Gardens
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