

COMMUNITY THEATER

'The Music Man' belts out an entertaining show

The Avon Players present "The Music Man" 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday, also 8 p.m. Monday, Sept. 20 and Thursday, Sept. 30. Performance dates are Sept. 17-19, Sept. 24-26, Sept. 30 and Oct. 1-2, at the Avon Players Theater, on Tienken Road, East of Rochester Road in Rochester Hills. Tickets are \$16. Student, senior and group rates are available. For more information, call (248) 608-9077.

BY CARRIE COOPER
SPECIAL WRITER

Be careful who you trust. No matter how good a judge of character you are, it's hard to recognize a smooth-talking con man.

Smooth-talking is an understatement in Merideth Wilson's musical, "The Music Man." Directed by Debbie Schlutow, the play opens the morning of July 4, 1912 on a railway coach where

several traveling salesmen are discussing a particular salesman — who appears to be a con man. Harold Hill, played by Bradley Pfeifer, is a sweet-talking swindler who finds himself in River City, Iowa, with aspirations of making money. To do so, he pretends to be a professor who tries to coax the school children into joining the school band.

By gaining the trust of the townspeople, including the Mayor (Michael Bramson) and his wife (Nancy Cannava), Hill encourages the children to have the confidence and courage to join.

He prompts young Winthrop Paroo (Andrew Danowski) to join in, even though the boy rarely speaks because of his lip. Everything is running smoothly for awhile. Hill manages to design the school attempt made by the school board to obtain his credentials.

He changes the subject through music, by turning them into a barbershop quartet.

But Hill had not counted on falling in love with the town librarian and music teacher, Marian Paroo (Elizabeth Stutz). She doesn't trust him from the start. She sings a beautiful ballad about finding her white knight, though she sees Hill as anything but.

He tries to win her over and the arrival of instruments for the band finally does the trick. This is significant because Winthrop is finally able to speak more than two words, leading Marian to believe that Hill is good guy after all.

She falls in love with him, and gives him the benefit of the doubt, despite hearing the awful truth about his past. The townspeople are onto his scheme by this time. Knowing he must

leave town, Hill can't bare to leave Marian.

Pfeifer gives a solid performance as Harold Hill. His presence onstage was commanding and made it hard not to like the character's sweet talk and humor.

Stutz's voice is captivating. She sings several ballads in the play, bringing the audience into Marian's life in that manner.

Cannava has tremendous stage presence for a newcomer to the Avon stage. She's humorous and full of expression. As the Mayor's wife, she visibly stands behind her husband, when what she really wants is to be the leader and center of attention. She obtains that attention by becoming a teacher and a dancer.

Director Debbie Schlutow and her crew do a great job working with a large cast on a small



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN STOKELAND

Musical: The Avon Players in a scene from their season opener, "The Music Man."

stage. Though, at times, it is difficult to understand what's being said, the music tells the story of

how love can change a man and help make a difference in other people's lives, as well as his own.

Ridgedale Players show 'hip nuns are heavenly'

The Ridgedale Players present "Nunsense" 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, Sept. 17-18 and 24-25, and 3 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 26 at the playhouse, 208 W. Long Lake, between Crooks and Livernois. Troy. Tickets are \$13 adults, \$12 seniors/students, includes sandwich and coffee afterglow, call (248) 988-7049.

BY JOHN O'DONNELL
SPECIAL WRITER

As the audience gathered for Saturday's sold-out, season opening Ridgedale Players performance of "Nunsense," there was a sense that many didn't quite know what to expect. One could count on irreverence with a plot that centered around dead nuns stuffed in a freezer. Having

never seen a production of Michigan native Dan Goggin's play, I suspected it was based on a now familiar premise of imphish nuns running roughshod over a stern Mother Superior.

Within moments of the beginning of this production, it became clear that these nuns bear little similarity to others in films, TV, or theater, or those many Catholics think they grow

up with. To cut it in this convent, decimated by food poisoning fatalities from the pleasant and unaccountable Sister Julia "Child of God," it was common to question your vocation, deliver an edgy barb to your fellow sisters, and display a flair for bawdy humor. Hey, how were we to know they act just like us when nobody's watching.

The individuality of each character emerges early, which quickly puts the audience in the comfortable position of appreciating the quirks as well as the punchlines. An effectively scattered Sister Mary Amnesia (Tania Velinsky of Royal Oak) shines in an audience quiz about opening scenes. A spunky Sister Robert Anne (Lynn Koch of Troy) yearns for stardom while squeezing every ounce of fun out of the convent life she stumbled upon as a child.

However, it is an outrageous scene late in Act One that demonstrates just how far the nuns are willing to go to provide laughs. Mother Superior, played by Becky MacIntire of Troy, samples an unfamiliar substance called "rush," which was found in a student's locker. Having a buttoned-down authority figure under the influence of some goofy juice is timeless comedy fodder, but this production takes it to new heights.

MacIntire's physicality turned the scene into something reminiscent of a looped Lucille Ball and the manic improv of Jonathan Winters. Engaging an audience in playful giddiness is no simple task. It works here because of an air of spontaneity that MacIntire and director/choreographer Dan See bring to the scene. With perfect timing and an infusion of the

unexpected, the scene provided the sustained laughs that made me eager for what was to come after an intermission of bingo.

It didn't disappoint. Highlights included a sister's internal review of the homicidal cookbook, which yielded a bounty of inadvertent perils. A rousing rendition of "Holler Than Thou," led by Sister Mary Hubert (Peggy Jones of Rochester) showcased the distinctive singing ability of the well-cast performers.

There's a minimum of inside jokes directed at Catholics, which is one of the play's strengths. The nuns aren't cloistered and neither is the comedy. The Ridgedale Players production demonstrates how fresh Goggin's script remains twelve years after its premiere. Hip nuns are heavenly.

'Murder by the Book' thrills audience

Clarkston Village Players presents "Murder by the Book," 7:30 p.m. Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, Sept. 16-18, Sept. 23-25, at the Depot Theatre, 4861 White Lake Road, between Dixie Highway and Andersonville Road in Independence Township. For ticket information call (248) 625-8811.

BY MICHAEL A. GRAVAME
SPECIAL WRITER

Clarkston Village Players opened its 39th season with the English suspense thriller "Murder by the Book" by Duncan Greenwood and Robert King.

The red velvet curtains of the intimate depot theater opened to an impressive set skillfully designed by Verne Vakaro and beautifully decorated by a talented five-person crew, which enhanced the mood and set the stage for murder. Since the play is a mystery, all I can tell you about the plot is it's full of intrigue, plot twists, double murder, sleuthing detectives, confrontations and locked doors.

The play centers around an English mystery writer, Selwyn Piper, portrayed by community veteran Rick Shaw. Rick's droll English accent was quite effective, and it would have been nice if the other actors had risen to his challenge. His sarcasm, mannerisms and blasé attitude worked well most of the time, but he could have used more lev-

els and pace in his delivery, especially in the confrontational scenes. His line delivery regarding his actress wife's performance of Juliet was very funny.

Merriment is added to this show in the persona of Shaun Pittman, who portrays Peter Fletcher, Selwyn's eccentric next-door neighbor. Laughter began uproariously the moment he set foot upon the stage. His stage presence and facial expressions are outstanding. Shaun kept the play moving and exciting, and his comical antics were engaging.

Mark Delcamp is very careful with his portrayal of John Douglas, the witty, nervous publisher of Selwyn's novels. He fares well in his delivery and grows on you as the play progresses, especially when he is frustrated, befuddled and clueless. His emotions, however, were not always convincing.

Amy Seaman as Imogen Piper, Selwyn's separated wife, has the sarcasm, bitterness and snotty looks down pat, however, she lacked the depth and maturity needed to flesh out the role.

Karen Boehm as Selwyn's diligent secretary Christine Scott tried to be alluring and mysterious; instead she came across as nervous, quiet and mousy for most of the play. Not to say this didn't work, although it would have been more interesting if

she would have shown more emotion, been more frantic and used more volume, especially in the play's ending scenes.

Making his directorial debut, John McCaffrey assembled a cast who worked well together. His staging is very natural, interesting and never hindered the actors. He needed, however, to tighten up the pace, which occasionally dragged, in order to achieve a better climactic ending. This is imperative for a wordy English mystery.

Kudos to Barbara Ensminger for her costumes, especially the women. The purple ensemble on Imogen is very attractive, but Imogen's black character heels and John Douglas's wrinkled suit were distracting.

The sound cues were executed well except for the telephone rings, which sounded like they were ringing from the back of the theater.

All in all, "Murder by the Book" entertained the audience who made occasional comments openly to the cast along with a few "oohs" and "gaahs" that rumbled through the theater as the story unfolded, along with the rumbling sound of the passing freight train during Act II.

If English murder mysteries are your cup of tea, then chug on down to the depot where Clarkston Village Players take a well-aimed "shot" at one.



Saturday, September 25 • 10 a.m. - 6 p.m.

Sunday, September 26 • 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.

(Sunday Accessibility Hours: 9-10 a.m. for physically challenged)

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