

THEATER

'Some Americans Abroad' falls short for audience

Wayne State University presents Richard Nelson's satiric comedy "Some Americans Abroad" through Feb. 5 at the Hilberry Theatre, 4743 Cass at Hancock on WSU campus, Detroit. Tickets \$11-\$18; Group discounts are available. For tickets or more information, call (313) 577-2972.

BY SUE SUCHYTA
SPECIAL WRITER

The Hilberry graduate theater company takes us to England with a group of American University professors in "Some Americans Abroad."

The comedy of manners shows how the worst comes out in some people when they are in a foreign environment and how they confront those flaws. Nelson, an American dramatist, was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company to write the

play. Joe Taylor, the new head of the English Department, is at the center of the story. He covers his nervousness and inexperience with his charm and uncompromising liberal politics. Throughout the play Taylor must find a way to inform one of his staff that he will not receive tenure or a renewed contract, a decision he is uncomfortable with because it bypasses the teacher's talent and focuses on his lack of prestigious credentials. Along the way he has to deal with an AWOL student and a professor accused of unwanted sexual advances by a student.

The play itself is dialogue intensive. Professors and students who have actually been on a college-sponsored trip abroad will experience a somewhat amusing sense of déjà vu, but most of the play is weighed down

by ponderous dialogue.

The opening scene, set in a restaurant, is a prolonged discussion of 1989 cold war politics. Undoubtedly boring 10 years ago, the topic inspires even more yawns today. The mealtime banter merely serves to establish the intellectual snobbery and political shallowness of the professors on the tour, a promise that could have been accomplished in less time with a livelier conversation.

Taylor, the neophyte department head, is played with calm and plodding efficiency by Erik Gratton. The character is a nice snob — a pleasant fellow, but a snob none the less — and spineless, as demonstrated by the character's unwillingness to tell Henry McNeil of his impending unemployment. Gratton keeps the character undignifyingly cheerful with a stiff smile, never

allows a loss of temper, and rarely raises his voice. It's an interesting character study for a student actor but hardly a compelling protagonist for audiences to like.

Mike Schraeder plays Henry McNeil, the young professor all but groveling to keep his position — even willing to forego tenure and work on a yearly basis. Schraeder plays the part with unabashed brown-nose enthusiasm, with enough desperation to make the audience squirm in uncomfortable recognition. As he clings to his threads of hope that he'll keep his job, his wife Betty, played by Emily Miller, chafes at the hypocrisy of the situation. She's already accepted the inevitable loss of her husband's job and can barely maintain her civility toward the group. One wishes for her to lose her composure, if only to liven

up one of the tedious scenes.

Gavin Lewis portrays Orson Baldwin, the retired English chairman who gives a voice to the outrageous thoughts that his successor, Joe Taylor, keeps tightly in check. His rude pronouncements add some life to the scenes, and occasionally jars his stuffy former colleagues out of their comfort zones. Even though his character is unpleasant, it's refreshing to hear his breaks with the arcane conversation and his irrelevant pronouncements.

Sexual harassment is a side plot and dates the play. Today, a professor accused of inappropriate sexual conduct toward a student would be subject to extensive scrutiny at the very least. The play's willingness to sweep the whole incident quietly under the carpet emphasizes the characters' shallowness, but it also

dates them.

The play is an interesting exercise for actors but not an interesting evening of theater.

The changing locations — usually restaurants or public places — were announced with an overhead slide at the start of the scene, a slight shifting of neutral backdrops screens, and the arrival and departure of furniture and props. A Union Jack hung from the back of the set, partially hidden by the screens. The set was very neutral and bland — it did nothing to give the play a British flavor.

The rearrangement of the screens served little purpose beyond changing the entrance and exit locations; their rearrangement added work to the scene changes. Perhaps some scenes of London or Stratford might have added some color to an otherwise-dry show.

Hilberry Theatre's 'Merchant of Venice' a treat to watch

Wayne State University's Hilberry Theatre presents William Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" through Dec. 9 in rotating repertory. The Hilberry is on Cass near Forest on the campus of Wayne State University in Detroit. For ticket information, call (313) 577-2972.

BY SUE SUCHYTA
SPECIAL WRITER

The Hilberry Theatre's production of "The Merchant of Venice" is a quick paced, easily understood and well-acted rendition of one of the immortal bard's better-known works.

Directed by Gillian Eaton, the play is a treat to watch. The undercurrent of anti-Semitism, with which the play is generally associated, is used to highlight

intolerance between cultures, not to indict Shakespeare for holding similar beliefs.

Despite its serious moments, "The Merchant of Venice" is a comedy of attitudes that explores the lifestyles of the merchant ruling class in Venice 500 years ago. Antonio, a merchant, borrows money from Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, to help his friend Bassanio win the hand of the beautiful and noble Portia.

Shylock, who had been treated like an outcast for much of his life, grants the loan with a notarized condition that he receive a pound of flesh if the bond is forfeited. Antonio, whose fortunes depend on a fleet of his ships traversing the globe, carelessly assumes his fortune is assured.

Romantic escapades enliven the plot. Portia's potential suit-

ors attempt to solve the riddle of her late father's will, which would grant them Portia's hand in marriage, while Shylock's daughter Jessica elopes under cover of darkness with a Christian, lining her pockets with much of her father's wealth.

Gavin Lewis is a convincing mixture of wounded pride and burning revenge as the bitter Shylock. Scorned by the same society that grovels for his loans, his sudden obsessive quest for revenge seems more aimed at his tormentors at large than Antonio alone.

Shylock refuses to accept the cash of others and prefers to exact the vengeance of the bond. It is through Portia's wisdom that Shylock learns that cruelty can not be repaid in kind.

Sara Wolf performs the role of

Portia with polish and finesse. A third year student, she delighted audiences as Ophelia in the company's 1998-1999 season production of "Hamlet." With a talent equal to the bard's great female role, she captures the spirited nature of Portia while cloaking the character with the sophistication of her station and a well-spring of intelligence and insight.

The scenes with her lady-in-waiting Nerissa, played by Triha Miller, were light-hearted yet key to the plot. They show a strong-willed woman in a positive light, unusual in this male-dominated era. Miller, a first year student appearing in her second show of the season, exudes talent and charisma on stage.

Christopher Gilbert portrays Antonio, the merchant whose

pound of flesh lies in the balance of the scales of justice, with stubborn pride and quiet dignity. More passionate than practical, Antonio's heroism is dimmed only by his anti-Semitic attitude, which was as acceptable in that era as it is disturbing today in a century scarred by the Holocaust.

Erik Gratton is a charming, sincere and moon-eyed successful suitor to Portia. Jessica, the eloping daughter of Shylock, is played with lusty enthusiasm by Cat Shoemaker.

Dallas Henry played Launcelot Gobbo, the comic relief and lower class clown, with a cavalcade of amusing accents, the most disconcerting of which was a red-neck twang. Though funny, it broke the otherwise historical

continuity of the production.

The entire cast poured enthusiasm into the production, making the most of even minor characters, who compensated with movement and expression what they lacked in lines. Costumes designed by John D. Woodland, and created by Mary Leyendecker, were elegant and superb, with bright splashes of irrefutable color to intensify the comedic elements where appropriate. They also managed to mask the gender of the female cast playing male roles with a reasonable degree of deception. Scenic designer Charles Moore's multi-level set, replete with stonework and rich tapestry, accomplished the numerous shifts in scene easily.

Artist paints 'purrfect' portraits

BY LINDA ANN CHOMIN
STAFF WRITER
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Kristine Dumm admits it's unusual for a pet portrait artist not to have at least one dog or cat. After all, the Redford artist specializes in watercolor paintings and drawings of animals.

It's apparent by listening to Dumm speak about dogs, cats, horses, and iguanas, the love for them is there. She just hasn't had the opportunity to express it.

"Our only pet is a goldfish I won at a church festival," said Dumm. "We lived in apartment

so we couldn't have an animal. But now that we have a house and our son is past the tail-pulling age, we hope to get a puppy in spring."

Dumm's sensitive portrayals of animals include a horse and colt at Maybury State Park, a kitten lounging in a bowl at Upland Hills Farm, and her brother's beagle puppy who didn't want to sit still to have its photograph taken. Dumm uses photographs as reference for the paintings and drawings.

"I'm always armed with my camera," said Dumm. "He was just a farm cat I tried to catch in

different poses."

A black-and-white watercolor of a little girl and her dog was created after a vintage sepia-toned photograph. Dumm searched for the photograph for several years before creating this dramatic portrait.

"People didn't seem to have their portraits taken with their pets back then," said Dumm.

As with any portrait, Dumm's goal is to paint a likeness of the pet.

"When I'm working with clients I let them supply photos," said Dumm. "I need clear photos, in focus and the pet is in a nice pose. The better the photograph, the better the painting."

Dumm will demonstrate the process of creating a pet portrait from sketch to finished work Saturday, Dec. 4, when she paints the store cat at Backdoor Friends Cat Shoppe in Farmington Hills.

Dumm came up with the idea to create pet portraits about five years ago. After receiving an associate's degree in graphic design from Henry Ford Community College, Dumm designed print ads for local newspapers and mail order catalogues, which included horse related items, for

several years. Since deciding to do the portraits, she's exhibited at cat and dog shows. One of her cat paintings is also on display at Canterbury Tails.

For more information about Dumm's pet portraits, call her at (313) 541-7425.

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