

# Schoolcraft's 'Night Watch' a thriller

Schoolcraft College Theatre presents "Night Watch," Lucille Fletcher's suspense drama, as a dinner theater 6:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, Nov. 6-7 (\$19) in the Waterman Center. The show begins at 8 p.m. in the Liberal Arts Theatre, and theater only 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, Nov. 13-14 (\$8), on the campus at 18600 Haggerty Road, between Six and Seven Mile roads, Livonia. (734) 462-4596.

By BOB WEIBEL  
SPECIAL WRITER

If ever there was a suspenseful thriller about which you could say, don't believe a thing you see, and much of what you hear, until the very end, then "Night Watch" is the show. The current dinner theater production at Schoolcraft College keeps the audience guessing about what's really going on from the eerie beginning to the climactic finale.

The setting is an elegant Manhattan townhouse (nicely executed by scenic designer Timothy Amrhein). Elaine Wheeler, a hopeless insomniac, is having a pre-dawn smoke as a storm rages outside. She sees, or thinks she sees, a dead man in the window of a building across an alley. Later, she sees another body and unexplained shadows behind the window shade.

The police find no bodies and are skeptical of her story. Her husband suggests psychiatric treatment. Is she crazy? Is she up to something? Why won't anybody believe her? Are they trying to get rid of her?

Professor James Hartman's taunt direction keeps us guessing. Especially good is his choice of haunting synthesizer music. It sets the right mood and takes us into the catacombs of Mrs. Wheeler's disturbed mind.

Brenda Lane, in the role of Elaine Wheeler, more than meets the difficult challenge of playing a woman who appears to be

slowly losing her mind. The strain in her voice, the tension in her body, the looks of despair build naturally and convincingly into a solid, terrific performance.

Brinn Taylor, in his 10th performance at Schoolcraft, does his usual fine job as her seemingly sympathetic husband, John Wheeler. We learn he is having an affair with her best friend, Blanche Cooke. Tiffany Byars is generally effective as Blanche, but could be more of a schemer.

Benjamin Karl, as Curtis Appleby, creates a most interesting odd-ball neighbor, who wanders in at the strangest times with the strangest comments. Good stuff. Charles LeClerc, in his stage debut, displays natural stage presence as Lt. Walker. His no nonsense approach to solving murders is the underpinning for the final scene.

Rory Asher is very good, especially his New York accent, as police officer Vancelli. Matt

Hovach comes on strong as Sam Hoke, owner of a local deli.

Sarah Rae Frame scores as Helga, the suspicious German maid who always seems to be eavesdropping in the shadows. Joyce LaSala gives a smooth seamless portrayal of Dr. Lake, who has come to analyze Mrs. Wheeler's problems.

It is the breathtaking final 90 seconds, however, that make "Night Watch" a satisfying theatrical experience. It's fun being fooled by a clever playwright (Lucille Fletcher of "Sorry, Wrong Number"), and hearing audience comments on false clues that are suddenly washed away like sand castles at the beach. "Night Watch" it turns out, is about immutable psychological truths: of human nature and reinforces the notion that "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned" — except perhaps a woman betrayed.

# Join JET for 'The Last Night of Ballyhoo'

Jewish Ensemble Theatre presents "The Last Night of Ballyhoo," by Pulitzer Prize winner Alfred Uhry through Sunday, Nov. 15, at the theater, 6600 W. Maple Road, West Bloomfield. Call (248) 788-2900 or http://jett.org/jet for ticket information.

By JON KATZ  
SPECIAL WRITER

They are Jew haters, and their ignorance is potentially as dangerous as the machine guns who are pillaging Poland when we meet them in December, 1939. They are, you see, Jews themselves, but the blood of Abraham that flows through them is thinner than their chicken soup — if they ever attempted to make any.

But wait! "The Last Night of Ballyhoo" is a comedy... really. Not with "Hogan's Heroes" fun war laughs, but with the kind of down-home humor you'd find poking out from under the message in a show like, say, "Driving Miss Daisy." No wonder, for both were written by Alfred Uhry, and "Ballyhoo" is given a warm, rich and heartfelt treatment by director Nick Calanni and his uni-

formly skilled JET cast.

It's tree-trimming time in Atlanta, even in the Frothing/Love home, one of two Jewish households on the block. Beulah "Boo" Levy (Evelyn Orbach) insists that still-unmarried daughter Lana (Peggy Johns Campbell) take down the star, but rationalizes the tree itself: "Christmas is just another American holiday if you leave out that silly stuff about Jesus." Lana, meanwhile is all afutter about the biggest thing to hit Atlanta since General Sherman — the world premiere of "Gone With the Wind." "Clark Gable," she gushes, "is less than five miles from this house!"

Of greater urgency to Boo and her slow-witted sister-in-law Reba (Mary Bremner) is THE social event of the season, Ballyhoo, when prominent Jewish youth from all over the South converge to dance and roast wienies (not kosher ones, we bet). Perhaps Lana, in her Scarlett O'Hara hoop skirt, will at last find her Rhett. And maybe there'll even be someone for smarter cousin Sunny (Carey Crim).

That someone just might be Joe Furber (Tom Sewen), just down from Brooklyn to work for Uncle Adolph (Philip Fox). But not if Boo can help it. Joe is "the other kind" — a descendant of Jews from east of the Elbe River, which apparently separates more than just Germany from Czechoslovakia. Joe realizes he's a stranger in a strange land, telling Sunny "You smell like a rose, and I smell like a salami sandwich."

JET's "Ballyhoo" is a ball, as much a tribute to its cast as to its script. Orbach and Bremner are Lucy and Ethel with a drawl, so wonderfully matched are they. Feisty Orbach truly is, as they call Boo, "The Jewish Tallulah Bankhead." Bremner is Aunt Bea with grits for brains.

Campbell's Lana, if she'll accept the compliment, isn't quite frumped-up enough to warrant the old maid treatment; but she hits home when kvetching to her cousin, "God didn't give you one Jewish feature, and look at me!" Crim's Sunny is just that, with an ever-present smile masking a cloudy future. Fox is

everybody's lovable uncle or grandpa, an appropriate patriarch, but there's a monster at work here who would cast out another Jew because he's not, in its strictest geographical sense, a landsmann (fellow countryman).

Scott Sewen has the show's meatiest role, and he sticks it high like corned beef on rye. With back arched, not looking for a fight but not about to retreat from one, he challenges these Southerners' rights to even call themselves Jews. "I can't hide being Jewish," Sunny objects. "So how come you try to camouflage it so much?" he replies, more hurt than angry. Jim Shanley as Lana's intended is a funny red-haired redneck, oozing charm like molasses.

Yes, "Ballyhoo" is a ball. At times it's a Nerball, with an airy Southern manner that even has Lana exclaiming, Scarlett-like, "Oh fiddle-dee-dee." But mostly it's a hardball that's thrown right down the middle of the plate, making one wonder into how many "other kinds" we can ultimately divide ourselves.

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**Deadly:** The dead travel fast in Steven Dietz's adaptation of "Dracula" featuring Dejan Radovanovich of Livonia as Count Dracula at Wayne State University's Bonstelle Theatre.

# Haunting 'Dracula' frighteningly fun

Wayne State University's undergraduate Bonstelle Theatre Company opens its season with Steven Dietz's adaptation of "Dracula," 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, Oct. 30-31, and 2 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 1. Tickets \$8-\$10 with group rates available. The theater is at 3424 Woodward Ave., Detroit. Call (313) 577-2966.

By SUE SUCHITTA  
SPECIAL WRITER

If you're looking for a fitting way to celebrate Halloween, and are tired of the haunted house scene, the Bonstelle's chilling production of "Dracula" will envelop you in a masterfully performed tale of the forces of darkness.

A powerful opening show, "Dracula" is a strong harbinger for an exciting Bonstelle season. Talented, intense acting and frighteningly realistic staging and special effects combine to produce a riveting, chilling drama.

In Steven Dietz's adaptation of the Bram Stoker novel, Dracula is seduced by thoughts of London where he feels the teeming populous will provide easy succor for his bloodthirst. As his dark curse begins to enfold its initial victims, brave but unknowing humans try to use rationality and faith to conquer the evil they know is infiltrating their security and threatening their survival.

"Dracula" is both philosophical and visceral. We hear impassioned discourse, then are swept into the frightening calamity of bloody assaults and battles perpetrated by the incarnate forces of evil. The result is a deliciously suspenseful play that thrills and moves its audience.

Bonstelle's strong cast brings the fear and vulnerability of the story to life. Maribeth Monroe brilliantly blends impetuous strength and sensuality to create a powerfully sympathetic Lucy, the passionate young woman first victimized and seduced by Dracula. Monroe shows that even the strong are overpowered by Dracula's evil ends.

Joel D. Steingold turns in a powerful and riveting performance as Van Helsing, London's Victorian version of the X-File's

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