

Weighty and funny, 'Resident Alien' has its moments

Show dates for "Resident Alien" are Dec. 20, Dec. 23-27, Dec. 30-Jan. 3. Times are 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday, Saturday 8 p.m. and 2 p.m. Sunday matinee. Additional matinee 2 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 23. JET performs in the Aaron DeJoy Theatre, lower level of the JCC, 6600 West Maple Road (corner of Maple & Drake) in West Bloomfield. Tickets are \$13-\$23 for more information visit their Web site at <http://cometnet.org/jet> or to purchase tickets call (248) 788-2900. JET will present two special New Year's Eve performances of "Resident Alien," 6:30 p.m. and 10 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 31. Tickets

for the 6:30 p.m. show \$35 per person includes hors d'oeuvres, champagne, and party favors. Tickets for the 10 p.m. show \$50 per person includes champagne, party favors, and breakfast. Call number listed above for reservations/information.

By VICTORIA DIAZ
SPECIAL WRITER

Does God exist? What is the nature of true love? Are angels metaphysical? What do you do when you can do nothing? Who reads Kierkegaard? And what's the correct pronunciation of "Buddenbrooks"? These are just a few of the weighty questions under discussion in Stuart Spencer's fantasy-comedy, "Resident Alien," now on stage at the Jewish Ensemble Theatre. The play was originally produced by Actors Theatre of Louisville for this year's Humana Festival.

"Resident Alien," here directed by John Seibert, is the story of two men, each born on different planets, and each feeling as if his home planet isn't really where he belongs. One day, one of these men is dumped on Earth, in a kind of temporary exchange program for the other man's young son.

Soon after the cosmological kidnapping, the two men meet. Then, the boy's mother enters

the action (and, of course, she's not buying any story about little green men kidnapping her son), her not-too-bright husband thickens the plot, and the town sheriff tries to keep everybody and everything from falling apart. Imagine "Northern Exposure" and "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" Picture Mayberry beamed to Wisconsin, and tangling with "space" — the final frontier, and you'll get at least a part of the picture.

Sounds like it could/should be fun, maybe. But the production falls short.

Perhaps part of the reason for this is that the play is trying to

be too many things at once. Part comedy, part romance, part suspense, flavored with philosophy and techno-thrills, it seems to get bogged down sometimes in its own mixed signals. (Also, even though some of Spencer's lines and situations are screamingly funny, some play-goers may wonder why he chose to build comedy around the disappearance of a child — a distinctly unfunny event, especially to those who have directly experienced it.)

Generally, the six-member cast does a good job, although they all seem a little under-inspired at times. Scott Sevens as the erudite, earthbound

Michael, and Greg Trzaskoma as the rather bilious-looking Alien are charged with some of the funniest lines in the play, which they usually deliver with aplomb.

Rounding out the cast, Scott Goei makes a brief, enthusiastic appearance as the kidnapped boy, Billy.

Settings, which include a definitely unpretentious kitchen, an equally unpretentious bar, a kitchen where the blue light is almost always on-the-blink, and several other spots in and around a small Wisconsin town, have just the right mundane-but-cartoonish flavor. Special effects are first rate.

Music from page C1

music. She cried after hearing it. She'd long waited for the day when her "little brother" would return "to his roots in music." Shortly thereafter, Ramo called Curtis in Santa Monica with an invitation to play with the duo. Since arriving two months ago, Hepler, Ramo and Curtis have entertained audiences at Encore Studios in Plymouth. On New Year's Eve, the trio performs at Il Posto Ristorante in Southfield, and in March as part of the "Just for You" arts and entertainment series at Oakland Community College in Farmington Hills. Their music defies categorization but shows strong influences of Brazilian, American, Spanish, French, Italian, jazz and classical music.

"I saw the potential," said Ramo. "The timing was there and the same thing happened to me. I didn't play guitar when I first came to this country, but at least I played violin. I know how hard it is to get back to something you haven't done for a while. Todd and I went to Hines Park to practice. I don't know the horn language, but I knew what I wanted to hear."

From Italy with love

Born and raised in a small Sicilian village, Ramo began studying guitar at age 12 and violin at age 13. By age 15, he'd heard a recording by jazz violinist Stephan Grappelli and guitarist Joe Pass and decided that one day he would move to America.

At his father's insistence on obtaining a degree, Ramo went to Palermo to study violin at the Conservatory of Music. Although

his passion at this point was for the guitar, the instrument was out because the conservatory didn't have a guitar certificate. By age 17, he was under contract as a violinist with the Orchestra Del Teatro Massimo in Palermo. He went on to earn a master's degree in violin at the Conservatory of Caltanissetta in Italy in 1985.

Two years later on the way to the U.S. at age 23, Ramo's guitar was stolen in Florence so he improvised. He worked as a strolling violinist in a restaurant near Belle Isle. Ramo now has five recordings to his credit and is grateful for the opportunities he found in this country. He became a U.S. citizen in July.

From the early years when Ramo wrote his first piece of music capturing the sounds of birds, honking horns and homeless dogs while practicing 12 to 15 hours a day on a shepherd's range in Italy, he evolved into a composer for orchestra. "Afro-Brazilian Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra" is set for debut in 1999 by the Munich Youth Orchestra.

Ramo releases a solo recording in January. Curtis plays on one cut, Hepler sings on another.

"We're all trained in the classical field and broke out of it," said Hepler. "There's an understanding of what we're doing with phrasing."

Growing up in Livonia, Hepler's and Curtis' parents sought to cultivate an interest in the arts in their children. All three pursued studies in music: Curtis

on trumpet, Heidi on cello and younger sister Holly on piano. Talent seems to run in the family. Holly Hepler attended Interlochen Arts Center's summer camp and now works as an engineer for Fox 2-Detroit.

Hepler, from an early age, sang with the church choir. Later, she studied voice with Marjorie Gordon in Detroit; Seth Riggs, Los Angeles, and with the University of Michigan Opera Theatre at the Interlochen Arts Center. While in Rome she performed at the 1991 Rome Jazz Festival. Longing for home, Hepler returned to Michigan in 1994 and began singing with Ramo. They married in October 1994. Since then they've been busy touring Italy, Germany and The Netherlands as a duo.

"In our home, creativity was encouraged," said Hepler. "And that's such an important thing. We used to put on productions like Rumpelstiltskin in the basement."

Music lovers will be able to enjoy the rare brand of music created by Hepler, Ramo and Curtis at least until January. Curtis' return to his home in California depends on potential movie deals and a series, currently in the negotiating stages. In the meantime, the trio will continue to be a family affair.

It's a small world because of Ramo. His sister is a big fan of "Capitol" now playing continuously in reruns in Italy. He never realized Curtis was such a big star in Italy until talking to his sister who still lives there.

'A Cricket in Times Square' is a fast-paced show for families

Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village in collaboration with the Wild Swan Theatre present "A Cricket in Times Square." The annual children's holiday play is performed in the Anderson Center Theatre in the museum. American Sign Language interpretation is provided for deaf and hearing-impaired audience members. Special services for the blind and visually-impaired individuals are available when arranged in advance by calling (313) 982-6044. The show runs Saturdays and Sundays at 2:30 p.m. through Jan. 2. For tickets call (313) 982-6176. BY SUZ SUCHITTA
SPECIAL WRITER



American classic: Don Donnelly as Mario in "The Cricket in Times Square," presented by Wild Swan Theatre at Henry Ford Museum.

"The Cricket in Times Square" is a fast-paced children's show with delightful animal characters and a cricket-sized set that young and old will enjoy.

When Chester, a Connecticut cricket, arrives in Times Square via a picnic basket, he is discovered by Mario Bellini, a young Depression-era boy who's always run a struggling newsstand. With the help of a friend cat and mouse, Chester the Cricket gets in and out of scrapes, and uses his unique musical talent to help the newsstand prosper.

The useful rotating set defines the play. Half of it is a human-sized newsstand, while the other half is on a cricket-sized portion of the same set: a giant box of Ohio Blue tip matches, a cricket cage the size of an elevator, a towering radio, and an imposing cash register. The scenes switch back and forth between the humans in the story and the animals, offering a unique perspective. The actors move things along quickly by rotating the set 180 degrees for each scene change.

Unlike last year's offering, "The City Mouse and the Country Mouse," this year's play is lively and quick, holding its young audiences' attention. Aaron Toronto plays the lively

cricket Chester, and delights audiences with his energetic high-jumping bounciness. Chester is a good role model, too, choosing right over wrong even when the consequences are tougher.

Sandy Ryder plays the delightfully eccentric mouse Tucker, the richest rodent in New York City. Ryder's Tucker struts about with enthusiasm and energy, evoking giggles from the youngsters with his unusual habits.

The mischievous mouse has an unusual friendship with the resident cat, Henrietta, his partner in crime, played by Michelle Trame Lanz. Henrietta looks like a mouse at first, since the relationship lacks the normal cat and mouse adversarial edge, and since both actors are the same size and wear furry costumes. Some meowing mixed with the dialogue might clear things up.

The three animal actors double as humans in the alternating scenes, and manage their quick costume changes cleverly and completely; one wouldn't know they weren't double cast if not

for the program. Ryder plays Mama Bellini, Toronto plays the wise Chinese neighbor who conveys cricket lore, and Lanz plays a newsstand customer. Don Donnelly is full of boyish charm as Mario, the excited youth who discovers Chester, and Jackie Marano is a likable father-figure as the forgiving and optimistic Papa Bellini.

Chester the musical cricket's foot-tapping tunes, including Glenn Miller's "In the Mood" add a fun touch to the show, although Roger and Hammerstein's "Oklahoma" probably wasn't written until after the Depression.

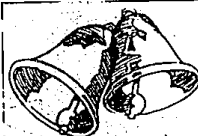


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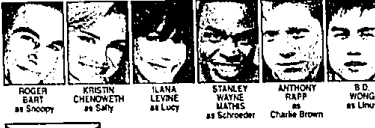
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