

Dinner, theatre--a package deal

By CRAIG REYNOLDS

The package deal has always appealed to the American sense of thrifty variety. Lately the package idea has crept from shopping centers and communities of condominiums into the entertainment sphere of Metropolitan Detroit.

Certainly the most attractive deal in town is located in a basement room of the Mercy College Student Center, now known as The Dinner Theatre of Detroit.

The seats are hard; support pillars get in the way of some views; and the room gets a bit stuffy around intermission time, but for about 12 bucks a head, this deal is hard to beat.

Personalized service at door and table.

Buffet dinner with no one counting reruns.

A carafe of wine and unlimited coffee.

And possibly the best little big musical entertainment in the area, courtesy the Phil Marcus Esser Company.

Esser & Co. were responsible for

the fantastic run of "Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris," presented in that same basement room for 15 months.

Now this group of immensely talented singers, musicians and technicians brings to the cabaret stage "Personals," a searching look at lives and living in America from the "Reluctant Emigrant" in Michigan's pre-statehood wilds through the "Booze Trilogy" of Prohibition to one woman's recollection of the decades spent "In My Grandmother's House."

As a collection of songs, the show is most pleasing; as what it purports to be—a personal history of America gleaned from personal columns appearing in newspapers for the past 200 years—the show fails miserably.

There is no sense of order, structure or historical outlook in the grab bag of 25 musical comedies, just as the progressively timeless projections of personal ads seldom connect in any fashion with the stage activity.

An actor reads at one point of "No intermingling of style, no confusion of period, the result of perfection." Surely director Esser and producer

author John Scmittroth could have learned something from this light. Their results are more kaleidoscopic, it is then ordered, more distasteful than perceptive regarding that most extraordinary thing, America.

Composer/lyricist Michael Peter Smith pays little attention to specific periods as well. The opening number entitled "Blazing Guns" sounds like a rock-and-roll version of a Frankie Laine standard, while "Sodom and Gomorrah" demonstrates more the contemporary reliance on repetition of musical and verbal phrases for impact than the solid development of melody and viewpoint for memorability.

Smith's lightweight verse also lacks the consistently pungent imagery of a master songwriter like Jacques Brel. But the songs by themselves are always adequately entertaining.

The entire Esser troupe, from writers to performers, seem most comfortable with material recalling the Depression era, from the riotously funny "Booze Trilogy" to the early isatones of "Charlie Meadows" and Oke feelings about "Paul's Bank."

Given the cultural development of Detroit out of the massive influx of southern-seeking jobs throughout the 20s, the country-western, black and blues feeling of "Personals" comes as no surprise.

Songs like "The Dutchman" and "Young Men Who Speak of the Heart" not only stand out in high relief from the general tenor of the show, but also indicate the wider possibilities of the Esser Company.

Still, it's hard to think of a more spirited ensemble than the Esser crew of Charlie Latimer, Barbara Bredius, Mary Ann Paquette, Ralph Archibald and Phil Marcus Esser himself.

Backed by slide projections and fronted by Charlie Ashcom's crisp lighting, the singers perform each song in vignette, with each number becoming a musical world in miniature.

Of course on opening night, a few of those worlds steered around in the dead air of belated light and sound cues, and the easy glide from "Spoon River" to a "Bait Farm" was often troubled by overlong and uninteresting projections of personal ads.

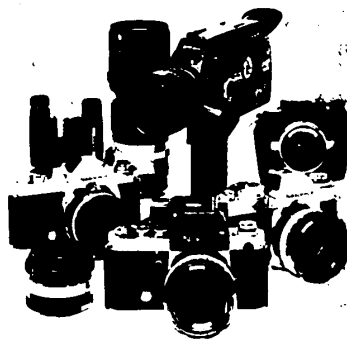
But what's opening night for, if not to discover if a show works for an audience?

"Personals" works, even though it labors too heavily once in a while. Mercy College better send another order to their wine and food broker, there's a welcome guest in for a very long stay at the Dinner Theatre of Detroit.

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