

'Forum' nice opener for cocktail theatre

By ETHEL SIMMONS

With a well-tested production of "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," cocktail theatre at the Pontiac Bloomfield Sheraton got off to a pleasing start Friday.

The new Cocktail Playhouse, as it is called, brought the Broadway musical comedy hit direct from a 15-week run at dinner theatre in Ann Arbor.

Most of the cast in this romp—about a Roman slave who wants his freedom and a young master who falls in love with a virgin courtesan—are from the Ann Arbor area. The lead role in the show is portrayed by Chuck Keeps of Bloomfield Hills.

Keeps is in good command of the part originally created by Zero Mostel, as Pseudolus, slave to Hero. To be in control requires the ability to seemingly relax and be merry in spirit and limb.

With vigor and charm, Keeps keeps the action moving along as Pseudolus manages to create a case of mistaken identity for his own advantage, keep everybody out

of everybody else's way at the right time but bring them together when it matters.

CONTRASTING WITH Pseudolus' roundness is the lankiness of Hysterium, slave to Hero's father Senex, portrayed by Calvin MacLean. He is Pseudolus' anxious but willing cohort, even dressing up as a girl to allow the real girl to escape with Hero.

MacLean brings a lively comic air to his part, as does John Stephens, who also manages to convey dignity and restraint in the role of grey-haired chaper Senex, competing with Hero for the courtesan's attention.

Turning in good performances are Joel Dulvey as the slave, Jovellus Hero; Lodes Nowicki as the eager-to-please courtesan Phyllis; and Pat Rector as Senex's watchful, giddy wife Domina. Thomas Mann is properly coy and crafty as Lycus, seller of courtesans.

Eye-stopping are the trio of courtesans from Lycus' stable: Tuntunabula; with belly-dancer mystery; Sabyla or Blaise; and alternate in this role: Vibrata, a

jungle tigress (Alma Watches); and Cynosia, in black from boots to whip, who captivates Pseudolus (Laurel Bayha).

The show really gets rolling musically when Senex, Pseudolus, Hysterium and Lycus take turns on the slightly wicked "Everybody Ought to Have a Maid."

Senex and Hero have a nice duet on "Impossible," with two views of their possible rivalry.

Others in the cast are Ronald Orentstein, as the captain who comes to claim Phyllis; Robert Seeman, as Egeus, an old man, searching for his long-lost children; and Tom Sumenda and Lou Brockway in several roles.

GARY MC HUGH, who originated the concept of dinner theatre, gave a brief talk before the performance. McHugh said he thought up the name dinner theatre back in New Jersey, where he ran Meadow Brook Dinner Theatre, and that there are now 200 dinner theatres in the United States.

"We believe cocktail dinner theatre is

the answer," he said, explaining that "you don't force people to have dinner."

McHugh said the production company he represents plans to have a circuit of cocktail theatres in Michigan and the United States.

After the run of "Forum" on Friday and Saturday nights at the Pontiac Bloomfield, they plan to bring in from Ann Arbor "I Do, I Do" in October, followed by "Pajama Game" in January.

There are a few problems with cocktail theatre, however, at the Pontiac Bloomfield Sheraton. First of all, dinner, which you may order separately in the hotel's Chateau Louis Restaurant, is not really very good: a seafood platter was overcooked, mashed potatoes were served with a scoop of gravy, a steak was greasy.

For example, drinks are available in the cabaret theater setting, before the show or at intermission, they rated fair.

In the cabaret theater setting, first night patrons were ones that perhaps are more easily corrected. Tables and chairs were clumped around the stage unattractively.

to give the small audience a close look, but patrons would have been more comfortable spread out a little more.

Stage spotlights shone in the eyes of the audience, too, and were more than competition for flickering candlelight on the tables. The theater in the round caused a slight visibility problem, due to the Roman columns on stage.

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"A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" musical comedy at cocktail theatre (in the rounds) in Pontiac Bloomfield Sheraton at 1001 Woodward, Pontiac. Performances each Friday and Saturday at 8:15 p.m. Drinks served in the theater. Dinners available in the Chateau Louis Restaurant. Reservations by calling 338-4121.

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