

Radiant evening provided at 'Little Mary Sunshine'

By BARBARA MICHAELS

Review

"Little Mary Sunshine" is sheer cornball nonsense, but somehow this wacky spoof of Nelson Eddy-Jeanette MacDonald musicals works beautifully in its current dinner theater format at Alvaro's in Royal Oak.

Theatre of the Arts Productions is presenting "Little Mary" Saturday evenings only through Dec. 2. Dinner is at 7 p.m., with the show following at 8:30. Skillful performances and a generally above-average meal make a pleasing package.

Diners may choose between an excellent stuffed flounder and a New York strip steak of hefty proportions. Fresh green beans and hot salted rolls enhance the meal, which also includes a pedestrian tossed salad and sherbet for dessert. A dry and tasteless stuffed potato ought to be reconsidered.

Cocktails are available with dinner and between acts, and the plot of "Little Mary Sunshine" is easier to swallow with a few drinks.

RICK BESOVAN wrote the book, music and lyrics. His upbeat tunes are always pleasurable, but only a few numbers have clever lyrics. The real fun comes from the outrageous mugging of the actors as they lampoon the stereotyped characters of the old-time musicals.

The framework of "Little Mary" calls to mind the Nelson Eddy-Jeanette MacDonald hit "Rose Marie." The locale has been changed to Colorado, and the "swoon-heeled men" are U.S. forest rangers instead of Canadian mounties.

While in hot pursuit of a wicked Indian named Yellow Feather, they stop for a romantic musical interlude at the mountain inn owned by Little Mary Sunshine.

Mary is the adopted daughter of the good Indian, Chief Dark Brown Bear. Though she is about to lose the mortgage on her inn, Mary doesn't let such a trivial detail mar her ever-sunny disposition. Instead, she teaches the rangers to always "Look for a Sky of Blue."

David Cowles is hilarious as Capt. "Big Jim" Warrington, the leader of the rangers who is hope-

lessly smitten with Mary. His toothy grin and exaggerated military strut never let up, whether he's singing, courting Mary, or fighting Yellow Feather.

Playing Cpl. Billy Jester, William Jones Jr. is as adept as Cowles at letting his expressive face enrich his performance. Bungling and cowardly, the corporal would rather pursue girls than Indians.

COMPLETE WITH requisite long blond curls and high-pitched voice, Kathy Kay is a charming Mary, full of wide-eyed innocence and disgusting cheerfulness.

Del Howison does a fine job as Pvt. Pete, the third singing forest ranger, but when he doubles as the old Indian scout Fleetfoot he is clearly the hit of the show.

Fleetfoot enters chanting "Hail to the Victors." The aged Indian is so stooped his dangling hands nearly touch the floor, and he continuously falls asleep when spoken to.

Suzie Linahan and Robin Martin are likable as Mary's pert companions, who long for some romantic intrigues to replace their images as proper young ladies.

Melvyn Hardman's resonant voice lends dignity to the wise old chief. Toni Ryan is amusing as Madame Ernestine, the robust Austrian opera singer and health nut. David McDonald is convincingly lecherous as a retired general, but Ken Peters' Yellow Feather is a long way from menacing.

Director Michael Klier keeps the pacing brisk, and he has nicely utilized the small stage. Costumes look fresher and more professional than in past Theatre of the Arts productions. Overall, the show triumphs above its script.

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