

'Remarkable Mr. Pennypacker' has gentle touch

By ERIC PETERS

Review

Good-natured tolerance and familial affections characterized the period piece drawing room comedy "The Remarkable Mr. Pennypacker" by Liam O'Brien.

It is lightweight, slightly stiff, mildly thought-provoking, eminently respectable fare for families, a sort of "Cheaper by the Dozen" touched with just the merest hint of Shavian idealism.

The First Theater Guild of Birmingham production suits the tenor of the play in likewise respectable fashion. A slightly stiff, gently amusing participation for family members on both sides of the footlights. It is jointly directed in an easy, unrushed pace by Linda Kaufman and Melissa Chapelaine.

Excellent costumes and a beautifully furnished, well-designed set provide nice professional touches.

Two more performances of "The Remarkable Mr. Pennypacker" will be given at the First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, 1659 W. Maple at 8 p.m., Friday and Saturday, Nov. 16 and 17 in Knox Auditorium.

"PENNYPACKER" IS a plotless series of conversations and family interactions revolving around the frequently absent, eccentric central figure of Horace Pennypacker, Jr., (J. Marshall Robbins), father to a veritable hoard of children. It is the kind of family which moves one to inquire if the

home isn't really a boarding house.

Further, these children have been raised to be able to think and act for themselves. Each has a mind of his own, which sometimes means following conventions as well as breaking them, a lesson they teach their father in the end.

Primary action concerns the question of a sudden matrimonial plunge by the eldest Pennypacker daughter, Kate (Karen Beswick) and her shy young man of the cloth, Wilber (Ed Krebs).

The lad's father is their minister (Don Jolliffe), who has reservations about conducting the ceremony because the girl's father has a reputation as a "free thinker." The minister's concern turns to alarm at the mention of Darwinian natural selection, thence to shock, as still more unorthodox revelations come to light in the bright flame of Pennypacker's open, liberal mind and engaging, matter-of-fact approach to revolutionary concepts.

Against this irresistible force stands the immovable object of Grandpa. Struggling to regain his lost position as dominant personality, Horace Pennypacker, Sr., bellows and bullies with amusing ineffectiveness. As titular head of Pennypacker Prime Products, he shrinks at the description of his business as an abattoir.

HE CLINGS TO a patriarch's delusion that he can somehow bring his son's family back into the restrictive bounds of his own view of decent behavior. Never mind that he has himself been seen sinking down back alleys with chorus girls.

Stan Fiol plays this part up to the hilt and commands the stage (if not his extended family), skirmishing with Mrs. Pennypacker (Miranda Burnett) the over-patient and understanding mother of the brood, or with his unmarried middle-aged daughter Jane (Sidney Burrows). The old coot blusters and bosses, flails the air with cane and derby hat, stammers, gapes, endures the Waterford crystal with bouts of table pounding, and generally struts and storms about the place, all in the cause of restoring "reason." (Shades of yet another turn-of-the-century Horace here, viz. Vandergelder.)

It is a large cast. With so many brothers and sisters, there is precious little material with which to fill out a character, yet these kids do a fine job and the group is pretty terrific.

There is inquisitive, perceptive Elizabeth (Cheri Lee) finding holes in her parents' logic; scrappy, mischievous Ben and David (Chris Phelps and Robert Kaufman) always clamoring in open competition to occupy the same space; bright and charming Teddy (Chris Diedrich) entertaining visitors and avoiding Gramps.

Daughter Laurie (Cathy Jolliffe) teaches ballet in the parlor at three for a dollar and dreams of dancing as prima ballerina for the Metropolitan Opera. Son Henry (Chris Plumb) with wry humor takes enthusiastically to the fanciful notion he might be illegitimate, cites famous men in history of that condition, and quotes Edmund from "King Lear": "I grow; I prosper; Now, gods, stand up for bastards!"

THERE IS a reporter (Bill Krebs) who conducts an interview with Horace, Jr., on evolution, Marxism and nudily; a sheriff (Tom Ward) who turks about trying to deliver a summons to the right Horace Pennypacker; a third Horace Pennypacker (Doug Thiel); and an assortment of sweet and lovely little ballet pupils (Beth Palmer, Elizabeth Burnett and Liz Robbins).

The underlying theme of "Pennypacker" is the clash of tradition with change, religion with science, the status quo and the new order.

However, unlike the high-intensity Hegelian thesis, plus antithesis, equals synthesis which, when handled by Shaw, yields both energy and illumination, we get compromise and toleration with love conquers all as a coda. Ironic, too, because Horace, Jr., even speaks against toleration. Direct statement of opposition is more honest, he says.

Honesty is, in this play, sacrificed to nostalgia. Yet, it is a harmless and pleasing indulgence. The time is the

start of the Gay Nineties, in retrospect a magical time as America and Europe were poised on the brink of a new social order, a totally different world. It was the end of a century but it was more. It was the end of a whole way of life.

Discoveries in science were changing technology, building a new economic system. With these changes came the stirrings of a revolution in ideas, personal philosophy, public morality, social and political consciousness. For once, the world looked full of exciting and liberating possibilities, unheard of betterments for all, heretofore unthought alternatives for life, and undreamt hopes for the perfectability of man.

ALL THESE POSSIBILITIES seemed briefly to quiver deliciously upon the horizon like a shimmering mirage. The character of Horace, Jr., is like a brilliant child delicious with the possibilities for experience and anxious to taste every possible offering. He is brought to realize that the real consequence of action is responsibility to those affected by that choice.

This play is a mere bauble, a trinket pleasing, if unprized, of what that time might have been like or, rather, in our fond imaginations, what it must have been like. It was a wonderful, warm, dear and charming time.

We all dream of living in such a simple and fulfilling way, one which can never come again.

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REMAINING CONCERTS in the series will also be held at 8 p.m. at the Art Institute as follows:

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Spencer Barefield, guitars; Anthony Holland, saxophones; and Tani Tabbal, drums and percussion.

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