

Lillian Hellman Drama adds up to strong stuff

By HELEN ZUCKER

Meadow Brook Theatre's production of Lillian Hellman's "Another Part of the Forest" is an evening of absorbing drama.

Director Terence Kilburn and his accomplished cast have a solid hold on the mentality of Alabama citizens in the post-Civil War era. The brisk pacing is a delight. So is Peter-William Hicks' airy, gracious set.

The play runs through March 22 at Oakland University near Rochester.

Hick's magnificent set is the only romantic thing about this production, the only reminder of the world Margaret Mitchell gave us in "Gone With the Wind."

The Hubbard drawing room works in beautiful ironic counterpoint against the disintegrating Hubbard family. Nothing is out of place in the lovely rooms. Everything is wrong at bottom in the Hubbard household.

IT'S ALMOST an "Ordinary People" drama set in 1880. Everyone is obsessed with appearances, but guilt takes its toll and, step by step, the Hubbard family falls apart.

The play works as an entity despite the fact that it was written after "Little Foxes," a play that deals with the Hubbards long after Marcus Hubbard's complicated greed and Lavinia Hubbard's guilt have taken their toll.

review

Despite touches of melodrama (the same flaw that mars some of Eugene O'Neill's plays), the Meadow Brook production of this rarely produced work is tough, engaging and believable. Ms. Hellman is no Faulkner, but the cast brings out the best in Ms. Hellman's lines.

Flashes of truth about human nature leap from the boards. (As the gentleman sitting next to me remarked, "There's lots of body heat here to-night," an allusion to the fact that no one left after the first act — a rather frequent phenomenon at Meadow Brook opening nights).

Plays that take chances, tougher acting, faster pacing would help Meadow Brook productions in general.

BETHANY CARPENTER is especially touching as the timorous Birdie Bagby who sets her pride aside and comes to borrow money to save her family's home without its knowledge. Ms. Carpenter is totally convincing as a lady in reduced circumstances, she can hardly bear what she's doing — all she knows about money is that her family is literally starving, the cotton will die in the fields, and her brother,

who lives to be a soldier, will die of wounded pride if she doesn't borrow from the rich Hubbards.

We know immediately that life has been too hard on Birdie. Ms. Carpenter makes us feel instant compassion for this vulnerable girl who was meant to marry.

She doesn't even know how much to ask for. She's an easy mark. Ms. Carpenter builds beautifully to her final despairing whisper about buying "mosses and sugar. I mean, sir, we're not hungry. We're starving!"

She doesn't get anything, let alone mosses. Birdie Bagby and her burned-out brother, John Bagby, intelligently played by Steve Wise, are the keys to understanding the Southern mentality.

Jean Ashley is very fine as Lavinia Hubbard, the neglected wife of Marcus. An outcast in the town of Bowden where the Hubbards have a nasty reputation, Lavinia attends the colored church and dreams of opening a school to educate black children.

HER HUSBAND has more or less convinced her she's crazy. But Lavinia knows she has seen Marcus pay off Yankees, allowed a massacre of their neighbor's sons and has watched her husband get rich charging exorbitant rates for staples.

Ms. Ashley gives us a classic study of a wife torn between loyalty to her chil-

dren — all of whom turn out to be selfish, petty creatures — her husband who she married in her green youth, and her own better nature. Despite her shakiness, we believe Lavinia when she leaves to open her school at the end. Ms. Ashley gives us a woman who grows to understand her own fragility, who will not be coned anymore.

She makes us want to cheer when she gives her incomprehending family her parting gifts.

Phillip Locker turns in a wonderfully repulsive performance as Benjamin Hubbard, the older son who has worked for a pittance for 20 years for his father. Locker is so oily, angry and brilliant at dirty business dealings we have no trouble believing that he winds up with all his father's holdings.

He hasn't "wasted time reading Aristotle." He's the manipulative, brutish side of his father incarnate. His only saving grace is his love for his mother. Even so, he's loathsome — to Locker's credit.

CYNTHIA PARVA as the beautiful, 20-year-old, conniving Regina Hubbard turns in a hard, sexy performance. While playing wife to her father (she's his only soft spot), she plans to run off to Chicago with Papa's money and marry John Bagby.

Ms. Parva gives us a self-centered girl with no understanding of the Civil War, what it has done to the men of her generation, and she goes off looking rather stunned at Benjamin's takeover and the news that Bagby would rather fight in foreign wars than marry her.

Michael Ryan, as Marcus Hubbard the dotting father who pines with his daughter and excuses the way he made

his fortune with tales of his poor youth, turns in a powerful performance. Ryan is wonderfully sarcastic to everyone but Regina. He's a very good at the finale, trying to convince his "crazy" wife that she took "eternal vows." His voice drips with sincerity, yet we know Marcus hasn't a shred of fellow-feeling for anyone.

We think Marcus is going to commit suicide when he signs his holdings over to Benjamin, but Ryan carries us through the character's eerie mood and quiet walk back into the drawing room to take up a new position under Benjamin.

J. DOUGLAS JAMES is delightfully silly as Oscar Hubbard, the younger son, who wants to marry a woman. "I'm deeply, faithfully in love with her!" Oscar cries, asking his father for a thou-

sand dollars so he can go to Atlanta for a fling, or marriage.

Oscar seems to think a trip and marriage are the same thing. James gives us a spoiled, absurd wreck of a son. He hasn't a decent value in him. Virginia Hut as Laurette Sincce, the harlot who discusses "Mozart, that musician!" with Marcus, and winds up calling him "bastard," is loud, vulgar and amusing. Alina Parks as Coralee, Lavinia's faithful maid, turns in a deft, quiet, thoroughly professional performance.

Rhomeyn Johnson as Jake, the black servant, displays instant intelligence when he switches to following Benjamin's orders after years of following Marcus's. Johnson gets off subdued sarcasm at the expense of the family he works for.



Mabel Arvo

Mabel Arvo, soprano, Mrs. Michigan of 1980-81, will be featured when the Oakway Symphony under the direction of Francesco Di Biasi presents a one-hour preview concert at 3 p.m. March 15 at Twelve Mall in Southfield. Popular selections from the orchestra will be taken from Oakway's Cabaret Concert, which will be performed at 8 p.m. March 21 at Madonna College.

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