

Theater group overextends with 'My Fair Lady'

Performances of the Garden City Civic Theatre production of "My Fair Lady" continue at 8 p.m. to night through Saturday at the O'Leary Auditorium, Middlebelt near Ford Road. Tickets are available at the door.

By Tom Puntzenhagen
staff writer

The Garden City Civic Theatre encloses a questionnaire with its program guide for "My Fair Lady" and the Lerner and Loewe musical that continues this weekend at the theater.

One of the questions asks theatergoers what sort of production they hope to see in the future on the O'Leary Auditorium stage. Chances are that few in attendance at Saturday's performance responded by saying they hoped to see more productions like "My Fair Lady."

It's not just that most of the well-intended Garden City trouper had

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troupe keeping up with Lerner's difficult lyrics, which they did, or that the youthful orchestra had trouble keeping pace with the trouper and Loewe's spirited music, which they did.

NO, INDIVIDUAL performances didn't bring "My Fair Lady" down. Rather, one senses that this undertaking was doomed from the onset because of such tangibles as the enormous popularity of the original Broadway production and subsequent Warner Bros. film, as well as the poor acoustics of O'Leary Auditorium and, to a small degree, only the limited talents of many members of the cast.

A play can work even when its cast is

blessed with minimal aptitude, but "My Fair Lady" rarely makes the most of its few blessings.

Ronald Mack, who plays Eliza Doolittle's father, Alfre, is a good example of this. When attempting "With a Little Bit of Luck" early in the play, Mack utterly fails to establish his character as one of the world's most original moralizers as Professor Henry Higgins refers to him. He seems instead more like a doddering Skid Row derelict than a vibrant celebrant of Cockney resourcefulness; and Mack's go as the Cockney accent is more indescribable than English.

Complicating matters is that fact that Mack is given center stage throughout much of this number, and that a space he can't possibly fill.

Yet, later in the play, Mack is an integral part of this production's most successful number, "Get Me to the Church on Time." Most of the ensemble

is turned out for this lusty song and dance, which comes closest to matching the spirit of the original play by its faithful recreation of the English musical hall style. To be sure, there were many mistakes, missed cues, sturred lyrics and sluggish musical accompaniment.

BUT THE ASSORTED flower girls and Cockney vendors in the number play it off with a genuine glee and vitality, sadly missing from the rest of the play.

It's difficult to understand why director Michael Burden chose to spotlight the borderline musical talents of Mack in "With a Little Bit of Luck" while wisely blending him into the festive "Get Me to the Church on Time."

The result in each case was a show-stopper, one based on a show-stopper. Here the Burden manages too few innovations, "Ascot Gavotte," whereas the genre at the Ascot races sing

"What a Frenzied Moment that Was" with splendid, upper-crust composure, was one of the evening's hits.

A misdeed, however, soon followed when Eliza — in vivid contrast to the mannerisms of the genre — shouts rather vulgar instructions to one of the nags in the race. The line hardly grates as acerbically before Burden cuts to black; accordingly, the line's impact is lost in the dark and amidst the shuffle of scene-clearing feet.

None of the performers adequately filled the O'Leary's large, unaccommodating stage, but Burden, to his credit, keeps the cast on the move and, for the most part, uses the massive stage to best advantage.

But why Burden placed Professor Higgins and Eliza on one extreme side of the stage for their most touching, character-revealing conversation late in the play is unclear. And, certainly, more intimate sets and/or lighting by

light designer John Quinn would have benefited all concerned.

BARBARA SCANLON as Eliza and Michael Rothaar as Professor Higgins are by far the best performers in the cast, yet it's sometimes painful to watch them perform. When not overshadowing the other members of the cast to such a degree as to be distracting, Scanlon and Rothaar may be observed waiting for the orchestra to served up with their lyrics — even greater distraction.

Musical director Carole Mihalo warrants a bit of the blame for the latter; perhaps it's beyond anyone's capability to get this young orchestra to play better, but at least they could play faster.

The cast also includes Stephen Sell as Colonel Pickering, Kraml Plemple as Mrs. Higgins, Diane Kremsler as Mrs. Pearce and Marc Gawronski as Freddy Eynford-Hill.

Steven de Groot excels playing 'Emperor' concerto

By Mary Jane Doerr
special writer

Pianist Steven de Groot, Grand Prize Winner of the Fifth Van Cliburn Quadrennial Piano Competition in 1977, opened the 37th season of the Plymouth Symphony Orchestra on Sunday afternoon at Plymouth Salem High School Auditorium with a technically superb rendition of Ludwig von Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 in E Flat Major.

It was that same display of the tech-

nical accuracy that made him not only the winner of the Cliburn contest but also of the Young Concert Artists International Auditions in New York city and a finalist in the 1976 Levittitt Competition.

De Groot has a fluidity in his hands and the ability to sensitively shade his delivery so that each note is clearly heard. It is a precision that makes each note distinct.

The E-flat Piano Concerto is better known as the "Emperor" Concerto. The name is a misnomer, but it aptly de-

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scribes the majestic work with its regal qualities. The work is a virtuoso concerto for its technical demands, but it requires more than a virtuoso to play it in the emotion and spirit that it demands.

FROM THE opening grand chords,

the work is exciting with an intensity that persists to the end.

The Allegro movement was disjoined, but by the Adagio a poco mosso Conductor Johan van der Merwe and de Groot seemed to be united in their purpose and direction.

Here the performance took on the qualities that we associate with the work. In that second movement, the two countrymen from South Africa achieved a melodic blend of orchestra and soloist, which carried into the third movement, the Minueto Allegro, though it wasn't that strong.

De Groot, a former student of Ru-

dolf Serkin at Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, is now associated with the piano department of Arizona State University. He has released two records with Deutsche Grammophon.

Other numbers on the afternoon concert were Overture to the Opera "Il Barbiere di Siviglia" by Rossini, "The Firebird Suite" by Stravinsky and "Elegna Variations" by Elgar.

THE ORCHESTRA'S most impressive and inspired performance was in the final number by Elgar. Perhaps van der Merwe's background serves him well in providing an interesting in-

terpretation of the English music so often considered to be dull. Under van der Merwe's baton, the music was alive and powerful.

The Firebird Suite No. 2 is music that is very familiar to Detroiters now, with the Detroit Symphony's many performances of its complete version and coming recording. Van der Merwe wisely chose the abridged version. In the absence of the visuals (the hall), this version is dramatic and keeps the audience attention.

Next concert of the Plymouth Symphony Orchestra will be on Nov. 21, featuring Donald Sims, saxophone.

Area actors play in 'Mame'

Several area residents will appear in the Players Guild of Dearborn production of "Mame" the original play from which the musical was taken.

They include Helen de Julio of Westland as Nora Muldoon, housekeeper to Mame, played by Jacqueline Bacus; Clemie Cyburt of Plymouth as Mame's close friend, Vera Charles; and Cynthia Sweeney of Redford as Gloria Upson, designated bride of Mame's nephew, Patrick.

Performances of "Mame" are at 8 p.m. Oct. 29-

and Nov. 5-7. Reserved seat tickets are \$5, except for senior citizens on Oct. 31 when the price in advance is \$3. For reservations and ticket information phone 565-5392.

The cast also includes David Wrubel as Ho, her Japanese-American houseboy, and Norris Anderson as Beau and Woody Bredlin as M. Lindsay Woolsey, the man in her life.

"Mame" is the season's second offering for the Player Guild.

2 cabaret concerts close series

Two Friday evening cabaret jazz concerts remain in the 1982 "Jazz at the Institute" series, which will conclude Oct. 29 at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

The Harold McKinney Trio will be featured Friday, and the series will finish Oct. 29 with the Charles Boles Quintet.

Two performances are given each Friday, at 7

and 9:30 p.m. in the museum's indoor continental garden, Kresge Court cafe. Tickets at \$6 may be purchased through the museum ticket office (632-2730) and at the door on an availability basis. Reservations are suggested.

Wine, beer, soft drinks and snacks may be purchased.

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