

Players' 'Elephant Man' deserves to be seen

Performances of the Spotlight Players production of "The Elephant Man" continue at 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday at the John Glenn High School Auditorium, 36105 Marquette, west of Wayne Road, Westland. For ticket information, call 595-6117 or 522-2326.

By Debi Barasman
special writer

The Spotlight Players production of "The Elephant Man" by Bernard Pomerance is an extraordinary effort.

Being a part of this audience is an experience you won't soon forget.

"The Elephant Man" deals with the life and times of John Merrick, who lived in England in the late 1800s and suffered from neurofibromatosis, a debilitating disorder in which huge sack-like folds grow from the sufferer's skin. Merrick was hideously disfigured.

The drama depicts a man whose spirit flourishes in spite of emotional and physical brutality inflicted on him by a society that is ill-equipped to cope with his physical deviation. Pomerance

uses Merrick's physical non-conformity as a springboard from which to comment on major social issues and constraints.

To produce this play is an ambitious project, but the Spotlight Players accept the challenge. The production excels both technically and artistically.

CO-DIRECTORS John P. Eastman and Gail Susan Mack have surpassed themselves. They have skillfully and delicately designed this play to such degree that no detail is overlooked. Their interpretation is nearly perfect.

The cast is remarkable. Many portray double roles. Yet they all move with precise understanding and intent. They work together like a well-tuned machine.

David Rago as John Merrick gives a sensitive and intelligent portrayal. His character is so three-dimensional and believable that you will genuinely grow to love him. His consistency of character is mesmerizing. Rago is simply outstanding.

Henry Bennett equally excels in his portrayal of Dr. Frederick Treves, who serves as Merrick's personal physician

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and protector. It is a complicated role, in that the character develops and expands as the play evolves.

Bennett never loses track of his character's direction. He is firmly in control from the opening to the finish. The audience feels his pain and confusion and truly sympathizes with him.

Mrs. Kendall, an actress and Merrick's closest friend, is portrayed by Lorraine Parent. Parent depicts a warm aristocrat, with style and verve, but the role deserves more. We need to see a mature character who has known pain and vulnerability herself.

Enough cannot be said of the technical elements of this production. Lighting, designed by Gail Susan Mack, is just great. It is particularly effective during the dream scenes.

The set, designed by both directors, is simple, elegant and functional. The music, interspersed throughout, is intelligently selected and lends itself to the mood of the play.

Costumes are wonderful. The overall costume plan is creative and artistic, and each costume is appropriate to the period.

The production staff can be congratulated. It is rare that all technical functions fuse so perfectly to augment the action of the play.

In a word, this play is beautiful. It exhibits quality in every respect. Please see this wonderful production. It is community theater at its best.

'Bad Seed' shocks the audience

Performances of the Plymouth Theatre Guild production of "Bad Seed" by Maxwell Anderson continue at 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday at Central Middle School, Church and Main streets, Plymouth. For ticket information, call 453-7505.

By Bob Weibel
special writer

The Plymouth Theatre Guild's latest production, "Bad Seed," is a first-rate thriller with shocking moments that keep the audience in suspense to the very end.

This 30-year-old play was Maxwell Anderson's last, but it's as modern as today's newspaper headlines of random senseless juvenile violence. It's what you might call a dramatic answer to the old radio show "The Shadow" that began with the rhetorical question: "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?"

In "Bad Seed" it's not a man or a

woman but an 8-year-old child who has a heart so evil she can commit cold-blooded murder without a trace of guilt. As the story unfolds the audience is asked to consider, is this the result of heredity ("Some people are simply born as bad seeds") or is it a matter of environment (in which case the parents and society are to blame)?

The center of this controversy is little Miss Rhoda, played expertly by Melanie Follow. She is the perfect picture of innocence, sweetness and charm one might expect of an 8-year-old child in front of Mother and other adults — and at other times she is a selfish, pragmatic, clever killer.

CYNTHIA SZCZESNY plays the mother, Christine, who bears the brunt of the psychological trauma caused by her daughter. She is outstanding as a tragic heroine, who slowly becomes aware of what Rhoda is up to. Christine's compassion as a mother, together with confirmation of the reality of horrifying dreams regarding her own past,

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lead to even more shocking and chilling results.

Sue Ellen Haukula is engaging as her bubbly friend, Monica Breedlove, who is constantly analyzing people as she introduces psychiatric ideas to the play.

The central theme of "Bad Seed" is convincingly presented by Chuck Miller, Christine's father (who believes crime is caused by environment) and Peter Cause as Reginald Tasker, a mystery writer and amateur criminologist, who believes that a few people are simply born as bad seeds.

The only problem with Cause is his make-up. The aging is too obvious. Otherwise, the rest of the cast is uniformly good.

Clemie Cyburt as Mrs. Diable, the

mother of a murdered boy, is very good as an alcoholic woman trying to get to the bottom of her son's death. And Elie Kulsel as Miss Fern looks perfect as Rhoda's white-haired schoolteacher.

ANOTHER GOOD character role is turned in by Gerry L'Heureux as Leroy, the apartment janitor, who has the misfortune to cross wits with Rhoda. Other members of the supporting cast are Robert Myrtle, Gary Burton, Jack Farrow and Lisa Risko.

Costumes, set, sound and lighting are well done and contribute to the sinister atmosphere of the play. The show is directed by Patricia Bray-LaFramboise, who has put together a very suspenseful and entertaining evening of theater.

table talk

Benjie's Restaurant

Chief Benjie Pearlman offers an update on his family restaurant, Benjie's Fish and Seafood, at 28500 Orchard Lake Road, between Middlebelt and Cass Lake Roads, in Sylvan Lake. Benjie's has added "Michigan's only authentic wine bar," Pearlman said. At present, the bar is set up to serve

80 bottles of wine by the glass. "The nitrogen system maintains the quality of wine up to six months," he said. "There is a capacity for 30 bottles (to be open) on the nitrogen system." Pearlman said the restaurant provides the largest selection of fish in Oakland County, served broiled, char broiled, sautéed, poached or baked. Benjie's is one of three restaurants in the area that has Mesquite-grilled fish (using Mexican charcoal). Dinner prices range from \$4.50 to \$12.95.

Hours are 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. seven days, except Sundays when closing is at 9 p.m.

Pontch changes

The Top of the Pontch at the Hotel Pontchartrain in downtown Detroit now has a more complete dinner menu and a special after-theater menu with lighter entrees at prices

starting at \$7.95. Dinner entrees are priced from \$16.75 for Sole en Croûte to Alaskan King Crab Legs at \$20.95.

Scampi Scampi, Shrimp Chablisienne, Veal Chop Lavalier, Rack of Lamb Parillie and Danish Lobster Tails are all at \$19.75. A new Happy Hour has special drink prices and hors d'oeuvres, served from 5-7:30 p.m. and 10:30 to closing. Winter schedule for the restaurant includes Thursday-Saturday evenings.

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