

'Present Laughter' gets stylish performance

Performances of the Meadow Brook Theatre production of "Present Laughter" by Noel Coward continue through Sunday, Dec. 1, on the Oakland University campus near Rochester. For ticket information, call the box office at 377-3300.

Witty dialogue, sprightly pacing and superb casting make Meadow Brook's production of Noel Coward's "Present Laughter" a worthy bit of comic nonsense.

In "Laughter," Coward dispenses almost entirely with the heavy-duty demands of playwrighting in favor of brightness and the engaging sophistication that came to be his trademark. He gives challenging ideas into walk-on parts, then rushes them into the wings so they don't interfere with the fun, and he entirely dispenses with the convention that characters ought to develop.

Characters stay charmingly the same from beginning to end. Style, rather than idea, is the essence of the comedy.

The fine set by Peter Hicks has all

the right witty touches down to pictures of Shakespeare and Shaw on the walls. And the costumes for the femme fatale of the play are electric. They could have rivaled Cher's when her flamboyant outfits stole every TV show away from poor Sonny, or Marlene Dietrich's in an earlier era. Costume designer Mary Lynn Bonnell knows that with Noel Coward, style is what counts.

THE FACT is Coward couldn't stay out of the limelight so he kept writing himself plum parts to showcase his talent. The role of Garry Essendine, the philandering mailman (idiot in "Present Laughter," is a part Coward wrote for himself. Many consider Essendine a thinly disguised Coward clone.

Carl Schurr is fine as Essendine, the egocentric poseur who can't stop acting even when he's alone in a room. Alone he never is for long, with the stream of oddball servants, fawning fans and other assorted zanies who catnip in and out of doors in his studio.

Jayne Houdyshell is a howl as Essen-



Cathie Brelendenbach

dine's maid, a Scandinavian spiritualist who shuffles about with a dour deadpan look and a cigarette stuck to her upper lip. She's hilarious even before she opens her mouth to speak in her hokey Scandinavian accent.

Jillian Lindig as Joanna, the "diamond-studded siren," slithers like a predatory female—all catlike grace. The lady definitely moves well. It adds to the suspense to wonder if we'll catch a more-than-intended glimpse of cleavage as she slinks around in her knock-em-dead gowns.

Cynthia Carle plays Daphne, the silly young thing who falls under Essendine's spell and into his bed. She captures charmingly the blithering appeal

of her character.

IN REAL LIFE Carle is married to Curtis Armstrong, who plays the off-kilter young playwright. Director Terence Kilburn capitalizes on Armstrong's recent popularity as a nerdy type in the movies "Revenge of the Nerds" and "Risky Business."

On stage Armstrong plays a nerd, who is a lightning bolt of crazed energy. He's an apt comedian who steals the limelight with his rubberized ankles and broad gestures. The audience loves him.

Plot, despite its multiple complexities, is merely a vehicle for keeping the people moving in and out in "Present

Laughter." It's an example of Coward's much-applauded skill at keeping action bubbling. Essendine's entourage includes his secretary (Barbara Barringer), his estranged, but friendly wife (Jane Lowry), and two producer/director friends, Morris (Christopher Darga) and Hugo (George Gullto).

Complications in the plot revolve around femme-fatale Joanna's penchant for collecting men. She's wife to Hugo, mistress to Morris and in the course of the play adds Gary to her list of conquests. Everyone conspires to keep the tangled ties with Joanna secret and to ignore the presence in the spare bedroom of Daphne, the latest smitten-young-thing Gary has "befriended."

For added mayhem, throw in the crazy young playwright, a chokey butler and a Scandinavian occultist maid. "Present Laughter" keeps the comic characters coming (and going) and shows off Coward's gift for dialogue, the verbal fencing between clever people that, though seldom profound, made him a legend.



Carl Schurr stars in "Present Laughter."

Longish concert has good variety of both old and new

A mixture of contemporary sounds, old favorites and classical music was the blend Sunday afternoon at the Oakland Symphony Orchestra concert. There were some wonderful offerings, although the concert was on the long side of two hours.

David Cerone, newly appointed president of the Cleveland Institute of Music and former chairman of the Violin Department at Curtis, was magnificent in his virtuoso performance of Saint-

Saens' Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso. The piece is always a crowd pleaser and a perfect choice for the artist to show off his technique. Earlier in the program Cerone joined Concertmaster Emily Mueller Austin in Vivaldi's Concerto Grosso in A minor for Two Violins. The two violinists did not match in the levels of their sound, especially in the first movement. This tended to be remedied by the third movement.

Austin, who usually has



Mary Jane Doerr

a very sweet sound from her violin, did not top the bold sound of Cerone.

CERONE's performance was impressive enough and would have been enough for one concert. Conductor Fran-

cisco Di Biase, 1985 winner of the Farmington Distinguished Service to the Arts Award, brought in the Larry Nozoro Quartet for the second half.

Many musicians today, who like both jazz and classical music, are doing what is becoming known as crossing over, or playing works in both idioms. James Hartway, chair-

man of the division of composition and theory at Wayne State University, likes both jazz and classical music but he is not crossing over in his compositions. This work is light and appealing, as Hartway's others works are. It describes city life, beginning with church bells on "Sunday Morning" and moves through the week with livelier sounds for "Weekdays" and "Saturday Night."

Larry Nozoro, alto saxophone; James Hartway, piano; Peter Dominguez, bass; and James Ryan, drums, all followed the score, improvising during their own solo selections, which is where the work gets its greatest attraction.

THE ORCHESTRA

sounded much better Sunday than it did in the spring. There were some pitch problems in the strings in Handel-Kinder's Prelude and Fugue in D minor and a few off-pitch notes in Handel-Harley's "Water Music Suite." Overall, the strings have a very full sound.

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