

When band plays music, it's strictly make-believe

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The idea for Illusion came to Best three years ago when he and his wife were attending a wedding reception. "The disc jockey was so loud that you could honestly feel the air pressure pushing on your body from the speakers of his equipment. And there was no way you could talk to the person next to you, let alone say, 'Pass the salt.'"

On the way home that night, Best said they were listening to CKLW and the big band sound. "I said, 'Now that's what people ought to play at these weddings and reunions and stuff like that — music that's soft and pretty and that's played at a volume (so) that the people can talk at the tables and enjoy themselves because that's where the party is — at the tables, not up on the stand where some person, a DJ, is making a lot of noise.'"

When his wife then said that he'd have to have a gimmick because "there are millions of disc jockeys," Best replied that if he was going to be one, he guessed he'd show slides on the wall of all the big band leaders.

"And she kind of said, 'that wasn't very exciting.'"

"Then it just hit me within two seconds. I said, 'I know I can go out and get 15 or 20 friends and acquaintances to get up there and pantomime or mimic or lip synch, what have you, the big band sound.'"

He'd also go out and get real instruments that were broken, build handstands and have mirrored balls turning and the lights running

'I said, 'I know. I can go out and get 15 or 20 friends and acquaintances to get up there and pantomime or mimic or lip synch, what have you, the big band sound.' — Mike Best

up and down, and the group would all wear uniforms. "Then one of us would be a disc jockey and play that great sound, but the people in the audience would have something to look at also."

IN ILLUSION, the piano player is the disc jockey, working the audio equipment.

Of course, a person in the audience who really wants to make the illusion as real as possible won't look for the equipment or what the pianist is sometimes doing off to the side. And the person will forget that members of Illusion have such real-life occupations as teacher, newspaper writer, stockbroker or naturalist at a nature center. The person should simply enjoy the show.

Best considers the group's vocalist, Andrea Wojack, "a knockout. I don't know what we would do without her," he said. "And when you're five feet away from her or 15 feet away from the band you can't tell ... She's incredible."

In addition to Best and Harper Woods resident Wojack, regular members of Illusion include Don Myers of Troy, George Freston of Plymouth, Ken Boldig of Rochester, Monroe Walker of Detroit, Clark Landon of Rochester, Dick Turnquist of Livonia, Peter Smith of Northville, John Folsom of Redford, John Gosney of Wilmet, Martha Hines of St. Clair Shores, Best's son, Bob, of Fair Haven, Don Laix of Inkster, Wayne Whitlark of Westland and Dave Powers of Detroit.

Best noted how difficult it is for Dave Powers, a professional drummer, to pretend to play drums. "And when he's done, we almost have to carry him off the stage because it's much harder to play but stop short of actually hitting. The guy really wears himself out."

BEST ALSO SAID that Illusion has no intention of taking work away from disc jockeys or from real bands. There are very few real bands performing in the Detroit area today. It takes a lot of money to keep a real big band together.

"If the person has the money — there's no doubt about it — they should definitely hire a band. You can't beat that excitement of live entertainers and live music."

For those who can't afford a real big band but can spend a little more than what a disc jockey requests, Illusion might be the answer.

However, Illusion only performs once a month or maybe twice. "We don't intend to or want to work every week."

Large stage swamps Ayckbourn's comedy

Performances of the Meadow Brook Theatre production of "Absent Friends" continue through Sunday, March 20, on the Oakland University campus in Rochester Hills. For ticket information, call the box office at 370-3310.



Cathie Breidenbach

Alan Ayckbourn's little two-act comedy, "Absent Friends," gets lost on the Meadow Brook stage like a rubber duckie on a vast theatrical sea.

Ayckbourn himself says, "Absent Friends" is a play for a small intimate theater where one can hear the actors breathing and the silences ticking away."

The fact that the play is out of its element on the broad Meadow Brook stage only compounds its problems. For starters "Absent Friends" is not one of Ayckbourn's best (which probably accounts for why it's not done as often as his other plays).

Despite an excellent cast, the Meadow Brook production suffers on three counts — from a setting that swallows its small action, from sluggish pacing and from limitations in the play itself.

Keeping the pace whirling along at a breathless clip may be the only way to keep Ayckbourn's commentary on marriage in "Absent Friends" from becoming lugubrious, but director Terence Kilburn sets the play chugging along in the slow lane.

Compared to the antic pace of Ayckbourn's hyperactive comedy "Taking Steps," which Meadow Brook Theatre wonderfully produced three years ago, "Absent Friends" nearly runs aground on its own seriousness.

In the plot, five British suburbanites gather for afternoon tea in honor of a friend they haven't seen in three years. Three couples — Paul of the voracious roving eye, married to the hostess, Diana, who knows more than she can stand of her husband's philandering; John of the non-stop switches, unhappily married to the taciturn, malcontent Evelyn in scarlet boots; and Madge, in constant phone contact with the helpless 262-pound baby of a husband she calls "Jumjums."

INTO THIS matrimonial wasp's nest comes Colin, the friend invited for tea, who proceeds to regale the unhappily married folk with tales of his fiancée who recently drowned. His friends hoped to console him, but this evanescent Pollyanna doesn't need consoling. He's disgustingly happy. To hear him tell it, his fiancée was perfection personified. Marriages bruised by time and the rigors of reality come up short compared to the might-have-been wonders of Colin's marriage that never happened.

Richard Easley plays Colin as an unremittingly chipper fellow. His cheery howl, argyle sweater vest and matching caramel shoes all coordinate with his bristly sunshine-

colored mustache. To his "friends" mixed in miserable marriages, he's like sunshine and brass bands trying to cure matrimonial hangovers.

As the taciturn swinger, Evelyn, Sherry Skinner does wonders with a wad of gum she chews continually even while delivering her droil lines. Will Love plays her hubby, John, with an endless repertoire of twitches and squirms aggravated by a neurosis about death and by a rotten marriage "blessed by a miserable baby." His hyperkinetic anxieties are funny for a while, but by Act II his perpetual motion verges on tedious.

If John has a phobia about death, Paul is fixated on sexual conquest. Carl Schurr plays Paul as an aggressive, ambitious man-on-the-make whose proper English manners can't gloss over the fact that he's an egotistic cad underneath.

Poor Diana lives with him, but wonders why. Jayne Houdyshell has proven her gift for comedy in numerous other Meadow Brook productions, but she never gets to show her stuff playing the distraught Diana.

As Madge, Jane Lowry gets the dizziest part in the play and takes off with it. The wonder is this dear, mid-die-aged dizzy almost likes playing mama to her whale of a hubby.

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