

Good news, bad news for 'Comedy of Errors'

Performances of "The Comedy of Errors" at Meadow Brook Theatre continue through Sunday, Nov. 27, on the Oakland University campus in Rochester Hills. For ticket information, call 377-3300.

By Cathie Breidenbach
special writer



Cathie Breidenbach

First the good news. The Meadow Brook Theatre production of Shakespeare's "The Comedy of Errors" turns on the comic energy and uses acrobatics to propel along the tangled plot about two sets of twins. Shakespeare's early comedy lends itself well to broad comic treatment, and the cast excels at slapstick antics as the Three Stooges. Also good news is the exotic and versatile set by Peter Hicks, which has arched doors, stairs and windows to facilitate the busy comings and goings of the identical twins, Antipholus of Ephesus and Antipholus of Syracuse, and their look-alike servants, the two Dromios.

Here ends enthusiasm for Meadow Brook's version of one of Shakespeare's frothier comedies.

Which leads to the bad news. Director Charles Nolte's heavy-handed monkeying with Egeon's opening speech transforms it into commentary for dumb dumbs. Granted, Egeon goes on at wordy length explaining how long ago a storm at sea separated him from his wife and one of his infant sons. Nolte adds a chorus of people on the street to speak the tacked-on commentary, but their distilled interjections insult the audience's intelligence as well as Shakespeare's original language.

PREVIOUS NOLTE adaptations of other plays have complemented the original works well. His successful dramatization of Dickens' "The Christmas Carol" will return to Meadow Brook this December for its seventh blockbuster season, and two years ago his alterations on Act I of Richard III heightened Shakespeare's paganism. In contrast, the liberties Nolte takes with "The Comedy of Errors" come off as simplistic, stagey plays.

Costumes in the production suffer from stereotyped ideas of how folks in exotic Asia Minor must have dressed. One expects the friendly neighborhood harlot to tart it up in a

red harem outfit with exposed midriff, but when the hero's wife, Adriana, wears modern high heels and a similar shimmering harem getup for a weekday dinner at home with hubby, it challenges credibility — even in a farce set long ago and far away.

At moments, cast members in assorted exotic duds look like holdovers from a Halloween costume party — which is not to say the costumes aren't pleasantly colorful or that they don't glitter with enough metallic thread to make a magnet go berserk.

The costumes shimmer to excess, but no one in the cast turns in an equally shining performance. To be sure, there are no duds either. Sherry Skinner as Adriana stomps her pretty feet and plays the shrewish, wronged wife at full volume, and Eileen Connolly holds her own as Adriana's comely sister Luciana.

Anthony M. Brown and Lawrence Overmire make a handsome pair of

Antipholuses, although the romance between the heroes and their ladies never heats up beyond lukewarm. Jay Brian Winnick and Wayne David Parker as the twin Dromios sound like Smurfs and look like Lou Costello clones as they tumble about the stage in classic slapstick style.

Joseph Reed plays a pleasing Egeon, the merchant from Syracuse sentenced to die for finding himself in Ephesus, which punishes by death any citizen of Syracuse foolhardy enough to venture into town. Egeon seems to take his life-or-death dilemma with equanimity, as if he knew all along he had nothing to worry about because Shakespeare's comedies always end with clemency, feasting and happy pairing of lovers.

Cathie Breidenbach of West Bloomfield teaches college writing classes and works as a freelance writer.

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Redesigned Audrey II makes musical unique

Performances of the Oakland University Center for the Arts production of "Little Shop of Horrors" continue through Sunday, Nov. 20, at Varner Studio Theatre in Rochester Hills. For ticket information, call the box office at 370-3013.

By Mary Jane Doerr
special writer

Orson Welles' voice rang out through the Varner Studio Theater at Oakland University. "Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt this broadcast . . . " was coming from a transistor radio, barely something used to hear a 1938 spoof. Actors in the OU Center for the Arts "Little Shop of Horrors" launched into the opening number "Downtown," and the scene came into focus as 1981, with punks, leather-coated motorcycle fanatics and bag ladies. It was not 1938. This bizarre musical by Howard

Ashman and Alan Menken envelopes the French idea of black humor and the Mozart concept of the three spirals. It's a strongly rhythmic spoof about Marlians taking over the world in the form of man-eating plants.

For Oakland University, the musical is a vehicle for entry into the American College Theater Festival. If successful, the show will be taken to a national festival at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

T. ANDREW ASHTON has given the production tight direction and casting. But it is Christopher Olmsty's remake of the Mary Copenhagen design of Audrey II that makes this production unique. The green monster begins as a potted plant but grows with each scene change until it is several times larger than a human being. Puppeteer Rick Carver's work gives the giant life, reacting to the lines of the actors.

Crystal (Kathy Sprey), Chiffon (Sheri Nelson) and Rosette (Daphne Briggs) are the Andrews Sisters look-alikes who give the show continuity and humor. In this case the voices are perfectly blended.

Harry Carlson as Mushnik forgets to vary his voice tonalities but controls that action with his dominant acting. Michael Chowning as Seymour is sometimes so serious that we wonder how the show will end. His interpretation does provide a sense of drama.

Carrie Bickner is a Marilyn Monroe replica with her actions and speaking. Marketa Tate's voice as Audrey II is not easily understood at times. At other times it is too loud. Good casting and strong direction makes this OU production entertaining, but the puppet makes it special.

Mary Jane Doerr of Bloomfield Hills is a full-time teacher and freelance writer who specializes in opera and musical theater.

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