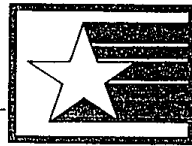


# Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100



Thursday, November 9, 1989 O&E

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## Theater is alive and well in suburbia



Mary Lee Richey and Parry B. Stewart star in "The Boys Next Door," in its Detroit-area premiere at Meadow Brook Theatre.

## Musical numbers hilarious in 'Oil City'

Performances of "Oil City" continue through Sunday, Dec. 3, at the Birmingham Theatre. For ticket information call the box office at 644-3533.

"Oil City" at the Birmingham Theatre is a highly entertaining, very funny bit of musical fluff adroitly performed by a quartet of immensely talented actors-musicians.

Ostensibly the four-piece symphony of fictitious Oil City, Ohio, is performing for its 20-year high school reunion, and the audience becomes their classmates in the crepe-paper-festooned high school gym.

Actually the plot is non-existent, though the cast manages to deftly create characterizations from the brief dialogue between the musical numbers.

Mike Craver and Mark Hardwick are two of the show's four creators and appeared in the original off-Broadway production as well. Craver's character, also named Mike, is a former flower child of the '60s, who both looks and sounds like the more dim-witted of the Smothers Brothers. His slow, soft-spoken delivery is an amusing contrast to the strident tones of the female cast members.



Mike Craver (left), Christine Elliott, Mark Hardwick and Mary Ehlinger play four former high school reunion in "Oil City."



**Cathie Breidenbach**

## Tribute to humanity is 'Boys Next Door'

Performances of "The Boys Next Door" continue through Sunday, Nov. 26, at Meadow Brook Theatre. For ticket information call the box office at 377-3300.

It is nice, civilized and humane to laugh at four fellows with mental inadequacies?

In "The Boys Next Door" you bet it is — because Arnold, Lucien, Norman and Betsy differ only in degree from the rest of us.

Author Tom Griffin's play looks with a compassionate eye at the comic quirks of four mentally deficient adult men who share an apartment in a suburban complex. They are not a strange breed of weird beings but people just like us, struggling to make sense of it all.

The superb Meadow Brook cast

polishes this little gem of a play until it glows, as a heartening tribute to our shared humanity.

John Ulmer came from the Asolo Center for the Performing Arts in Sarasota, Fla., to direct this fine production, and he brought seven of the nine cast members with him. The five who play retarded people are so believable in their roles that when they step on stage for the final curtain call it's a shock to see the transformation. Acting that convinces so thoroughly and seemingly without intention takes an extra measure of skill.

LEROY MITCHELL, JR., who plays severely retarded Lucien, radiates the ingenious sweetness of a 3-year-old. He tries over and over to remember the alphabet song, always

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**Barbara Michals**

EACH MEMBER of the musical quartet specializes in one instrument but changes off to an impressive array of others. Craver's specialty is the synthesizer, which he comically suggests will make the other symphony members obsolete.

Mark, Hardwick's nerdy character, lives with his mother and looks very much at home with his accordion, though he actually spends more time at the piano keyboard. Hardwick has a wonderfully expressive face that speak volumes.

Christine Elliott's Mary specializes in the violin. She is as intensely uptight as her tightly curled hair, and the exaggerated exactness and volume of her voice suggests a cross between an elementary teacher and a marine sergeant.

Mary Ehlinger's Debbie, a wife, mother and community pillar, takes out all her frustrations

through vigorous assaults on her drums. Ehlinger's stage patter allows for many nuances of character, and she makes the most of it.

The show's music is as diverse as the characters. It includes classical, rock, big band, gospel and ragtime. Some of it is familiar, and some of the numbers are very clever original spoofs. For a Michigan

audience, surely the funniest is "Ohio Afternoon," reminiscent of "Moonlight in Vermont" but with all the romance missing. Audience participation is encouraged for the "Hokey Pokey."

Director Larry Forde, another veteran of the original production, keeps the pace snappy. There's really no common thread holding the musical numbers together, but most of the time the audience is laughing too hard to notice.

Barbara Michals teaches high school English in Southfield. A theater critic for the last 15 years, she is an inveterate playgoer who regularly catches up on all the New York productions.

## It's a comical, cock-eyed view of modern life

Performances of "The Prisoner of Second Avenue" continue through Sunday, Nov. 19, at the Ridgedale Players playhouse in Troy. For ticket information call 644-8328.

By Helen Zucker special writer

The Ridgedale Players production of "The Prisoner of Second Avenue" is fast-paced and well acted. Under Kent Martin's direction, the cast manages to capture the madness of New York, and by extension, the madness that underlines much of life in America. Neil Simon wrote better than he knew; his black comedy about a couple who lose their jobs because of corporate cutbacks is timely in the late Eighties.

Larry Pellicioni, who looks like Walter Matthau, turns in a strong performance as Mel Edison, the 47-year-old ex-executive who waits four days

to tell his wife that he has lost his job. Mel is a totally bewildered, angry husband, and Pellicioni hits all the emotional keys this roller coaster role calls for.

When his wife tells him to see an analyst, Mel says, "I don't need an analyst. I need a lost and found." And, in a sense, he's right. If his job were miraculously returned to him, he'd be a found man. His life would regain its balance. Of course, the job is gone for good, and all Mel's screaming on the terrace gets him a pail of water thrown by the neighbors upstairs.

After three burglars, dressed in black, dismantle the apartment (while the theme from "The Pink Panther" hums to their deft movements), Mel finds the courage to tell his wife he's unemployed. Devoted wife Edna has just told Mel that she "ran downstairs for five minutes" to get groceries for dinner and left the door unlocked because she lost the key.

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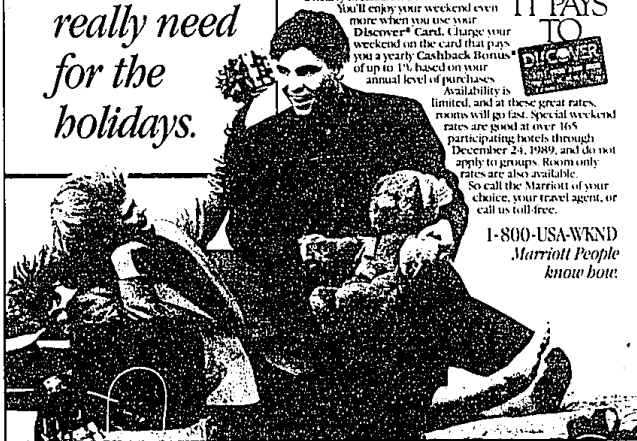
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