

# Entertainment

Keely Wygonik editor/953-2105



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C19B

## Outrageous opera

### Believable situation makes show funny

Performances of the Birmingham Theatre production of "Lend Me a Tenor" continue through Nov. 3. For ticket information, call the box office at 644-3533.

By Barbara Michals  
special writer

**A**FTER 49 WEEKS, and 275 performances in 50 cities with the national tour of "Lend Me a Tenor," stars Barry Nelson and Ron Holgate are still freshly enthusiastic about the Birmingham Theatre production opening this week.

Holgate plays Tito, a flamboyant Italian tenor, who is about to make his American debut with a Cleveland opera company. His sudden, accidental incapacitation sets off a chain of hilarious complications. Nelson portrays Saunders, the distraught impresario trying to cope with it all.

**BOTH ACTORS** cite the show's fine writing as the reason for its enormous success.

"The genius of the play is that the situation is so believable. This is the most important day in the lives of these characters. The writing sets the situation up so that it makes sense and never seems forced," said Holgate who also directs this production. "Tenor" is a farce of classical proportions with eight players, one set, and six doors in frequent use.

"The comedy comes from the inter-relationships of these very volatile, colorful characters. The humor is not dependent on one-liners. In addition, the show has lots of visual appeal, with lots of movement plus a lush set and wonderful costumes," said Nelson.



Barry Nelson portrays the opera impresario who is bringing an internationally renowned opera star to Cleveland for his American debut in the zany comedy "Lend Me a Tenor" at the Birmingham Theatre.

All that movement proved hazardous when the show was rehearsing in Baltimore pre-Broadway. Holgate recalled. The much-used doors had sharp steel edges, and the performers all had bandaged knuckles and even a few stitches.

**HOLGATE ORIGINATED** the role of Tito when "Tenor" was first performed at the American Theatre Festival and performed it in the London and Broadway productions as well. Yet he says he still finds new possibilities for comic nuances each time around.

Directing the show at the same time he is performing has some obvious difficulties. "It helps that I

know the show so well," he said, "but sometimes it is like trying to be in two places at once. I must rely on others' eyes when I'm on stage myself."

With his shock of gray hair and sparkling dark eyes, the tall and handsome Holgate looks like a dashing opera star even when he's relaxing between rehearsals in jeans and a hot pink polo shirt.

Though best known for his work in musicals ("A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," "1776," and "The Grand Tour" on Broadway plus the national companies of "Annie," "42nd St.," and "Can Can"), the affable South Dakota native began his career as an opera singer after theater training at Northwestern University and extensive voice training.

**NELSON, INTERVIEWED** in his comfortable dressing room, is the charming, genial antithesis of the high-strung impresario he plays. Has he ever worked for anyone like Saunders?

"David Merrick," he said, "for whom I did 'Cactus Flower' on Broadway and '42nd Street' on tour. There aren't many colorful impresarios around any more; producers are businessmen now."

He spoke fondly of the weeks on tour with "Tenor." He likes to travel, and "has done so extensively in Europe and Asia. This gave me a good chance to discover the U.S.," he said. "I rented a car and drove between cities. I loved seeing the countryside, the old houses, stopping off for dinner at some old mill. I hope another chance to tour comes up."

Nelson has had a long, varied career encompassing comedy, drama, and musicals, with a heavy emphasis

on comedy that goes back to his co-starring in the very popular television series "My Favorite Husband" for 103 live performances in the mid-'50s.

**HE BEGAN** his career starring in "Macbeth" at the University of California, but switched to comedy "because I want to get paid," he joked with a warm grin.

Reminiscing about the pressures of live television, Nelson explained, "It was far from glamorous. It was a lousy life. You went to work when it was still dark out and returned home in the dark to learn the lines for the next day, and there were no residuals from those days."

Nelson has the distinction of being the first actor to portray James Bond. This was in a live telecast of "Casino Royale" with Peter Lorre as the villain, pre-dating the movie Bonds. "The pressure was great with live television. The orchestra was in a room next-door. If your timing was off, the orchestra would be playing to underscore the action at just the wrong time."

**SHAKING HIS** great mass of red hair, Nelson expressed no desire to return to television work regularly.

Nelson said he believes the Birmingham production of "Lend Me a Tenor" benefits from all the careful polishing the show has had since its inception. He stresses though, that he does Saunders in his own style, not a clone of what previous actors have done. He sees the character as having "many colors, not just one-note comedy. There's a lot of dry humor that makes his explosions more meaningful."

After long involvements with the show, both Holgate and Nelson con-



STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

Ron Holgate watches opera fans sing for free tickets to the show "Lend Me a Tenor," which opened Tuesday at the Birmingham Theatre. Holgate stars as Tito Merelli, known to his fans as "Il Stupendo," an international opera star.

tinued to speak of "Lend Me a Tenor" with a deep affection and respect. Barbara Michals is a retired Southfield English teacher. A the-

ater critic for the last 17 years, she is an inveterate playgoer who regularly catches up on all the New York productions.



Rick Frederick and Miriam Yezbick in a scene from "Laughing Wild" to be presented at the Attic Theatre in Detroit, Sept. 13-15.

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## Director draws on real life drama

Performances of the Attic Theatre's production of "Laughing Wild" continue through Sept. 15 at the Attic Theatre in Detroit. For ticket information call 875-8284.

By Keely Wygonik  
staff writer

It sounds like an unusual combination, social work and theater, but Annette Madias of Farmington Hills has shaped her career to accommodate both.

"One gives me a lot of material for the other," said Madias, producer-director of "Laughing Wild," an outrageous comedy by Christopher Durang, Sept. 13-15 at the Attic Theatre in Detroit.

She works the midnight shift at a suicide prevention center in Detroit and runs drama therapy workshops for adult survivors of incest. She's also an artistic associate and faculty member at the Actors Alliance Conservatory in Southfield, and a directing staff member at Crossroads Productions in Redford.

Madias has directed a number of shows with the theater groups including the Actors Alliance Theatre Company, Somerset Dinner Theatre and The Theatre Company. She's also won awards for work as a producer, director and production assistant.

A graduate of Harrison High School in Farmington Hills, Madias started out as a pre-law/sociology

major at the University of Detroit. She started taking theater classes and liked it.

"I took a couple of classes on a lark, and ended up changing my major to fine arts, theater directing," she said.

"Laughing Wild" is about a man and woman coping with life in the 90s. These two off-the-wall strangers come together in a number of ways which lead them into a roller-coaster relationship with angry, sexy, terrifying and hilarious experiences are the result.

"It sounds very heavy, but it's done in a funny stand-up comedy sort of way," said Madias.

The production touches on some of today's topics — AIDS, the environ-

ment, therapy and New Age religion are only a few.

When the woman encounters the man and his new-age friends meditating, she joins in "Ohmmm," they moan together, until she gets bored and pretends to be a car alarm instead.

Said to be an entertainment poised oddly between Samuel Beckett, Spalding Gray, Monty Python and Saturday Night Live, "Laughing Wild" was first presented at Playwrights' Horizons in New York City in 1987.

Tickets are \$15 and \$15. The Attic Theatre is at 7339 Third West Grand Boulevard. Secure, lighted parking is available across the street from the theater.

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