

## ON THE MARQUEE



KEELY WYGONIK

Theater, music groups  
wrap up 1993-94 season

Summer will soon be here. Local community theater and music groups are wrapping up their 1993-94 seasons, getting ready for a much needed break. We are fortunate to have so many talented performers and musicians in our coverage area. They are deserving of our applause and thanks for entertaining, enlightening, and enriching our lives. Here are some of this week's highlights.

■ Playwright Sarah Goldman responds to her parent's 11th commandment. "Thou Shalt Marry A Nice Jewish Doctor," in "Beau Jest," presented by the Jewish Ensemble Theatre through June 12.

"Beau Jest" is a play about a single dancer, her mother, and the dream catch, or is it match, makes for a very funny night at the theater. Sarah's only problem is there isn't enough of the real thing to go around. Her rescuing leaves the audience laughing.

Arthur Beer directs the cast which includes Eden Cooper Sage, Larry Shy, John Lepard, Marshall Zweig, William Premin, and Shirley Benyas.

"Beau Jest" opened for previews Wednesday, regular performances begin Sunday, May 22. Performances are in the Aaron DeRoy Theatre at the Jewish Community Center, 6600 W. Maple Road, West Bloomfield. Tickets range from \$8 to \$19.50. Call 758-2900 or Ticketmaster, 645-6666.

■ The Rochester Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of James Hommeyer will present the last concert of its season. 8 p.m. Friday, May 20 at Varner Recital Hall on the campus of Oakland University. Tickets will be available at the door for \$11; children 12 and under \$8. Call 651-4181. Numbers to be performed are Symphony No. 8 in F Major, Op. 93 by Beethoven; "Ancient Airs and Dances (Suite No. 2)" by Respighi and "Three Corners Hat" by de Falla.

■ Detroit Chamber Winds "Nightnotes" series concludes their season 8 p.m. Friday, May 20 with an evening presenting by "In Harmony," an outstanding vocal quartet at Hagopian's World of Rugs, 450 S. Woodward, downtown Birmingham. Doors open 8 p.m., performance begins 8:30 p.m. Admission of \$12 includes performance and refreshments. Call 362-2622.

■ Don't miss the Musica Viva International Concerts 2nd annual Michigan Flute Festival, 8:30 p.m. Sunday, May 22 at Orchestra, 3711 Woodward Avenue in Detroit. Tickets range from \$10 to \$30, call 833-3700.

See MARQUEE, next page

## LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Entertainment next week:

- What's new at the movies.
- Upcoming plays and concerts in your community.

## 'Closer Than Ever' is sensational

## THEATER REVIEW



VICTORIA DIAZ

in a word, sensational.

How does a memorable piece of stagecraft like this happen? Who knows exactly? Hard work, complemented by talent, knowledge, and large dollops of special care help, of course. Most probably, luck plays a part too, although perhaps a relatively minor one.

And, of course, in order to execute something impressively, it doesn't hurt to have something impressive to execute. Perhaps the first right move made by this group was their decision to go with Maltby and Shire's winning music and lyrics.

"Closer Than Ever," an all-music musical, is a small symphony of middle-aged us, stumbling around in the direction of the 21st century, and trying to do so with at least a modicum of grace, sanity, and maybe not too much fat. Here is humor and sadness (mostly humor), lust and love, pain and gain. Also, here is a delightful, insightful comment

that, often, when we meet with surprises, it is ourselves we meet.

Onstage, a knockout crew delivers the goods. Carollee Castle, Doug Clark, Sean Harmon, and Patty Ward not only perform well solo, but work together beautifully, too. (And, after awhile, who cares if they all look a little young for their roles?) Paul McCaffrey, at the piano, and Chuck Bartels, on string bass, add just the right notes of panache and pizzazz to the production.

Just about every number performed seems special in its way. Highlights of the evening include the company singing about their "over-educated, under-stimulated... hyper-ventilating" generation trying to deal with hubbub from cellulite to prostate trouble to aging parents in "The March of Time"; bass player Bartels, backing up Patty Ward as she belts out the comically-suggestive "Back on Base"; the not-just-great-looking-but-terribly-talented-too Sean Harmon,



Musical: Patty Ward stars in the Village Players of Birmingham production of Richard Maltby-David Shire's musical "Closer Than Ever."

singing of the vague regrets of "One of the Good Guys"; Doug Clark, giving it his best in what might be a perfect anthem for male mid-lifers, "I'll Get Up Tomorrow Morning"; and Carollee Castle, wearing an utterly enchanting spell with her splendid rendition of the bitter-sweet reminiscence, "Life Story."

Choreography by Christine Tobia contributes significantly to the success of this well-put-together production.

As do other peripherals. The good-looking, but simple costumes, (by Gravame) deserves special mention. Mostly in artfully coordinated October colors, everything looks absolutely perfect for this occasion.

Victoria Diaz is a Livonia-based freelancer, who specializes in arts and entertainment articles in the metro area.

## Great singing, dancing in country musical



BARBARA MICHAELS

With the first strum of a guitar and lively "yee-haw!" the Birmingham Theatre's production of "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas" is off and running at an exuberant pace.

Director Worth Gardner, staging his seventh wonderful production for the Birmingham, did not make any major conceptual changes in this delightful country-western musical, but he did enhance it with his distinctive touches.

Once again, he utilizes a raked stage and onstage musicians that become a very pleasing part of the show, and once again he presents a strong ensemble of talent who deliver energetic, well-polished performances.

There's a little town in Texas where Miss Mona (Sharon Montgomery) is the current proprietor of a long-established whorehouse fondly known as the Chicken Ranch. She runs a nice, clean, friendly enterprise

where the girls are treated like family and customers like guests, where there are strict rules of behavior for everyone, and there's a comfortable relationship with the local sheriff, Ed Earl Dodd (Hal Davis).

Everything goes sour when a grand-standing television music crooner, Melvin P. Thorpe (Ron Lee Savin), makes an issue of the Chicken Ranch and all the "do-gooders" pressure the politicians into closing the place

down.

One needn't be a devoted country-western fan to appreciate the charming music and lyrics of Carol Hall. The musical numbers range from the very upbeat "Texas Has a Whorehouse in It," and "Twenty-Four Hours of Lovin'" to the more plaintive "Girl, You're a Woman," and "Hard Candy Christmas."

Montgomery and Davis are both very personable and credible in their roles. Montgomery's strong vocal skills are well complimented in her duets with Cleo King, who plays Jewel, Mona's assistant. King is a knock-out in "Twenty-Four Hours of Lovin'" and contributes a tremendous stage presence whenever she appears.

Savin as Thorpe, Steve Pudenz as the two-faced Senator Wingworth, and Ryan Hilliard as the Governor who does "The Sidekick" to every awkward political question are all adequately funny but never quite plumb the full comic potential of these rich roles.

Among the ladies of the ranch, Virginia McMath is touching an Angel,

trying to support the child she has left behind, and Judy Fitzgerald is convincing as the naive Shy. Nancy Carroll elicits empathy as Dostey Mae, the plain cafe waitress everyone manages to overlook.

Under Scott Woolley's musical direction and Gardner's choreography, the production numbers are all stylishly accomplished. The male dancers are top-notch.

Eduardo Sileganco's scenic set design seems classic bordello with the red flocked wallpaper carrying right over onto the piano. What would normally have been the orchestra pit cleverly functions as the clothes closet for the male dancers, who do a complete costume change on stage.

While the 1993-94 season at the Birmingham Theatre got off to a rickety start, all of the productions have been strong, and it is anything but a coincidence that Gardner has directed the three best of the year.

Barbara Michaels is an inveterate playgoer who regularly catches up on all the New York productions.

## ON STAGE

"The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas"

\*Theater: Birmingham Theatre, 211 S. Woodward

\*Curtain time: Show continues through June 12, performances 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays; 7 p.m. Sundays; matinees 2 p.m. Wednesdays, Sundays and Thursdays, June 9.

\*Tickets: Range from \$19.50 to \$35 call 644-3533 or Ticketmaster 645-6666.

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