

ENTERTAINMENT

THURSDAY, MAY 26, 1994

ON THE MARQUEE



KEELY WYGONIK

Final curtain falls at Birmingham on July 30

I received some very sad news on May 19 — the Birmingham Theatre will be closing July 31. It first opened in 1927. By the late 1930s it became a full-time movie theater and continued as such through the early 1960s when it closed for 18 years.

In 1976 renovations began, and the Nederlander Organisation signed a lease in 1978 with the intention of producing and presenting professional stage plays and musicals.

They opened Nov. 20, 1979, with the "Gin Game," and will present their last play "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas," on June 12. The Birmingham Jazz Fest performance starring Joe Williams will be featured at the Birmingham Theatre on July 30.

"Our decision is not an easy one," said Harry Nederlander, president of Birmingham Theatre. "After great deliberation and review of the extensive renovations the theater requires, including new roofing and auditorium repairs, it is not economically feasible for us to continue our program. Renovation costs exceed our operating and production budget requirements."

It's sad when a theater closes. I'm reminded of this every time I drive by the former George Burns Theatre on Plymouth Road in Livonia. Theaters shouldn't be allowed to die, there ought to be a way to save them. I remember when the Fox was boarded up, now it's a gleaming jewel.

Going to the theater is an event. Memories of shows linger long after audiences leave for home, and the performers pack their bags. I'm reminded of outstanding performances at the George Burns Theatre, and seeing Burns on the stage, every time I drive by the vacant parking lot.

A lot of people will mourn the closing of the Birmingham Theatre, as they do the George Burns Theatre.

Call me at (313) 953-2105 and leave a Voice Mail message with your thoughts about the closing of the Birmingham Theatre. Feel free to share your memories, and comments about what shows you liked best.

See MARQUEE, 8B

LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Entertainment next week:

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

Birmingham Theatre remembered fondly



BARBARA MICHALS

With the imminent demise of the Birmingham Theatre announced last week, I am about to lose a dear friend.

Even though reports of her ill health have been circulating for months, the final pronouncement of death still brings great sadness. The last act will be the Birmingham JazzFest performance starring Joe Williams on July 30.

After 15 seasons and 56 productions, the Birmingham wasn't quite a grande dame. She was more like a typical teenager experimenting with different makeup to find her real identity.

I've reviewed the Birmingham Theatre regularly for the past 10 of those 15 seasons. She's had her triumphs and disasters, but the good shows have far outnumbered the poor ones.

In 1986, the theater announced it was switching from a balanced program of dramas, comedies and musicals to a heavier diet of musical revivals because that's what Birmingham's conservative, middle-aged audiences seemed to want. While sympathetic to economic demands of filling the seats, I questioned at the time how a theater could build new audiences if they were never exposed to anything fresh or different.

Now theater officials have cited financial problems, especially building

repairs and lagging attendance, as the reasons for the closing — lagging attendance attributed in part to a failure to attract younger audiences. Sounds like the proverbial "Catch 22."

Then along came Worth Gardner, the innovative director who gave exciting new interpretations to old classics. Gardner's six productions for the Birmingham drew raves from critics and audiences. He was building quite a local following and had been promised a major say in selecting next season's shows. He might have had just the prescription but the patient was pronounced too ill to save before therapy could be completed.

When she was good, she was very, very good. . . Among the many excellent productions over the years, shows like "Master Harold . . . and the Boys" and "Crimes of the Heart" (both in 1983) and "Inn't It Romantic" and "Kuni Lem" (both in 1985) were every bit as fine as their New York counterparts.

Also outstanding were Arte Johnson in "The Foreigner" (1986), "Nunsense" (1986 and 1991), Florence LaCoy in "Evita" (1989), Rosemary Prinz in "Driving Miss Daisy" (1989), "Singin' in the Rain" (1990) and Gardner's "Man of La Mancha" (1992) and "Oklahoma" (1993).

Other especially memorable productions included "Do Black Patent Shoes Reflect Up?" (1984), Ken Barry in "Run for Your Wife" (1988), "The Shop of Horrors" (1987), "I'm Not Rappoport" (1988), "Romance, Ro-



Closing show: Hal Davis as Sheriff Ed Earl Dodd and Sharon Montgomery as Miss Mona Stangley in "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas," at the Birmingham Theatre.

mance" and "Jesus Christ, Superstar" (both 1990), "Lend Me a Tenor" (1991) and Gardner's "Wizard of Oz" (1992) and "Little Me" and "The Not Mikado" this season.

But when she was bad, oh my. . . Usually the clunkers were due to miscasting, poor play selection, or both. There was the world premiere of "Shot Through the Heart" (1983), a show never heard of again. There was a rotten mystery called "Corpus" (1985) that ran about a week in New York. The 1992-93 season opened

with Van Johnson in a hopelessly corny and outdated "On Borrowed Time." This season began with an inept "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes." And this year's "Jake's Women" didn't deserve to be produced anywhere. According to the theater staff, the most infamous disaster was Bert Benton in "Dames at Sea" a few years back, but I fortunately was out of town for that one.

The one production that previewed:

See CURTAIN, 8B

'Beau Jest': laughs without stereotypes



CATHIE BREIDENBACH

Goldman, an attractive young brunette rather than a silver-haired maven, hires the out-of-work actor-turned-escort to impersonate an imaginary Jewish doctor she's con-cocted to appease her parents.

The Jewish Ensemble Theatre's production of "Beau Jest" seems effortlessly uproarious thanks to an outstanding cast and the expert directing of Arthur Beer.

The glitch in Sarah's ruse to fool her parents is that Bob Schroeder — sometime actor and escort — isn't Jewish as she requested. When he rings Sarah's door bell, little does he

ON STAGE

"Beau Jest"

★Theater: Jewish Ensemble Theatre, in the Aaron Delany Theatre, 6555 W. Maple Road, West Bloomfield.
★Curtain time: 8 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays; 8:45 p.m. Saturdays, 7 p.m. Sundays through June 12. Matinees 2 p.m. Sunday, June 5 and Wednesday, June 8.
★Tickets: Range from \$8 to \$18.50 with discounts for students, senior citizens and groups. Call 788-2900 or Ticketmaster 845-6555.

REVIEW

know that within minutes he'll be catapulted into the role of Dr. David Steinberg, answer questions on cardiac surgery — about which he knows nearly nothing — and pretend to Sarah's family that he's the beau to fill

fill a Jewish mother's most fervent dream.

Sarah created the imaginary David to camouflage her real romance with an advertising executive with the unacceptably non-Jewish name of Chris Cringle. Then she finds herself attracted to Bob Schroeder, but is it Bob she loves or David, the man she imagined into being?

One fictitious and two real beaus compound the humor in the real crisis of a grown daughter who still feels obliged to live the life her parents expect of her instead of the life she chooses. Will Bob/David be able to fool her parents into believing he's yarmulke from slipping off his head onto his dinner plate?

John Lepard as handsome Bob/David, exudes boyish charm reminiscent of a young Alan Alda. He's quick and funny, with a self-deprecating grin. Shirley Benyas plays Sarah's quintessentially Jewish mother, Miriam, as bossy, argumentative but devoted

to her family. In a role that could easily slip into stereotype, Benyas resists the slide and maintains a character with individuality.

Daughter Sarah, played by Eden Cooper Sager, resists her mother's advice about little things like warming Kugel in the microwave, but she can't stand up to her parents on the big issue of what manner of man she loves. William Premin puts in a fine performance as Abe Goldman, Sarah's father in the dry-cleaning business. He rages against Wagner's anti-Semitism, blusters about the scarcity of parking places and shortens Seder prayers when he's hungry. Marshal Zweig as Joel, Sarah's therapist brother, is nagged by suspicions about David and conveys them with a therapist's scowl and masterful timing. Chris Cringle, played by Larry Shy, rounds out the fine cast as the earnest ad man in this genuinely funny show.

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

Mr. Z's

STEAK HOUSE

27311 Fre Rd. N. (corner of West)

537-5600

Up to \$10.00 Value

Cordially invites you and your guest to enjoy one complimentary ENTREE when a second ENTREE of equal or greater value is purchased.

Reservations: 800-354-1994 • Valid Anytime • Dine In Only

— COMING ATTRACTIONS —

BLUE SURVIVORS • JUNE 6 & 7

ENTERTAINMENT NIGHTLY

OCEANIA GRAND BUFFET

Over 100 Chinese Dishes

Specialty Prepared for Family, Friends and Gatherings

A Most Nutritious, Economical Meal

Lunch \$10 (Mon-Fri.)
Dinner \$12 (Mon-Fri.)
\$15 (Sat-Sun)

We cater to parties • Banquet Rooms from 15 to 500 Guests

29900 Van Dyke (at 12th Mile) Across from GM Tech Center 574-1423

At the Van Dyke location only

OCEANIA AT ROCHSTER

10000 W. 13th Mile, Rochester

Reservations: 800-354-1994 • 513-375-8200

OCEANIA AT WARREN

2804 E. Ryan Rd., Warren

45 Miles & Beyond • 513-785-6965

ST. MARY'S ORCHARD LAKE POLISH COUNTRY FAIR

MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND

May 27th, 28th, 29th & 30th

- Polish Dinners • Arts & Crafts • Vegas Tent
- Beer Tent With Live Music • Raffle • Bingo

GIANT MIDWAY — OVER 40 RIDES

AMERICA'S LARGEST HIGH SCHOOL FAIR

Featuring the Fabulous

PUGH SHOWS CARNIVAL

Ride All Day For Only \$15 Per Person (Individual Ride Tickets Also Available)

Friday 6-11, Sat. 12-11
Sun. 12-11, Mon. 12-10

LAKE FRONT SETTING
IDEAL FOR FAMILY OUTINGS
Bring Your Family & Friends

Remember by the Name & Check to Benefit the Orchard Lake School

MITCH HOUSEY'S

Open 11 A.M.

Businessmen's Lunches

DINNERS from \$8.95

ALL NEW FASHION SHOW

Thursday Starting at Noon

WORLD'S FINEST PRIME RIB with bone in

\$10.95

NOW APPEARING...LIVE THE SHOWCASEMEN

WEDNESDAY thru SUNDAY

COCKTAIL HOUR 4-7 P.M. DAILY

EVERY COCKTAIL HOUR WED. 4 P.M. CLOSING

NOW BOOKING BANQUETS (small or large)

28500 Schoplercraft • Opposite LaSalle • CIRC • LIVONIA

425-5520

OPEN SUNDAY at 4 P.M.

NAG'S HEAD PUB

RON & BOB

THURSDAY & SATURDAY NIGHT

MEMORIAL WEEKEND

MAINE LOBSTER.....\$9.95

LIVE ENTERTAINMENT - THURS. & SAT.

Karaoke on Friday

HAPPY HOUR SUN.-WED. 3 PM-CLOSE

Banquet Room Available

Hours: Fri. & Sat. 11-11, Sun. & Mon. 12-8

REDFORD • 25641 PLYMOUTH RD. • 937-8220