ENTERTAINMENT

INSIDE:

ON THE MARQUEE



Final curtain falls at Birmingham on July 30

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

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 Organization sigmed 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 Theater on July 30.

"Our decision is not an easy one," said Harry Nederlander, president of Birmingham Theater on July 30.

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It's sad when a theater closes. I'm reminded of this every time I drive by the former George Burns Theater 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 its a glistening 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 Theater, 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 Theater, and seeing Burns on the stage, every time I drive by the pole min mourn the closing of the Birmingham Theatre, as they do the George Burns Theater, as they do the George Burns Theater, as they do the George Bur

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 communi-



of death still brings grant saddress. The last act will be the Birmingham Jaszfest performance starring Joe Williams on July 50.

After 15 seasons and 85 productions, the Birmingham wasn't quite a grande dame. She was more like a typical tenager experimenting with different makeup to find her real identity.

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.

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

ure to attract younger audiences. Sounds like the proverbial "Catch 22."

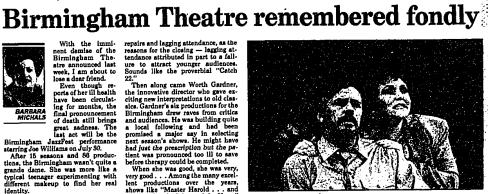
Then along came Worth Gardner, the innovative director who gave exciting new interpretations to old classics. Gardner's six productions for the Birmingham draw raves from critics and audiences. He was building quite a local following and had been promised a major say in selecting next season's shows. He might have had just the persent production to the petient 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 "lan't it Romantic" and "Kuni Lemi" (both in 1983) and "lan't it Romantic" and "Kuni Lemi" (both in 1986) were every bit as fine as their New York counterparts.

Also outstanding were Arte Johnson in "The Foreigner" (1986), "Nunsenser" (1986 and 1991); Forence Lacey in "Evita" (1987), Rosemary Prinx in "Driving Miss Daisy" (1999), "Singin" in the Rain" (1990) and Gardner's "Men of LaMancha" (1992) and "Oklahoma" (1993).

Other especially memorable productions included "Do Black Patent Shoes Reflect Up?" (1984), Ken Barry in "Run for Your Wife" (1985), "Little Shop of Horrors" (1987), "Intel Shop of Horrors" (1987), "Intel Shop of Horrors" (1987), "Romance, Rolose 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

are regularly for he past to wit those 15 seasons. She's had her triumphis and disasters, but the good shows have far outnumbered the poor ones. In 1936, 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



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.

whorehouse in Texas, at the Bmance" and "Jesus Christ, Supermatar" (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 "Corpse"
(1985) that ran about a week in New
York. The 1992-93 season opened

with Van Dinson 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 Ber.'
bis Benton in "Dames at See" a fewyears back, but I fortuliously was outof town for that one.

The one production that previewed;

'Beau Jest': laughs without stereotypes



An actor between jobs hires on at an escort agency to accompany little old ladies to the opera in James Sherman's hilarious comedy "Beau Jest" now playing at the Jew-ish Ensemble Thestre.

With the immi-nent demise of the Birmingham The-atre announced last

atre announced last week, I am about to lose a dear friend. Even though re-

identity.

I've reviewed the Birmingham Thestre regularly for the past 10 of those
15 seasons. She's had her triumphs

CATHE
BREIDENBACH

Goldman, an attractive young
brunctie rather than a silver-haired
maven, hires the out-fower's actor
turned-escort to impersonate an
imaginary Jewish doctor she's concocted to appease her parents.

The Jewish Ensemble Theatr's
production of "Beau Jest" seems effortlessly uproarlous thanks to aroutsanding 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 — inn't
Jewish as she requested. When he
rings Sarah's door bell, little does he

ON STAGE

Pleasi Jest

*Thester: Jowish Ensemble Theatre, 6500

W. Maple Road, West Bloomfeld.

*Curtain times B p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays; 8-45 p.m. Saturdays, 7 pm. Saturdays, 7 pm. Surdays Prough Pro

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 ful-

fill a Jewish mother's most fervent

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?

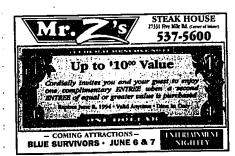
One fictitious and two real beaus compound the humor in the real crisis of a grown daughter who still feels obliged to live the life her parents expect of her instead of the life she chooses. Will Bob/David be able to fool her parents into believing he's Jewish? What will he do when asked to bless the wine at Sabbath dinner? Will a gentile know how to keep his yarmulke from slipping off his head onto his dinner plote?

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 east

to her family. In a role that could easily allp into stereotype, Benyas resists the slide and maintains a character with individuality. Daughter Sarah, played by Eden-Cooper Sage, 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, Marshai Zweig as Joel, Sarah's therapist brother, is nagged by auspicions about David and conveys them with a therapist's acowl and masterful timing. Chris Cringle, played by Larry Shy, rounds out the fine cast as the-carnest ad man in this genuinely funny show.

Cathie Breidenbach of West Bloom-field teaches college writing classes and works as a freelance writer.





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