

THEATER

'Appalachian Strings' music sets toes tapping

Meadow Brook Theatre presents "Appalachian Strings," through Saturday, May 18, at the theater in Wilson Hall, Oakland University, Walton and Squier boulevards, Rochester. Shows 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursday, 2 p.m. Wednesdays (\$22), 8 p.m. Fridays (\$26.50), 2 p.m. Saturdays (\$22), 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturdays (\$32), 2 p.m. Sundays (\$22), and 6:30 p.m. Sundays (\$26.50). Student, senior and group discounts available. (810) 377-3300.

BY BARBARA MICHAELS
SPECIAL WRITER

"Appalachian Strings," the current production at Meadow Brook Theatre, is a toe-tapping, foot-stomping musical that is joyous and uplifting even though it deals with the hard lives of generations of Appalachian families.

Written by Randal Myler and Dan Wheelman, the show features classic Appalachian songs that have been passed down through the years, and the characters are composites of real people. Myler also

directs this production. Wheelman serves as musical director of the three on-stage musicians.

During the famine of the 1840s a family reluctantly leaves Ireland, the land they love, because it can no longer support them. Ironically, they settle in Appalachia because it reminds them of the green rolling hills of home, but in time the new land also fails to support them. There is no work, and in the latter half of this century the people must once again leave the land they love if they are to survive.

As one character states, they may be poor, uneducated hillbillies who "talk funny," but they are people who love their land, their families, their neighbors, and their music and story-telling.

The first act deals with their struggle to farm the land and survive bad moonshine and the revenuers. The second act tells of the unsavory conditions in the coal mines, where the men either

died in cave-ins or more slowly from black lung disease, and the need to migrate to factory work in big cities when the mines closed.

The fine cast is multi-talented and very believable as they sing, dance and make music with a variety of unique instruments.

Adele O'Brien is very moving as the plucky mother figure; Bob Burrus, very likable as the grizzled father/grandfather character, and Molinda Deane, very appealing as the daughter figure. Molly Andrews has a captivating voice and often lends her musical skills to the combo playing guitars, mandolins, fiddles, penny whistles, dulcimers, auto harps, jugs, and even a saw. In addition to Wheelman, the other on-stage musicians are Tony Marcus and L.J. Slavin.

Choreographer Sandy Silva performs many dazzling solos, variations on clog dancing and tap. The other performers all join in the dancing at various times.



Musical: Tony Marcus (left to right), Molly Andrews, L.J. Slavin, Sandy Silva, Dan Wheelman and Bob Burrus are among the featured performers in Meadow Brook Theatre's "Appalachian Strings."

Paul Wonssek's down-home

set design and dramatic lighting work beautifully to

enhance this delightfully warm and stirring show.

Avon 'Secret Garden' production 'simply beautiful'

Avon Players presents "The Secret Garden," Friday, May 2 to Sunday, May 4, Friday, May 9-Sunday, May 11, and Thursday, May 16-Saturday, May 17, Avon Players Theatre, 1185 Washington Road at Tienken Road, 1-1/4 miles east of Rochester Road, Rochester Hills. Shows 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. \$13 adults; with discounts for students, seniors, and groups. (810) 659-9077.

BY JON KATZ
SPECIAL WRITER

"Beautiful ... simply beautiful" were the words most often heard after another magnificent production by one of the area's leading community theater groups, Avon Players of Rochester Hills.

Indeed, that appraisal could have applied to so many aspects of Avon Players' "The Secret

Garden," the 1991 family musical based on Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel about the healing power of love.

Orphaned in colonial India after a cholera epidemic, young Mary Lennox is sent to England to live with her uncle Archibald in his mansion amidst the dank and dreary moors of Yorkshire. Still brooding after his wife, Lily, died in childbirth 10 years earlier, Archibald has locked up her garden, hidden the key and turned over the care of sickly son Colin to his brother and the servants.

But the spirits of the departed wander this "house on the hill" with something wrong inside it, and the spirits guide Mary to discover the garden and its magical wonders, releasing the dead and renewing the living. Dreams are an important part

of this show, not the least of which is the dream cast, under the skilled craftsmanship of director/choreographer Kevin Edwards and musical/vocal director Lee George.

Seventh grader Michelle Sick is a glorious Mary. A feisty fountain of emotions and strong musical ability, she practically glows beneath the moody stage lighting. Phil Paonessa performs Uncle Archie with a majestic tenor that cries out his torment, notable in the climactic "Where in the World." His duet of "Lily's Eyes" with bad-guy brother Neville (Glen DeLong, in a long-overdue emergence from behind-the-scenes roles) elicited the most sustained applause from an appreciative opening-night audience. The soaring vocals of Leslie

Henstock (Lily) implore us tenderly to "Come to my garden ... there I'll keep you safe beside me." Doing so restores to health son Colin (portrayed with great sensitivity by boy soprano Matt Solsion) and redeems the efforts of the house staff: charming Jennifer Combe as Martha, inspiring Ashley Peacock as Dickon, and the ever-enjoyable Chuck Thompson as gardener Ben. Judy Privacky also stands out as an appropriately priggish Mrs. Medlock.

Technical support is a particular strength of the Avon Players, and "The Secret Garden" cultivates many talents to full blossom. George Kozak's set of swirling childhood images is breathtaking. Costumes by Margaret Hering and Hattie Hughes, topiaris and the lovely

finale backdrop by Dennis East, and John (JD) Deirlein's lighting are all superb in design and execution. Lee George conducts his own magic, making three keyboards sound like a pit of 30.

Contrary to perception, "The Secret Garden" is neither a Victorian "Annie" nor a musical "Goosebumps." It is an enchanting and uplifting show for all ages, and this professional-cal-

iber production is a fitting herald of Avon's upcoming golden anniversary season.

Jan Katz of Rochester Hills is a freelance writer who specializes in community theater.

Mother's Day Brunch at The Batsford Inn Farmington Hills
\$19.95 10 a.m. - 3 p.m. Reservations Now! (810) 474-6500

SUPERIOR PASTIES
31840 Plymouth Rd. Just W. Of Merriman 313-425-9300

FREE PASTY
Buy 3 Pasties at regular price and get **ONE FREE**
1 coupon per purchase

\$100 OFF
The purchase of 2 pasties or more
1 coupon per purchase

THEATRE TOURS

DETROIT - "SHOWBOAT"
Wed. Eve., May 21 - \$70
Top Priced Ticket, Motorcoach from Dearborn

TORONTO - "RAQTIME"
May 17-18 \$189/2t.
June 7-8 \$209/2t.
July 12-13 \$209/2t.
August 9-10 \$209/2t.
King Edward Hotel, Roundtrip Motorcoach, Top Priced Ticket, Beach, Transfers and Shopping.

OPTIONAL \$\$\$
"PHANTOM" or "JOSEPH"
CARNIVAL GROUP, 10000 W. WALKER
313-562-7416

Farmington 'Brigadoon' cast gels nicely

Farmington Players presents "Brigadoon," weekends through Saturday, May 17, at the Barn, 32332 W. 12 Mile Road (between Farmington and Orchard Lake roads), Farmington. Show time is 8 p.m. except Sunday matinees at 2 p.m. \$12. (810) 653-2955. All shows sold-out except for Thursday, May 1 benefit performance, call (810) 932-2174.

BY VICTORIA DIAZ
SPECIAL WRITER

Watching the Farmington Players' production of "Brigadoon," you may feel as if you're witnessing a brisk, down-the-stretch dress rehearsal of the popular Learner-and-Lowe musical. Much of it gels nicely. On the other hand, it has some pretty rough spots.

"Brigadoon" centers around two American hunters, Tommy Albright and Jeff Douglas (here played by Kevin Branshaw and Marc Rosati), who stray off the beaten path in the heathery Scottish Highlands and find themselves in an enchanted spot called Brigadoon. Placed under an eighteenth-century spell, the tiny hamlet and its inhabitants awake, it would appear, just once every 100 years. Wouldn't you

know that the Yanks have happened by at just the right time. Or maybe it's the wrong time. Though there's love, romance, and some laughs ahead, trouble and heartbreak also loom.

In this production, no props self-destruct. No scenery collapses or gets chewed up by a performer. The cast is terrific and pleasant to watch. All that tartan and all those kilts add color and authenticity (although some '90s hairstyles here and there in the chorus turn the eighteenth-century scenes a little askew). Everybody seems well-drilled. Lines aren't flubbed or mumbled by performers. For the most part, no sound or lighting glitches pop up. Definitely, director Ralph Rosati keeps things moving right along.

One trouble spot involves scenery and repeated scene changes. As players and backstage crew rush on and off stage to raise and raise numerous unwieldy (sometimes unattractive) backdrops, any mood previously established in the audience is seriously undercut. (Wouldn't some creative lighting have achieved similar effects with

much less distraction?)

Individual singing voices often fall off the mark or seem uncertain. A belated chorus (which overfills this stage) sounds all right but appears a little offhand or hurried with this music, as if chorus members had something more important to do after the performance. Not much appears to be presented for all its worth or savored in the way some of these delightful, delicious tunes ("Almost Like Being in Love," "The Heather on the Hill," "I'll Go Home With Bonnie Jean," etc.) could be. Choreography (by Rosati) and dance appear rather uninspired much of the time, too. Finally, since this is a story essentially about the power of

love, it's regrettable that such little real chemistry appears to exist between Branshaw's Tommy and Jan Forhan's Bonnie Fiona.

In addition to Branshaw, Rosati and Forhan, the large cast features George Monticello as Harry Beaton, the troubled Scotman, and Barbie Amann as Meg Brockie, the lively village flirt.

Wee chorus members Rachel Manana, Joshua Fitch and Shannon Snideman add irresistible charm.

Victoria Diaz is a Livonia freelance writer who specializes in theater and books

Box Office: Mon 11am, Tue 11am, Wed 11am, Thu 11am, Fri 11am, Sat 11am, Sun 11am

(810) 965-2222

The Second City
NEXT TO THE FOX THEATRE

IN THE SECOND CITY BUILDING
for reservations call 313.965.9500
NEXT TO THE FOX THEATRE

DOWNHOME MUSICAL!
APPALACHIAN STRINGS
by Randal Myler and Dan Wheelman

"A joyous celebration of a people's history" Westword

"Stunning!" Denver Post

April 23 - May 18

For tickets call Meadow Brook Ticketmaster Box Office (810) 645-6666 (810) 377-3300

Presented with the support of NEB

Observer & Eccentric NEWSPAPERS 1996-97 Season Media Sponsor

Creative Priority
Craft & Collectible Show
ALLEN PARK CIVIC ARENA
15800 WHITE STREET, ALLEN PARK
SUNDAY MAY 4TH
10 a.m. - 4 p.m.