

THEATER

Meadow Brook's risqué farce spotlights crackerjack cast

"What the Butler Saw" by Joe Orton at Meadow Brook Theatre, Wilson Hall on the campus of Oakland University, Rochester Hills continues through March 8. Tickets range from \$22 to \$32, call (248) 377-3300.

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

The word got out before the curtain rose. Meadow Brook Theatre's "What the Butler Saw" would be risqué and challenging to whomever clutches to conservative aesthetics.

Even prior to opening night, some of the more traditional theatergoers registered their vehement disapproval. Artistic Director Geoffrey Sherman received a handful of hate letters for simply selecting the play.

Ah, yes. Theater can provide a foil to prod the masses from their slumber.

Apparently, the mere thought of salty dialogue and nudity was too much for those who expect a university theater to perform the classics, and occasionally offer a wink to contemporary realities.

Well, in a step toward reinventing Meadow Brook as a place of vital and vigorous contemporary theater, "What the Butler Saw" is a promising start. Joe Orton's play about a tech-savvy psychiatrist, a suspicious wife, mistaken identities and embarrassing disclosures has

the high-pace plotting and frenetic pace of farcical drama in the British tradition.

Throw in an irreverent references to religion, psychiatry and Winston Churchill's private parts, and there's plenty of disrespect to go around.

The high-energy play showcases the comedic timing of a crackerjack cast.

In the genre of farce, pacing is crucial. The audience can't be given too much time to realize the absurdity and irrational predicaments before them.

Any weak link in the cast will inevitably have a domino effect in slowing down the play. In "What the Butler Saw," there are no weak links.

Bruce Burkhardtmeier, Carey Crim, Raul E. Esparza, Mark Rademacher and John Seibert ring every nuance from a script filled with irreverence, absurdities and biting humor. Perhaps Esparza, the morally maligned bell-hop and cross-dresser, pulls off the combination of comedic timing, and physical comedy in the finest spotlight.

"What the Butler Saw" premiered in 1969. It's considered Orton's best play. In a chilling footnote to Orton's promising talent, the playwright was murdered shortly before the play opened nearly 30 years ago.

Orton's penchant for witticisms have drawn comparisons to Oscar Wilde.

For instance, he observes the reason a person would pursue a career in psychiatry: "Having failed to achieve madness for himself, he took to teaching it to others."

And, in noting the advice to a guilty man wondering what to say: "You're guilty, you don't say anything. Only the innocent have something to explain."

Fans of "Seinfeld" will not be disappointed. Nor will viewers of slap-stick, or the farcical episodes of "I Love Lucy," "Three's Company," or other slip-stick-com.

But clearly, "What the Butler Saw" isn't Lucy, Desi, Ethel and Fred. Nor is it Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer.

In "What the Butler Saw" the whims of the characters are bulging along with their hormones. The acid barbs would never be heard in prime time.

Yet Meadow Brook's production is a reminder of how long audiences will keep attentive for a play about sex and the promise of nudity - however brief, very brief.

No need for further rationalizing. If this play is offensive, then you've never watched FOX.

Sometimes a laugh is just a laugh.



Comedy: Diana Van Fossen and Raul E. Esparza are featured in Meadow Brook Theatre's production of Joe Orton's outrageous comedy "What the Butler Saw."

JET provokes audiences to take a side in morality play

Jewish Ensemble Theatre presents "Taking Sides," through Sunday, March 8, Aaron DeRoy Theatre, 6600 W. Maple Road, West Bloomfield. Performances 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays, Thursdays and Sundays, 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays and Wednesday, March 4. Tickets \$13-\$23 with discounts for seniors, students and groups, call (248) 788-2500.

BY BARBARA MICHALS
SPECIAL WRITER

To the victors belong the spoils, such as the privilege of deciding who did right and who did wrong, who is good and who is evil.

In "Taking Sides," the Ronald Harwood drama about a post-war military investigation of Nazi collaborators, the Jewish Ensemble Theatre production does a superb job of examining some difficult questions.

It's 1946 in the American Zone of Occupied Berlin. Major Steve Arnold (John Michael Manfredi) has been assigned to investigate world-famous German conductor Wilhelm Furtwangler (Robert Grossman).

Having just visited the liberated Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, Arnold is convinced there is no such thing as an innocent German. A culturally bereft former insurance investigator, he never grasps the concept of art transcending politics let alone beliefs it.

Though there is massive evi-

dence of Furtwangler helping countless Jewish musicians flee the country in the early days of the war, the conductor's arrogance only strengthens Arnold's obsession to prove him a Nazi.

Unfortunately, the play program never mentions that "Taking Sides" is based on a real incident, and the drama's closing scene only hints at the slander campaign that ended Furtwangler's career.

If he was really strongly against the Nazi regime as he claims, "Why didn't you flee the country yourself when you had the chance?" Arnold asks a surprised Furtwangler, who sputters, "but it's my country, my people..."

This is the most disturbing issue Harwood raises with all sorts of more modern applications.

During the Vietnam War, for instance, a great many were vaguely against U.S. involvement in the conflict, but lacked the courage of their conviction... to do much about it.

"After all, it's my country," many reasoned, "they must know what they're doing."

"Taking Sides" abounds in ironies. Arnold tries to pin the conductor's guilt on some documented anti-Semitic remarks.

But early in the drama the major makes his own anti-Semitic remark, presumably his prejudices are so deeply ingrained he is unaware of them. Tamarra Sachs (Joanna Hast-

ings Woodcock), a half-crazed widow who seeks to testify on Furtwangler's behalf, warns Arnold that misusing the power of the victors to persecute the innocent will make him no better than the last regime.

Furtwangler is also strongly backed by Emmi Straub, Arnold's German secretary whose father was one of the generals in the plot to assassinate Hitler, and most ironically, by Lieutenant Wills, (David Wolber), Arnold's young Jewish assistant.

Though his own parents died in the Holocaust, Wills is a music lover who has no problem separating art from politics.

In Arnold's obsession to bring the big prey to trial, he befriends Helmut Rode (Charles McGraw), the one member of Furtwangler's Berlin Philharmonic proven to be a Nazi party member.

Under the excellent direction of Evelyn Orbach, the entire cast delivers flawless, deeply affecting performances.

Manfredi and Grossman are especially well-cast as head-on antagonists.

Christopher Carothers' set and Edith Leavis Bookstein's costumes add to the production's polish. Rita Girardi's fine lighting needs only more impact at the end of each act.



Drama: John Michael Manfredi as Major Steve Arnold (left) and Robert Grossman as Wilhelm Furtwangler in "Taking Sides."

Overall, "Taking Sides" is one of the most thought-provoking plays in contemporary theatre. JET's outstanding production should not be missed.

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