

## THEATER

## 'Angels In America' elevates future collaboration at OU

"Angels in America: Millennium Approaches," a play by Tony Kushner, is a co-production of Meadow Brook Theatre and the Department of Music, Dance and Theatre at Oakland University.

Performances: 7:30 p.m. Thursday-Friday, May 7-8; May 13-15; 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday May 9 and 16; 2 p.m. Sunday, May 10 and 17. Varner Studio Theatre, Varner Hall, on the campus of Oakland University, Rochester Hills. Tickets: \$18, (248) 377-3300.

Seldom does a play come along that serves as many purposes as

"Angels in America: Millennium Approaches" at Oakland University's Studio Theatre.

A provocative play about a range of hot-button topics, "Angels in America" spares neither tactfulness nor decorum in making its point: America is in serious denial, more concerned with consumerism than social conscience.

But politics aside, "Angels In America" is an optimistic sign of the future of theater in Oakland County.

The collaboration between

OU's Department of Theatre and Meadow Brook Theatre proves that at the core of any theatrical experience must be an appeal to community.

After one-too-many musical revivals and predictable dramas, perhaps Meadow Brook Theatre has found a way to push the boundaries without insulting their conservative subscribers.

To his credit, director Geoffrey Sherman pulls off a gutsy production that combines some fine performances by an experienced cast along with a look at some

promising student-theaters still figuring out their craft.

Set in the intimate Varner Hall Studio Theatre, Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning play literally engages the audience by making them feel a part of the play.

In a frenetic display of indignancy, raw homosexuality and the haunting insanity of a society lacking compassion, the play unfolds on the floor-stage from several directions.

There are four entrances/exits with actors carrying on props to complement the play's minimal set design.

The issues covered by playwright Kushner could be placed in the pot of the most controversial issues of the day: AIDS, homosexuality, racism, sexism, political aggrandizement and notions about what exactly is "American."

In essence, homosexuality isn't just a label or something that happens "out there." The proximity of the actors presents the "unsexy" issues of an arm's length away. Close enough to see the humanity of those who are victims of prejudice and a plague.

But as an alarming indication about the state of American theater, no other play in the '90s has compelled audiences to directly confront the long shadows sweeping over American culture.

Essentially, Kushner defiantly poses a challenge to the audience: Deal with it.

And the cast proves they're up to the challenge. Again and

again and again.

Structured in well-timed episodes, the ensemble handles a range of roles. Primarily, the story revolves around the infamous attorney Roy Cohn, a homosexual couple and a husband and wife.

In a preview performance, the cast showed the raw energy and dexterity of an ensemble finding its own rhythm and interpretation. That's an incredible accomplishment given that they had rehearsed the play for less than three weeks.

Once again, Sherman and the OU Department of Theatre deserve kudos for tackling the demanding play and putting together a production that doesn't compromise the author's vision nor the character's dimensionality.

As mentors, veteran actors Robert Grossman and Karen Sheridan prove up to the task. In particular, Grossman's portrayal of Cohn is achingly surreal, at times he's the calculating beast behind the persecution of Joe McCarthy's political enemies and pathetically insecure about his own sexuality.

Given time, Grossman will no doubt create one of the most unforgettable portrayals seen in some time in Detroit theatre.

The remaining cast all have their outstanding moments. Of special note is Ray Schultz, who walks a fine edge of his character's intellectual ramblings and his basic desire to survive the onslaught of AIDS.



On stage: John Biedenbach and Jacquie Floyd in "Angels In America."

For sheer energy and emotional range, John Biedenbach demonstrated that he is an actor willing to stretch and experiment.

Biedenbach's performance is the centerpiece of the play. And he doesn't flinch. His energy and emotion resound long after the winged angel descends.

For anyone who believes theater can heal, you'll find "Angels In America" is the first step. A catharsis of the first order.

The impressive debut of Meadow Brook-OU Department of Theatre's collaboration will be closely followed. And more importantly, greatly anticipated.

## Great 'Odd Couple' delivers

Ridgedale Players present "The Odd Couple," female version, by Neil Simon, Friday-Sunday, May 8-10 and Thursday-Sunday, May 14-17 at the playhouse 205 W. Long Lake Road, Troy. Performances 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday, and 7:30 p.m. Thursday. Tickets \$11, \$10 on Thursday, May 14, and include a sandwich and coffee afterglow. Discount for seniors and students on Sunday. Call (248) 988-7049. Bring donations for Haven House, a shelter for abused women and their children.

By HELEN ZUCKER  
SPECIAL WRITER

The Ridgedale Players production of the female version of Neil Simon's canny play, "The Odd Couple," is hilarious. Directed by D. Coffey and Laura Bell, the six women in the cast bond together in the way old school friends can, and the two men seem joined at the hip. The fast and furious energy is wonderful.

Danielle Milton as Olive Madison of the quick mind, empathetic heart and slowly witty, is darkly vibrant. A workaholic who sends her ex money, Olive eats all her meals out, and from the way her apartment looks, is only in on Wednesday nights when the girls come over to play Trivial Pursuit.

Milton exudes real physical menace in the scene where she kicks Florence out, and a poignant mix of horniness and

loneliness when she begs Florence to think of a romantic evening instead of cooking.

Kimberly Cruchon is terrific as the compulsive, gymnastic, neurotic Florence Underwiler. Floeing from her husband who wants to divorce her, though she's "a wonderful wife and mother," Florence is taken in by Olive. By morning, Florence is happily waxing, vacuuming, putting Olive's belongings in black garbage sacks, doing moose calls at night, impossible neck and back postures by day; in short, making Olive wish she had jumped out of the window. Cruchon looks like a woman in an El Greco painting, and she's very funny trying to put English into Spanish and vice versa.

Tony Castellani as Jesus Costazuela (call me "Hoy") is at once an innocent and a sophisticate. His brother, Manolo, played with great verve and wit by Jim Rink, describes both brothers as "new." They work for Iberia in sales and management, live in Olive's Park Place Avenue apartment house, are divorced from Spanish wives, but in many ways are deeply traditional. They are gentlemen of the old school, speak of Castilian and "Bartholomina," and trade wonderful proverbs that melt away in a haze. They leap up and down whenever the ladies stand or sit

and tell us "that's why we need siestas." They wind up angry at Olive and whisk Florence away to stay with them. (What happens to the Spaniards and Florence is the stuff of another play).

Tania Velinsky as Mickey, the lady cop, is warm, sensible, and very good as a woman comfortably wedded to a man who wishes an affair on him so she'd be left in peace.

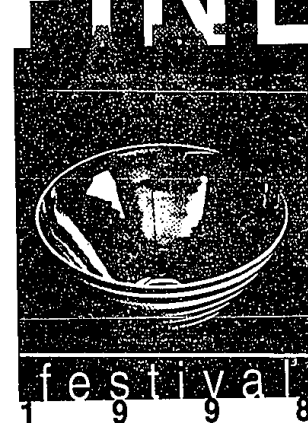
Susie Skibicki shines as Vera, the dowdy, slightly dim intellectual whose husband thinks she dresses "too sexy." Skibicki manages a Vera who is always one step behind, yet one of the girls. Kimberly Renfrew Gobbie is very fine as Renee, the fast thinker who ends her affair with a gynecologist and seems to be sending thought rays out over the universe as she discusses Florence, their game and life. Madonna Holden is radiant as Sylvie.

Florence gets independent, Sylvie gets pregnant, Olive gets money from her ex, the neighborly brothers get Florence and the audience gets a wonderful evening.

The set and props by Jim West, Helen Gach, Linda Martini and crew, sound by Carl Jones and Thom Griffin are dandy. Sandra Grider's working girl costumes are swell. Sonia Milton produced.

BIRMINGHAM

FINE



festival

Saturday May 9, 10 a.m. - 6 p.m.  
Sunday May 10, 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.

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