

THEATER

Actors' Company intense in 'Agnes of God'

The Actor's Company presents John Pielmeier's riveting drama "Agnes of God," 8 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays through Jan. 23 at Trinity House Theatre, 38840 W. Six Mile Road, between I-275 and Haggerty, Livonia. Tickets are \$14 with group discounts available, call (248) 988-7032. BY SUE SUCHITTA SPECIAL WRITER

The Actor's Company's presentation of the gripping psychological drama "Agnes of God" is an intense and well-performed serious drama. Director Michael Gravano of Madison Heights assembled a talented cast and produced a tightly paced show, an element crucial to the success of a heavy drama. Theater lovers will enjoy the well-performed show, but it's not what you'd want for a light evening out, and

the content is inappropriate for preteens.

"Agnes of God" is the story of a court-appointed psychiatrist, Dr. Livingstone, sent to determine the mental competency of a young nun, Agnes, to stand trial after her newborn is found dead in a wastebasket. Agnes, young, naive, and the product of childhood abuse, has blocked everything from her conscious mind. Dr. Livingstone becomes obsessed with the case and with Agnes, and with both the resistance and help of the Mother Superior begins to unravel the truth behind the devastating discovery.

The talented three-woman cast is a strong tour-de-force, and their chemistry makes the show click. Rae McIntosh of Beverly Hills as Dr. Martha Livingstone mixes an aggressive, take charge

personality with the touch of vulnerability needed to lend depth and likability to her character. Although she stumbled over a few of her lines opening night, she had an otherwise strong performance and stage presence. Her soliloquies tied the scenes together, giving the show a sense of progression.

Tania Velinsky of Royal Oak captured both the naivete and terror of Agnes, the young innocent who has endured too much emotional torment in her young life. Even her face reflected a tranquil, innocent quality so essential to the role's believability, and her voice conveyed a childlike lilt and cadence. She was equally effective portraying Agnes' physical agony when under hypnosis as she relived scenes of childhood torment and the traumatic birth of her child.

Charlotte Leisinger of Detroit was a natural to the Mother Superior role, with a no-nonsense and seasoned approach to both the character's serenity and stubbornness. Leisinger and McIntosh played well off each other in their head-to-head scenes.

The set was intentionally simple, with a series of raised platforms and straight-backed chairs. Subdued gray banners flanked the wings, complementing the costume colors: Dr. Livingstone's tailored gray pant suit, the Mother Superior's gray habit, and Agnes' symbolically pure white robes. The musical selections interspersed throughout the production were well-chosen, non-intrusive, and subtly reinforced the mood.

Ridgedale's 'The View From Here' worth a look

Ridgedale Players presents "The View From Here," 8 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays, Jan. 15-16 and 22-23, and 3 p.m. Sundays, Jan. 17 and 24 at the playhouse, 205 W. Long Lake Road, (1/4 mile west of Livonia) Troy. Tickets \$11, \$10 seniors/students at Sunday performances, call (248) 988-7049.

BY HELEN ZUCKER SPECIAL WRITER

The Ridgedale Players production of Margaret Dulaney's "The View From Here" is wonderfully acted. Directed by Kent Martini and Vicki Higin with special assistance from Jim Rink, the cast fine-tunes Dulaney's fiercely tender lines and keeps the play afloat.

"A View From Here" is the kind of play that can easily denigrate into sitcom, but in the hands of the Ridgedale troupe, it never does.

Laura Kerr is totally believable as Fern, the agoraphobic who watches babies for a living. Fern hasn't been out of the house since 1992, yet she's in

hourly contact with her mother, her sister, her neighbors, and the world via TV. Kerr gives us a Fern who's very funny, very wired, and deeply sad. Kerr's physicality gives her an edge; she does Buster Keaton flops over the couch, falls on her knees to thank the Lord in all directions, lifts weights and seems to be made of rubber. Kerr makes us believe that winning a microwave from the Super Kroger may be the beginning of a cure, and "Arnold Palmer," the golfing neighbor, may be the cure itself. Kerr's keen mind shines through Fern's diary lines.

Julie Fuller is superb as Maple, Fern's sister who has

been trying to have a baby for 12 years. Fuller has a remarkable ability to move from the depths of depression (no speech) to full, tearing rage in seconds. Maple is a creature of general sweetness, meant to nurture babies and coddle her mother who is in the "nifty house," still trying to make a baby with Maple at play's end. Whether she's wearing wigs, cooing to "Arnold's" child, or trying to talk sense to her sister, Fuller gives us a Maple who is rooted in hope in a disappointing world. Fuller and Kerr make us aware that these sisters will survive.

Pam Heath is hilarious as Carla, a neighbor with big hair, big bags and a very big mouth. Carla comes equipped with every crime story and strange event that ever made its way into the tabloids. Heath wears a wonderful bikini shirt, and gives us a Carla who drives men away with her table manners. Yet Heath makes the little girl who is afraid of cars, and of life, peep through the racket Carla makes.

Gary Sekerak, in his harlequin trousers, as "Arnold" whose wife has left him with an infant, is soft spoken. Arnold is thankful for goodness where he finds it, tells his infant daughter she leads a "charmed life," and we believe it despite his straits. Arnold finally gets Fern out of the house. Sekerak ends the play on the right note: life has its hiccups, but it has its graces, too.

Linda Martin's costumes are clever; the props by Helen Gach, Valerie Simkus, Carolyn Church, set construction by Mike Flum and set decoration by Dawn Hooper, especially the portrait of Elvis, blend into the words.

Village Players 'Deathtrap' suspenseful

Birmingham Village Players presents "Deathtrap," 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, Jan. 15-16 and Jan. 22-23; 2 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 17 at the theater, 752 Chestnut, Birmingham. Tickets \$12, \$10 children age 18 and younger, (248) 644-2075. BY MARY JANE DOERF SPECIAL WRITER

The Village Players latest theatrical suspense thriller "Deathtrap" is enough to give anyone a severe case of what playwright Ira Levin calls "thrilleritis malitia."

Suspense permeates the air from the minute Bob Overmyer stops on Bob Carington's striking English tutor living room set as the seemingly casual Sidney Bruhl. Sally Savoie is Bruhl's uptight wife Myra.

The scene might be pleasantly appealing except for the wall decor of murderous paraphernalia; all sorts of cross bows, daggers, guns, and Houdini hand-

cuffs. Blatantly apparent is why Myra has stress related syndrome and heart disease, which Savoie clearly projects with acting skills. Anybody would be nervous who was living in the Connecticut countryside with an aging playwright with writer's block in the middle of a mid-life crisis. Sidney is insanely jealous of a promising young student, Clifford Anderson, in his seminar class on mystery writing. Matt Rafferty is natural and straight forward as Clifford, completing this trio of diverse characters: the jealous, the neurotic with the cold-hearted.

Sidney might be affable except that Overmyer's smooth portrayal leaves the audiences in little doubt of Sidney's malicious intentions beneath his mellifluous conversations with the fearful Myra. As Sidney heads for the railroad station to pick up Clifford who is bringing the only

copies of his first play, everyone understands Myra's concern that Sidney's intentions are murderous.

The "Bruhl-ha-ha" of this mystery thriller is that it while the actions follow the pattern of the mystery Angel Street, just as we figure out the plot, there is an unexpected twist. No matter how many times we see the movie with Christopher Reeves, the freshness of a live stage performance makes the shocking murders even more surprising. This Ira Levin classic mystery thriller is filled with not only witty lines but humor. The highly experienced Joan Reddy captures that humor as an adorable psychic Helga Ten Dorp. She knows how to get the laughs with clearly spoken, well-timed lines despite the necessarily heavy accent.

Perhaps Wayne Yashinsky is a lawyer in real life or has been. He plays the part of Porter Mil-

grim with such believability and a classy reality that brings some reality to the surrealist plot.

Bill Haycock directs the play with his usual professional tightness and effectiveness along with help from Jay Petersen, Maureen Cook, Keith Lapard. He doesn't try to update the piece with updated electronic equipment to replace the manual typewriters.

"Deathtrap" may seem like play that incorporates the death wishes of two eccentric mystery writers who have crossed the line between "murder on paper" and the real thing. While Sidney never does beat Clifford to death with a Roger's Thesaurus as he threatens, the murders, who commit them and when and why, is the fun that is enough to turn Ira Levin's fictitious disease thrilleritis malitia into thrilleritis malignus.

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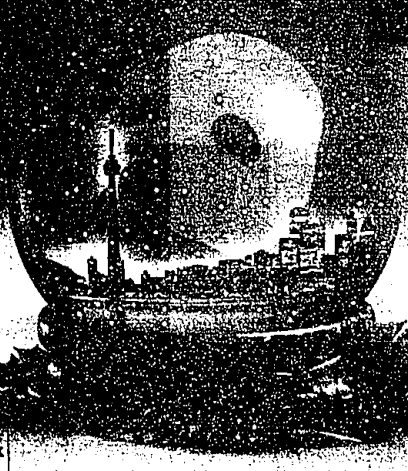
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