

Gem Theatre 'yoops' it up with Jeff Daniels' play

"Escanaba in da Moonlight," a comedy by Jeff Daniels, runs through Feb. 13 at the Gem Theatre, 333 Madison Ave., Detroit. Performances: 8 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday. Tickets: \$29.50-\$56.50. For information call (313) 963-9800.

BY ALICE REYN
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Sure, there are thick breezes of flatulence jokes and a profusion of politically incorrect "yooper" conventions, but what's not to love in "Escanaba in da Moonlight"?
Not much. In fact, fewer folks leave the show with a frown on

their face than there are men walking the streets of downtown Menominee on opening day of deer hunting season. In both cases, there sure aren't many.
Jeff Daniels' comedy offers a constant array of manly merriment regulated by practical wisdom.
"If you're looking back at the things that you missed, you won't know what hit you," is just such a truism.
Yet this story does look back, to opening day 1989 at the Sooty deer camp, "the world famous Sooty deer camp," outside Escanaba.
In a log cabin decorated with animal hides and cases of Gobel

beer, Albert Sooty (Jim Porterfield) talks up the Superior State while he rips on the "flatlander fudge-sucking, beer-drinking trolls" who drive up north in their Winnebagoes.
"If we wanted company we would have built a bridge sooner."
He's awaiting the arrival of his sons, Ruben (Phil Powers) and Remnar (Joseph Albright) and he candidly explains, are not "the sharpest tool in the shed."
Ruben, at 35, is about to become the eldest "buckless Yooper" in Sooty family history. So this year, he's breaking with tradition. No pasties. No Spam and mayo sandwiches in the

blind. He's trusting that the concoctions and incantations from his full-blooded Indian wife Wolf Moon Dance (Sandra Birch) will guide his aura (that's air-a as in "the air around ya") and break the curse that has forever denied him a buck.
Naturally, the Sooty men and friend Jimmer (Wayne David Parker), whose speech was rendered unintelligible after an alien abduction, are reluctant to stray.
Remnar offers evidence to that with the tattered, duct-taped flannel shirt he's worn since he was 9. "Does it smell?" he asks rhetorically, "Most certainly." But it's tradition. And the

Sooty men don't mess with ancestral forces.
Hilarious happenings ricochet as the plot charges through visions of God, mishaps with porcupine pee and a surprise visit from DNR Ranger Tom Treado (Randall Godwin), who has a penchant for teddies.
But there are moments of "Blair Witch" suspense, as when the men confront a "bear walk," which, according to their knowledge of Indian lore, requires a sacrifice far beyond going without whisky for the duration of camp.
Under Guy Sanville's direction, the cast hits their comedic marks dead-on. And though

pretty much the same group has been performing since it first opened at the Chelsea's Purple Rose Theatre in 1997, they still have the ability to make rehearsed material sound - and appear - spontaneously funny.
Daniels has plans to take his gem to the silver screen and is currently working on the movie screenplay. But you'd be wise to see the Gem's production.
Get ready for a facial muscle workout because "Escanaba in da Moonlight" will keep you little "flatlander fudge-suckers" grinning ear-to-ear, from da start to da end.

Flanagan's from page C1

ington, extends beyond the stage. Audience members are encouraged, prodded, provoked and drafted into participating in putting flesh on the skeleton story about Flanagan's dreams, demise and foibles.
The collaboration with the audience requires a balance of wit and respectful distance - not easy when the cast is on the prowl for a quick laugh. But with this endearing cast, there is a near-instant comfort.
While actor appear firmly grounded in their respective characters, it's when they let out their personalities and demonstrate their improv skills that they shine.
At various times, the spotlight shines on Dorrington, Tony

Lawry of Garden City, Dojan Ravich of Livonia, Charles McGraw of Hamtramck, Tom Whalen of Royal Oak, Pat Caporuscio of Richmond and Courtney Jo Demsey of Grosse Pointe.
All have their fair share of dramatic and comedic theater credits and stints in improv.
Together they take audiences on a journey through an Irish wake without hitting any insulting bumps. Well, then again, that depends on whether you're open to sparring with the likes of Flanagan's angry fiancée or his bubbling, iron-fisted mother.
After six years of performances in Chicago, the play opened in Pontiac in early October. Several weeks later, however, the origi-

nal producer, Joe Nederlander, pulled out of the show, and Baci owners Nino and Luigi Cutaro stepped up to keep alive "Flanagan's Wake" and extend its open-ended run.
In a local theater scene often lacking in vibrant performances, "Flanagan's Wake" offers a glimmer of hope. It's the type of play that will be fun for those who prefer movies or home entertainment.
And it's a good laugh for die-hard theater-goers who should be impressed with the improv ability of the cast.
"Danny Boy" might be delivered off-key, but there's nothing out of tune with "Flanagan's Wake."

Conversations from page C1

Within a recent 10-day stretch, she will have moved into a downtown Birmingham condo from her home in Bloomfield Township, traveled to and from Florida, then made a two-day jaunt to New York to make presentations to venture capitalists to try to attract financial support for I-CAN.
And before she leaves the Big Apple, she'll present a \$75,000 check for spinal-cord research at a dinner given by Christopher Reeve.

No excuses
In 1992, Van Arness established a foundation to help find a cure for paralysis.
And about four years ago, she began "Spend A Day In A Wheelchair," a program to help students heighten awareness of the challenges faced by people with disabilities.
By the end of the day, it's not unusual, said Van Arness, for students to be in tears, partly out of frustration, partly due to the melting away of their igo-

rance.
"People can't begin to realize how devastating it is to be in a wheelchair."
Yet the greater conundrum might be why we all continue to accept the violence at the root of so many these "accidents" that leave people bound within their own bodies.
Too busy? That just isn't an excuse.
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Galleries from page C1

Indeed, the pervasive quality of the exhibits at the Kidd, Klein and N'Namdi galleries is that most of the paintings contain a sense of mystery.
Ever since the emergence of

photography in the mid 19th century and the efficiency of translating a snap of a shutter into an impeccable resemblance of reality, the art of painting has undergone a continual search for

identity.
A canvas is a reflection of both physical and spiritual realities.
Perhaps each of the exhibits along Townsend Street illustrates Jackson Pollock's oft-quoted observation: "Painting is a state of being. Every good artist paints what he (or she) is."

ART BEAT
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DSO TO PERFORM LOCAL COMPOSER'S WORK
Erich Kunzel will lead the Detroit Symphony Pops in the finale from Tuskagee Airmen Suite, written by local composer Brian Belanger of Royal Oak.
The Suite, which was original-

ly premiered in entirety by the Birmingham-Bloomfield Symphony Orchestra under Felix Reanick in October 1998, is a tribute to the group of black World War II pilots known as the Tuskegee Airmen.
Belanger, who is the recipient of two Michigan Council for the Arts grants, became interested in composing a piece to honor the Airmen after attending a fund-raising dinner for the Tuskegee National Historical Museum in Detroit.

The performance will be part of the DSO program that features the Flying Karamazov Brothers and works of Tchaikovsky, Hayman and Williams.
Concerts are 8 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 18; 8:30 Friday & Saturday, Nov. 19-20, and 3 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 21.
Tickets: \$14-\$47. For information, call (313) 578-5111, or (313) 576-5130.

FRANKLIN RESIDENT EXHIBITS IN TOLEDO
The art work Patrick McCoy of Franklin will be on exhibit Nov. 20-Jan. 7 at 20 North St. Clair Gallery in Toledo.

McCoy, an acclaimed painter in his home country of England, is a new faculty member at the Center for Creative Studies. His large-scale works on paper and canvas have been described as a connection between art and music.
For information, call (419) 241-2400.
CALLING ARTISTS FOR POLK CONTEST
The Polk Company has announced its third-annual art competition held exclusively for Michigan artists.
The juried art contest, "The Polk Competition: Art & Technology," will feature the selection of works of 50 artists. Ten artists will be chosen for the top cash awards.
Deadline for entries is Feb. 18, 2000.
The works will be displayed May 14-20 at the Birmingham Bloomfield art Center. The award-winning pieces will be included in the Polk Collection.
For more information, call Dan Willis, Polk public relations director, at (248) 782-7827.



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