

Detroit Rep raises veil on Catholic liturgy mystery

"Ad Altare Dei (Unto the Altar of God)," a two-act play by John E. Shea. Through Thursday, Dec. 31 at the Detroit Repertory Theatre, 13103 Woodward Wilson, Detroit. Times: 8:30 p.m. Thursday & Friday, 3 & 8:30 p.m. Saturday; 2 & 7:30 p.m. Sunday; (313) 868-1347. e-mail: detreph@aol.com

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER
fprovenzano@e.home.com.net

In "Ad Altare Dei (Unto the Altar of God)," playwright John E. Shea sets forth an interesting idea for a spirited drama about a priest's reluctance to obey the liturgy in English, shortly after the reforms of Vatican II. A topic

that allows Shea to traverse ancillary subjects such as good, evil and redemption, while defending the need for faith to be espoused in a mystical language.

Overall, "Unto the Altar of God" is an ambitious play performed at the Detroit Repertory Theatre, one of the few regional venues producing contemporary work. In fact, this season Detroit Rep features premiere performances for all four of its plays.

Few other theatres have demonstrated the commitment to the tradition of theatre and the healing power of setting contemporary dramas upon a stage as Detroit Rep.

Yet in the case of "Unto the Altar of God" even a talented cast cannot salvage a script with one too many quick turns and superficial subplots.

The Monsignor Rene LaFarve is played by Robert J. Finner, a frequent actor who shows up frequently in Meadow Brook Theatre productions.

Grossman plays the role with an impious swagger and sarcasm, and from scene to scene, seems to be trying to figure out the emotional intensity of the story. Not an easy task since the playwright forsakes dramatic pacing for preaching, and worse, attempts several plot twists to set up the ultimate metaphor, whereby the play's 13 characters assume positions at a modern-day Last Supper.

While the topic of faith, language and the mystery of life make for a fascinating topic for the drama, the application of the idea comes off as a tiresome gimmick.

For instance, Monsignor LaFarve is threatened with dismissal if he doesn't conform to the Church's mandate to say the mass in English. The dictum comes from the archbishop takes on added melodrama when it's revealed that the holy patriarch is also LaFarve's childhood friend.

Throw in a prostitute whose mother had amorous intentions for the crusty Monsignor, two adolescent boys fighting against their abusive father, and an

African-American priest who is a combination of Sydney Pottier and Ossie Bedding, and the dramatic mix is more like a sampling from predictable torn-from-the-headlines movie-of-the-week fare.

It even gets more implausible when LaFarve's long-time secretary has the type of "secret" that wouldn't even make it into a soap opera script.

What the story needs most is what it has the least - intimacy and mystery. The melodic whisper of Latin is an ideal vehicle to enter the spiritual realm of the newly reformed apostolic church.

Yet the set design of a long, bulky table, a desk and chairs

creates an unnecessary distance with the audience.

But in fairness to the playwright and Detroit Rep, the ambitious production of "Unto the Altar of God" shouldn't dissuade audiences. The play offers several compelling issues.

In addition, the cast, especially Grossman, Dee Andrus, and Roy Dennison bring the most paths from their roles.

And for any Catholic who recalls the sudden change when the mass began to be recited in English, the play will likely inspire memories when the veil began to be raised on the mystery of the liturgy.

'Heiress' awakens from sleepy 1st act

"The Heiress" continues through Sunday, Nov. 29 at the historic Baldwin Theatre, 415 S. Lafayette, Royal Oak. Performances 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, with additional performances 8 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 19; 7 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 22, and 2 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 29. Tickets \$10 and \$12, all seats reserved, call (248) 541-6430.

BY JON KATZ
SPECIAL WRITER

Catherine's life was doomed from birth, for she would always bear the burden of her mother's death in delivery. That burden includes an impossible task, as her stern and unloving father has been waiting for this plain young woman to "approach the perfection of your mother." How perfect was she? She even tuned her own piano!

Stagecrafters presents "The Heiress" as its season's prerequisite drama. Set near the turn of the century when New York's Washington Square was populated with the genteel upper crust in pillared brownstones, the play glides along, well, genteelly. The final scene, however, packs a wallop that could qualify Catherine for an appearance with Sally Jesse Raphael.

Who amongst us hasn't felt like the proverbial square peg in life's round hole? Painfully shy, Catherine (Robin Thomas) is without charm or poise. She crumbles like a cracker when

company comes into the parlor. Why isn't she going married like cousin Marian (Michelle Held)? "Someone must love me," she declares. "Someone must tell me he wants me."

Her new brother-in-law's cousin Morris (Tony Castellani) eagerly applies for the job. This oily cad, having gone through his own inheritance, sets his sights on Catherine's, and it seems there's not much he's unwilling to do to get it, short of breaking into a chorus of "On the Street Where You Live."

To her father (Pat Reid), Morris' motives are "pitifully clear." Catherine, as expected, is dazzled by their first kiss, and succumbs to his quick proposal. Is Morris' love true? Will father cut her off if she marries him? How much of herself is Catherine willing to sacrifice to meet the expectations of others - or can she summon the courage to tell the world where to go?

Robin Thomas is a woeful caterpillar and an even more plodding butterfly; her metamorphosis a superb accomplishment. Like her Venetian crystal so desired by Morris, Thomas' Catherine is delicate and easily shattered, yet durable and, yes, beautiful in ways that her relatives and suitor can't see.

Pat Reid's Dr. Sluper is the living embodiment of every Victorian-era portrait. Have you ever seen a smiling face in one? You won't on this man, either; his bit-

terness is so deep it stays with him right into the grave. Reid plays the doctor as your most intimidating college professor, only he happens to be your father, too: "There are some things one cannot give to others; one cannot give eyes or understanding if they have none."


Tony Castellani is a wolf in chamois gloves. His Morris skulks outside the hen house licking his chops, even winning over the doctor's two sisters: sympathetic, somewhat vacant Aunt Lavinia (nicely played by Jeanine Matlow) and non-nonsense Mrs. Almond (Linda Hammell, a five-foot tornado who'd make Carrie Nation a wimp).

"The Heiress" suffers from a sleepy first act that doesn't awaken until the closing line, but it rolls to its "what's she gonna do?" conclusion with vigor and much audience interest. The set is rich with velvet and French Provincial, but could have used a background flat to add to the authenticity, rather than go for the abstract. Costuming is a Stagecrafters' strength; lavish dresses and handsome waistcoats abound. Sound reinforcement was lacking in conversations between Catherine and Morris.

"The Heiress" has much contemporary relevancy; it's intriguing to see a woman at the close of the last millennium demanding the same right of self-determination.

The City of Southfield presents the *Southfield Celebrity Series*

Judy Collins
Holiday Concert



Tuesday, December 8, 1998
at 8:00 pm
Southfield Centre for the Arts
24350 Southfield Road

"a voice of liquid silver"
The New York Times


Tickets are \$30 and \$35 per person. Tickets available at all **TICKETMASTER** Ticket Centers including Hudson's and Harmony House Stores. To charge 248/645-6666. Tickets are also available by check or cash at Southfield City Hall, 26000 Evergreen Road, at the Main Reception Desk weekdays 8 am to 5 pm; or the Parks & Recreation Building evenings 5 to 7 pm and Saturdays 9 am to 2 pm.

Pre-concert dinner offered by the Golden Mushroom at 6:00 pm. For dinner reservations at \$25 per person, contact the Golden Mushroom at 248/559-4230.

Call the City of Southfield Community Relations Department at 248/354-4854 for more information.

THE DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

BUT IS IT ART?



LIKE YOU'VE NEVER SEEN BEFORE.

NOW OPEN:
THE NEW GALLERIES OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART.

FEATURING THE SPECIAL EXHIBITION: A PASSION FOR GLASS: THE AVIVA AND JACK A. ROBINSON STUDIO GLASS COLLECTION THROUGH FEBRUARY 14.

TOUR OF MODERN & CONTEMPORARY GALLERIES: SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2 P.M. WITH THE CENTER FOR CREATIVE STUDIES' DENNIS NAVROCKI.

GLASS WORKSHOP FOR TEACHERS: SATURDAY, DECEMBER 5, 9 AM-3:30 PM. FOR FEES AND TO REGISTER, CALL (313) 833-4249.

MUSEUM HOURS: 11 AM-4 PM WEDNESDAYS-FRIDAYS; OPEN TILL 9 PM THE FIRST FRIDAY OF EACH MONTH. 11 AM-5 PM SATURDAYS & SUNDAYS. CLOSED MONDAYS & TUESDAYS.

RECOMMENDED ADMISSION: \$4 PER ADULT; \$1 PER CHILD; DIA MEMBERS FREE.

THE 1998 REINSTALLATION OF THE MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY COLLECTIONS WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY GRANTS FROM THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS, THE GARDNER FUND, THE FRIENDS OF MODERN ART AND FOURHOURS JUNIOR COUNCIL OF THE DIA, THE MICHIGAN COUNCIL FOR ARTS AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS, AND THE CITY OF DETROIT. PROGRAM AIDED TOUR SPONSORED BY HUDSON'S.

A PASSION FOR GLASS WAS ORGANIZED BY THE DIA AND IS MADE POSSIBLE WITH THE SUPPORT OF AVIVA AND JACK A. ROBINSON, THE MICHIGAN COUNCIL FOR ARTS AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS AND THE CITY OF DETROIT.

CELESTINE ZUBER, THE BEAST, 1987

5200 WOODWARD AVENUE, DETROIT, MI 48202 • (313) 833-7900 • www.dia.org

THE MICHIGAN EXTENDS YOUR OPPORTUNITY TO

FARVEST THE 'MAGIC'
IN TORONTO!

TOP-PRICED TORONTO 'PHANTOM' TICKETS AT 2 FOR \$90! (US)

IN THE SPIRIT OF THANKSGIVING, LIVENET IS PLEASED TO OFFER MUSICALS THEATER GOERS THIS SPECIAL SAVINGS OFFER!

BOOKING DEADLINE EXTENDED TO NOVEMBER 20!

SPECIAL 'PHANTOM' THANKSGIVING BONUS OFFER!
With the purchase of every new Phantom ticket, you will also receive FREE The Phantom's TORONTO BONUS COUPON BOOK 10th Year Celebration Edition WITH UP TO \$500 IN SAVINGS!

ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER'S
The PHANTOM of the OPERA
Directed by HAROLD PRINCE

NOW IN ITS TENTH YEAR IN TORONTO!

AT&T CENTRE FOR THE PHANTOM OPERA
PANTAGES THEATRE

SPECIAL HOLIDAY PERFORMANCE: FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 27 AT 2:00 PM

CALL: (416) 872-2222 AND QUOTE DISCOUNT CODE: NOV1998 OFFER IS AVAILABLE BY PHONE ORDER ONLY

THIS EXCLUSIVE OFFER IS VALID FOR ALL PERFORMANCES OF TORONTO'S PHANTOM NOW THROUGH JANUARY 31, 1999 (excluding Saturday evenings)

FOR INDIVIDUAL TICKETS TRAVEL AGENTS TO TORONTO, CALL LIVENET THEATRE AT 416-872-2222 OR YOUR LOCAL TRAVEL PROFESSIONAL

Concessionaires: CIBC, Delta, The Music Store, Ticketmaster, and many more.