COMMUNITY THEATER

Warm comedy a sign of a good year for SRO

BY SUSAN TAUBER
STAFF WRITER

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Here are a few theater trivia questions: What play won the Tony Award for Best Play in 1964? "The Teahouse of the August Moon."

Next: Who wrote the script for this outstanding comedy, which was made into a famous movie in 1956 starring Marlon Brando? Answer: John Patrick.

OK, name another play by John Patrick?

Stumped? The answer is "A Bad Year for Tomatoes."

And if you aren't familiar with the play, Standing Room Only Productions is offering everyone a chance to see another of Patrick's warm comedies also filled with personable, zany characters.

The title, "A Bad Year for Tomatoes," tends to make one question what kind of play it is.

"It's a comedy that will make people feel happy and pleased to be alive," said director Genevieve Terry of Farmington Hills. "Adults and kids will get a big kick out of it because of the funny characters."

The story is about an actress who wants to get away from her hectic life. She leases a house in the small town of Beaver Haven, to write her memoirs, according to William Mandt, SRO productions executive producer. The plot revolves around the actress, her agent, pretend sister, funny neighbors and the town sheriff. The name of the play stems from conversations about tomato growing.

On Stage

What: SRO Productions presents "A Bad Years for Tomatoes"
When: 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday, through March 26.
Where: The church at the historic Burgh site, at Civic Center Drive and Berg Road, Southfield
Tickets: $10 general admission; $8 for senior adults and children. For information, call (248) 827-0701.

The play takes place in the year 1969, which, Terry said, allows Barbara Amman of Livonia a chance to use crazy clothes for costumes. Set designer Maggie Gilkes of Farmington Hills created a tiny haven in Vermont look with an old wood cabin, complete with cedar shingles and other authentic touches.

But the biggest challenges to preparing the production for opening night were finding a beaver and instilling a New England accent in the actors.

"We had the hardest time finding a stuffed beaver for a prop," said Terry. "Luckily, my daughter, Patricia knew someone who lived in Brighton who had one we could borrow."

Alice Durbin is the dialect coach to this group of community theater performers. Ves Spindler probably has the easiest time with his accent, according to Terry. His lines consist mostly of one-word retort, stereotypical of a small town New Englander.

Not so for Linda Pelliccioni of Northville, who has the lead role of Myra. She's on stage for 56 pages of the 58-page script, said her husband, Larry Pelliccioni. He plays her wise-guy agent, Tom.

"A Bad Year for Tomatoes" is the sixth community theater production the Pelliccionis have been in together.

"This play is really fun for us," Larry Pelliccioni said. "We've added some dialogue to the part when I attempt to seduce her. It's more fun for us since we're married."

In fact, community theater is what brought this theatrical couple together.

Making a scene: *Robin DeMaagd, (standing left to right) Linda Pelliccioni, Terri Denise Faison, and Connie Fox (seated) in a scene from "A Bad Year For Tomatoes."*

"We were both cast in a play at Ridgedale Players in Troy together in 1991 and we were married in 1992," he said.

"I have had the good fortune to have married my leading lady and that's just as true today as it was eight years ago."

Linda said she enjoys working with her husband on stage. "It's actually very comforting to have him up there with me," she said.

Working behind the scenes are producer and stage manager Joan Boufford of Southfield and assistant director Martha Tabacco of Farmington Hills. Ben Chunov and Mark Liljegren are responsible for lights and sound. Ron DeMaagd handles props. Gilkes also handles the playbill.

"A Bad Year for Tomatoes" opens SRO Productions' 2000 season. The season includes "You Should Be So Lucky," opening May 12; "Agnes of God," opening July 28 and "The Last Night of Ballyhoo," which is set to open Oct. 13.

Talented 'Night Watch' cast will keep you in suspense

The Players Guild of Dearborn presents "Night Watch" weekends through Saturday, March 18. Performances 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, March 10-11; 17-18; and 2:30 p.m. Sunday, March 12. The theater is on Madison St. near the southwest corner of Monroe and Outer Drive in Dearborn. For tickets or more information, call (313) 561-TXTS.

BY SUE SUCHYTA
SPECIAL WRITER

The Players Guild of Dearborn's production of Lucille Fletcher's suspenseful drama "Night Watch" is a well-acted, quick-paced and captivating production.

Under the experienced hand of director Patricia LaFramboise the talented cast has captured the traits of each character and realistically blended them into the storyline.

"Night Watch" is the story of Elaine Wheeler, a wealthy heiress plagued by insomnia, who tries in vain to convince her husband and the police that she has witnessed not one, but two dead bodies in the building across from her apartment. As a parade of intriguing characters pass through her life, the motives of the different characters suggest many possible reasons for murder and a cover-up. As Elaine continues to insist she's witnessed foul play, her husband and best friend plan to have her committed to conveniently pave the way for their ongoing affair. Will the police believe Elaine, or will someone get away with multiple murder?

Joyce McGookey is a fascinating contradiction as Elaine Wheeler, portraying both the frustrated intensity of a woman clinging to her sanity while at the same time exuding a sensual energy. Lance Abke of Plymouth, who portrays Elaine's husband John, seems stiff at first but warms to the role when his anger, impatience and frustration are stirred.

Alicia Ryan as Blanche, Elaine's best friend and John's mistress, delivers a warm, exuberant performance.

Kirk Haas' Lt. Walker is an effective mix of sarcastic wit and determined but overworked professional. He wastes no words in his blunt but on target delivery.

In contrast, his underling, Officer Vanelli, played by Marl Ripper, overplays the humor and accent in his limited role almost to the point of mugging.

Janice Meissner's Helga would be a lot more fun without the studiously delivered German accent predicated by the script, but the nosy and self-serving housekeeper does inject some humor into the mix. Jennie Ashley, as Dr. Tracey Lake, needs more authority in her voice to pull off the illusion of an esteemed psychiatrist – she comes across as more of a sympathetic friend than a confident professional.

Rich Bulleri has fun with the role of Curtis Appleby, the colorful and nosy neighbor. Jason Thomas, as Sam Hoke, the local deli owner, makes a brief but explosive appearance when Elaine's contribution to the crime rumor mill hurts his business even more than his horrible potato salad.

David Reynolds and Gordon Mosley's set is sumptuous and detailed. It sets the tone for characters' affluence. The detailed woodwork is real, not painted on. The faux marble is elegant and a natural part of the room, and the profusion of artwork is tastefully arranged.

The lighting crew had fun with some offstage lighting effects from Elaine's window. They need to consider darkening the upstage foyer, though, to distinguish the passage of time between scenes.

Director LaFramboise's attention to detail is also reflected in the costumes, right down to weather appropriate coats and elegant accessories.

The cast and crew of "Night Watch" add another strong show to the Guild's season, and will keep you in suspense until the play's final and delightful plot twist.

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