

'Trial of God' commands attention at Trinity House

Trinity House Theatre presents Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel's "The Trial of God" 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday through Sunday, April 30. Trinity House Theatre is at 38840 West Six Mile Road in Livonia, (immediately west of I-275). General admission \$10; Sunday matinees \$5. For tickets or more information, call (734) 464-6302. BY SUE SUCHYTA SPECIAL WRITER

"The Trial of God" is a tragic farce that puts God on trial in the aftermath of a devastating pogrom that all but annihilated a small Russian Jewish community.

Inspired by events during his childhood in Auschwitz, Nobel Peace Prize winning author Elie Wiesel has created a play whose characters demand to know why God allows innocent people to suffer at the hands of their persecutors. Wiesel insisted that humor in his script be preserved amidst the horror of the survivors' accounts. As they hold court against God, we find the prosecution subconsciously defending God, instead of becoming more vehemently opposed to him.

In addition to presenting high

quality community theater productions, Trinity House has pledged to present works that it believes are "brave, necessary and truthful." In the midst of ethnic cleansing atrocities around the world daily, it becomes imperative that the horror of such crimes against humanity become more personal than a sound bite on CNN, lest we become desensitized. Trinity House accomplishes this by bringing this compelling story to its intense and intimate theater setting. Director Thomas Malcom Olson has assembled and honed a strong and talented cast.

Cast

Mark Hammell of Lathrup Village portrays the embittered innkeeper Berish, who, along with his daughter Hannah, portrayed by Hannah Riddell of Canton, are the only surviving Jews after a brutal pogrom in their village. Berish struggles with grief and guilt, and mourns silently over Hannah's devastating emotional state. Into this setting come three Purim Players, who are aghast when they discover their heart-wrenching errors: they have come to a town where the intended celebrants

have been massacred.

Hammell's portrayal of Berish is strong and intense. His agony and frustration with life's cruelty is reflected in both his words and his actions - his body is a mass of defeated tension, and his words ring out with the finality of bitterness toward God and man. His face is a fluid mask of emotions: anger, frustration and guilt.

Anissa Martin of Redford plays Maria, a lapsed Catholic servant at the inn, with unrelenting intensity. She too carries a heavy burden of anger and disdain, since she witnessed the massacre of close friends, but she harbors her own secret tragedy. The physical defeat of her anger and grief is reflected in both her face and slumped body. She moves mechanically, without any joy, never allowing herself to relax. Her face shows the tension and debilitation of one always on guard and unable to seek of receive solace. Martin delivers her lines with force and intensity, commanding attention, and returning all verbal volleys with intense ferocity.

The three Purim Players, played by Paul Henry of Westland, Scott Martin of Redford and Art Colling of Livonia, are strong

as a trio as well as in their individual roles. Henry, the unflinching leader of the band of players, exuded wisdom and patience, and became the judge during the trial of God. Martin, the youngest and least patient of the three, exhibited his group's collective anxiety with his body language and hand gestures. However, his impatience disappeared when Hannah's muddled recitation of the Purim legend called upon his chivalry and patience. Art Colling, the third of the trio, blends well into the camaraderie of the group.

Hannah Riddell's portrayal of the emotionally shattered daughter is haunting and trancelike.

Though her madness limits her character's cognizance, she effectively vents conveying Hannah's suppressed rage and sorrow through her explosive grief for Queen Esther's ordeal.

Guy Snyder of Livonia effectively portrays the starling conflicts of the village priest. Clumsily anti-Semitic, as demanded by his indoctrination, he is nonetheless uncomfortable with the absolutes of the positions, and its contradictions to love one's neighbor.

The Purim Players' masks added an appropriate flavor to the show, providing much needed humor to a tense play. However, while the Purim players, Berish and the

times, ostensibly to drink, but in reality to warn him of an imminent attack by an angry mob of his own parishioners.

Dan Gunning of Redford is intriguing and contradictory as Sam, the mysterious stranger who arrives to defend God. Sam approaches the defense unamazingly, forcing the characters holding God up to judgment to constantly reassess their positions and justify their anger. Gunning is clever with a phrase, with well placed infections and impeccable timing. His gaze is intense and startling, and he effectively shakes up the collection of humanity gathered in the inn.

Costumes

The costumes were mostly superb, from Maria's worn and diry yet provocative tavern wench gown, to Hannah's innocent white night gown. The Purim Players' masks added an appropriate flavor to the show, providing much needed humor to a tense play. However, while the

priest seemed to be costumed from compatible time periods, Sam's modern turtleneck and Alpine jacket seem out of place.

The set captured the elements of a rough countryside tavern well, but Trinity House's stain glass windows should have been masked - what were they doing in a Jewish tavern? And the three cabaret style tables with checkered cloths would have been better served by rough wooden benches. And Maria needs to stop sweeping into corners - get the poor girl a dustpan! The modern green glasses seemed out of place; mugs or tankards, or at least shot glasses might be more appropriate to our conceptions of the era.

While it is a long production, nearly three hours with two intermissions, Trinity House's presentation of "The Trial of God" is an intense, well-acted and thought-provoking drama, and is a compelling choice for those who like to be moved and challenged by their theater experience.

'The Pied Piper of Hamelin' perfect family event

The Marquis Theatre, 135 E. Main St., Northville, presents "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" 2:30 p.m. Monday-Friday, April 24-28 and Saturday April 29 at 2:30 p.m. Tickets \$7.50, call (248) 349-8110. Please, no children under age 3.

BY EMILY PRYBY SPECIAL WRITER

Maybe, it is the moral of the story - "Parents, love your children well and children, learn to read and spell" - that made this a perfect family event. Or it could be the squeak of the rats, which brought a smile to everyone's face. It could be these and so many more things that make "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," now playing at the Marquis Theater in Northville, a great spring event and a nice vacation treat for children and adults of all ages.

Hamelin, a mystical village somewhere, has a problem with an infestation of rats. Enter the Pied Piper. Through the magic of his flute, he promises to get rid of the rats. When he doesn't get paid for his work by the mayor, he takes the children for payment.

So goes the story, which, luckily, has a happy ending. In the process, the audience is treated to delightful musical presentations.

Kon Haering, who plays the Piper, leads the talented cast of 18 adults and children, ranging in age from 8-15, with his strong voice.

Three young actresses do an exceptional job and are believable in male roles. They are Emily Moses, an eighth grade student, and Ashley Hernandez, a seventh grader, both at Power

Middle School in Farmington; and Lauren Brantetter, a fifth grade student at Country Oaks Elementary in Commerce Township.

Another noteworthy performer is Debbie Lannen, who plays "Mabel" and serves as the production's director. She sings "Great Day" in a great way that gets a great response from the audience. One of the show-stopping numbers, which especially appeals to the youngsters in the audience, is the dance and squeaks of the rats to "Hall of the Mountain King."

In addition to the lively music, the show is enhanced by simple but believably scenery and creative and colorful costumes. One of the best trademarks of Marquis Theatre productions, which is also found in "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," is that they are

short, sweet, but complete. The musicals are never too lengthy. This is especially good for young audience members.

Another feature that appeals to the youthful theatergoers is that audience participation is encouraged. Audience members are invited to join in the singing and are asked questions by the cast. The cast also performs in the aisles, making the audience truly a part of the production.

"The Pied Piper of Hamelin" is still another of The Marquis Theatre's child-appealing presentations intended to introduce youngsters to the joy of live theater. It is worthwhile entertainment, like all the theater's offerings.

Emily Prysby is a junior at Birchwood Hills High School in Beverly Hills.

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