

'Arsenic and Old Lace' comedy of manners now

By CRAIG REYNOLDS

Revivals of old plays resemble reunions of the old class or the old battalion: they're fun once in a while, but most of the participants don't have an awful lot in common any more.

So it is with Joseph Kesselring's "Arsenic and Old Lace," now at The Theatre of the University of Detroit-Marygrove College.

The 1941 play has become as much a comedy of manners as outrageous farce; Brooklyn's middle class now behaves far differently from its counterpart of three decades ago.

Brooklyn is the place where Abby and Martha Brewster live in Victorian splendor, encased in frills and taffeta, surrounded by antiques and wainscoting, sitting on a dam dead bodies buried in the cellar.

NEPHEWS JONATHAN, Teddy and Mortimer also pass the time on a Queen Anne settee. Jonathan, the recreated Boris Karloff, Teddy the acted image of the late Roosevelt and Mortimer the drama critic. One of them is supposed to be sane.

Naturally, police and mad doctors, crabby old men, a minister and a

pretty girl also populate the menage, but it's all terribly polite and formal and hilarious.

Director David Regal has crafted the niceties of old style social graces into this production of "Arsenic and Old Lace," but a number of his 1973 actors do not come down to pre-war upper crust.

Following the expansively showy idiom of the 1930s, Regal's staging is also curvaceous, loose and sometimes pointless, but it works in a play where murder is made a redeeming social value.

THE THING that doesn't quite work is Kesselring's aging script. It's not just that the film of "Arsenic and Old Lace" is as familiar as "Citizen Kane," but that repetitiveness and belabored exposition no longer sit well on the stage before a contemporary audience.

Some judicious pruning would be in order; a dozen bodies in the basement we can take, but the extra dozen minutes' running time is too much.

As always, the performing company at The Theatre is attractive and competent, though the familiar Dennis



Louise Martin of Bloomfield Hills (Abby), Mary Callaghan of Birmingham (Elaine) and Raye Bush of Franklin (Martha)

TIMOTHY R. Dewar provides both setting and lighting, both of which are attractively planned but lacking for polka-dot touches. The costumes by Verna Flaty and Bonnie Whalen are a distinct asset. "Arsenic and Old Lace" reposes through this weekend in The Theatre on the Marygrove Campus.

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