

features

Greg Porter, Editor



Staff photo by Gary Lobraico

Summer Playmakers

A bit of confusion but a barrel of fun

"Summer theatre" covers a multitude of groups of varying ability—professional summer stock, community theatre, outdoor drama, college companies, youth groups. Yet this diversity in organization usually finds common ground in two genres: light comedy and especially musical comedy. The Carolina Playmakers are no exception, offering three plays of differing quality and effectiveness which all have the same audience-pleasing goal: laughs.

"My Three Angels" is classic community theatre fare: the good guys are honest and

(John Stafford) approaches from France to check Felix's hopelessly wayward accounts and, in all likelihood, take over the store. What's more, Henri's equally unscrupulous nephew Paul (James Rainbow), with whom the Ducotel's daughter Marie Louise (Ginger Bridges) has recently had an affair, is also coming along, to her delight and Paul's discomfort. And to top it all off, three slick convicts—Joseph (Kurt Corriher), Jules (Peter Hardy) and Alfred (Ross Silver)—are roofing the Ducotel's house.

itself, which perfectly reproduced the sweltering 104 degrees of Guiana.

Overall, then, a modest and entertaining enough experience, with expedient acting, direction (Joe Simmons) and authorship (Sam and Bella Spewack, those giants of modern theatre). The next production features a much more illustrious author, Peter Shaffer, whose current "Equus" has been galloping away with audiences and critics in London and New York for almost two years now. His "Black Comedy," though, is no more distinguished than the Spewacks' play; it, too, is situation comedy, only with a distinctly British and adult flair.

"Black Comedy" is appropriately named, for it takes place in the dark in sculptor Brindsley Miller's London apartment on a rather pretentious Sunday evening: he is expecting a millionaire art patron and his fiancée's bombastic father (for which he has, without permission, borrowed his meticulous next door neighbor's furniture). Fatefully, a fuse blows; hence, the dark; hence, "Black Comedy," as Brindsley tries to hide everything from his guests, his neighbors and his unexpected old girlfriend Clea, who threatens to ruin it all.

The three angels quickly descend, however, and are soon guiding the Ducotels through their traumas of romance and finance. As the penal entrepreneurs take over, so does Kurt Corriher in his central role as the inspired accountant-schemer Joseph. Corriher is captivating, dapper and witty—his 2-year term, he says, when taken in the context of geology and history, is not so bad—and his omnipresence lends the production what continuity it has. The other two jailbirds, although entertaining, get slightly carried away in their characterizations—Silver is a bit too impulsive/physical and Hardy sometimes affects his British intellectualism.

The production's other star performance comes from Ginger Bridges as the gooly, stary-eyed, incurably romantic Marie Louise.

The bamboo-rod and straw panel set design of Peter Baselici and Ann Hard is excellent, lending the appropriate tropical atmosphere to the proceedings. (The same basic frame and platforms were well adapted for all three plays.) The most convincing contribution to the atmosphere, though, came from the ancient Playmakers Theatre

provided by Shaffer.

Indeed, much of this carping is directed at the playwright and not the production, which is good enough. "Black Comedy" itself is silly, weak comedy, and seems especially pale in comparison with the enthusiasm of both performers and audience for the Playmakers' final summer offering, "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown."

"Charlie Brown" is a welcome departure from the sitcom format of the first two plays to yet another American comedy standard: the musical. Luckily, this one doesn't take itself seriously: there is no breaking into song in the middle of an embrace or a huge choral finale or anything. Instead, composer Clark Gesner has merely taken six favorite characters from the Charles Schulz comic strip and moved them through what he calls "a day in the life of Charlie Brown."

There are marvelous songs Linus's thumbsucking ode, "My Blanket and Me," a collective choral yech to homework, "A Book Report on Peter Rabbit," Snoopy's jazzy paean to the dog food bowl, "Supper-time." These are tied together by brief and amusing sketches which often call to mind Shaffer's daily three-panel approach: the gang greets Snoopy as usual, he gets a look of canine frustration, and he laments, "No one ever calls me Sugar Lins."

As entertaining as this may be, the basic situation is familiar and must be given life by the cast. The Playmakers have responded with the necessary enthusiasm and innocence, and one performer in particular: Jon Mezz as Snoopy, who steals the show. His inspired rendition of "Supper-time," which literally brought the house down, sums up his play-long excellence: a lithe body, an expressive and eager face, a clear, controlled delivery, and an abiding penchant for the hambone.

Mezz's performance, the highlight of the three-play production, is matched in energy by Margot Corrigan's Lucy, a loud and abrasive incarnation of the neighborhood crab, splendidly flat and childlike in her songs. Sometimes Charlie Brown (Monty Diamond) and Schroeder (David Timothy Lamm) lose this 10-year old quality in their songs, lapsing into melodic moments more native to standard musical comedy and their own voices. Otherwise, they were fine, as was Lisa Krupp (Peppermint Patty); my only reservations in the cast rest with John Johnson as Linus. He is too much Lucy's wide-eyed little brother, lacking Linus's characteristic subtlety of intellect and humor beneath this rather flat and incomplete facade.

"Charlie Brown" is a guaranteed success with three little kids, who often join in with their favorites, and old ladies, who can be heard to cackle, "Isn't that cute?" The Playmakers and director Russell Graves have happily gone beyond that, succeeding with everyone, with an appealing show of sincerely ingenious nature.

theatre

by Michael McFee

Jon Mezz stars as Snoopy in one of three Playmakers productions this week

unsuspecting, the villain is evil and mustachioed and the resolution is poetic justice at its clumsiest. And like most community theatre, the dead wood in the dialogue is forgivable if the plot, typically full of surprises, mistaken identities, and outright deceptions, is somehow advanced.

The plot is this: Felix Ducotel (Paul Myers) is the proprietor of a general store in a penal colony in French Guiana in 1910. The time is Christmas, but he and his wife Emilie (Barbara Stripling) face problems, not presents: his dastardly cousin Henri

unsuccessful Congressional candidate, led the Pledge of Allegiance; and two governors and three U.S. senators talked politics before Helms introduced Reagan.

"The men are strong and staunch and the women are beautiful," Idaho's Sen. James McClure conceded of North Carolinians. "Jesse stands like a stone wall in the U.S. Senate," said Virginia's Sen. William Scott of his North Carolina colleague. In all the praise and lamentations, three words constantly surfaced: "responsibility," "right," and "Reagan."

Conservatives have a responsibility to bring forth "the kind of government that is going to lead us out of the chaos that exists," the speakers agreed. ("American can be saved," master of ceremonies Tom Ellis proclaimed, "if only we try hard enough.") The right way to save America, they contended, is for the right to do battle for their rights and against the interventions of big government. And most of them believed that Ronald Reagan might be the right man to lead the battle.

The crowd had warmed up by the time Reagan spoke—and he didn't let them down. He blasted such liberal archetypes as George McGovern and Thomas Eagleton ("hijackers of the '72 Democratic convention") and economist John Kenneth Galbraith ("living proof that economics is an inexact science... he deals in fairy tales"). He offered assorted clever anecdotes about

the conflicting regulations and bumbling bureaucrats of HEW, EPA and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

"Everyone can have a bigger slice of the pie," Reagan theorized about renewed prosperity, "if government will get the hell out of the way and let the free enterprise system work!" (That brought them to their feet.)

Reagan prompted a rousing ovation at a favorable statistical comparison between life in the U.S. and in the USSR. "Adam and Eve must have been Russian," he continued. "They had no roof over their heads, no clothes on their backs, only an apple between them, and they thought it was paradise."

Again his listeners rose in applause as Reagan concluded the address with his hope that "if ever again we ask the young men of our country to fight, their goal will be victory." The crowd cheered, little flags fluttered above the tables and "Ronald Reagan for President" posters floated over heads.

The minister wrapped up the evening when he told Reagan just before the benediction, "I think God may have in you the man we need to lead our country."

A laid-back affair with Ronald Reagan

by Cole Campbell Editor

Above all else, the gathering was unquestionably political.

But political in a real down-home sort of way, which was surprising for a \$100-a-plate dinner. The parking lot was filled with as many common Chevrolets and Fords as classy Oldsmobiles and Mercedes-Benzes. The men had trendy correct haircuts and wore fashionable suits or sports coats. The women sported a variety of apparel from informal pantsuits to floor-length gowns. One middle-aged, middle-class, Middle-American woman boasted a bright red dress with a brassy gold peach-size elephant pin (facing right) balanced by a sizeable red, white and blue "Reagan for President" button.

Friday's salute to Ronald Reagan by the North Carolina Congressional Club was billed as "the largest bipartisan political event ever held in our state." With over 2,000 people in attendance, it was certainly large. And it was somewhat bipartisan, if only because the predominantly Republican gathering was held in the Gov. Kerr Scott Pavilion, named for a staunch Democratic governor and father of North Carolina's most recent staunch Democratic governor, Bob Scott. Occasional references to the "discerning Democrats" in the crowd added a bipartisan note, as did the fact that both Reagan and host Jesse Helms had been Democrats before joining up with the Grand Ole Party.

"About half the people on Helms' staff are conservative Democrats," an aide to the North Carolina senior senator confided. "I'm a conservative Democrat myself, but don't tell these people that."

But party identification wasn't paramount to the conservative crowd that had gathered from across the state to embrace the

conservative ideas of Ronald Reagan. Good food, good music and a return to good times were foremost on their minds.

Parker's Barbecue from Wilson (famous throughout eastern North Carolina) was doling out fried chicken and Lexington-style barbecue, while the Blue Grass Cut-Ups twanged banjos, guitars and voices to keep the crowd toe-tapping to tunes like "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" and "Blowin' My Sweet Baby Home." Some uniformed Boy Scouts and some uninvited flies added a special picnic atmosphere to the indoor feast.

The color scheme was strictly red, white and blue, from the curtains behind the rostrum to the blazers, shirts and slacks of the Cut-Ups. Every five feet or so along the long banquet tables stood a small desk-size Old Glory.

A petition soliciting support for Reagan as "a conservative candidate" (again bipartisan, or third-partisan) for the presidency circulated the auditorium. Deep blue posters with white lettering (oddly reminiscent of 1972 McGovern posters) mysteriously appeared. The last of the chicken and barbecue went down as the first of several ovations went up at the entrance of Helms, Reagan and company. The main event was on.

Down-home politicking prevailed again. A major television Raleigh minister prayed; Governor Steve Ritchie, Vietnam air ace and

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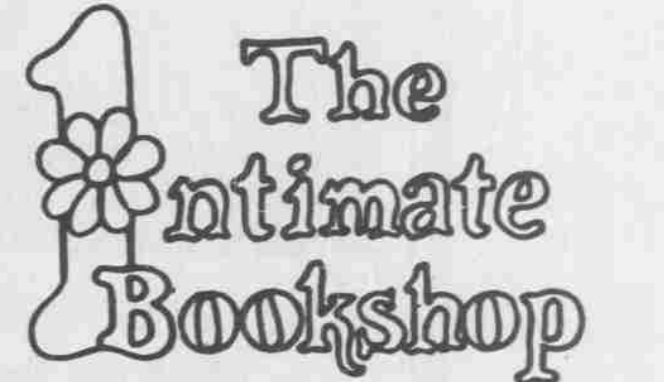
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