

'History of the American Film': mixed bag of theatre and movie

By MICHAEL McFEE
Staff Writer

Some clips from the cutting room floor about Chris Durang's new "History of the American Film," the current Playmakers Repertory Company feature:

TAKE ONE. Concept: America and the movies. What better metaphor? From the innocence of the silent to the all-out carnality of Sensurround, learning to talk, sing, fight, love—it's been an ideal symbiosis, one made in the stars. The quintessential American dream: God, girls and guns.

TAKE TWO. Plot: how to make it work without being either "That's Entertainment: Part Three" or a rapid sequence of allusions for the film buff? Solution: make it both.

TAKE THREE. The musical illusion. This seems most promising: it's common to both film and theatre: it offers a flashy synthesis of music, dancing and acting; and it epitomizes a sort of national naivete that "no matter what happens, everything is going to be all right." The playwright manages this beautifully in his take-off on the Busby Berkeley Goldiggers production number, here called "We're in the Salad"—"we've got a lot of what it takes to fill a bowl." The Dick Powell male with his dancing radish, lettuce, carrot and tomato, smiling his way through those wonderful clichés of choreography and spectacle, all the way to a huge bottle of Roquefort dressing glittering in from the

flies to douse the dancers with bubbles. Great fun, awful puns, and even the theme—"I love God, and I love Lassie."

TAKE FOUR. The allusion illusion. Much more tricky. The references to cinema past are inevitable, of course, given the nature of the play; but how to make this piece of theatre exist independent of its references for those who do not know film history, or for those historians who insist on more plot than a mere montage of clips? Durang fails on both levels. The boy/girl plot line of Jimmy (Joseph Cole) and Loretta (Sandra Geiss), the play's inconsistent attempt at dramatic unity, is brittle as an old print. And the universe of allusions through which they transform themselves seems random (where were the Westerns? the silent comedies?) and ill-developed (compare Stoppard's integration of Wilde into *Travesties*).

TAKE FIVE. Characters: cartoons or archetypes? If the latter, the *The Mother*, *The Gangster*, *The Moll*, *The Good Girl*, *The Negro* and so on, should resonate immediately in the audience's collective filmic consciousness. At first they do, as *Mother* abandons *Child*, who becomes *Girl* in *Orphanage*, who is finally sent out to face *The World with a Quarter*. But the typical cleverness cannot last if not embodied, and the demands of Durang's history must move us along before we are satisfied. Characters become two-dimensional, clichés pulled from the panels of a *Marvel Comic*.

TAKE SIX. Character: example. Frank Raiter, who has clearly demonstrated his abilities with the PRC this year, does as well as anyone here in being briefly appealing. But consider the mere *costume* exhaustion of his playing (in order) God, Ticket Man, Gangster, Judge, Edward, Pa Joad, Cardinal Richelieu and the Theatre Manager. This is the fecundity fallacy: more is not always more.

TAKE SEVEN. Technical considerations: enormous, given the multitude of transformations in the play.

TAKE EIGHT. Direction. The essence of American movies is action, so the director must keep it moving. Bill Ludel does so, although Act Two gets pretty static in spots.

TAKE NINE. Taste. Much of that fat in Act Two is due to some puzzling and only marginally funny lapses in the playwright's sense of taste. The whole atom bomb sequence is just terrible, like Cagney's grapefruit in the face: "Goodnight Hiroshima" likens the Japanese victims to french fries. Little Mickey loses his hands; Loretta becomes an alcoholic with polio; and the Blessed Virgin Mary is reduced to a redundant sight gag.

TAKE TEN. Tone: comic or not? This corresponding uncertainty doesn't mean that one must absolutely choose between comedy and message, but one shouldn't be continually confused about it. Take the conclusion in the movie theatre: is it parody?



Barbara Shepherd and Joseph Cole in PRC's "History of the American Film"

satire? absurd homage? straight statement? **TAKE ELEVEN.** Soundtrack. I know we are a melodramatic people on the screen, screaming, firing and fainting. But I couldn't shake the feeling that blank pistols and all that aural hubbub were like Sennett slapstick: funny at first, but eventually

empty. **TAKE TWELVE.** Self-consciousness. "I want this to be over—I don't like screwball comedies," Loretta complains in an early sequence. This typical and constant reference of the play to itself, to its structure and representative nature, seems arbitrary

and self-congratulatory for the most part. **CONCLUSION:** Given the long controversy over films of plays, and considering the difficulties with this new play about film, maybe mixing these media is just that, a mixed bag. Maybe it's only in the ads that they look the same.

Bob Seger

Bob Seger, whose latest single, "Night Moves," is now number 5 on the charts, will appear at the Greensboro Coliseum at 8 p.m. Friday, April 1, with the Atlanta Rhythm Section and the rock group Starz. Reserve tickets for the Bob Seger concert are \$7 and \$6. Tickets are on sale at the Coliseum Box Office and all area Record Bars.



Deep Jonah: Jazz Night

Steve Wing, jazz pianist and vocalist, and Rodney Marsh, saxophone and flute player of "Hard Times Jazz Band" fame, will return to Deep Jonah this week.

Wing and Marsh provided one of the highlights of the year for Deep Jonah with their history of jazz performance last February.

Since that time, both musicians have been performing with the local musical "Hot Grog" at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

They will return to perform in Deep Jonah from 8:30 to 11 Thursday night. There is no cover. Bring a bottle of wine, and enjoy some good jazz.

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The Carolina Union Needs Your Help!

The application due date for committee chairpersons of the Carolina Union has been extended to Monday, April 4.

Applications and interview sign-ups for all committees are available at the information desk of the Union.



CAROLINA UNION

UNC student wins MTNA contest



William Chicurel, a graduate music student from Asheville, won first place in the college composition competition of the Musical Teacher National Association (MYNA) for his composition, "Butterfly."

"Butterfly" is a statement about the struggle of the Jewish people during World War II. Chicurel said he was inspired by a poem written by Pavel Friedman, a German Jew who died in a Nazi concentration camp.

The work is a classical composition based on the most dissonant interval in music, the augmented fourth (tritone).

Chicurel said that the flute represents the butterfly, and the soprano voice is

youth, aware of the reality of the situation. The violin represents the struggle of the Jewish people.

The piece was performed in Atlanta last weekend during the MTNA national convention.

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