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1 May 1971

'Arsenic and Old Lace'

Local Play Termed Hilarious Homicide

By WALTER LAZENBY

The Community Theatre's choice of Joseph Kesselring's 30-year-old farce-melodrama "Arsenic and Old Lace" for its current production brings the nationwide vogue for nostalgia in movies, fashions, and stage revivals to Charleston. And the nostalgic note struck by the revival of this near-classic was clearly palatable to last night's capacity opening night audience.

The sure-fire comedy of homicidal mania is a good choice for a community theatre group. It calls for old-style "character" acting and has a cast of eccentrics that would tickle the aspirations of any amateur actor. Two of the roles give added challenge as take-offs of Hollywood personalities. The plot is replete with chilling surprises, numerous unexpected twists, and even bodies that seem to be playing musical chairs. As one character says, "It's what you'd expect if Strindberg had written Hallzapoppin."

But its chief virtue is the way it can laugh at itself. By theatrical hokum it spoofs unbelievable situations in thrillers, the old scheme of poetic justice in which the villain gets what he deserves, and even the stereotyped boy-gets-girl ending.

In the third act the unsuspecting theatre critic ironically fails to realize that life seems to be following the script of a bad thriller. The

denouement even depends on a classic gimmick of revealing a character's true identity at the last minute.

These virtues come across well in the local production, which can be seen again tonight and Monday night at 8:00 p.m. and tomorrow afternoon at 2:00 p.m.

Diane Byrd gives a polished performance as Elaine Harper, showing considerable poise. Mary Rogers' expressive face is her greatest asset in her convincing portrayal of Abby Brewster. In the show's most demanding role, that of the drama critic Mortimer Brewster, Pat Lenihan performs energetically and with flair. Bill Prescott sustains a creditable German accent in the role which parodies Peter Lorre; he invents appropriate stage business and despite a mannerism or two exhibits distinct artistry.

But top honors go to Richard Rogers, as the villain who does not like to be reminded that he looks like Boris Karloff. His naturalness in reacting and picking up cues, his control of voice, his sustained gestures all give him the show's most convincing performance.

Jerry McGlaughlin's set successfully deals with the cramping limitations of the make-shift theatre, and Gerald Sullivan's direction welds the individual performances into a satisfying whole.

Despite some heaviness in delivering the wise-cracking dialogue, the show is hilarious homicide.