

'Spoon River' well done

By CARL LEBOVITZ

CHARLESTON — One of the highlights of EIU's three-day festival of the arts "Celebration 80" last weekend was the theatre department's production of "Spoon River Anthology."

If you missed it then, it will be repeated in the Fine Arts Center Theatre at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, May 2 and 3.

I recommend it to all as an absorbing and moving theatrical experience.

"Spoon River Anthology" is Charles Aidman's acting version of Edgar Lee Masters' classic collection of terse free verse. Masters' book, published in 1915, was drawn from his own life and observations in an Illinois town — Petersburg in fact, Spoon River in fiction. It is a poetic examination of 244 souls asleep in a graveyard by the river. They speak home truths that had to be hidden in life — poignant, tender, vindictive, bitter, wryly humorous or outrageously funny truths.

Masters was a leading light in the poetic renaissance that swept the Middle West early in this century. The Chicago school, which included Sherwood Anderson and Carl Sandburg, was in the ascendant. This was a group dedicated to debunking, to probing beneath the surface of rural and city life.

About 60 characters come to life in the theatrical version — the rich and lordly and the drunks and trollops alike. Some of them appear for less than a minute, others for a very few minutes, but each of them is vivid and intensely interesting. There is Searcy Foote, who chloroformed Aunt Persis — "a

joke on you, Spoon River?" And Harry Wilmans who followed the flag to Manila and lies under it now; Silas Dement, the arsonist who gleefully set fire to the courthouse; Ann Rutledge, who speaks of being wedded to Lincoln "through separation." And so on.

Director Gerald Sullivan has assembled a cast of 15 actors and singers. It must be difficult to establish a fully realized character in only a minute or two, but happily in many instances Sullivan has coaxed some excellent performances out of these kids. Rich Haimann, Toni Canell, Nancy Hunt, Mark Highland, Clay Peterson, Kevin Rettka and Jack Spaniol are especially impressive. And there is a gifted young lady named Linda Neuzil who lights up the stage with her presence.

There is an occasional tendency to race lines, so that we don't get the full value of the

poetry. There is also the bad habit of swallowing the punch lines. And the few attempts to sound Illinoisan come out with a southern or hillbilly flavor.

Some welcome breaks to the dramatic recitations are provided by lovely folk tunes that are effectively performed.

The set is simple, consisting mainly a star-studded blue backdrop and a few trees that resemble tortured souls reaching for the heavens. The lighting is effective, with a striking sunrise at the conclusion. The costumes, especially in the balloon pants, seem anachronistic.

"Spoon River Anthology" is somewhat in the manner of the cemetery scene in Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," but without the connecting narrative and plot. And like "Our Town," it provides an evening of emotional satisfaction and insight into the human condition.

narrated by Orson Welles (90 min.)
8:30 PM 2 2 8 15
 (20) Hello, Larry Conclusion. Larry finds Diane in a hotel with the rock star. Guest starring Joey Travolta. (CLOSED CAPTIONED)

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8:50



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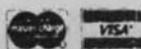
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