

Camping with 'Little Mary'

By CARL LEOVITZ
Critic at Large

The EIU theatre department's summer musical this year is *Little Mary Sunshine*, Rick Besoyan's takeoff on oldtime operettas like *Rose Marie*, *Naughty Marietta* and *Rio Rita* and the later Jeanette MacDonald-Nelson Eddy movies.

The setting is Mary's Colorado Inn, high in the Rocky Mountains. Mary has missed a mortgage payment on the inn and may be evicted, but she's undaunted, always able to *Look for a Sky of Blue*. She's adored by the U.S. Forest Rangers and by Captain "Big Jim" in particular. The inn's guests include a famous European opera star, Mme. Ernestine Von Liebedich and, straight out of

Gilbert and Sullivan, some young ladies from the Eastchester Finishing School. And if that's not enough, the plot also involves some bad Indians and good Indians.

The EIU production, directed by Gerald Sullivan, doesn't have much style, but it is done with a certain sense of fun. A spoof should be played straight, and that includes the music. Things may be off a bit, and the audience and the actors know it, but not the characters. They're completely serious about it all. The EIU actors keep getting cutesy and campy, just to make sure there's no doubt about it, and it's not necessary.

The first act is long and slow and seems to go nowhere. But then suddenly in the second act J. Michael Sain appears, deliciously droll as Gen. Oscar Fairfax, Ret.,

and things come delightfully to life.

Cathy Berns is blonde, pretty, wide-eyed and sweet-voiced as Little Mary, and Dean Leitzen is tall and personable as her Capt. "Big Jim." Nancy Paule and Darren Tuggle are cute as the secondary comic lovers, and Jim Romanovich does nicely as a good Indian chief.

There's little or no choreography in the show. Several of the songs practically beg for big production numbers, but no such luck. Maybe EIU's theatre and dance people should get together sometime.

C.P. Blanchette's set is sunshiny bright. The rangers are dashing in their red uniforms and the young ladies fetching in their pastel gowns. The orchestra, under John Maharg's direction, started off

sounding a bit ragged opening night, but got better as the evening progressed.

This *Sunshine* isn't exactly hot, but it's still a warm and entertaining show. There are performances Tuesday and Wednesday at 8 p.m. in the Fine Arts Center Theatre.

Incidentally, last weekend, while EIU was doing *Sunshine*, the Charleston Community Theatre was putting on *Side by Side by Sondheim*. These two shows are Coles County's only theatre this summer. Perhaps there's a reason why they had to be done at the same time, but I fail to see it. It's about time these two groups started coordinating.

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