

THEATER REVIEW | BLACK COMEDY

Troupe gives lights-out performance

By Michael Grossberg
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Otterbein Summer Theatre is ending its season by making audiences an offer they can't refuse: Laugh in the "dark."

Black Comedy, an ingenious British farce, reverses stage conventions so that the audience sees what the characters don't see and vice versa.

Peter Shaffer, who approached in his early one-act the structural ingenuity (and gimmickry) of Alan Ayckbourn's comedies, sheds light on the differences between public and private behavior. When a fuse blows and causes a blackout in a 1960s London apartment, the public faces of a young sculptor (David Beukema) and his visitors slowly drop away to reveal their secrets, flaws and desires.

While a bit slower than one expects from most farces, *Comedy* generates just as many punch lines from its measured pacing.

The characters' halting movements, British accents and misdirected gestures meld into a farcical ballet of pratfalls, near-misses, mistaken identities and misunderstandings under Doreen Dunn's expert direction.

Beukema, brimming with haplessness, moral weakness and hidden motives, generates laughter from his increasingly frantic efforts to keep his visitors literally and

metaphorically in the dark. When his not-so-old girlfriend (Geneva Hyman, sexy and savvy) arrives invisibly, the proverbial light bulb goes off above her head quickly enough for her to gently blackmail him about his new girlfriend (Megan Ward, acting like a British Sally Struthers) with hysterical results.

At Friday's performance, Otterbein professor Christina Kirk approached tipsy perfection in

the filigreed role of Miss Funnival, a prim older neighbor who exploits the darkness to slake a hidden thirst.

Among others revealing classic weaknesses of character: Lucas Adams, as a moralistic colonel; and David Shane, as a foppish and fey neighbor.

While the characters often fall into confusion, the audience watches them from a blissful state of clarity.

Rob Johnson's lighting fits the bill, from the bright whites of the pitch-dark scenes to the dim glows whenever anyone briefly turns on a flashlight or tries to light a match.

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JAMES D. DeCAMP | DISPATCH

gh a soggy set at Cooper Stadium.

quickly during Big Daddy Kane's set when the rain resumed and tarps thrown over the speakers badly muffled the sound.

Almost from the moment Slick Rick took the stage, the crowd became a happy, hopping mass, shouting along with his call-and-response lines and laughing at his wit.

The amazing transformation testified to hip-hop's power to change attitudes and whip up energy at clubs, in baseball stadiums and on city streets across the country — and showed why it has become the most influential art form of the past 25 years.

In somewhat of an extended anti-climax, Brooklyn-based rap group Whodini did versions of its classic hits *Freaks Come Out at Night* and *Friends*, complete with the trademark step routines and tag-team rhyme schemes.

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ES KIM BASINGER

389 Otterbein flips a switch on comedy in the dark

Light is dark and darkness is light in Otterbein Summer Theatre's farcical season finale.

The conventions of stage lighting are reversed in *Black Comedy*, opening tonight on the Westerville campus.

The gimmick of British playwright Peter Shaffer's 70-minute one-act: The scenes in which the characters are in the dark are fully lighted, from the audience's perspective, while the brief scene in which the lights go on for the characters is blacked out for the audience.

"It's an unusual concept," lighting designer Rob Johnson said. "We reverse the notion of light and dark, since most of the play takes place during a blackout. We, the audience, can see everything, but the actors have to perform as if the stage is totally black."

"If it was reality, you'd sit there virtually in the dark for the whole play, so it was clever of Shaffer to reverse it."

Director Doreen Dunn saw Michael Crawford and Lynn Redgrave in the original Broadway production, a 1967 Tony nominee for best play.

"I never laughed so hard in my life," Dunn said.

"It's really hard to find a funny play for summer theater, and this is one of the best."



MICHAEL GROSSBERG



TOM DODGE | DISPATCH

Megan Ward, left, David Beukema and Geneva Hyman in Otterbein Theatre's *Black Comedy*

The play revolves around a London sculptor who is showing his work to a multimillionaire when a fuse blows out in his apartment, throwing everything and everyone into darkness.

"People behave very differently when they're in the dark, reaching and touching furniture and accidentally hitting someone in the face or somewhere else on the body," Dunn said.

To learn how to move more realistically in darkness, the cast rehearsed one morning in blindfolds.

"It was hysterical," Dunn said. "We wished we'd filmed (the rehearsal). That's when we found that people become over-

sensitive to any touch because you don't expect it to be there."

When the blindfolds came off, "everyone was exhausted because they'd been working so hard through their other senses. Your ears get really big in the dark."

In retrospect, "our initial approach to not being able to see was very fake," Dunn said.

"Before, when they were trying to imagine what it might be like, the actors pretended to not see something by listening with their heads sideways."

After the "blind" rehearsal, the actors stopped twisting their heads, realizing that it was more natural to stare intently ahead.

For the brief scene of darkness — dark from the audience's point of view — Johnson used "just enough" light blue backlights to reveal the figures onstage but not their expressions.

The title may be "a little misleading," he added, because it doesn't refer to race or genre. In style, *Black Comedy* is a light farce, not a "black" or dark comedy.

"It's only called *Black Comedy* because of the lack of lighting," he said. "The comedy comes from us seeing the characters as if with X-ray vision in a black room, and from the way people grope around and react to each other with faces that they would never show in the light."

Johnson suggested the extra twist that Otterbein has added to the opening moment.

"The play normally starts with a blackout, after which actors move into place in the dark, and then the lights go up and the action starts. We're doing the opposite," Johnson said.

At Otterbein, "the lights come up, the actors move into place and freeze, and then the lights go out, and the action starts."

Performances will be at 7:30 tonight, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — and 8 p.m. Aug. 5-7 and 2 p.m. Aug. 8 — in the the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$17. Call 614-823-1109.

Michael Grossberg is Dispatch theater critic.

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Charmian Todd Boyd

has extensive experience in development, fund-raising, marketing, special-events planning and broadcasting.

She has worked as a TV production assistant and associate producer, a radio news reporter and a public-information coordinator for the WOUB TV and radio network at Ohio University.

Most recently, she co-owned a small restaurant business in Columbus and Athens. Boyd replaces Laura Roth, who went on maternity leave in March and briefly returned but is moving to Minneapolis.

— Michael Grossberg