

'House of Blue Leaves' highly entertaining play

By Sarah Skaates

The final production of the 1978 season for Otterbein Summer Theater is the kind

of show that leaves an audience trying in vain to classify or label what it has seen, yet sure that whatever it was was something special.

In "The House of Blue Leaves," Artie Shaughnessy describes a tree covered with perfectly still blue leaves. Yet when he approaches, the leaves flutter and lift off to another tree, and he sees that they are in reality blue birds. Those lines form a good analogy for the play. What seems to be pure comedy takes a sudden twist and poses as drama, shifts again to flash bits of satire and sacrilege, then parodizes the very elements it has defined.

In the hands of director John Duval and the talented Summer Theater company, "The House of Blue Leaves" is given an exquisite staging. While it may sometimes seem that certain characters were really written for a different play, Duval wisely chose to let each one dance to his or her own drummer. The result is a delicate but clear cohesion.

Kent Blocher has a solid, down-to-earth authority in his grasp of Artie. Sincerity and conviction are projected in larger measure than noted before in his previous work.

Nancy Shelton, too, sets a career high mark with her portrayal of Bunny. Voice, mannerisms, and a true sense for timing and control make this a real triumph for Shelton. Balancing Bunny's bright exuberance is the wraith-like Bananas, whose mind skirts, but rarely confronts, reality. Karen Radcliffe gives an excellent delineation to this totally unglamorous role.

Jeffrey Dill is appropriately wild-eyed with madness as the son of Artie and Bananas. Anne Kanengeiser smiles serenely as the beautiful but deaf actress, while a trio of nuns (Annabeth Eschbach, Cindy Mustaine, and Lisa Durham) raucously shoot down any illusion of dignity among the devout.

Byron Hays provides what is required in a role that was written with less substance than some others. David Butterfield and Mark Eichorn complete the cast.

The set design by Mary Jo Yeakel and costumes by David Robinson were discerningly put together to evoke a sense of time and place as well as mood.

"The House of Blue Leaves" will play nightly through Saturday at 8 in the Campus Center arena theater, and will conclude with a 2 p.m. Sunday matinee. It's different...but it's expertly done.

Direction superb in 'House of Blue Leaves'

By **ROSEMARY CURTIN HITE**
Citizen-Journal Music Critic

I admired John A. Duval's work as an actor in the Otterbein Summer Theatre's production of "Let's Get a Divorce" last week. But now I admire him even more as a director.

The 1962 Otterbein graduate and now professional director pulled together all the threads of meaning in John Guare's "The House of Blue Leaves" with extraordinary skill Wednesday night in Otterbein's Campus Center.

GUARE ATTACKS human nature and behavior on many levels, paralleling the tragic and the comic, the pathetic and the absurd, the real and the illusory. The success of a production of "Blue Leaves" depends on the clarity with which these oppositions emerge.

Even though there is some unevenness in this production by the student company, the themes are realized with dramatic pungency and probing insight.

Guare assembles a group of "types," on the morning of October 4, 1965, the day of Pope Paul VI's arrival in New York to speak at the United Nations about the Vietnam war.

He gives us Artie, a zookeeper with aspirations of being a song writer. And Bunny, Artie's girl friend who is a passionate supporter of Artie's Hollywood ambitions.

THEN THERE'S Bananas, Artie's wife, who has been drifting through life since a "nervous breakdown" two years earlier. And Ronnie, their son, who is AWOL from the Mariens. Add Corrinna, a former movie star, now deaf; three hysterical nuns; an insane asylum attendant; M.P.: and Billy, the big shot from Hollywood, and you have as bizarre a collection as you'll find this side of Saroyan.

These are not "real" people and any attempt to rationalize them according to the canons of reasonable behavior obscures the playwright's intention. But what is real is the conflict between

human aspirations and possibilities, between "seeming" and "being," between wisdom and foolishness, between knowledge and ignorance, between madness and sanity.

Duval plays these themes like Harpo Marx at the harp with wild rolling of the directorial eye and unerring comic timing.

GUARE HAS US look at these few hours through the eyes of Bananas, wonderfully played by Karen Radcliffe. True she is not sane, but if these others are sane, who would not rather be mad?

Mis Radcliffe's brooding Olivia de Havilland eyes take in the absurdity about her, turn questioningly on the audience, find no answer there, and close with a quiet despair. It is the only logical result.

Kent Blocher's Artie struts and stomps about the arena stage, full of self-importance, crazed ambition, a ridiculous figure of self-deception.

BUNNY AS PLAYED by Nancy

Shelton is a marvelous caricature of the calculating, brassily attractive, self-congratulatory home wrecker. She is a fount of wisdom, all collected from such experiences as being an usher, working in ski resorts, as a phone operator, and at Con-Edison.

Like Bananas, we watch her with fascination that such consummate ignorance can parade as knowledge. But we have no doubt that her total imperviousness to logic or human understanding will prevail in the end.

The theme of the Pope's visit plays throughout, a serious, humanistic event parodied by the crassness of the characters' expectations of it.

THREE TRAVESTIES of nuns, agilely played by Annbeth Eschbach, Cindy Mustaine, and Lisa Durham, emphatically define the total lack of religious sincerity in the group's pseudo pious enthusiasm for the papal visit. These three are diabolic, and it is no coincidence that Artie's best song is "Where is the Devil in Evelyn?"

Tragicomedy Missing A Factor

By James McCafferty
Of The Dispatch Staff

Otterbein Summer Theater almost missed the point Wednesday in presenting *The House of Blue Leaves*.

The work was allowed to move much too far along before even hinting at its ultimate tragedy.

Director John A. Duval played the piece for comedy, and comedy there is in abundance; but it is a sinister sort of comedy that should not be used at the expense of an unsuspecting audience.

MATURITY WAS mostly the missing element. Too many of the characters were depicted as caricatures, deprived of depth and falsely suggesting farce.

At its best the play offered a wonderfully hesitant performance by Karen Radcliffe as the wife whose mental illness provides the pivot of the plot. Certainly she looked the part, but she could have been even more effective had she been encouraged to grovel more.

Kent Blocher as her husband simply was not cruel enough. He failed to take advantage of his opportunities to treat her as he would one of the animals at the zoo where he is employed. He was too light and frivolous with the bad musical composing which is supposed to be his consuming passion.

SIMILARLY, NANCY Shelton scored only part of the time as the flip flirt from

downstairs who wants to run off with the husband and help have the wife confined to the institution that gives the play its name.

Jeffrey Dill turned in an outstanding performance as the son absent without leave from the Army. His expression of madness gave rise to suspicions that perhaps he came by it honestly, because he left no doubt about the bitterness he bears toward both his parents. In Dill's hands it seemed a shame that the part was not a bigger one.

Anne Kanengeiser did what she could as the actress who shows up at the wrong time and manages to get herself blown to bits by the bomb the son had intended for the visiting pope.

IN LESSER ROLES Annbeth Eschbach,

Cindy Mustaine and Lisa Durham made rather a mockery of their roles as nuns, and David Butterfield fared even worse as the military man charged with capturing the son.

Byron Hays was fortunate in that he had so little to do as the family friend whose Hollywood power is more useful as fancy than fact. The role refused to jell.

Design and technical direction by Mary Jo Yeakel was more than adequate, and David Robinson's costume designs left nothing to be desired.

The fault rests equally with the concept and the execution. All hands will have to study remaining performances at 8:30 p.m. through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday if Otterbein's summer season is to end the way it should.