

COLUMBUS DISPATCH
COLUMBUS, O.
9M & SUN - CIRC. 227,651

JAN-26-89

Homespun 'Quilters' has a hard edge

By Jay Weitz
Special to The Dispatch

Until recent years, history largely has been written by men. Only lately has the rest of the story begun to be told — *herstory*, if you will.

Last night, the Otterbein College departments of music and theater and dance opened 1989 with their luminous production of the musical *Quilters*, a homespun contribution to that retelling.

There is not a weak voice nor a false step in the ensemble.

Led by Shane Frampton as the matriarchal Sarah (the closest this patchwork comes to a continuing character), each of the six "daughters" has her own chance to spin a story. Lisa Walton, Rachael Harris, Colby Paul, Laura Hagan, Patricia Cockburn and Kay Bowers blend voices and spir- its powerfully and tirelessly.

They take us into the lives, joys and tragedies of the pioneer women who kept the family warm, clothed and fed while the men

REVIEW

Otterbein College will present *Quilters* at 8 tonight in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St. in Westerville. Performances continue through Feb. 5. For times and tickets, call 898-1109.

made the history we read about. Unburdened by plot, *Quilters* stitches a collective portrait around the central metaphor and reality of the ubiquitous quilt.

Playwrights Molly Newmar and Barbara Damashek based their work on the book *The Quilters: women and domestic art* by Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Allen. But its appeal is widely human, not narrowly female.

One might expect so potentially sentimental a topic to degenerate into cutesy mush, yet it never does. It retains a hard edge, much like the women it portrays.

Deprivation and the pain of women in a pre-modern medicine age is never far from the surface. One scene, depicting the burden of pregnancy after pregnancy, provoking some women to desperate measures in order to end the cycle, is a poignant plea to allow women control of their lives.

Just as every quilt maker has a scrap bag full of light, dark and neutral patches, *Quilters* ranges the spectrum of emotions. There's a baptism scene that will keep you in stitches. And children making proto-Muppets out of socks and cornstalks in *Cornelia* elicit a broad grin.

Small touches make big impacts, as well. A wailing wind is that much louder when an imaginary door opens. A tornado-alarm bell is muffled when all the students are shut safely in the basement shelter.

Kudos go to pianist Beth Burrier, guitarist, banjo and harmonica player Molly Pauken, flutist Jennifer Wilcox and percussionist

Mandy Hissam for their solid contributions.

Director Pam Hill keeps things moving swiftly. Occasionally, things move a bit too swiftly, and some moments are swept away by the rush of the next. But *Quilters* is history — her story — to be savored.

"Quilters" a vibrant representation of frontier women

By David Bruce

Otterbein's production of "Quilters" is no less than brilliant. The cast, the music and the choreography are masterfully pieced together to make a wonderful show.

The play itself is similar to a quilt: made up of 18 blocks, each block representing a different aspect of the lives of the American frontier woman. From their first lessons in patchwork (stitching homemade dolls), to the frustrations and joys of reaching maturity, the cast, through the excitement and sheer joy of their performance, captures the vibrancy of pioneer women.

The production paints both a harsh and gentle picture. Particularly fearful moments, such as childbirth or a great fire, are

staged in shadow blocks—dark surrealistic scenes of confusion and terror. The gentler moments are presented by peaceful harmony and movement. The joyous celebration of living is captured by the weaving songs and dances.

The play begins with a letter from the mother to her six daughters and ends with the daughters carrying her body to her grave. Her letter utilized quilting as a metaphor for their lives.

Within the epistle, the audience is shown the spectrum of these women's existence. There were no comforts or extras in their lives. Each woman performed more than her share of the chores. Each woman had between 10 to 15 children, some of whom died either at birth or soon after, in a land

susceptible to drought, prairie fires, tornadoes and freezing winters.

But the theme of this production is not bitterness and resentment toward their life. Rather, it presents women making the best of the circumstances—that is what quilt-making was all about. Quilting became the hobby to vent nervous tension. It became the women's social forum. It became the therapy in recovering from loss. It became the symbol of the rebuilding process of the instability of early Western life.

Like the quilts, the fabric of their life is made from both the silk of joyous moments, and the burlap of the ugly realities of their day, forming a story of perseverance that endures like one of their finely woven blankets.