

ENTERTAINMENT

'Crimes' salute to humor

By Dennis Fiely

Dispatch Theater Critic

The loonies are loose in Westerville.

They've arrived, courtesy of Otterbein College Summer Theatre, in the form of the Mcgrath sisters from Beth Henley's Pulitzer Prize-winning kitchen comedy, *Crimes of the Heart*.

The play covers about 13 hours of a day in the life of these three siblings who belong to the grand literary tradition of Southern eccentrics.

Crimes of the Heart takes place on Oct. 23 in Hazelhurst, Miss., five years after Hurricane Camille, and it's what you might call your basic bummer of a time for the sisters.

OLD GRANDDAD is in the hospital after a severe stroke.

Babe, 24, just buried a bullet in her husband's gut because she "didn't like his looks."

Meg, 27, just returned from Hollywood where her singing career deteriorated into a regular job with a dog food company.

And Lenny? Pity poor Lenny, an old maid at 30 due to a "shrunken ovary." It's her birthday and nobody much cares or remembers. Lenny is also a little dismayed by the death of her horse, struck by lightning.

Bad days and betrayals of passions are what *Crimes of the Heart* is all about, but the sisters, buoyed by Henley's crisp, engaging script, handle life's disappointments with unflappable spunk.

THE PLAY is, most of all, a

Crimes of the Heart continues at 8:30 p.m. through Saturday in the Arena Theatre in the Campus Center on the Otterbein College campus. Tickets, \$4 and \$4.50, may be obtained at the Campus Center box office.

REVIEW

celebration of humor, and the Otterbein production, under the direction of Charles Dodrill, understands and reflects this. True to Henley's vision, the sisters emerge sympathetic and lovable in spite of their shortcomings.

At 2½ hours, including two brief intermissions, Henley burdens her script with enough shocking plots and subplots, few of which are consummated, to fill an entire afternoon of soap operas. The play is quite simply too busy and too long, but it never stops being funny.

It shows us how humor is a tool of survival and a key ingredient for emotional strength. It shows us how humor is sometimes appropriate and necessary even in the darkest of situations. This is most clearly demonstrated at the beginning of Act 3, when the sisters launch into a laughing fit after they learn that old granddad has lapsed into a coma.

SHORT ON slapstick and pratfalls, *Crimes of the Heart* is a comedy of words, and the student cast at Otterbein responds to the challenge with a keen

sense of rhythm, timing and inflection. It takes awhile for the audience to adjust to the characters' thick Southern accents, yet much of the humor exists in the lazy, nonchalant manner in which they deliver these lines.

Susan Diol, Jodie Silk and Liana Peters don't look anything like sisters, but they *act* like sisters, alternately bickering with each other and loving each other. Despite their physical disparities, they capture an emotional kinship.

As the spinster, Diol is the most mature and subtle performer on the stage. She has a twinkle in her eye that reveals a spark in her soul and belies her fussy, uptight behavior.

Peters carries well the demeanor of a wholesome, naive blonde that contrasts nicely with her criminal and illicit offstage activity that includes an affair with a 15-year-old black boy.

SILK IS A bit overbearing as the man-crazed Meg. She simply seems to be trying too hard, but still garners her share of laughs.

The fine supporting cast includes Brent Erdy as the young, enthusiastic lawyer who prepares Babe's murder defense and Giovanni Moscardino as Doc Porter, Meg's former lover. But Laura Stitt proves to be a scene-stealer for her exaggerated portrayal of the nosey neighbor.

In lesser hands, *Crimes of the Heart* could easily become a silly sitcom, but a passion for life drives the Otterbein production and turns it into something more.

Entertainment

'Crimes of the Heart' moves at comfortable pace

Local theater groups know a good play when they find it.

Consider "Crimes of the Heart," Beth Henley's Pulitzer Prize winner. Worthington Community Theatre recently completed a successful area debut of the three-act comedy, and Players Theatre has included it in its 1984-85 season.



Frank Gabrenya
C-J Entertainment
Writer

Now Otterbein has opened its summer theater program with its own version of "Crimes" in a production that clearly proves why this study of a Southern family is such a crowd-pleaser.

The play focuses on the McGrath sisters of Hazelhurst, Miss. Lenny is the oldest — it's her 30th birthday — and the one who stayed at home to care for their grandfather. She's a spinster-in-training, avoiding life as much as her sisters have embraced it.

Meg is earthier, a would-be singer whose talent doesn't match her ambitions. The youngest sister is Babe, whose marriage to a rascal named Zach isn't helped by the fact she recently shot him. Her only rationale is she "didn't like his looks."

Among the shared pains of the sisters is their mother's suicide years ago. Meg explains Mom's exit simply: "She had a bad day."

Well, bad days seem to run in the McGrath family, but they still manage to find laughs to share and snatches of sunlight between the

gathering clouds. Periods of separation can't diminish their closeness.

That's the key relationship of "Crimes," a closed circle of siblings outsiders can't penetrate, where no one really wants to fight but everyone does, where only those inside the circle are allowed to criticize family members. They're emotional yo-yos, and we all either know such a group or belong to one.

The plot details padding out these relationships are sometimes real and sometimes too extreme. But "Crimes" always returns to its central theme and that's when it works best. It has plenty of solid laughs, the best of which spring from the characters themselves.

Otterbein's production, directed by theater department chairman Charles Dodrill, moves at a comfortable pace, milking the best laughs without tipping too far into situation

comedy. The arena staging, with the audience on all four sides of the single kitchen set, requires fairly constant movement, but the blocking is seldom artificially motivated.

Susan Diol, as Lenny, is the stand-out in this ensemble cast. She knows how to listen on stage and how to check her emotions until the script calls for an outburst. To her additional credit, she is just as effective in her quietest moments.

Jodi Silk as Meg and Liana Peters as Babe get most of their mileage from their comedic scenes. Both characters are less real than Lenny, and at times the actresses try to make up for that.

Among the supporting players, Giovanni Moscardino is perfectly low-key as Doc, an old beau of Meg's, and Laura Stitt is appropriately broad and irritating as Chick, a nose neighbor. Brent Erdy plays Babe's lawyer with a little too much "gee whiz," although the script doesn't offer a lot of choice.

The Southern accents, often as thick as Spanish moss, are the production's biggest weakness. Also, the seating in the Campus Center Arena Theatre proves there's a fine line



Jodi Silk as Meg McGrath (left) and Susan Diol as Lenny McGrath share a light moment in "Crimes of the Heart" at Otterbein.

between intimate and cramped, although the air conditioning relieves the claustrophobia.

For all its prize-winning acclaim, "Crimes of the Heart" is a crowd-pleasing play that delivers an evening of amusement. Its territory isn't totally original, but its pleasures are genuine.

"Crimes of the Heart" continues at 8:30 p.m. through Saturday. Call 890-3028 for tickets.