

Entertainment

Otterbein's 'Arsenic' good for an evening of laughs

By FRANK GABRENYA

C-J Entertainment Writer

You probably won't find the name of Joseph Kesselring on any honor role of American playwrights. But his one and only Broadway hit is probably there.

"Arsenic and Old Lace," Kesselring's offbeat comedy, has tickled audiences since 1941. With its comically deranged characters caught up in a macabre web of ghoulish situations, "Arsenic" is a slice of lovable lunacy virtually in its own genre.

Otterbein College's Summer Theatre has opened its 1985 season with

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a version of "Arsenic" that shows how to make an old chestnut seem as fresh as this week. Thanks to a spirited pace and joyful exaggeration, "Arsenic" had Tuesday's opening night audience laughing, almost on cue, for nearly three hours.

"Arsenic" is about a day and a night in the lives of the Brewsters of Brooklyn. Every limb on this family tree features someone on loan from the Twilight Zone.

The elderly aunts, Abby and Mar-

tha, with their lethal elderberry wine poison lonely old gentlemen. Nephew Teddy is convinced he's Theodore Roosevelt. Nephew Jonathan is a homicidal maniac and Boris Karloff look-alike. And, making it a clean sweep, nephew Mortimer is a drama critic.

Otterbein's production starts slowly, due to several overly theatrical performances. But, from the moment that Mortimer first discovers one of his aunts' victims lying in the window seat, the proceedings take off like a rocket without a guidance system.

The key to a good "Arsenic" is a

good Mortimer, and Otterbein has one in Tim Gregory. The role asks an actor to peak early in Act 1, then hold that level of agitation for the rest of a long play. Thanks to explosive timing at the right moments, Gregory maintains his level without wearing down the audience.

In contrast to Gregory's energy is Ken Erney as a perfectly sinister Jonathan. Erney is an eerie Karloff clone, from the creepy voice and deep-set eyes to the broad shoulders and granite jaw, looking like a formal cadaver.

As the two aunts, Jodie Silk and Laura Stitt have to play old maids well beyond their own ages. Too often, they turn Abby and Martha into elderly Munchkins, giggling and squealing like wind-up dolls. Still, their comic timing is on target.

The supporting cast has both strengths and weaknesses. The best is a superb cameo by Michael Harper as Mr. Gibbs, a potential victim of the sisters. You'd swear this talented young actor was in his mid-'60s and just wandered in off the street.

It's impossible to keep "Arsenic" short — this version ran close to three hours on Tuesday — but Geoff Nelson's brisk direction keeps the convolutions moving merrily along. No matter how often you've seen it, "Arsenic" can still be fun. And, if you've never seen it, its tricks are a genuine treat.

"Arsenic and Old Lace" continues through Saturday at 8:30 p.m. and Sunday at 2:30 p.m., at the Campus Center Theatre of Otterbein College. Call 890-3028 for tickets.

Arsenic' is summer tonic

by **Dennis Fiely**
Columbus Patch Theater Critic

The laughs multiply as fast as the corpses in the Otterbein College production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*, opening the summer theater season this week.

Joseph Kesselring's family nurse about two sweet, elderly sisters who put lonely seniors out of their misery with killer homemade wine is one of the most frequently performed works in the history of the American stage. But this production is fresh and funny.

The demands on the actors are modest because *Arsenic and Old Lace* calls for broad comic caricature instead of depth. Several of the key roles, such as the eddy Roosevelt impersonator (Steve Salyer) and the Bela Lu-

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gosi lookalike (Ken Erney), require impressionists more than actors.

Director Geoff Nelson wisely allows his performers to ham it up and have fun.

Outfitted in gray wigs, Jodie Silk and Laura Stitt shadow each other with tiny, mechanical steps and creaky movements as the kindly old murderers.

But Erney and David Cald-

well create the show's most delightful comedy team as the deranged fugitive Jonathan Brewster and his accompanying plastic surgeon, Dr. Einstein. Erney, with his dark, sinister eyes, angular form and mellifluous voice, plays Dracula to Caldwell's variation on Ratso Rizzo from *Midnight Cowboy*.

Tim Gregory, however, turns in the most impressive performance as the cynical drama critic, Mortimer Brewster, the rock-solid center of the play. Surrounded by the multitude of crazy character parts, Gregory holds his ground and gets some of the show's biggest laughs.

The timing is crisp and sure. Nelson's direction smoothly handles all of the complicated stage business.