

Funny things tickle enthusiastic 'Forum' audience at Otterbein

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Otterbein Summer Theatre's 25th anniversary season is off to an impish start with *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Consistent congeniality, to borrow one of the show's alliterative phrases, marks this light and breezy revival. It's spry summer fare.

Next year, this landmark musical farce will be 30 years old. Yet, *Forum* has aged imperceptibly, thanks largely to the clever wit of composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim and author Larry (Tootsie) Gelbart.

A funny thing about *A Funny Thing*: Its slapstick humor remains as fresh as ever. Remarkable, really, considering that its stock characters, motivations and situations were familiar more than 2,000 years ago.

Choreographer-director Doreen Dunn freshens up this rambunctious romp through ancient Rome even further by encouraging a game student cast to involve the audience in its antics. If you sit in the Campus Center Theatre's first row, you may be asked to hold a prop or two.

AT A GLANCE

■ *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, Otterbein Summer Theatre's student production of Stephen Sondheim's musical farce. Directed by Doreen Dunn.

Prologus, Pseudolus Ed Vaughan
Miles Gloriosus Jess Hanks
Hero Bryan Brems
Philia Katie Bowers

Consistently congenial Roman farce an old-fashioned crowd-pleaser

■ Performances at 8 tonight and Saturday night, 2 p.m. Sunday, 8 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday, and next Friday through July 7 in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

■ Tickets: \$8.50 to \$10.50. Call 898-1109.

On a more typical proscenium stage, *Forum* tends to come across as an acrobatic spectacle. On Otterbein's intimate thrust stage, it becomes a more human comedy of

THEATER REVIEW

love, lust, larceny and a scheming slave's unquenchable thirst for liberty.

Ed Vaughan's guileful, gleeful Pseudolus grows on you, although it takes much of the first act to get used to his epicene, faintly English persona. Unlike the rotund imbecility of Zero Mostel, who originated the role on Broadway and repeated it on film, Vaughan's slave is an altogether leaner, hungrier fellow. His impishness cannot mask his intelligence.

Vaughan doesn't pretend to be a fine singer. So he acts his songs, following Rex Harrison's approach to *My Fair Lady*. Personality substitutes for melody, with Vaughan half-speaking some lyrics. The important thing is that it works.

Although his monologues are less amusing than they could be, Vaughan's chemistry with the other performers is electric. And his pranks and plots with Daryl Lozoupone's Hysterium, who "lives to grovel," are simply, well, hysterical. Lozoupone is rather delightful himself, especially in a courtesan's reluc-

tant drag. Bryan Brems' lovesick Hero and Peyton Dixon's marriage-weary Senex rise to new heights of hilarity in a clever father-son duet in which each suspects the other of romancing the same woman. They sing well.

Jess Hanks' macho, egotistical Miles Gloriosus rises to heights of "hilawity." In a tongue-tied characterization that owes an incalculable debt to Elmer Fudd, Hanks steals his every scene. He's gruff, bluff and utterly silly — truly a "wegend" in his own mind.

Amy Patton's Domina is such a shrew that it's a shock when she opens her mouth to sing rather than bray. Patton's voice is almost as lovely as Katie Bowers' beguiling Philia when she and Hero sing *Lovely*.

A three-piece band backs the cast effectively just offstage. Given the space constraints, the band's size is understandable, but a Sondheim score deserves a larger orchestra. At Otterbein, much of the music's subtleties are muted.

Overall, I found Otterbein's revival mildly disappointing. Perhaps, as an admittedly rabid Sondheim fan, I remember *Forum* as funnier and faster than it proves here. (Cer-



Eric Albrecht/Dispatch

From left, Bryan Brems, Ed Vaughan and Katie Bowers

tainly, the second act's loosely choreographed chase sequence could be tightened up.)

Even so, a packed crowd laughed uproariously at Wednesday's opening. Comedy tonight, indeed.

copy ↓ Otterbein's 'Funny Thing' is a funny thing

By Dennis Thompson

SNP Theater Critic

Otterbein Summer Theatre gets its 25th season off to a crowd-pleasing start with an energetically entertaining revival of a musical comedy classic.

It has been nearly 30 years since *A Funny Thing Happened on the way to the Forum* opened on Broadway. The original production starred Zero Mostel with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and book by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, the latter of *M*A*S*H* fame.

This early work does not



review

have the musical substance of Sondheim's later creations. The only recognizable song from the show is the breezy *Comedy Tonight*. In fact, beyond some clever lines, there is nothing mem-

orable about the music.

The success of the show rests largely with its dialogue and farcical situations drawn from traditional Latin characters. The success of this production lies with its direction and choreography, with a strong student cast supporting a stellar performance by guest Equity actor Ed Vaughan.

Vaughan plays Pseudolus, a slave who yearns for his freedom, which he can achieve if he can match up the young lovers, Hero and Philia, before Philia is taken away by Miles Gloriosus, a warrior who has purchased her.

The work is true farce, with quick entrances and exits, disguises and mistaken identities and attempted sexual trysts that are never quite fulfilled.

Vaughan has a face for farce, which the intimate setting of Otterbein's Campus Center Theatre displays to good advantage. Without saying a word he can display bafflement, disgust, impatience, mock surprise and suppressed lust, rolling his eyes through marvelous double takes.

He playfully prances across the stage, working up a considerable sweat by the middle of the first act. He seems to be working so hard,

yet is having so much fun the audience shares in it.

The strong student cast keeps the quality near Vaughan's level. One show-stopper is Jess Hanks as the lisping warrior Gloriosus. His methodical lisp is humorous to us because Hanks portrays the character with bravado, so wrapped up in his own self-importance that he is unaware of any flaw.

Bryan Brems as Hero and Katy Bowers as Philia make a winsome couple, although Brems has the stronger presence.

Director-choreographer Doreen Dunn manages the large cast exceptionally well, always mindful of the quick-

paced timing so essential to farce. The choreographed comings and goings of both individuals and groups are major reasons the comedy works so well.

With few exceptions, the cast is equally proficient at both singing and acting, a combination that is often rare in large student productions.

Simply put, *A Funny Thing* is a funny thing.

Otterbein Summer Theatre's *A Funny Thing Happened on the way to the Forum* continues tonight through Sunday at the Campus Center Theatre in Westerville. For more information call 898-1109.

'Forum': Not enough funny things happen

By Richard Ades

I kind of liked Otterbein Summer Theatre's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* until the soldier with the speech problem showed up.

It's not that Jess Hanks was bad as Miles Gloriosus—he was good—but turning the swaggering, self-worshipping Miles into a Roman Elmer Fudd is the kind of comedic overkill that leaves me cold.

While others around me cracked up every time he mispronounced "leg" as "weg" or "lust" as "wust," I could only wonder if Otterbein offers a course that would help me appreciate this kind of humor. Something like Communications 401: Jerry Lewis—A Man and His Muse.

Miles aside, director Doreen Dunn's production of the 29-year-old musical farce is still a mixed bag. It mostly does well by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart's jokes and Stephen Sondheim's songs. Especially in the beginning, it benefits from the comic tal-

THEATER REVIEW

ents of the show's star and only Equity actor, Ed Vaughan, who can deliver a punch line with the best of them.

But some of the visual humor doesn't fare as well. During the several choruses of *Everybody Ought to Have a Maid*, Vaughan acts

I kind of liked the Otterbein Summer Theatre musical until the soldier with the speech problem showed up.

like he was given vague instructions to mince around the stage acting like a woman. And a slapstick chase at the end is little more than a lot of people running back and forth kicking each other.

Still, the material is good, and only a little dated.

Set in Rome around 200 B.C., *Forum* is the story of Pseudolus (Vaughan), a wily slave who yearns to be free. His master is the young and decidedly unwily Hero (Bryan P. Brems), who is surprised to hear of his wish.

"People do not go around freeing slaves," Hero tells him.

"Be the first. Start a fashion," Pseudolus urges. When Hero's parents go

out of town, Pseudolus stumbles across the fact that Hero is secretly in love with a courtesan in the house of ill repute next door, who unfortunately has already been sold to the aforementioned Miles.

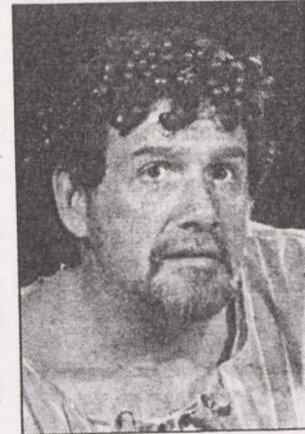
Pseudolus and Hero make a pact: If the slave wins the master his sweetheart, the slave wins his freedom.

Pseudolus's subsequent scheme involves a rumored plague, potions and a fake corpse. Complications arise, of course, involving the unexpected return of Hero's parents and the stubbornness of Miles, who won't take no for an answer.

Brems is effectively simple-minded and laid-back as Hero, offering a good contrast to the brusque, scheming Pseudolus. Some of the other student actors work harder but to less effect, though all have their moments.

Daryl M. Lozupone at first tries too hard to make the slave Hysterium live up to his name. Later he calms down and mugs hilariously while Pseudolus serenades and flatters him into believing he could pass for an attractive—and female—corpse.

Peyton Dixon is not bad as Senex, Hero's father. But Amy Jo Patten's early overacting fails to bring off



Ed Vaughan: As Pseudolus, he delivers a punch line with the best of them.

the play's most dated role, Senex's battle-ax of a wife, Domina. She blows the part entirely with her Act II rendition of *That Dirty Old Man*—sadly, because she does it too well. In fact, her sexy delivery of the lament makes her husband's ongoing attempt at unfaithfulness seem obligatory. Why, one wonders, can't he be satisfied with her?

Keith Berkes is serviceable as Lycus, buyer and

seller of courtesans, but Katy L. Bowers can't quite carry off Philia, the empty-headed courtesan-in-training who catches Hero's eye. Bowers does manage to display one of the sweetest voices in a cast full of good singers.

Music is one of this production's strong points. Sondheim classics such as *Comedy Tonight* and *Lovely* are performed memorably, while such ditties as *Pretty Little Picture* are painless and (thankfully) forgettable.

Also generally on target are the show's bit players, including Meg Chamberlain, Kim Butterweck, Karen Justin, Kimberly J. Glann, Colby Anne Paul and Kam Ann Clay as assorted courtesans, and Michael S. Warren as Erro-nius.

Still better are David Coffin, Douglas M. Geib and Nick Koesters in several male walk-ons. They're especially funny as a trio of squeaky-voiced eunuchs. For their sake, we can only hope Otterbein doesn't teach method acting.

Just for laughs

Otterbein lures Ed Vaughan for another stint in 'Forum'

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

A funny thing happened to Ed Vaughan on the way to a career as a "serious actor." He found out he could make people laugh.

"Even when I'm serious, I make people laugh," Vaughan said. "I went through a long period when I didn't act in farce — or didn't enjoy it — because I took myself too seriously."

"But one of the things you have to deal with as you get older is a recognition of what you're good at," he said. "So I guess I have to accept that I'm a pretty good farceur."

Vaughan may be a bit modest, judging from Otterbein College's invitation for him to return for the third time to play Pseudolus in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Stephen Sondheim's musical farce, which opens Wednesday, launches Otterbein's 25th anniversary summer season.

"I guess I have to accept that I'm a pretty good farceur."
Ed Vaughan
Actor

"It's very clever, lowbrow stuff," Vaughan said. "If the show goes well, there are huge belly laughs. Even without Sondheim's songs, it's a well-constructed play with a funny story about ancient Rome."

Forum represented a milestone for Sondheim, who made the mirthful most of his first chance to write the music and lyrics for a show following his collaborative successes with *West Side Story* and *Gypsy*.

"This is early Sondheim," Vaughan cautioned. "*Forum* doesn't have any of the darkness of a *Sweeney Todd* or *Into the Woods*. There's no message here. It's pure fun."

Although Sondheim's lyrics are witty, much of the credit for *Forum*'s zany hilarity must go to gagmeister Larry Gelbart, who wrote the musical's "book," or story. Gelbart went on to write *M*A*S*H*, *Tootsie*

and last year's similarly antic Tony winner for best musical, *City of Angels*.

"Gelbart borrowed his stock characters from old Roman comedies," Vaughan said. "Pick up any extant Roman comedy, and you can't miss the similarities of form. You have the henpecked husband (Senex), the dominating wife (predictably named Domina), the old man (Erronius), the

young lovers (Hero and Philia), and the slave."

Vaughan's Pseudolus, of course, is the scheming slave "who makes things happen." Zero Mostel originated the role in 1962 on Broadway and played Pseudolus in the disappointing 1966 film.

To Vaughan, Pseudolus is an obvious cousin to Harlequin, the jesting figure of



Daryl M. Lozupone, left, and Ed Vaughan fret in *Forum*.

Eric Albrecht/Dispatch

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum. Otterbein Summer Theatre's student production of Stephen Sondheim's musical farce. Directed by Doreen Dunn.

Major cast members:
Pseudolus, Prologus...Ed Vaughan
Miles Gloriosus.....Jess Hanks
Senex.....Peyton Dixon
Domina.....Amy Patton
Hero.....Bryan Brems
Philia.....Katie Bowers

Performances are 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday and July 2, 3, 5-7 at the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

Tickets: \$8.50-\$10.50. Call 898-1109.

commedia dell'arte. Perhaps an ancestor would be more accurate, since Roman farce strongly influenced the development of Italy's popular late-Renaissance theater genre.

"Pseudolus thinks on his feet, adjusts quickly and loves what he does," Vaughan said. "His behavior may be zany, but this character has good reasons for it. All the silly things he does are to gain his freedom."

Vaughan enjoys Pseudolus so much that he has played the roly-poly slave twice before at Otterbein: in 1973, two years after Vaughan's graduation, and 11 years ago, when he returned as a guest Equity artist. This revival's other guest artist is director Doreen Dunn.

Why return to a role, however enjoyable, whose challenges Vaughan has met before?

"It's like a line in the show," said Vaughan, 41. "Hysterium asks Pseudolus: 'Why?' And Pseudolus says: 'Why not?' It's a great comic role."

"Anyway, comedy is often much more difficult to do than drama. It's all a matter of timing. Plus, you get to be really silly, and *Forum* is a great crowd-pleaser."

"Or that's my memory of it, anyway," Vaughan said. "Eleven years is a long time."

Columbus theater's top five for 1991

By Dennis Thompson
SNP Theater Critic

Some thoughts on the year of 1991 in theater:

Although I was rarely overwhelmed in 1991, it was a year filled with strong and varied productions.

I would offer this as a list of five favorites: The Contemporary American Theatre Company's *A Christmas*

Memory-The Thanksgiving Visitor and *Speed-the-Plow*, Grandparents Living Theatre's *I was Young ... Now I'm Wonderful*, The Ohio State University's *Eastern Standard* and Actor's Summer Theatre's *The Music Man*.

CATCO's Christmas plays were warmly poetic and staged with imaginative simplicity. *Speed-the-Plow* brought together Geoffrey Nelson and Ed Vaughan, two excellent actors who attacked David Mamet's language with crisp electricity.

GLT's perceptive *I Was Young ...* was a poignant and humorous work in progress that was especially sharp in its October return.

Strong ensemble acting by OSU's '90-91 graduate acting company was a major key in the success of *Eastern Standard*.

WHO AM I to argue with the 30,000 people who swarmed to AST's *Music Man*? They saw a well-staged production of the popular musical, enriched by the talents of Rick Kessler and Kristin Huffman.

Also a favorite was Otterbein Summer Theatre's successful comedy, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, highlighted by Vaughan's broad



review

portrayal of Pseudolus.

In addition to the performances already mentioned, other standouts included Dann E. Reese's Sizwe in CATCO's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and Andrea Bigg's Chicklet in Reality's *Psycho Beach Party*.

In viewing a stream of productions, critics run the risk of detachment, of becoming too analytical to feel.

However, there were two moments in 1991 productions that prodded my emotional involvement. These were the close of the first act of Reality Theatre's *Bent* and the Act II scene of GLT's *I Was Young ...* entitled "The Darker Side."

REALITY'S Frank Barnhart's moving speech, describing the degradations inflicted by the Nazis, was powerful. GLT's tales of loneliness and loss that accompany age were poignantly presented by the cast of older actors.

It is encouraging to see the extensive work done in children's theater in this town. These productions introduce theater to a young audience, serving as both entertainment and education.

Columbus Junior Theatre and Players Youth Theatre

both have a strong reputation in this area, with Players reaching out to an even younger audience this year. Otterbein's fall children's production is met with annual acclaim.

Even CATCO did a children's play this fall. Its *Revenge of the Space Pandas* did not draw as well as planners hoped, although that may be attributed to CATCO's status as a new player in the children's arena. Hopefully, it will try again, providing another talented option for parents.

There are some changes in schedules for 1992. Peter Schaffer's *Lettice and Lovage* was to be Players Theatre's first offering of the new year in its Capitol Theatre Series.

HOWEVER, it is not yet available to regional theaters due to a national tour. Thus Players has replaced it with the venerable thriller *Wait Until Dark*, which opens Jan. 15.

Players has also filled the

final slot of its Studio season with *Oil City Symphony*, opening April 22. Billed as a silly spoof of small town music, it was an Off Broadway success in the late '80s.

CATCO's April 8 opening of *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche* has been replaced with the Alan Ayckbourn comedy *Relatively Speaking*.

January is always a busy time for local theatres as they gear up after the holidays. In addition to Players' *Wait Until Dark*, opening between the Jan. 9 and 16 will be CATCO's *Laughing Wild*, Reality's *Corey and the Third Annual Playwrights' Festival*, Players Youth Theatre's *Appleseed*, and Spotlight Dinner Theatre's *Side By Side By Sondheim*.

The rest of the month will include Players' *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* and Otterbein's *Nunsense* followed in early February by Columbus Junior Theatre's *Treasure Island* and OSU's *Candida*.

Enjoy.

Washington News 1/1/91