

Otterbein does well by Simon's 'Women'

By Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

Neil Simon does not have a reputation as an experimental playwright. For good reason: If anyone is a master of the well-constructed, mainstream comedy, it's America's most successful living playwright.

Yet, *Jake's Women* can be considered a quasi-experimental play. Simon's semi-autobiographical comedy-drama, about a workaholic writer struggling to come to terms with his middle-aged life and all the women in that life, playfully but seriously blends reality, memory and fantasy.

Otterbein Summer Theatre's fine production, which opened last night to laughter and applause on

THEATER REVIEW

Jake's Women, Otterbein Summer Theatre's student production of Neil Simon's comedy. Directed by Ed Vaughan.

Jake Scott Kloes
Maggie Mandy Fox
Karen Janin Jones
Molly (age 12) Bronwynn Hopton
Molly (age 21) Sara Laudonia
Women on — and from — the brain
Being presented at 8 tonight through
Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday —
through July 2 — at the Campus
Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St.,
Westerville.

Tickets post \$9.50-\$12.50. Call 823-



Barth Falkenberg/Dispatch

Sara Laudonia (as Mollie at age 21), left, Scott Kloes (as Jake) and Bronwynn Hopton (as Mollie at 12) will appear

June 21-July 2 in the Otterbein Summer Theatre production of Neil Simon's *Jake's Women*.

THEATER

Simon, sketches, New York hits make up appealing plate of plays

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

New plays represent the lifeblood of theater, but the flow usually tapers to a trickle under the summer heat.

Not this year: Several theaters will stage interesting new plays or recent New York hits.

Contemporary American Theatre Company will launch its 1995-96 season — expected to be its first under a long-term contract with Actors' Equity Association, the national union for stage actors and stage managers — with two recent off-Broadway hits.

All in the Timing, David Ives' witty collection of comedic sketches, shows off the up-and-coming playwright's ingenious wordplay and imaginative concepts. Suburbia, the most fully developed play by monologist Eric Bogosian, explores the dead-end lives of young adults who have nothing better to do than hang around the parking lot of a convenience store.

The two plays will be performed repertory-style, on alternating weeks, in July and August.

Other off-Broadway hits will focus on gay themes: Reality Theatre's production of Jeffrey, Paul Rudnick's safe-sex comedy (and upcoming film) about dating in the era of AIDS; and a co-production, from Act Out Productions and Reality Theatre, of The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me, David Drake's one-man, coming-of-age comedy-drama.

Every summer seems to have its share of ho-hum Neil Simon revivals, but Otterbein Summer Theatre's regional premiere of *Jake's Women* should offer something a little more offbeat.

Simon's recent Broadway comedy is among his most

experimental: *Jake's Women* blends real and imaginary characters as a middle-aged writer comes to terms with his wives, girlfriends and sister.

Otterbein, which traditionally has found summer success with mysteries, also will offer a nifty whodunit, *Sherlock's Last Case*.

Shadowbox Cabaret will present three newish plays by nationally known playwrights: 10:40, Grace McKeaney's one-act comedy about a woman who begins an affair on the evening of her 15th wedding anniversary; White Man Dancing, a newly revised version of Stephen Metcalfe's two-act play about male-female relationships; and Salamander, Peter Maloney's one-act drama about a young, lower-class woman's confrontation with an elderly librarian.

Grandparents Living Theatre will explore oral black history in *Letters From Our Elders: A Celebration of African-American Life and Culture*. Charlie Rutherford of Grandparents, Jeannine Sessions of the old Center Stage Theatre and Francine Mar'chelle of Ujima Theatre will appear in the ensemble cast of the piece, which James Kevin Mathis based on the lives of elders on the Near East Side.

Actors' Theatre, meanwhile, will be reborn in German Village's Schiller Park: The troupe's first play will open in July, a month later than usual, to allow construction to be completed on a much-improved outdoor theater.

Appropriately enough, Actors' first play in the new space will be the fanciful Shakespearean comedy that marked the troupe's birth in 1982: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

THE OTHER PAPER
COLUMBUS, OH.

JUN-29-95

Of men, women and plot devices

359 Otterbein's production of **Jake's Women** kept me pretty well entertained, considering the Neil Simon comedy includes two plot devices that drive me up a wall.

The first is characters engaging in psychoanalysis as part of everyday conversation.

The old *thirtysomething* series used to do this a lot. You may remember this scene, or something like it: "I now realize that the reason I freaked out when you spent an extra weekend in New York, Elliot, is that I'd never gotten over the sense of rejection I felt when my dog Ginger ran away with a flea-bitten mongrel on the morning of my 11th birthday." (Fade in gentle guitar riff.)

The other plot device I hate is the imaginary character who doesn't know his or her own boundaries. Have you ever read the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip and wondered how a make-believe tiger could drop a water balloon on its human owner? That's what I mean.

Jake's Women is filled with characters who aren't exactly imaginary—they're more like imaginary versions of real peo-

ple. It seems that whenever Jake (Scott M. Kloes) needs help with a problem, he conjures up an appearance by one of his women friends—his sister, his daughter, his ex-wife or his analyst.

All this is a clever metaphor for the novelist's inability to relate to his wife and other women on their own terms. Sometimes, though, Simon can't resist giving these conjured-up women feelings and

needs of their own. It doesn't quite work.

Except once, that is. That's when Jake's long-deceased first wife, Julie (Tirzah Wise), gets to meet the grown-up version of her

daughter (Sara Laudonia). Wise is such a expressive performer that we feel the tenderness and wonder of the moment right along with Julie, even though the whole scene is just another figment of Jake's imagination.

It's too bad Mandy Fox doesn't have as firm a grip on Jake's current wife, Maggie, because the shaky state of Jake's marriage is the problem around which the play revolves. Fox is best in the more comic moments, particularly during a flashback when she nervously meets Jake's daughter, a precocious 12-year-old (Hillery Bronwynn Hopton).

As Jake, Kloes also is best at getting laughs. However, he manages to create a comfortable, likable central character—especially important since Jake almost never leaves the stage.

The rest of "Jake's women" are his sister (Janin Rhain Jones) and psychiatrist (Katherine Smart), both played at least as broadly as they're written; and a tempo-



'Calvin and Hobbes' meets 'thirtysomething': Mandy Fox and Scott Kloes in *Jake's Women*

rary girlfriend, played with style by Cara Miller. The well-paced direction is by Ed Vaughan.

Despite my problems with the script and some of the acting, *Jake's Women* comes off as an often funny and ingenious morality tale. In fact, I'd probably like it better if the ending didn't seem so saccharin.

I've always hated phony sweetness—ever since I was 8 years old and found out my uncle with the sunny disposition made his living selling overpriced burial insurance to gullible old ladies.

Oh, wait, I think I've got my life confused with another episode of *thirtysomething*.

Theater

RICHARD ADES



INFO:

Otterbein Summer Theatre will present *Jake's Women* at 8 p.m. through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets are \$11 today, \$12.50 Friday and Saturday and \$9.50 Sunday. 823-1109.

Simon comedy to spark Otterbein's summer season

By Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

Otterbein Summer Theatre will offer a Neil Simon comedy, a Sherlock Holmes mystery and an off-Broadway musical revue.

Jake's Women, which launches the company's 29th season in June, isn't a typical Simon comedy.

The experimental 1992 Broadway hit is a semiautobiographical comedy-drama about a writer who conjures imaginary encounters with his first wife, sister, daughters and girlfriends.

"It's a little different from other Neil Simon," said Dennis Romer, artistic director of Otterbein College Theatre. The play "combines his thoughtful side and his crackling one-liners. It's a relationship play about a man trying to come to terms with his current relationships with women."

Guest artist Scott Kloes, who has performed in several films and at Contemporary American Theatre Company, will play the title role, which Alan Alda originated on Broadway.

Mandy Fox, a 1993 Otterbein graduate who is studying at the Yale Drama School, will return to play Maggie. At Otterbein, Fox played Sister Amnesia in *Nunsense* and the Baker's Wife in *Into the Woods*.

Otterbein traditionally includes a mystery in its summer season. Charles Marowitz's *Sherlock's Last Case*, which appeared on Broadway in 1987, focuses on a death threat against Holmes.

"Mysteries are always enormously popular with our audiences," Romer said, "and this one offers a new look at the Holmes-Dr. Watson relationship, a lot of suspense and humor and a very surprising final twist."

Ed Vaughan will direct the Simon comedy and the mystery.

The season will end in late July with *Closer Than Ever*, a sophisticated revue of songs about modern life by Richard Maltby and David Shire. The show won the 1990 Outer Critics Circle Award for best off-Broadway musical.

"It's Maltby and Shire's best collaboration."

The team also collaborated on *Baby*, an early 1980s Broadway musical that Otterbein presented last year.

"Whereas *Baby* was a little saccharine," Romer said, "this revue talks about dreams that haven't quite turned out, two-career families and parents dealing with growing children."

Otterbein's summer season will end a month earlier than usual, he said, to provide a longer "turnaround time" before the fall season.

SCHEDULE

- *Jake's Women* — June 21-July 2.
- *Sherlock's Last Case* — July 5-16.
- *Closer Than Ever* — July 19-30.

All performances are Wednesdays through Sundays in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

Season subscriptions cost \$22-\$32. Single tickets, on sale June 13, cost \$9.50-\$12.50. Call 823-1109.

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Otterbein's 'Jake's Women' rich, fun and full of insight

By DENNIS THOMPSON

Suburban News Theater Critic

Otterbein Summer Theatre opens its 29th season with *Jake's Women*, a different breed of Neil Simon play.

Remember when mere mention of Neil Simon's name called to mind a certain type of play? Funny, but poo-pooed by "serious" theatre people as mindless fluff, the embodiment of the perceived lack of substance in popular commercial theatre.

Then Simon reached a point in his life when he became introspective. Plays such as *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, *Biloxi Blues* and *Broadway Bound* were referred to as "semi-autobiographical."

They were still funny, but we found ourselves thinking and feeling through the laughter.

This is never more evident than in *Jake's Women*, arguably Simon's most intriguing and insightful work to date. It still displays his



REVIEW

quick wit, those laugh out loud moments that sneak up on you.

But the trademark one-liners are merely accent. For this is an engrossing mixture of reality and fantasy within a personal crisis that strikes a heartfelt chord.

Jake is a successful writer trying to hold together his marriage to his second wife, Maggie. At various times he conjures up the images of the women in his life for emotional support.

These include his daughter Molly at age 12 and her present age 21, his sister Ka-

ren, his analyst Edith, and the one he could not see in person, his first wife Julie who died in a car crash and whom he has never gotten over.

The construction of the play, mixing the fantasy with reality, is quite clever and there are moments that are very funny.

But, the laughter is more than its own end. It gets us through a very poignant story with characters we care about.

At first, Scott Kloes seems too casual as Jake. But soon we get the sense of the inner turmoil beneath the glib surface. It quietly becomes an insightful, sensitive performance.

He can show a manic intensity as when he deals with a new girlfriend, Sheila,

while wrangling with the image of Maggie.

But, more telling is his easy maneuvering between the off hand comedy and the moving moments as he comes to grips with his life.

As Kloes' character seeks its bearings early on, Mandy Fox is initially overwhelming as Maggie. But her strong voice and confident manner are effectively altered by a quivering voice as her character's insecurities show through. Hers is a very polished performance.

Tirzah Wise is always a delight on stage. While her Julie does not appear often, hers is a pivotal character and Wise clearly shows the beauty and vitality that makes the memory of her loss such a stumbling block for Jake.

Katherine Smart's Edith, with her sassy Brooklyn accent, is a comic highlight.

In fact, the entire cast is solid. Janin Jones' Karen is the caring yet obnoxious sister they all seem to grow up to be. Cara Miller plays her single scene as Sheila so well with Kloes that it becomes a production high point.

Hillery Hopton (Molly at 12) and Sara Laudonia (Molly at 21) play well their ages and support for their dad. Laudonia is particularly moving in portraying a truly heart-felt moment when she is given a few moments with the mother she lost as a child.

Fred Thayer's set design of Jake's gray uptown apartment is minimal, yet sharp.

Director Ed Vaughan, using the entire theater, never

allows us to get confused with the changing images of reality and fantasy.

He draws out consistently strong performances and stages some wonderful moments. Of particular note is a mime sequence between Sheila and the image of Maggie.

Women is a rich play, full of fun and insight. Otterbein has captured its essence with a smart, classy production.

Otterbein Summer Theatre's *Jake's Women* continues Wednesday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. through July 2 at the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St. in Westerville. Tickets are \$12.50 Friday and Saturday, \$11 Wednesday, Thursday, and \$9.50 Sunday. For more information call 823-1109.

THE BOOSTER
COLUMBUS, OH.
W CIRC. 4,000

DEC-27-95

Five theater productions were clear winners in 1995

Another five were close seconds

By DENNIS THOMPSON

Suburban News Theater Critic

This is usually the time of year for a top 10 list. I have one, although I almost made it a top five list as those first choices came easily. The second five were more of a struggle, though still worthy.

Within each group, however, the productions are listed in no particular order.

The top five productions I

saw this year were the Contemporary American Theatre Company's *The Loman Family Picnic*, Otterbein College Theatre's *Jake's Women*, the Red Herring Theatre Company's *Waiting for Godot* and Columbus Junior Theatre's *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Pippin*.

Rounding out the top 10 are CATCO'S *Blythe Spirit* and its two summer offer-

ings, *subUrbia* and *All in the Timing*. Reality Theatre's *Garden District* and Shadowbox Cabaret's *Holiday Hoopla IV*.

Both *Loman* and *Jake* were innovative, funny and moving. *Godot* was a clear, well-played production of a difficult classic. *Lion* and *Pippin* were both magical.

Spirit was smooth; *subUrbia*, lifelike and gritty. Others raved about *Timing* more than I, but there was enough strength in the writing and ensemble work to make the list. *Garden* made it on restrained attention to detail and fine acting. *Hoopla* was classic Shadowbox, but with this one all the cabaret's elements of drama, music and skits worked.

Top acting performances for the year included CATCO'S Ed Vaughan, Ellen Newman, Steve Boyer and Zach Reat in *Loman* and Michael Harper in *The*

Sneeze. For Reality Theatre, there was Vicky Welsh Bragg in *District*, Joshua Lewis Berg in both *District* and *Destiny of Me*, and Bill Salmons and Steve Weiss in *The Lisbon Traviata*.

Otterbein's best included Scott Kloes, Mandy Fox and Tirzah Wise in *Jake* and Aaron Carter in *Catnap Allegiance*. For Ohio State University Theatre, there was Michael Mulligan in *The Trial* and Justin Simons in *Gym Rats*.

Also shining were Red Herring's Rich Stadler and Michael Herring in *Godot* and CJT's Michael Kempisty in *Pippin*.

Best set designs included Carolyn Sarkis' gymnasium in *Gym Rats*, Rob Shaffer's back lot of a 7-11 in *subUrbia*, Dan Gray's cluttered office in CATCO'S *Sisters*, Russell Hastings' drawing room in *Spirit* and Eric Lubkeman's wintry world of Narnia in *Lion*.

COLUMBUS DISPATCH
COLUMBUS, OH.
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JUL-23-95

Wealth of talent displayed last season

Best actors, directors,
designers picked from
shows in central Ohio

Where would actors be without good directors — or directors without good designers? Conversely, where would directors and designers be without fine actors?

The answers: Nowhere, for theater is the first collaborative art.

Here are my picks for the best actors, directors and designers in central Ohio theater last season:

Best actor: Scott Kloes, for his fantasy-prone but utterly realistic writer coming to terms with the women in his life in Otterbein Summer Theatre's *Jake's Women*.

Runner-up: Geoffrey Nelson, as childlike Lennie in CATCO's *Of Mice and Men*.

The finalists: Mark Mann, who demonstrated his affinity for historical roles as the Machiavellian lead in Actors' Theatre's *Richard III* and the heroic-romantic ghost of Reality's *Childe Byron*; Michael Mauldin, as the reclusive map store owner brimming with grief and fear in New Venture Theatre's *Lonely Planet*; Jonathan Putnam, forceful as Lennie's exasperated protector in CATCO's *Of Mice and Men*; Frank Barnhart, whose passionate conviction gave full-bodied complexity to his varied gay roles in Act Out Productions' one-man show, *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*; and Michael Milligan, for his bitter, defiant one-man triumph in Red Herring Theatre Company's *A Poster of the Cosmos*.

Best actress: Ionia Zelenka, who minimized her mannerisms and maximized the humanity of Du, the grandmotherly kidnapper in CATCO's *Keely and Du*.

Runner-up: Tirzah Wise was classy, wistful and gracious as the art dealer's wife in Otterbein's *Six Degrees of Separation*.

The finalists: Ellen Newman, the ditsy, neurotic housewife in CATCO's *The Loman Family Picnic*; Sarah Arnold, formidable as Byron's daughter in Reality's *Childe Byron*; Katherine Smart, plucky and lovably foolish in the title role of Otterbein's *Sweet Charity*; and Janetta Davis, the only vibrantly real character in CATCO's *Possible Worlds*.

Most versatile performer: Robert Behrens. He was headstrong and mean as Curley in

ONSTAGE



MICHAEL
GROSSBERG



File photos

Most versatile performer Robert Behrens (left), Geoffrey Nelson and Tony Roseboro in Contemporary American Theatre Company's best-ensemble production of *Someone to Watch Over Me*

CATCO's *Of Mice and Men*. He was diffident and vulnerable as the imprisoned English professor in CATCO's *Someone to Watch Over Me*. And he was a standout in the double role of true-blue Richmond and valiant Edward in Actors' Theatre's *Richard III*. I've never seen Behrens give a bad (or mediocre) performance.

Behrens also directs (CATCO's *The Loman Family Picnic*) and stages strong fight scenes (Actors' Theatre's *Richard III* and charming *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and CATCO's superb *SubUrbia*.) Is there anything this man can't do?

Best ensemble: CATCO's *Someone to Watch Over Me*, with Behrens, Nelson and Tony Roseboro as hostages sharing a Lebanese prison cell and an uncertain future.

Runners-up: CATCO's *Of Mice and Men*; and Shadowbox Cabaret's *Laundry and Bourbon*, with sassy Gail Griffith, catty Carrie Lynn McDonald and down-home Julie Klein as three Texas women.

Best supporting actor: David Ayers, a veteran Columbus actor and retired Ohio State University professor, as the mournful old codger who has lost an arm and will lose more in CATCO's *Of Mice and Men*.

Honorable mentions: Michael Mauldin, for his slapstick as the obese lawyer in OSU's *The Trial*; and Lawrence Alford, for his feverish innocence as the tortured teen-ager in Reality's

Equus.

Best supporting actress: Mandy Fox, now starring in Otterbein's *Closer Than Ever*, who brought texture to the second wife in Otterbein's *Jake's Women*.

Honorable mentions: Jennifer Freeday, the waspish Witch in Actors' Theatre's *Into the Woods*; Julie Klein, wanton and wounded in Shadowbox's sketchy *10:40*; and Denise Dumeyer, touching as the daughter in Gallery Players' *Lost in Yonkers*.

Best direction: A record number of finalists made this year's choice especially difficult.

First, the women: Patricia Ellson, for making sure that the 21-member cast of Actors' *Into the Woods* sang Stephen Sondheim's tricky lyrics with clarity and personality; Horacena Taylor, for the fine ensemble work in OSU's *Gym Rats*; Kathleen Conlin, for intelligent casting and shaping of OSU Theatre Company's creamy *Arms and the Man*; and Dee Shepherd, for the surreal beauty and stark lighting of Reality's suspenseful *Equus*, and for her tumultuous/langorous pacing of Reality's haunting *Childe Byron*.

Also: Ed Vaughan, whose firm hand and deft touches were apparent in Otterbein's *The Odd Couple* and *Jake's Women*; Dennis Romer, for his nimble staging of Otterbein's *Six Degrees of Separation*; Geoffrey Nelson, for CATCO's moving *Of Mice and Men*; Ed Graczyk, for his lovely staging (with Eric Boardsen) of *Quilters*, Theatre Lancaster's memorable debut; and Philip Thompson, for his freak-show concept of OSU's *The Trial*.

The winner: Shepherd, by a nose. Runner-up: Romer.

Best design: Rob Johnson's kaleidoscopic lighting, Rob Shaffer's plush sets and Ruth Boyd's smart New York costumes for Otterbein's *Six Degrees of Separation*.

Runner-up: Day Gray, for his weathered 1937 barn and dusty California valley in CATCO's *Of Mice and Men*, and for the mood of stark enclosure established by his utilitarian basement in CATCO's *Keely and Du*. Gray and Boyd also did well with the country, piney ambience of Theatre Lancaster's *Bus Stop*.

Honorable mentions: Christopher Clapp's sepia-tinged 1940s home for Gallery Players' satisfying *Lost in Yonkers*; Peg Smith's bold martial costumes and William

Penn's dramatic incidental music for Actors' Theatre's lavish smoke-and-blood-colored *Richard III*; and Jeffrey Wagner's rustic lighting for Theatre Lancaster's *Quilters*.

Next Sunday: The second annual theater critics' poll.

Michael Grossberg is Dispatch theater critic.



Best actress Ionia
Zelenka in CATCO's
Keely and Du