

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Eccentricity is entertaining in farcical 'Fever'

By DENNIS THOMPSON

Suburban News Theater Critic

Otterbein Summer Theatre presents the classic comedy *Hay Fever* by Noel Coward.

Coward is known for witty, urbane humor. But he also creates characters of great eccentricities.

Here the choice is made to broadly play up the eccentricities to the point that it becomes a farce. Accepting that, the result is quite fun.

The Bliss family welcomes weekend guests to its country estate. The seemingly normal guests struggle to cope with the increasingly odd foibles of their hosts.

Christina Kirk is the actress Judith Bliss, retired from the stage but not from emoting in life. Kirk's mannered, haughty vamp chews the scenery with marvelous melodramatic relish.

Randy Goetz plays her son, Simon, with a boyish giddiness. Daughter Sorel is played by Liz Beckham with animated intensity.

Husband David Bliss, a famous writer, is played with knowing detachment and worldly savvy by Jesse Wilson.

The befuddled guests include Sandy Tyrell,

played by Trent Caldwell with effusive naivete.

Natalie Arnold plays Myra Arundel with a conning sexuality that turns to simple exasperation. Faith Talley is the picture of "out of her element" nervousness as Jackie Coryton.

Scott Wilson plays Richard Greatham with guarded joviality until he, too, is drawn into the fray.

Kate Whitehead is the unflappable house servant, Clara, with a perfectly sardonic voice.

The work is peppered with delightful scenes, and director Doreen Dunn strikes a good balance between the droll quiete-

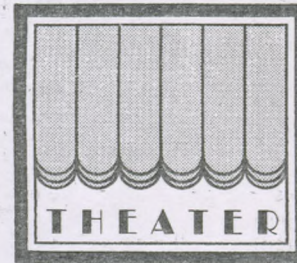
ones and the fervently outlandish ones.

Some favorites feature the recently arrived Jackie and Richard uncomfortably waiting for someone to notice them, and the mass tea-drinking scene that closes Act I.

The characters are clothed in Marcia Hain's elegant costumes and handsomely housed in scenic designer Dan Gray's ornate living room.

But it's the farcical extravagances of the family in full tilt that make this hilarious.

Otterbein Summer Theatre's Hay Fever contin-



ues at 8 p.m. through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday at the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets are \$14-\$17. For reservations call 823-1109.

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Otterbein not taking summer seriously

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

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Comedy — and nothing but comedy — will fill Otterbein Summer Theatre's season.

Noel Coward's comedy, *Hay Fever*, will run July 13-30 under Doreen Dunn's direction. Guest actor Christina Kirk, who has performed at the Illinois Shakespeare Festival and the Nebraska Repertory Theatre, will play the retired-actress mother of an ultrabohemian family.

Carter Lewis' new race-track comedy, *Longevity Abbreviated: for those who don't have time*, will open the season June 22-July 2. The world premiere of the Otterbein graduate's commissioned play was postponed because of the May production of *Ginger*, a new musical.

The season will end Aug. 3-13 with a compilation of six funny one-act plays by David Ives, including *Mere Mortals*, *Time Flies*, *Degas C'est Moi*, *Sure Thing*, *The Universal Language* and *Words, Words, Words*. Ed Vaughan will direct.

All three summer productions will be performed in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Season subscriptions cost \$39-\$45, with single tickets \$14-\$17. The box office opens June 12. For more information before June 12, call 614-823-1209 or 614-823-1657.

STAGE NOTES

THOMPSON IN CABARET

Lea Thompson will assume the role of nightclub singer Sally Bowles in the Roundabout Theatre's national tour of *Cabaret*.

Thompson, former star of the TV series *Caroline in the City*, began her



Lea Thompson

film career at 20. She starred in 17 films including *All the Right Moves*, *Red Dawn*, *Howard the Duck* and the *Back to the Future* trilogy. Her television movies include *A Will of Their Own*, *The*

Substitute Wife and *Unknown Cyclist*.

Thompson will replace Joely Fisher in the tour of *Cabaret*, beginning her performances March 28 in New Orleans, followed by engagements in Dallas, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Columbus, Baltimore, Atlanta and Houston.

The Tony-winning 1998 Broadway revival, which inspired the tour, was directed by Sam Mendes, an Oscar nominee for his directorial debut of *American Beauty*, and co-directed and choreographed by Rob Marshall (ABC-

TV's *Annie*).

The Broadway Series' season finale will be performed May 23-28 at Columbus' Palace Theatre.

Tickets cost \$35-\$53.50 and will go on sale in mid-April to nonseason ticket holders. Tickets will be available at the theater box office and Ticketmaster outlets (614-431-3600). For more information on the sign-interpreted or audio described performances, call 614-224-7654, Ext. 221.

COVER STORY

Play's witty lines nothing to sneeze at

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Noel Coward wrote sophisticated comedies about a classy elite.

In staging Coward's *Hay Fever* for Otterbein Summer Theatre, director Doreen Dunn looked for ways to make Coward accessible to a modern American audience.

"So much of Coward's humor is based on status and the class system," Dunn said.

"Now that everyone's in jeans and T-shirts, everyone's equal and we've lost a lot of the facade, so there's no immediate connection."

During rehearsals, Dunn has applied the lessons she learned from other Coward productions.

During her career as a New York-based professional actress in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Dunn appeared in productions of Coward's *Private Lives* and *Design for Living*. In her first trip to Ohio in the early 1970s, she appeared in *Oh, Coward!*, a musical revue that ran for six months at Cleveland's Playhouse Square. When Dunn came to Otterbein College in 1975, her first job was directing a production of *Oh, Coward!* for Otterbein Summer Theatre.

She has directed several Coward plays since, including her early 1980s adaptation of *An Evening With Noel Coward* for the maiden voyage of the M.S. Saga Fjord on a trip to China.

Dunn's biggest lesson: Coward's plays continue to con-

nect with audiences, once those audiences adjust to his period style, because of the language.

"His witticisms and choice of words have a musicality, a rhythm and a pace. *Hay Fever* is so funny because this particular theatrical family punctures the balloon of society's facades," Dunn said.

Coward's comedy revolves around four members of an ultra-bohemian 1920s family, each of whom invites a member of the opposite sex to join them for the weekend at their country home, "not realizing that anyone else has done the same," Dunn said.

"It's a wonderful little conceit that makes for one of Coward's more farcical plays."

Guest Equity actress Christina Kirk plays Judith Bliss, an aging matriarch who has retired from her role as a grande dame of the British theater — but who hasn't given up a bit of her dominance or theatricality.

"There's nothing more amusing than Coward, but you have to have your technique up," said Kirk, an Otterbein theater professor.

"You have to speak so trippingly off the tongue. Comic timing is essential in a Coward play, but the performance still has to be in the realm of reality."

Dunn agreed. A major pitfall in performing Coward, she said, is "being too slick and too snobby." When that happens, "the audience doesn't like you and they don't care."

Part of Dunn's job as director, she said, is to use the lessons she learned as an actress to help her cast avoid such mistakes.

"One has to avoid the put-down. When the characters relish the fun of the game of throwing witticisms back and forth, their delight makes it fun for the audience, too."

"But we're so sensitive now



File photo

Noel Coward's sophisticated humor challenges actors.

with our P.C. attitudes that we have to be sure to show that none of the lines are insulting. The audience must understand that the characters are enjoying the verbal swordplay."

Kirk certainly is enjoying it: Coward's language was a major draw in persuading the former New York actress to appear in her first major role in central Ohio.

"I'm going in with both barrels loaded," she said.

"You have to be willing to be large. Judith Bliss has to be the largest thing onstage. She wants to be the center of attention at all times, and she's hopelessly after every male onstage, which is kind of fun."

Having grown up in a theatrical family, Kirk finds the role tantalizingly familiar. Her father, a playwright-director, was chairman of Illinois State University's Theater Department during Kirk's childhood. Her mother is an actress, speech coach and English teacher;

■ Otterbein Summer Theatre will present *Hay Fever* at 7:30 tonight, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — and July 20-23 and 26-30 — in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$14-\$17. Call 614-823-1109.

and her sister is an actress-poet who worked at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre.

"The theater feels like home to me," she said. "We were always going to the theater, always seeing theater. At home, everyone was always performing, rehearsing or reading plays... the only thing I'm not ready for is reality."

"When I read the script (for *Hay Fever*), I immediately identified with the characters' desire to have fun and make theater a part of one's life. Judith and her adult children are dreadfully afraid of having their lives be dull and boring, so they're willing to take emotional risks."

Kirk has performed with the Nebraska Repertory Theatre and the Illinois Repertory Theatre, and appeared in Shozo Sato's Jefferson Award-winning Chicago production of *Kabuki Medea*. Since coming to Otterbein in 1992, though, Kirk has concentrated on directing. She staged Otterbein productions of *Proposals*, *Arca-dia*, *King Lear* and *The Trojan Women*, and plans to direct Otterbein's *Blood Brothers* this fall.

"I really enjoy just focusing on a role for a change, and not having to be the one in charge of everything. As an Otterbein faculty member who teaches acting, I think it's very important to live inside of what you're asking your students to do, and *Hay Fever* is a wonderful way to begin that process."

Otterbein's blissful 'Hay Fever' captures Coward at witty best

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Blithe self-centeredness can be defined only as Noel Coward did so elegantly and archly: Judith Bliss.

The grande dame, a recently retired actress, alternately dominates and ignores her equally self-centered family and their unexpected guests in *Hay Fever*, which Otterbein Summer Theatre opened Thursday.

Guest Equity actress Christina Kirk inhabits the pivotal role in Coward's stage-struck romantic comedy with blissful hamminess and hilariously unrepentant rudeness.

How beastly — and how divine.

The attractive, well-paced Otterbein production marks a triumph for Kirk and director Doreen Dunn, perhaps the leading expert on Coward in central Ohio.

Dunn makes sure that the punch lines detonate regularly, the British accents sound plausible and the three acts parade by with nary a lull. She also elicits consistently comic performances from the nine-person ensemble.

Competing for attention within Bliss' "divinely mad" family are her eager-to-please grown son (Randy Goetz), yearning-to-be-normal daughter (Liz Beckham) and preoccupied husband (Jesse Wilson), a writer.

Goetz and Beckham develop a

Theater review

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convincing brother-sister chemistry while plunging into the family's repeated bouts of bickering with fiercely youthful energy.

When each family member invites someone of the opposite sex to spend the weekend at a country home, the stage is set for Judith to pull out all the stops to dazzle and frazzle her new audience.

Trent Caldwell's naive Sandy, Faith Talley's timid Jackie, Natalie Arnold's seductive Myra and Scott Wilson's jovial Richard may have their own lives and their own agendas, but they are no match for the family. Seduced in turn by various

Blisses, the guests become easily manipulated extras in the ongoing family drama.

As the fed-up maid, Kate Whitehead hints that living in such a home while maintaining one's sullen sanity might just be possible.

But no: In *Hay Fever*, Coward created a funny forerunner of today's dysfunctional family dramas in which no one escapes the insanity.

At the well-received opening, the first act got off to a slow start, partly because of Coward, who took his sweet time introducing the gallery of eccentric characters; and partly because of sound problems, which were corrected by the second act.

The creamy production wouldn't be so persuasive without scenic designer Dan Gray's posh, butter-colored living room, Seth Reinick's lemony lighting and Marcia Hain's glamorous 1920s costumes. The women's flapper gowns and spangled headbands, and the men's dapper sweaters, robes and tuxedos not only help establish the era and the characters but also reinforce the wittily exaggerated theatricality.

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Jeff Adkins / Dispatch

FROM LEFT, LIZ BECKHAM (SOREL), JESSE WILSON (DAVID),
CHRISTINA KIRK (JUDITH BLISS) AND RANDY GOETZ (SIMON) IN OTTERBEIN
SUMMER THEATRE'S PRODUCTION OF *HAY FEVER*

'HAY FEVER'



OTTERBEIN ESCHEWS OVERDOING
COWARD'S HUMOR

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