

JUN-29-89

Columbus
Dispatch

Otterbein's 'Biloxi Blues' is solid comedy

384
by Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

There wasn't a bad performance in the fatigues-clad bunch last night during Otterbein Summer Theatre's superior ensemble production of *Biloxi Blues*.

No extraordinary performances, either. And extraordinary is what many members of Otterbein's loyal audience may have come to expect during the past few outstanding summer (and winter) seasons.

Yet, nothing more than the entirely adequate talent at hand is necessary to make this Neil Simon comedy work. As directed by guest Equity artist Dennis Romer, Simon's 1985 Tony award winner for best play is consistent summer entertainment.

Simon filters his rather standard coming-of-age drama through the nostalgic magnifying glass of America's last "good" war. *Biloxi Blues* explores the humdrum brutality of a World War II boot camp, the awkwardness of late adolescence and the casual indignities that humiliate a new recruit.

To a first-rate craftsman like Simon, that's sure-fire material for drama. And comedy — even without *Biloxi's* frequent food, sex and bathroom jokes.

Both the comedy and drama intensify in the second act. Simon's younger alter ego, Eugene Morris Jerome (Matthew Bartholomew), and his buddies face the frustration of going on leave in a small Southern town with "14,000 soldiers" and "only 14 girls." If this isn't exactly virgin territory, it's certainly fertile territory for

REVIEW

Simon's patented brand of poignant humor.

Bartholomew has a dewy, daffy innocence that's endearing, but little trace of the precocious intelligence responsible for Eugene's probing diary. There's no sense within Bartholomew's performance of the future playwright. (A gag writer, maybe.)

His buddies are fully believable: Keith Berkes' bigoted, bois-

terous Wykowski; Ron Maurer's gentle, sad Hennesey; Joshua Wank's irritable, vain Selridge; Dennis Rapp's hapless Carney; and Timothy Deak's complex, brilliant and neurotic Arnold Epstein, "the worst soldier in World War II."

Despite Eugene's near-monopoly on wisecracking punchlines, these actors hold their own. So do Rachael Harris and Cheryl Gay-sunas in dreamlike respective cameos as a kind prostitute and girl-next-door.

Equity guest artist Michael

Hartman plays Sgt. Merwin Toomey, Arnold's nemesis, with fierce, cockeyed intensity. Hartman, who last returned to his alma mater in *Harvey* and *The Dresser*, is gruff and crisp in the first act, but ultimately tragic. He's a top top sergeant.

Otterbein College will present *Biloxi Blues* at 8 tonight through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday in the Campus Center Theatre. Performances continue July 5-9. For tickets, call 898-1109.

Otterbein presents 'Biloxi Blues'

By Dennis Thompson
SNP Theater Critic

The blending of the talents of the Otterbein Summer Theatre company results in a smooth production of Neil Simon's *Biloxi Blues*.

This winner of the 1985 Tony Award for "Best Play" takes Simon's semi-autobiographical character Eugene Jerome into the army and through basic training at Biloxi, Mississippi in 1943.

ALONG THE way we get to know the five other soldiers in his platoon and their hard-nosed sergeant.

We share in Eugene's introduction to sex and later to first love.

These "coming-of-age" themes, while familiar, are still warmly and humorously handled with Simon's comedic touch.

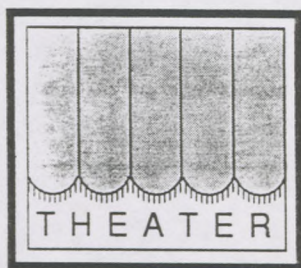
Guest Equity actor Michael Hartman returns to Otterbein as Sgt. Merwin Toomey. He effectively portrays the stereotyped boot camp sergeant with scattergun declarations of the army's illogical logic tempered with a softly threatening southern drawl.

OFTEN WHEN guest professional actors team with college actors the differences in age and training create an imbalance. But there is no such problem here.

Part of this is due to the play's premise teaming an older assured sergeant with a group of younger insecure recruits.

Matthew J. Bartholomew is the sensitive would-be writer Eugene Jerome. He is charming as he leads us through the play with a watchful bemusement.

Timothy Ryan Deak is the intellectual Arnold Epstein, a gentle man who doesn't understand the army world he sees through the wire rimmed glasses that



review

constantly slide down his nose.

JOSHUA ALAN Wank is the volatile Roy Selridge with Keith Berkes as the brutish Joseph Wykowski. Ron Maurer is the slow-talking, fair-minded James Hennessey and Dennis Rapp is the pleasant yet indecisive Don Carney who thinks he can sing like Perry Como.

Rachael Harris' deep sultry voice and worldly manner as Rowena provides a nice contrast to Bartholomew's eager nervousness in Eugene's encounter with the prostitute.

Daisy Hannigan, Eugene's first love, tells him that she intimidates boys her age. While there is nothing intimidating in Cheryl Gaysunas' portrayal, she brings a wide-eyed innocence to the role and seems the perfect companion for Eugene.

THE SHOW is excellent-ly cast. The performances are fairly low key with no one outshining the others. The acting provides no peaks and no valleys, just consistently fine light entertainment.

There is the suspicion, however, that the playwright intended more.

For all his success, Neil Simon's name has become synonymous with light comedy, funny but without much meat.

In his later work, including *Biloxi Blues*, he has at-

tempted to deal with more substantive matters, to touch more in us than just our funny bone.

While skillfully written, it is difficult to take the more somber moments he includes in his work as seriously as he might like because we know more laughter is just around the corner.

STILL, SIMON is a comic master. In this play he has drawn characters that are both endearing and aggravating. But between the laughter we care about each of them.

Dennis Romer's fluid direction keeps the action moving around Rob Johnson's multi-purpose set.

Christopher Clapp's lighting design helps keep the focus on the actors while the set is being shifted.

***Biloxi Blues* will continue Wednesday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. through July 9 in the Campus Center Theatre at Otterbein College in Westerville. Ticket prices are \$8.75 Wednesday and Thursday, \$9.75 Friday and Saturday, and \$7.75 Sunday. For more information call 898-1109.**