

REVIEW

Play opens 'Window' into singles' blues

By Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

Party down with *Blue Window*.

Lonely? Depressed? Socially awkward? The seven young adults who meet at a New York cocktail party in Craig Lucas' contemporary comedy-drama feel the same way.

But they don't let that stop them from having some nervous fun between pre-party jitters and the subdued, wistful post-mortems.

You shouldn't, either. Although *Window's* overriding tone is melancholy, Otterbein Summer Theatre's well-cast student production is the summer's freshest and most intriguing theater choice.

This central Ohio premiere, orchestrated with an almost improvisational subtlety by guest director Carter Lewis, offers an observant window into the way we live.

Some of us, anyway. If Libby (the maladroit hostess), Emily (a daydreaming secretary), Tom (a stolid studio musician), Norbert (a shy parachuting instructor) and Griever (Libby's self-deprecating friend) were a bit older, richer and more comfortably established, they might be stereotypical yuppies.

Only Meg Chamberlain's self-assured Alice, a published novelist, and her live-in lesbian lover, Boo (Katy Bowers), fit that bill.

But all embody the jangling insecurities and still-malleable identities of today's twentysomething generation — especially those brave enough to try their luck in the Big Apple.

Recognizable "New York" plays

(not to be confused with plays merely located there) have a certain urban, trendy, self-conscious ambience; *Blue Window* fairly glistens with it.

Lucas has a sharp ear for naturalistic dialogue. He also has a weakness for stacy bon mots, which give *Windows* its rare peaks of unbridled hilarity. Libby mordantly observes that "when you lay down with psychiatrists, you get up with flaws."

But the genuine difficulties of connecting to other urban isolates is no joke. Even Hope and Michael, Gary and Melissa, Ellen, Elliot and Nancy never got *this* morose.

Lucas attempts to balance *Blue's* blues with an amusing frankness and conceptual cleverness. He divides this meandering one-act into three disjointed scenes that eventually fit together almost as neatly as the jigsaw puzzle that Keith Berkes' playful Norbert completes soon after *Window* opens simultaneously in five separate apartments.

Rob Johnson's crisply functional set blends islands of chrome and glass furniture with a full-length penthouse window of phosphorescent blue. His shifting pools of light help distinguish one reality from another.

Otterbein's attractive ensemble, led by Bryan Brems' charmingly insecure Griever and Colby Anne Paul's sadly funny Libby, handles the script's overlapping dialogue and space-merging montage superbly.

At Wednesday's opening, Paul and Bowers' frisky, feisty Boo confronted the script's biggest challenges with brio and aplomb.

AT A GLANCE

■ *Blue Window*, Otterbein Summer Theatre's student production of Craig Lucas' urban comedy-drama. Directed by Carter Lewis.

Emily Amy Jo Patten
Tom Jess Hanks
Libby Colby Anne Paul
Norbert Keith Berkes
Boo Katy Bowers
Emily Amy Jo Patten

The summer's freshest and most intriguing theater choice.

■ Performances are 8 tonight and Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday, through July 21 at the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

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

Perhaps only Libby moves through a complete dramatic arc during the play's Sunday evening. Paul's superficial slapstick, as Libby awkwardly covers her face to mask a deeper embarrassment, ripens into a tearfully revealing monologue that brings *Window* to a satisfying close.

No one who thrills to contemporary theater can afford to miss this promising early work by Lucas, better known for his Broadway hit, *Prelude to a Kiss*, and the film script for *Longtime Companion*.

Window, undeniably a lesser and more modest work, offers neither *Prelude's* optimistic flights of romantic fantasy nor *Companion's* darker meditation on mortality and grief.

But this quasi-musical mood piece, graced by Amy Jo Patten's unexpected song of secretarial lament, does offer one of today's up-and-coming playwrights in an unapologetically minor key.

So cry if you want to; this is, after all, Lucas' party.

entertainment/arts

Otterbein's 'Blue Window' is paneful to watch

By Dennis Thompson

SNP Theater Critic

Blue Window is one window that should have stayed closed.

It's not necessarily the fault of the Otterbein Summer Theatre Company, other than the fact they chose the play, presumably at their own free will. Rather it's that Craig Lucas' play suffers from a lack of plot, poorly developed characters and self-serving contrivances and gimmicks.

This yuppie comedy-drama, which ran off-Broadway in 1984, concerns a party given by a nervous hostess in her New York apartment. The guest list includes a lesbian couple — one a well known writer, the other a

Anyone interested in a play about yuppie issues containing unusual simultaneous staging techniques would be better served with Richard Greenberg's .

family therapist — a studio musician and his office-worker girlfriend and a sky-diving instructor.

The 90-minute play is divided into three scenes, with

the party scene sandwiched between scenes that simultaneously show the characters in their own apartments.

The first scene indicating five separate apartments is tricky to pull off on Otterbein's small stage. Director Carter Lewis further muddies the image by having two characters roam the stage, breaking the illusion of individual boundaries.

Lucas' technique of showing the simultaneous action with intermingling dialogue comes off as pure gimmickry. It's as if he realized that none of the first scene dialogue could stand on its own without some sort of trickery.

We learn virtually nothing about the characters in this initial scene and as most of them are alone, their talking to themselves seems particularly artificial. One char-

acter sits center stage the entire scene, silently eating an apple. The effect is that of being at a three-ring circus where none of the acts are interesting.

The party scene is not much better. Aside from a few clever lines, we mostly sit through pseudo-intellectual discussions that again tell us little about the characters other than they don't listen well. What we do learn about them doesn't make us curious to know more.

The final scene returns the characters to their apartments, although Lewis confuses us again by rearranging them. In a cheap attempt at emotional impact, Lucas ends the play with the telling of a tragic story which is inserted out of the blue. It's suppose to answer questions about the central character but we have seen so little of

substance about her that we haven't asked any questions.

Otterbein's cast makes a good stab at it, although some are playing characters so far from their experience they seem uncomfortable. The main acting problem is they are given so little to work with.

Colby Anne Paul as Libby, the hostess, is skilled at playing nervous characters on the edge of breakdown and does well with the emotional buildup of the speech Lucas gives her. Unfortunately, the staging forces her

to sit center stage for several minutes afterwards maintaining the sniffles while others are talking.

Bryan Brems is a bright spot as Libby's friend Griever. His character has the most flash and Brems' portrayal injects the most energy into the production.

The rest are given even less to work with. As Norbert, Keith Berkes is given little to say. But when he gets his moments at the end he shows a quiet compassion. However, we are not reassured that Libby is in

(Continued on page 29)



Phone support

Otterbein Summer Theatre will present the comedy *Blue Window* today through Sunday in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St. The play focuses on the actions of seven sophisticated New Yorkers before, during and after a dinner party given by a self-conscious young woman named Libby. Before the party, Libby, played by Colby Paul (right), phones her friend Griever, played by Bryan Brems (left), for moral support. Tickets are available from the Otterbein Summer Theatre box office, 898-1109, from 12:30 to 8:30 p.m. through Saturday and 12:30 to 2:30 p.m. Sunday. The weekday performances begin at 8 p.m. and the Sunday matinee at 2 p.m. The play is intended for a mature audience.

Laughs over dinner

By Richard Ades

It wouldn't be surprising if the cast of Otterbein Summer Theatre's current show suffered from about 22 centuries worth of jet lag.

Blue Window opened just three days after most of the players appeared in the last performance of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Despite the fast turnaround, guest director Carter W. Lewis's production is beautifully mounted.

The star of the show is Craig Lewis's witty and evocative 1984 script.

The play follows seven New Yorkers to a seemingly trivial Sunday night dinner party that ends up affecting some in unforeseen ways.

The action is divided neatly into three scenes—before, during and after.

It quickly becomes apparent in Scene One that the dinner party is a prospect few relish—least of all the host, Libby (Colby Anne Paul). She's terrified, particularly since her hon-

THEATER REVIEW

ored guest is a published writer whose work is unknown to her.

She rehearses comments she hopes will hide the fact ("I always judge a book by its cover") and wonders how to introduce the lesbian author's companion.

Just to make her panic attack complete, she manages to lose a dental cap, a fact she tries to hide for the next few hours by claiming her upper lip itches.

The guests, meanwhile, prepare for the night with generally little enthusiasm. The author (Meg Chamberlain) and her lover, Boo (Katy L. Bowers), seem to be experiencing communication difficulties. Composer Tom (Jess Hanks) suffers from writer's block, which has saddled his latest melody with the lyrics, "I did this, then I went here and did this, then I went there and did this," etc.

Also on the guest list are Tom's secretary-girlfriend, Emily (Amy Jo Patten), and Libby's strangely remote friend Norbert (Keith Berkes).

Finally, there's Griever (Bryan P. Brems), a confidant of Libby's and the only guest fully prepared to enjoy himself. Brems gives an exuberant performance as the outgoing actor, who dresses while performing songs, soliloquies and a Diana Ross impression.

The dinner party itself is a delicious combination of high-culture chat and—once Libby's potent fruit punch takes effect—pop culture philosophizing. As expected, author Alice makes herself the center of attention, until she embarrasses herself by trying to trace the roots of depressing Sunday nights back to the little mouse puppet on television's *Ed Sullivan Show*.

Like all really satisfying art, *Window* suggests more than it says. Viewers may find that they, along with the guests at the party, have been affected in unforeseen ways.

Colo. Alive
7/24 - 8/7/91

Prelude to a Kiss, which is currently both playing on Broadway and being turned into a feature film.

The dramatic action of *Blue Window* attempts to put its finger on the pulse of contemporary living in New York City. It centers on a group of individuals who gather for a Sunday evening dinner party thrown by Libby, a reluctant hostess who is haunted by a hidden psychological trauma. In three scenes, we observe Libby and her guests before, during and after the party. By the end of the play, not only have we learned a great deal about each of the participants but we've also been touched by their shared sense of aloneness in a cold and unfriendly environment.

Most interesting of them all is Libby herself, played in Otterbein's production by Colby Anne Paul. The emotional climax in scene three, when Libby discloses her secret fears to Norbert (the shy parachutist who has fallen for her) was wonderfully gauged by Paul on opening night. So, too, was the tender sensitivity with which Keith Berkes' Norbert responded upon learning why the woman he wants to hold cannot bear to be held.

As Libby's supportive (albeit co-dependent) friend and would-be lover, oddly named Griever, Bryan P. Brems offered some of the evening's more genuinely comic moments. The role of Alice Fisher (the guest of honor—a famous, openly lesbian writer), however, was grievously miscast at Otterbein. It was not entirely the fault of an obviously talented Meg Chamberlain that the more caustic and cynical side of her character was not in evidence. Chamberlain *can* be faulted, however, for not showing us how much Alice really needs her lover, Boo.

Even weaker performances, sad to say, were given by Jess Hanks as Tom (a musician and Libby's first New York lover) and Amy Jo Patten as Emily (a secretary and Tom's current companion).

Guest directed by Carter W. Lewis, the play took a long time getting off the ground. In scene one—which is written in the counterpoint of overlapping dialogue occurring simultaneously in five apartments—only Paul conveyed a sufficient degree of character need. There was a gradual rise in tension during the party, and the final scene began to float in the emotional sphere the playwright seems to have intended. In the end, it seemed worth the wait.

Contemporary Fairy Tale

It's a shame that Otterbein Summer Theatre's production of Craig Lucas' *Blue Window* will have closed by the time this review appears in print, for it was worth seeing. This is so even though the play itself is not nearly as delightful as Lucas' more recent fairy tale for adults,