

# 'Baby' clunks through its cuteness

By Michael Grossberg  
Dispatch Theater Critic

The generic American musical usually relies on a boy-meets-girl plot. *Baby*, which opened last night at Otterbein College, focuses on sperm-meets-egg.

Cute but often overly clinical, this 1983 musical comedy has a conventional sitcom-style book by author Sybille Pearson that is only partially redeemed by David Shire's catchy score.

Many of Richard Maltby's lyrics are banal ("life is changing everywhere"), but the dialogue elicits chuckles: "Marriage is an anti-social act; no one survives."

*Baby* isn't a period piece yet, but its early-1980s state of mind is reflected in its song titles (*I Want It All*), spiked-hairdo and references to *Annie Hall*.

The characters are as generic as white bread: Lizzie Fields and Danny Hooper, a twentysomething college couple ready for a baby but not marriage; Pam and Nick Sakarian, a thirtysomething team fighting to overcome the biological odds against pregnancy; and Arlene and Alan MacNally, a fortysomething pair who have raised three children and aren't sure whether they want another.

Director John Stefano's brisk staging is bolstered by scenic designer Rob Johnson's changeable wooden blocks, Fred

## THEATER REVIEW

*Baby*, Otterbein Summer Theatre's student production of the musical comedy. Directed by John Stefano.

Alan..... Jason Morrisette  
Arlene .....Karlie W. Mossman  
Nick ..... Josh Gildrie  
Pam .....Patti Ann Knoop  
Lizzie .....Tess Hartman  
Danny..... Brian Fox

**Boy loves girl; sperm meets egg**

Performances are at 8 tonight through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday; and July 13-16 in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

Tickets cost \$9-12. Call 823-1109.

Smith's locale-defining lights, Craig Johnson's peppy music direction and Stella Hiatt Kane's perky but minimal choreography. Yet, *Baby*'s overlapping shifts between the three couples remain clunky and its bit players, largely superfluous.

The cast sings pleasantly, backed by a rousing onstage band: Beth Burrier-Bradstreet (keyboards), Eric Van Wagner (bass) and Ryan Hickey (drums).

Two student actors excel: Tess Hartman, an endearing Lizzie, and Josh Gildrie, who makes Nick the most well-rounded and believably human character.

Hartman brings the first act to a powerful close with *The Story Goes On* and leads a strong ensemble in the hilarious first-act opener, *The Ladies Singin' Their Song*, about women who can't help cooing over Lizzie's visible pregnancy. It's a show-stopper, greeted last night with sustained applause.

Casting young actors in older roles can backfire, but Karlie Mossman plays middle-aged Arlene with a beguilingly rueful maturity. She sings nicely, too, giving a bittersweet dignity to *Patterns* and her reflective final duet with Jason Morrisette's likable Alan.

Brian Fox rocks and rolls as Danny, an itinerant musician, but his lovely duets with Hartman (*What Could Be Better?*, *Two People in Love*) are pure pop.

Ron Thomas is funny in several brief roles, including the squinting doctor who gives Pam and Nick the "irregular" news and a cross-dressing cameo that markedly enlivens the second act.

Patti Ann Knoop earns the most laughs as Pam, whose eager expectancy to experience "everything" includes morning sickness and whose determination to have a child makes her willing to try it "by the book" with her patient husband.

Unfortunately, the book turns out to be *Moby Dick*. Oh, well. If at first you don't succeed, then try, try again.



# ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

## 'Baby' offers a few truths amid the cliches

By DENNIS THOMPSON

Suburban News Theater Critic

Otterbein Summer Theatre's current production, *Baby*, is a musical that deals with the prospect of pregnancy by three very different couples.

There's Lizzie and Danny (Tess Hartman and Brian Fox), college students who want a baby more than they want to get married. Pam and Nick (Patti Ann Knoop and Josh Gildrie) are an athletic couple who have been trying to get pregnant for two years.

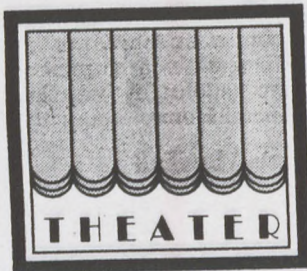
Finally, there's Alan and Arlene (Jason W. Morrisette and Karlie K. Mossman), empty nesters for whom another pregnancy is the last thing on their minds.

Sybille Pearson's story line for *Baby* falls into the trap of many musicals, taking a topic and treating it simplistically. The stories of the young couple who won't get married and the one having difficulty conceiving both take predictable turns.

IT'S THE older couple whose relationship is probed most deeply and insightfully. The prospect of having a baby at a late age is just a catalyst for other interpersonal issues Alan and Arlene must face.

It's the grappling with these issues that makes their story the most interesting, particularly in the second act.

David Shire's music and Richard Maltby's lyrics are not particularly memorable. An exception is Lizzie's first-act closing *The Story*



### review

*Goes On* and her snappy second-act opener *The Ladies Singin' Their Song*.

Even their success might be due to the presentation, especially the expert comic staging of *Ladies* by director John Stefano.

WITH FEW exceptions, the singing is better in ensemble than in solo. The voices are pleasant enough, but not polished. Some are weak, some harsh. Others can't get through a song without a strain or a squeak.

This may be due, in part, to the animated choreography the actors perform while singing the upbeat numbers. For when Mossman, for example, is allowed to sit still and sing the quiet *Patterns*, the result is beautiful.

But singing and moving together is what musicals are, and this cast is still a shade below the ideal.

The exception is Hartman, who combines a skilled voice with an impetuous characterization to give the most complete performance. By far the strongest singer, her Lizzie is also lively and sincere.

FOX IS earnest and natu-

ral as Danny with a voice that is clear and unpretentious.

Gildrie tries too hard as Nick. His character is known for his sense of humor, but Gildrie's portrayal of that comes off as forced.

In the scene during which he and Pam first deal with their difficulties in getting pregnant, his physical reaction to the news and his vocal displaced aggression with his wife are both false.

This is where Stefano should have stepped in. Young actors, no matter how talented, still are drawing on limited life experience.

Knoop's Pam is too delicate to be the jock her character purports to be. But Knoop shows true enthusiasm at the prospect of being a mother and the love in her eyes for her husband could melt the heart of any male.

MORRISSETTE and Mossman play their older

roles with care and sympathetic grace.

The supporting cast of Ron Thomas, Jennie Printz, Ben Sprunger, Jollina Walker and Julie Laureano are not given enough to do to make an impact. They are seen so rarely, even in group numbers, that one wonders why they were written in at all.

The exception is Thomas, whose too-brief appearances as a doctor and an old lady are true comic gems.

*Baby* is not the best musical to come down the pike. But there is truth scattered among the cliches, and Otterbein gives it a spirited run.

Otterbein Summer Theatre's *Baby* will continue at 8 p.m. today through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St. in Westerville. For more information call 898-1109.



# Otterbein's Baby

A sentimental pabulum of pre-natal musings

SCOTT PHILLIPS

When Jane Seymour, Henry VIII's third wife, gave birth to Edward VI, her labor lasted 30 hours — and killed her in the process. By contrast, Otterbein Summer Theatre's production of Broadway musical *Baby* is delivered in just a couple of hours. But make no mistake, this "baby" is just as deadly. The sentimental

pabulum of Sybille Pearson's book and the stupendously forgettable musical numbers by David Shire and Richard Maltby Jr. are enough to make a prospective parent chuck Dr. Spock's baby manual in favor of *Final Exit*.

Produced on Broadway more than a decade ago, *Baby* is a collation of pre-natal musings, the story of three couples who sing and dance their way through the trials and tribulations of conception and

pregnancy. Lizzie Fields and Danny Hooper (Tess Hartman and Brian Fox), two unmarried college students, bravely face the responsibility that's been prematurely thrust upon them. Alan and Arlene MacNally (Karlie K. Mossman and Jason W. Morrisette) are middle-aged, empty-nesters who thought their parenting days were behind them. Amiable jocks Pam and Nick Sakarian (Patti Ann Knoop and Josh Gildrie), in the prime of their childbearing years, try desperately, and unsuccessfully, to conceive.

"Her life is over!" Lizzie's campus friends remark cattily as they contemplate her condition. An earnest idealist, Lizzie spurns marriage as "an anti-social act — no one survives." Danny, an aspiring

composer, takes a gig in a traveling punk-rock band in order to support his new family. Alan and Arlene agonize over whether to have an abortion, while Pam and Nick (in one of the show's few genuinely funny scenes) go to a fertility clinic, where the discovery of Nick's low sperm count necessitates a new, much more clinical, approach to sex.

*Baby* sometimes borders on being cute, and occasionally elicits a belly laugh or two. In "The Ladies Singin' Their Song," for instance, the well-intentioned women of the town (including Ben Sprunger and Ron Thomas in a couple of amusing drag turns) assail Lizzie with horrifying stories of their own pregnancies.

But most of the time, what pass-

es for insight is trite and predictable. Consider some of the more epiphanic musical numbers and their moral lessons: "I Want it All" (pregnancy limits a women's options), "Fatherhood Blues" (life is a lot different after you father a child) and "Easier to Love" (women are difficult when they're depressed and angry).

Director John Stefano's cast struggles gamely, but their considerable talent is no match for this material. Likewise, musical director Craig Johnson's capable three-piece band cannot transcend the mediocrity of Shire's music.

Sorry Otterbein, but this is one *Baby* that should have been aborted.

Guardian

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