

# ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

## Strong acting, script make up for divergent acting styles

By DENNIS THOMPSON

Suburban News Theater Critic

Otterbein Summer Theatre continues its season with Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*, a touching, bittersweet dark comedy.

Henley's first play, *Crimes* won the 1981 Pulitzer Prize for drama and the 1980-81 New York Drama Critics Circle Award.

A plot description sounds like a real downer, but the depiction is not. This is a work that strikes a rare balance between poignancy and absurdity.

Set in the small town of Hazlehurst, Miss., five years after Hurricane Camille, the story centers on a reunion of the three MaGrath sisters.

The youngest, Babe, has just shot her husband in the stomach because she, "didn't like his looks."

The oldest, Lenny, is marking her 30th birthday and is fearful of becoming a spinster. She also just learned that her childhood pet horse has been killed by lightning.

The middle sister, Meg, has returned from Hollywood after failing to start a music career.

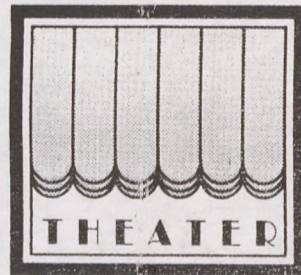
Hovering over all their lives

is the memory of their dead mother, who not only hanged herself in the basement but strung up her pet cat beside her because she was having "a really bad day."

This sounds a setup for dark humor, and there is that. The play reads funny based on eccentric characters and situations.

Otterbein's production is funny but puts more weight on the script's dark side. Director Doreen Dunn de-emphasizes the eccentricity of the characters, playing many of them straight.

Actually, there are a couple



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of different acting styles going on. Half the actors bring a lighter touch to their characters; half don't.

While I think it would have played better – funnier, without losing the humanity – with everyone taking a breezier character approach, it's a question of interpretation. I don't mean to sound too critical, because what is here, within the approach taken, is some of the strongest acting I have seen in some time.

The actors taking the lighter approach are Beth Triffon as Babe, Luke Dixon as lawyer Barnette Lloyd and Meg Ward as annoying cousin Chick.

Triffon is particularly delightful as the wide-eyed, naive Babe. She brings a sweet

energy to all her scenes.

As Barnette, Dixon brings the exuberance of youthful passions tempered by his learned propriety.

Ward's Chick is a type, but she revels in her cattiness. The audience eats it up and loves seeing her get her comeuppance.

Doc Porter, a previous love interest of Meg's, is more a straight part. Drew Aber does a nice job of showing his continuing affection for Meg but also a maturity that makes us wonder if he will act on his

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feelings.

Molly Camp's Meg seems too organized and serious-minded for the things Meg says and what we hear of her. Still, she captures the character's small-town glamour and makes real her combination of self-indulgence and genuine caring.

Although I would like to have seen Elizabeth Daniels less consistently dreary as Lenny, I could not be more impressed with her performance. She is totally immersed in her character, subtly showing signs of tension and nervous disease.

Stephanie Gerckens' scenic design takes care to show us a well-worn kitchen. The weathered door, chipped and faded paint and old appliances and knickknacks make it clear we're in a lived-in house.

Maybe I just came to this with a different play in my head. If you come with nothing in your head (you know what I mean), you'll find a fun and telling piece with endearing characters and excellent performances.

*Otterbein Summer Theatre's Crimes of the Heart continues at 8 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday at the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets are \$18. For more information call 614-823-1109.*