

Cast brightens 'Brighton Beach'

By Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

Is *Brighton Beach Memoirs* overexposed?

The question must be asked, with Gallery Players' fine production and the lackluster film version opening in Columbus during the past year.

Otterbein College's sturdy production that opened last night proved that the answer — in this case anyway — is a qualified no.

Visiting director Dennis Romer, a well-chosen substitute for Otterbein's ailing Charles Dordrill, spotlights a great deal of comedy and a good bit of pathos in Neil Simon's bittersweet memory play. Romer elicits solid performances from the seven-person student cast.

Kevin Ford Carty plays Eugene Morris Jerome, Simon's semi-autobiographical younger self, with winning enthusiasm. Carty, who previously shone as Mozart in Otterbein's *Amadeus*, outdoes himself as an aspiring writer who'd give up his future playwriting career for a chance to

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play baseball with the New York Yankees.

Carty almost transforms *Brighton Beach* into a teen-age sex comedy as he learns about puberty, frustration and the close relationship between lust and guilt.

Carty holds center stage whenever he's on stage — at times even when he shouldn't. Carty is that good, although perhaps overeager to go for the easy laughs.

But *Brighton Beach*, the first work in Simon's award-winning trilogy, has its share of sorrow. Eugene's sister Laurie (Meg Williamson) is an invalid. His brother Stanley (Scott Willis) just got fired.

His cousin Nora (Lori Schubeler) wants to leave the close-knit family's Brooklyn home for a Broadway career, but she is prevented by her mother, Aunt Blanche (Diana Blazer).

Presiding over it all as if he

were King Solomon is Eugene's overworked father, Jack (Ralph Scott), and patient mother, Kate (Cathy Lee Collins).

The ensemble cast delivers every feeling — anger, regret and finally acceptance — in the more serious second act, which moves beyond Eugene's horrified but amusing reaction to liver and cabbage.

What makes this *Brighton Beach* less than it could be is the inability of the young cast to fill the older roles. Collins and Blazer simply don't look their parts. Scott is marginally more effective as the father, but even his performance requires a greater-than-usual willingness to suspend one's disbelief. But this is a common flaw of college theater.

Brighton Beach Memoirs will be presented at 8 p.m. tonight and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday in Cowan Hall on campus. Performances continue Oct. 15-17. For tickets, call 898-1109.

Otterbein graduate's talents pull college out of a pinch

The show must go on. A cliché, of course, but one taken to heart at Otterbein College, which just opened its 82nd season with *Brighton Beach Memoirs*.

Charles W. Dodrill, Otterbein's theater department chairman, had planned to direct Neil Simon's Tony award-winning comedy-drama. But Dodrill was forced to take a semesterlong leave of absence after his August heart attack and subsequent surgery.

So veteran actor/director Dennis Romer was called in from California to try to take Dodrill's place. Romer, a 1971 Otterbein graduate, is spending this fall as a teacher and artist in residence at Otterbein.

"They felt they needed someone familiar with the department," said Romer, 37. "They have developed a strong BFA program here, and didn't want to jeopardize the program's continuity or momentum. Dodrill has done a tremendous job turning it into a professional training program. What I did on the graduate level these students are doing as undergraduates."

Romer has played Gene Blake on *All My Children*, directed plays for Ensemble Studio Theatre on the West Coast and appeared on episodes of *Dynasty*, *Hotel*, *Mike Hammer* and *Starman*.

Yet, he hasn't let his college ties lapse. Last summer, he returned to his alma mater to direct *The Dresser*. The summer before, he starred in *Plenty* and directed *Whodunnit?* In 1985, he returned to star in *The Good Doctor* and direct *Terra Nova* and *Murder on the Nile*.

Romer agreed to return to Otterbein for an extended visit to

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pay back his "debt" to the college and to explore the teacher's vocation. Romer is teaching beginning and advanced acting classes.

"Part of it was a sense of wanting to pitch in," Romer said. "And teaching is making me re-analyze my technique as an actor — and my communication skills as a director."

Romer views *Brighton Beach* as a memory play "about family, about love, about emerging sexuality." In directing Simon's coming-of-age autobiography, Romer has tried "to bring out the humanity of the people."

"What I like is the way Simon makes it look like the whole family is falling apart," Romer said. "Yet, in the end, they are able to come together."

Just as Otterbein's student actors have come together in the best show-business tradition. Dodrill should and probably will be proud. He has recuperated well enough to see *Brighton Beach* this week.

Columbus Summer Stage has sold out. No, the 1-year-old theater group hasn't abandoned its artistic principles — or its goal of giving Columbus "summer theater that sings." Instead, founder Michael Pauken reports that summer stage's three 1987 productions played to 101 percent capacity.

Columbus' promising summer theater group added chairs and provided standing-room tickets

Otterbein College will present *Brighton Beach Memoirs* at 2 p.m. today and 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday. For tickets, call 898-1109.

for *Jerry's Girls*, *Is There Life After High School?* and *The Fantasticks*.

All three shows were performed at the intimate Columbus Cultural Arts Center Downtown. Due to space restrictions, only 75 seats were available for the first two shows and 135 seats for *The Fantasticks*. But Pauken figured out a way to sell up to five more tickets for each show. The demand was so high that he had to do something.

"We surpassed every goal we set for ourselves," Pauken said.

Columbus Summer Stage plans to do three musicals next summer. Eventually, Pauken hopes to expand the group's season into the early fall. For more information, call 231-8552.

Players TheatreColumbus is breaking records. By tonight, more than 6,500 tickets will have been sold for Ed Graczyk's *A Murder of Crows*. That makes the rural Ohio comedy-drama the most popular show in Players' 64-year history. *Evita*, last year's smash musical, held the previous record of 5,935 tickets sold.

It helps that Players added Wednesday night performances for the first time this season. Each 1987-88 production will have 24 performances, compared with 15 each last season.

Michael Grossberg is the Dispatch theater critic.