

Midge moves on to bigger things

Downing wants audience to know 'Rappaport' lead

David Downing wants you to meet Midge. That's why Downing has played the aging black apartment superintendent unapologetically many times in *I'm Not Rappaport*.

His latest opportunity to introduce Midge to a wider audience is Otterbein Summer Theatre's production, which opens Wednesday for a two-week run.

"I want more people to know who this man is," said Downing, who has played Midge on Broadway, on the Tony-award winning play's first national tour and at regional theaters from Alaska to Arizona.

"IT'S A favorite role — otherwise, I wouldn't do it," Downing said during rehearsals at Otterbein. "I know this man. He's like my father, my uncle, my grandfather and a lot of other people I've known all my life. Midge could very well be me at some future point in my life."

Through much of Herb Gardner's bittersweet comedy, Midge spends his days hiding in Central Park from angry tenants who want him to retire. On a Central Park bench, Midge reluctantly befriends Nat, a feisty fellow octogenarian. Although Nat urges Midge to stand up for his rights, Midge chooses to bow to the inevitable.

"He's lived long enough to know how the game works," Downing said. "Midge makes choices to continue to hold on to his dignity. As a black man past retirement age, Midge realizes that if he is as vocal as Nat wants him to be, then his life is over. He's a practical man."

Not Downing. It wasn't practical for Downing to accept the understudy's role of Midge on a 14-city tour, after star Cleavon Little warned Downing that he might never get a chance to play his favorite role.

"I don't like to understudy, but this was a special situation," he said. "I couldn't not do Midge."

DOWNING NEVER did get the chance to substitute for Little, although Downing and the other understudies arranged showcase performances for themselves and friends during the tour. Afterward, Downing was invited to play Midge opposite *Laugh-In's* Arte Johnson at La Mirada Civic Theatre in greater Los Angeles.

That Midge led to other Midge. But Downing's entire career can't be summed up by one



Dispatch photo by Fred Squillante

David Downing as Midge, left, and Ed Vaughan as Nat in *I'm Not Rappaport*

Michael Grossberg ONSTAGE

character, however appealing. Downing was a charter member of New York's seminal Negro Ensemble Company. He has appeared onstage in everything from *Richard III* to *Master Harold and the Boys*.

Between theatrical stints, Downing has appeared on television (*Designing Women*, *The Jeffersons*, *Hill Street Blues*, *Mike Hammer* and *All in the Family*) and in movies (*Gordon's War*, *Putney Swope* and *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me*, among others).

ALTHOUGH THERE are five other cast members directed by guest Equity artist Clinton Turner Davis, *Rappaport* is predominantly a two-character sketch. Downing plays Midge opposite guest Equity artist Ed Vaughan, artistic director of Otterbein Summer Theatre.

Like Downing, Vaughan likes his character a lot. He plays Nat, a cantankerous 81-year-old Jew

who is a master of disguise.

"I think it's important to like the characters you play," Vaughan said. "Nat is easy to like. What he's searching for is a sense of hope. He doesn't want to be pushed aside. He wants to be recognized."

Here's Vaughan's favorite line as Nat: "I was one person for 81 years. Why not be a hundred for the next five?"

For Vaughan, the role is something of a stretch — and not only because Nat is something of an actor who likes to impersonate a variety of characters.

Vaughan, 40, never has played a Jew or a part that old. To make his aging immigrant credible, Vaughan has been developing a New York Jewish accent "with some Russian Lithuanian flavorings."

Rappaport is about, Vaughan and Downing agreed, "old age with dignity."

"Most plays are about some form of human dignity," Vaughan said. "The Elephant Man was life with dignity. *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* was death with dignity.

In *Rappaport*, the theme is the right to be recognized on your own terms, whether you're young or old."

THAT RIGHT, both actors observed sadly, is something old people can't take for granted today.

"In our society, we do not revere or venerate our elders," said Downing, who will celebrate his 46th birthday during *Rappaport's* run.

"Even in this society, in generations past, you got respect. Now we do (with old people) what we do with racehorses who no longer run winning races: We put them out to pasture in senior citizens' homes."

Michael Grossberg is Dispatch theater critic.

Otterbein Summer Theatre will present *I'm Not Rappaport* at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, and 2 p.m. next Sunday in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 Home St. Performances continue July 19-23. For tickets, call 898-1109.

Midge and Nat come to life at Otterbein

By Dennis Thompson
SNP Theater Critic

Two exceptional performances carry Otterbein Summer Theatre's excellent production of *I'm Not Rappaport*.

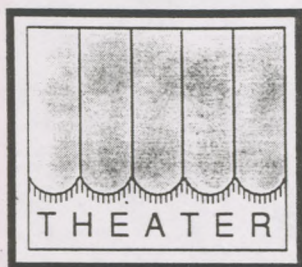
Herb Gardner's Tony Award-winning play is a bittersweet comedy of two old men who share a bench in Central Park in 1982. Both are in their 80s with widely divergent philosophies of life.

Midge is a building superintendent who has lasted long beyond retirement age by staying out of sight and avoiding trouble.

Nat is a passionate believer in causes who welcomes conflict. He has taken to concocting identities to better wage his battles.

David Downing as Midge and Ed Vaughan as Nat shine throughout. Their richly detailed performances are superb.

Downing creates a cantankerous Midge whose voice crackles in exasperation at Nat but becomes meekly respectful when dealing with people he would sooner avoid. With halting gait and nearsided gaze his portrayal runs from crotchety frustration to ner-



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vous timidity.

Vaughan's Nat is a passionate man who tries to instill his passion in others. Vaughan's attempts at a New York Jewish accent are inconsistent but we don't care. From fervent rage to mischievous laughter, Vaughan revels in his portrayal of a man who takes hold of life and refuses to let go.

Both in body and voice, each does a remarkable job of portraying men nearly twice their age. Their performances are deeply textured from the deliberate pace of a walk to the slight quivering of a hand. These are two wonderful performances.

Although this is essentially a two-man play, the Otterbein summer acting company fills in the peripheral roles well.

Anyone who saw Timothy Ryan Deak as the bookish Arnold in *Biloxi Blues* earlier this summer will be impressed by the diversity he shows as the punk Gilley. Although his appearance is brief, his menacing presence shows him to be an actor of range.

Matthew J. Bartholomew is almost as threatening as The Cowboy. His voice and manner are effective but his baby face keeps us from feeling totally intimidated.

Joshua Alan Wank is appropriately slick as Danforth, the yuppie attempting to nudge Midge out of his job.

Colby Anne Paul as Laurie is seen more than heard but shows believable fear in her confrontation with The Cowboy.

Cheryl Gaysunas has effective moments as Nat's daughter Clara who is torn between love and bitterness.

Their performances are deeply textured from the deliberate pace of a walk to the slight quivering of a hand. These are two wonderful performances.

However her portrayal suffers by the length of her scene with Vaughan who overshadows her.

The first act of Gardner's play is the stronger. Perhaps this is because Midge and Nat hold the stage virtually alone as we delight in watching them flesh out their humorous, yet poignant characters.

The second act, divided into three scenes and peppered with other characters, becomes too episodic. The second scene especially seems like it was pulled from a television situation comedy. While funny, it seems to take us away from the play. Fortunately the final scene is a strong one.

One wonders how many people in Central Park read the *Columbus Dispatch* as Midge does in the final scene. A small point, perhaps, but in a production that paid such loving attention to detail how difficult would it have been to send someone down the street to

buy a Sunday *New York Times*?

John Gutknecht's scene design is marvelous, a piece of Central Park put indoors. Scruffy benches of green paint and concrete are placed along a dirt path scattered with stones and leaves. All this is in front of musty stone walls and stairs covered with crawling ivy.

Director Clinton Turner Davis has molded a production of exquisite performances. With subtle touches and an intricate blending of youth and experience he has given us first-rate theater.

***I'm Not Rappaport* will continue Wednesday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. through July 23 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.**

Guest director at Otterbein impressed with local theater

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Director Clinton Turner Davis considers *I'm Not Rappaport* "fragile" and "delicately wonderful."

"I like the play's message and the feistiness of its two old characters," he said.

Davis is one of three guest Equity artists involved with *I'm Not Rappaport* at Otterbein Summer Theatre.

The 1986 Tony-award winner for best play continues Wednesday through Sunday at the college in Westerville.

Davis, one of six recipients of a 1988 Directors Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts/Theatre Communications Group, perhaps is best known as a co-founder of the influential Non-Traditional Casting Project.

The Project has encouraged theater groups nationwide to cast blacks and other ethnic actors in a broader variety of roles.

"*I'm Not Rappaport* is a poignant comedy about life, friendship, love, trust, honesty and aging with dignity," Davis said.

Speaking of honesty, let's be frank: Even if *Rappaport* weren't "wonderful," even if it were some other play, Davis said he would return to central Ohio to direct it "at the drop of a hat."

Why? Because Davis enjoys and admires central Ohio theater. Based on six years of close contact with area theater groups, Davis views theater here as "very, very



File photo

Clinton Turner Davis

strong; not only for professional and college theater, but community theater as well."

Davis' nationally recognized career has given him a firm foundation for such comparisons. He has directed major regional and world premieres for New York University, the Negro Ensemble Company, The New Theatre of Brooklyn, St. Louis Black Repertory Company and Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, among others.

On Broadway, Davis was production stage manager for *Home, Treemonisha, The First Breeze of Summer* and *Eubie!*

He also stage-managed the na-

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tional and international tours of *Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music*, more than 40 productions at the Negro Ensemble Company and plays at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, the Goodman Theatre in Chicago and Arena Stage in Washington D.C.

In 1983, Davis served as dramaturge and director for the Ohio Theatre Alliance's playwriting workshop. Since, he has assisted the Alliance, most recently serving as guest director for its 1988 convention. He also has served on the Ohio Arts Council and advised the agency on playwriting grants.

Through such activities, Davis has come to know and appreciate central Ohio theater — especially Otterbein College's theater program, which he praises for its scope, variety and "level of expertise."

"For a college this size to have more than 100 students majoring in theater is amazing," Davis said. "I'm delighted to be here."

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ENTERTAINMENT

Otterbein's 'Rappaport' hits the nail on the head

Craftsmanship counts. You'd never know from Otterbein Summer Theatre's expertly done *I'm Not Rappaport* that its guest artists began rehearsing a relatively short two weeks ago.

Otterbein's charming and crisp production opened last night to a highly appreciative audience. And why not? This is a warm fuzzy of a play. A warm funny, too.

Set in 1982 in Central Park, Herb Gardner's Tony award-winning comedy centers on two stubborn octogenarians — one black, one white — who grumpily join forces for mutual aid in a world that has left them behind.

Set designer Rob Johnson's dilapidat-



Michael Grossberg

ed park benches, next to an old stone bridge, look like they've been collecting grime in the cramped Campus Center basement theater for years, not weeks.

From *The Sunshine Boys* to *The Golden Girls*, the vulnerabilities and indignities of old age have been milked for easy comedy and sentimentality. In this respect, *Rappaport* is nothing new.

With its schmaltzy talk and coy humor, *Rappaport* requires ample craftsmanship to navigate its treacherously superficial currents without capsizing into bathos. Guest Equity artists David Downing and Otterbein's own Ed Vaughan navigate smoothly under Clinton Turner Davis' confident direction.

Midge (Downing), offended at being called "a licensed groveler," attacks Nat (Vaughan) as a "damn liar," "crazy old fool" and "weird commie blind man."

But Nat proves a persuasive liar — and an inspired imposter. If Nat is an aging Jewish Don Quixote, waving his cane/lance at such modern monsters as forced retirement, then Midge becomes his Sancho Panza.

Both parts could be hammy, but Downing and Vaughan excel through crotchety subtlety. Small touches bring convincing dividends, such as the reluctant way Vaughan's Nat fiddles with a brochure his daughter hands him about a local senior citizens center.

There are two wonderful performances here, comfortably surrounded by a solid student ensemble cast. Especially convincing: Joshua Wank's ingratiating

smugness as a yuppie with the power to take away Midge's job.

As Nat's suburbanized daughter, Cheryl Gaysunas blends exasperated love and enervated dismay in responding to her father's transparent pranks and old-fashioned socialism.

Otterbein could take this show on tour. It has that much polished conviction.

Otterbein Summer Theatre will present *I'm Not Rappaport* at 8 tonight through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday and July 19-23 in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 Home St. Call 898-1109.

CORRECTION

7-14-89 C1

John Gutknecht created the convincing stone bridge and park bench set for Otterbein Summer Theatre's *I'm Not Rappaport*. A review in yesterday's *Dispatch* erred in identifying the designer as Rob Johnson, Otterbein's resident scenic designer.
