

'Fifth of July' challenges company

By Dennis Thompson
SNP Theater Critic

In climbing on a limb with its season's second show, Otterbein Summer Theatre left some of its audience behind.

Lanford Wilson's *The Fifth of July* is a mixture of comedy and drama that is not shocking theater although its content leans in that direction more than typical Otterbein summer fare.

This 1978 play tastefully depicts a homosexual relationship, but that is not its main focus.

In somewhat of a precursor to *The Big Chill*, a group of college friends who bonded at Berkeley in the anti-war '60s gather for a reunion at the small town Missouri homestead of the Talley family.

The drama mixes the fear of dealing with the future with the pain of coping with the past.

The comedy rises from the various eccentricities of the characters.

OST attracts a very loyal audience who warmly greets whatever the players do, but it was obvious from several overheard intermission conversations that many were



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baffled by this offering.

More than once it was compared to *You Can't Take It With You* mainly because of the eccentricities of the characters. *Fifth of July* differed, it was perceived by some, by the negativity of its characters.

The rambling nature of the first act added to the confusion.

Wilson pulls the loose ends together in the second act, although climactic information is revealed so suddenly we almost miss it.

The production seemed occasionally out of sync as the actors grappled with the diffuse material.

However, they balanced the delicate mixture of comedy and drama, creating several nice moments and bringing the action to a close with a poignant second act.

Guest Equity Actor Dennis Romer played Kenneth Talley with a cool detachment that could have benefited from a little more passion. His physical depiction of a man with artificial legs was most convincing.

Colby Anne Paul etched her strong characterization of the neurotic singer Gwen

Landis with quick-paced speech and hyper movement.

Equally effective was the loose wheeler-dealer mannerisms of Bill Timmins as her husband-manager John Landis.

With open mouth, vacant eyes and a keen sense of timing, Jess Hanks greatly contributed to the comedy as the spaced-out hippy, West-ton Furley.

Tess Hartman vividly portrayed the overdramatic pangs of artistic adolescence as Shirley Talley.

While her overwrought suffering was strongly portrayed with a big voice, it would have been more effective if balanced more frequently with normal tones.

As Sally Friedman, Marilyn Sundin was easy going and quaintly eccentric. As an actress she knew what to do and did it, but her voice was so soft it was often difficult to hear her.

Keith Berkes and Meg Chamberlain were inconsistent in less colorful roles. As Jed Jenkins, Kenneth Talley's male lover, Berkes was best as the strong silent type, his speeches were sometimes heartfelt, sometimes flat.

As June Talley, Chamberlain had effective moments but also stiff ones.

Although there were inconsistencies, when the play clicked it was alternately funny and poignant.

Otterbein should be commended for challenging both its actors and its audience.

'Fifth of July' off to shaky start

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

At the shaky center of *Fifth of July*, a family struggles on the brink of psychological recovery — or continued denial.

Reluctance to confront the past and face the future undermines the former anti-war radicals in Lanford Wilson's highly praised drama, which opened Wednesday at Otterbein Summer Theatre.

Not so many years ago, *Fifth* seemed contemporary. Today, with its faded hippie characters and easy "Far out!" punch lines, *Fifth* borders on being a period piece.

Set during and after a rather symbolic Independence Day in 1977 on a farm near Lebanon, Mo., *Fifth* brings home the lingering traumas of the Vietnam War.



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Otterbein Summer Theatre will present *Fifth of July* at 8 tonight and Saturday, and 2 p.m. Sunday through July 29 in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St. Call 898-1109.

That trauma is personified in Kenneth Talley Jr., a crippled and gay Vietnam veteran. Talley lives at the farm with his laid-back lover, Jed; his sister, June Talley; and Shirley, her precocious daughter.

When old friends John and Gwen Landis (Bill Timmins III and Colby Anne Paul) visit the farm and consider buying it for their recording studio, family tensions mount, and buried resentments surface.

Wilson's drama is admittedly diffuse; its comedy affectionately mild; its theme of healing, indirect.

Even so, the complex first act didn't quite gel Wednesday. The pacing was uneven, and the sitcom humor overwhelmed the drama's intended poignancy.

At times, you wondered whether guest director Richard Harden had mistaken *Fifth of July* for *You Can't Take It With You*. The Talley family's wry eccentricities registered, all right, but not their underlying pain.

First-night jitters didn't help. Several cast members repeatedly tripped over lines, undercutting one of the main pleasures of a Wilson drama: the lyrical realism of its overlapping language.

Odds are that the cast will improve. This is a generally strong college production with fine ensemble work.

Adding greatly to the show's multigenerational realism is Otterbein's decision — rare for college theaters — to cast an older woman (Marilyn Sundin) as Aunt Sally and teen-age Tess Hartman as Shirley.

Hartman, whose striking stage voice gives her 13-going-on-21 role verisimilitude, is the talented daughter of Michael Hartman (an Otterbein graduate now appearing in Broadway's Tony-winning best play, *The Grapes of Wrath*).

One of the show's many small delights is the amusing contrast between Shirley's artistic and spiritual pretensions and Gwen's self-absorbed materialism. Paul stands out as Gwen, the freaked-out, burnt-out shell of a neurotic idealist.

Keith Berkes plays Kenneth's

lover with unselfconscious grace. Berkes makes Jed's gentle gayness vivid, despite the muted silences built into the part.

One must give these two actors credit for tackling difficult roles.

Guest artist Dennis Romer tackles his pivotal part with mixed results. His Kenneth is convincing enough as a crippled veteran, although more emotional vulnerability would have been welcome.

Yet, Romer fails as a gay man. Either he underacts, which wipes out Kenneth's sexuality, or overdoes it, coming across as affected and prissy.

About 25 people left at intermission, probably in response to the cast's inability to bring the first act to life. That's a greater than usual dropout rate, albeit still a minority for the sold-out 250-seat-or-so Cam-

pus Center Theatre.

I doubt they left because of the play's sophisticated subject matter, well advertised in advance.

For Otterbein, which tends to choose safe shows that appeal to a broad audience, *Fifth* represents a refreshingly adult change of pace. Its depiction of a gay relationship is frank but tasteful. The profanity is infrequent; the nudity, partial.

The most tasteless moment also happened to be an audience favorite: a "pointless, vulgar and scatological" Eskimo fable recounted by an archetypal hippie, Weston Hurley (Jess Hanks).

It's a funny story that helps clarify the play's amorphous message about family survival. Sadly, it cannot be repeated in a family newspaper.

Dispatch photo by Ken Chamberlain
Keith Berkes, top, and Dennis Romer in *Fifth of July*.