



CHRISTINE NICKEL

From left: Jane (Elizabeth Shivener), Eddie (Dolan Bloom) and Harvey (Cory Smith)

THEATER REVIEW | INDIAN BLOOD

6/23/08

'Our Town' cousin likable

By Michael Grossberg
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Life is funny. But isn't it sad that by the time you really get the joke, you also realize that life is fading?

That's the bittersweet heart of *Indian Blood*, continuing through July 12 in Otterbein College's Campus Center Theatre.

The Ohio premiere of the brisk comedy drama that will remind audiences of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* opens the 2008 season of Otterbein Summer Theatre.

Yet *Indian Blood*, by veteran New York playwright A.R. Gurney, seems fresh with the conviction of memory.

Drawing from his coming-of-age in the 1940s in Buffalo, N.Y., Gurney paints a light-hearted but wistful portrait of a teenage boy, his well-to-do family, their social class and their community on the cusp of change.

Under Doreen Dunn's graceful direction, eight actors create a rich gallery of 11 characters — not to mention others seen only through the actors' reactions.

Buoyed by Melinda

▶ Otterbein Summer Theatre will present *Indian Blood* at 8 tonight, 2 p.m. Sunday and 8 p.m. July 10-12 in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$22. Call 614-823-1109 or visit www.otterbein.edu.

Murphy's movement choreography, Dunn and her nimble cast make the central holiday-dining scene so compelling that one can even see the invisible table and the imagined characters, while the after-dinner game of musical chairs becomes as metaphorically resonant as it is hilarious.

As Eddie — Gurney's fictionalized alter ego and the 15-year-old narrator — Dolan Bloom embodies the eager innocence of adolescence. His boyish humor and energy are matched by Josh Mahaffey's rivalry as cousin Lambert.

Cory Smith and Elizabeth Shivener generate chemistry, humor and subtle marital tension as Harvey and Jane, Eddie's parents. Shivener shows off a pleasant voice

in a Cole Porter song.

Lucas Dixon projects middle-aged wisdom as the wealthy grandfather who gave Eddie his treasured "Indian blood."

Jonelle Browne earns laughs as the whiny grandmother, while Drew Cotton skirts easy stereotypes as Uncle Paul, a confirmed bachelor.

Student actors sometimes have difficulty portraying older characters, but not among the three generations evoked by this well-knit ensemble, which includes Cotton and Caitlin Scott in vivid multiple roles.

Otterbein's talented design team fulfills the minimalist style and imaginative spirit of the 95-minute one-act, presented on a stage that is bare except for some chairs and a backdrop of framed images and projections.

Rob Johnson's sepia-tinged lighting and fluid scenic design and Marcia Hain's well-chosen 1940s costumes evoke the fading affluence of a bygone era while leaving room for the actors to move and the audience to imagine. mgrossberg@dispatch.com

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Otterbein's actors make up for loose plot of 'Indian Blood'

By DENNIS THOMPSON

Suburban News Theater Critic

Otterbein Summer Theatre opens its season with A.R. Gurney's *Indian Blood*, a warm coming-of-age comedy.

Gurney was born in Buffalo in 1930, and he sets this play in Buffalo during Christmas 1946. If not completely autobiographical, one can at least see this is indicative of his memories of time, place and family.

The play revolves around a teenager, Eddie, and his relationship with his family. The title refers to the Indian blood that is in Eddie's family, a fact he uses as an excuse for any rambunctious behavior. In this case, it's a lewd drawing Eddie creates in class. The discovery of and resulting repercussions from it drive most of the plot.

But it's a loose plot. The main impetus of the story is Eddie's relationship with his family and a look back at the manner and tenor of the times.

Both by necessity and by design, college

productions give young actors an opportunity to play characters of all ages. Otterbein productions have long been strong in this area, having both the talent and instruction to show age in physical ways that are completely believable.

Director Doreen Dunn successfully pays attention to this important detail on both ends of the spectrum. Even though these actors are all within a couple years of age of one another, we totally buy into the depictions and family interactions.

As Eddie, Dolan Bloom shows infectious, even giddy enthusiasm. He is eager and impish.

Bloom hits the kaleidoscope of adolescence just right. He is boisterously contemptuous of his cousin, respectfully careful with his father, warmly affectionate



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with his mother and grandmother, disarmed and comfortable with his grandfather.

At first glance, Cory Smith looks too young to pull off Harvey, the father. But from his first word, his voice and manner indicate the authoritative adult. He is loving, but reserved in the way he shows it — proper, somewhat distant and mindful of appearances.

Elizabeth Shivener is delightful as Jane, the mother. On surface the dutiful wife, she is excellent in her casual droll asides that indicate her quiet desperation.

Lucas Dixon is jovial and patient as the grandfather. Jonelle Browne is loving and fastidious as the grandmother. Josh Mahaffey is brayingly annoying as cousin Lambert.

Caitlin Scott and Drew Cotton appear in a variety of supporting roles. Cotton is particularly fun as Uncle Paul.

Upon entering the theater, we are met with the actors already on stage, not in character but as themselves, putting on make-up, stretching. It's the kind of cutesy opening that seems to serve no purpose, perhaps meant to indicate that all involved know this will be a play we will be seeing.

Once the play starts, we notice another theatrical convention — the actors sitting

behind the set in partial view, awaiting their next entrance.

These *Our Town*-type conventions see out of place as the beginning seems to lack that of a typical play. There's the convention of Eddie directly addressing the audience, but that's fairly common these days.

The dinner scene that closes the play, where the theatricality takes clever hold, Eddie makes reference to this being a play and a small one at that, which could not afford additional actors. So only half the dinner guests are seen and the rest we are to imagine.

The actors' reactions to the imagined characters are great fun. The climax to game of musical chairs shown in slow motion is laugh-out-loud funny.

But more often, this is a work that elicits warm chuckles rather than guffaw. Still, it's sweetly enjoyable, with the subtle indications of family dynamics to which all can relate.

Otterbein Summer Theatre's Indian Blood continues at 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, July 10-12 at the Carpus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets are \$22. For more information, call 614-823-1109.

...The **ULTIMATE**

Tecumseh!



CHRISTINE NICKEL

Part of the cast of *Indian Blood*, from left: Lucas Dixon, Jonelle Browne and Dolan Bloom

COMING-OF-AGE PLAY TO USHER IN OTTERBEIN SEASON

BY MICHAEL GROSSBERG | THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A New York playwright's fictional portrait of his youth and family will launch the Otterbein Summer Theatre season.

A.R. Gurney blends comedy, drama and wistful remembrance as well as his observant eye about WASP culture in *Indian Blood*. The run of shows, featuring the Ohio premiere of the play, opens tonight.

"Gurney has written so many interesting plays," director Doreen Dunn said. "This one has charm, comedy and nostalgia."

"When I saw it, I knew Ohio audiences would love it."

Dunn saw *Indian Blood* last summer in Buffalo, N.Y., where Gurney grew up in the 1930s and '40s. His play is set in Buffalo in 1946.

Best-known for characters that

at a glance

Indian Blood

OTTERBEIN SUMMER THEATRE,
CAMPUS CENTER THEATRE, 100
W. HOME ST., WESTERVILLE
(614-823-1109,
WWW.OTTERBEIN.EDU)

SHOWTIMES » 7:30 tonight,
8 p.m. Friday and Saturday,
2 p.m. Sunday and 8 p.m.
July 10-12

TICKETS » \$22

share his upper-middle-class background and white Anglo-Saxon Protestant heritage, Gurney has

written more than 40 plays, including *The Cocktail Hour*, *The Dining Room*, *Later Life*, *Love Letters*, *The Middle Ages* and *Sylvia*.

Contemporary American Theatre Company and the Ohio State University Theater Department are among central Ohio groups that have produced Gurney plays.

Set during the December holidays in an era when bad manners were catastrophic and foul language was shocking, *Indian Blood* revolves around a well-to-do Buffalo family facing social and class anxieties and coming-of-age transitions.

"The play traces the demise of the Buffalo elite," Dunn said.

Gurney's alter ego is Eddie, a

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16-year-old private-school student who makes a lewd drawing in class, sparking repercussions for himself and his family.

The title of the 95-minute one-act refers to Eddie's belief that he has Seneca Indian blood in his family line. Eddie blames his school problems on the wildness of his mixed heritage.

"But it's not just about the young boy," Dunn said.

"I also think it's a coming-of-age story about the father," she said, "how he lets go of his mother's apron strings and commits himself fully to his family."

Liz Shivener, who will be an Otterbein senior in the fall, plays the mother. Shivener, 21, also appeared at Otterbein as Amy in *Company*, Irene Molloy in *Hello, Dolly!* and the singer in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

"The mother is very much a free spirit, not your typical housewife — which is why I like her so much," Shivener said.

"The mother and father disagree on many things,

especially the raising of her son. The divisions in the family pit the free thinkers against the by-the-book people."

Like *The Dinner Party* and several other Gurney plays, *Indian Blood* embraces a minimalism in scenic design and uses theatrical techniques that invite the viewers to exercise their imagination.

During a family holiday scene, for example, only eight of the 13 people sitting around a dinner table are visible — and the table isn't there.

"That's part of the delight of the play, ... the imaginary characters and invisible furniture," Dunn said.

And like Neil Simon's similarly autobiographical coming-of-age trilogy — *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, *Biloxi Blues* and *Broadway Bound* — *Indian Blood* uses the playwright's fictional self as the narrator whose memories and point of view help frame the story.

Shivener drew upon memories of her mother and her youth to help understand and flesh out her first maternal role.

"My mother and I are very close, and she's the strongest example of motherhood I know," she said.

"Every child wants their parents on their side, ... and my character is very close to her son," she said. "It's interesting to play the other side. ... That may be my future."

The Reynoldsburg native has invited her parents — Greg and Patty, who still live in Reynoldsburg — to attend the opening-night performance.

"We've joked about it," Shivener said. "I was nervous, never having played a mother before. But my mother thinks I'll take to it very well."

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