

ENTERTAINMENT

'Ladyhouse Blues' no song for women

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Life would be better if men were still around, an exhausted mother tells her impatient daughters.

In Otterbein College's production of *Ladyhouse Blues*, which opened last night, five St. Louis women await the return of their men from World War I. They wait, and wait, and wait — tragic figures all.

Helen (Nancy Fox) is dying from tuberculosis, while Dot (Liana Peters), recently married above her class, appears to be dying emotionally from a surfeit of false values.

Eylie (Cathy Collins) struggles to come alive sexually, entranced by a Greek Catholic man in her poor neighborhood, while Terry (Gina Grogg) struggles to come alive politically by joining a delegation to the World Congress of Women.

AND MOTHER Liz Madden (guest artist Betty Miller) simply struggles, as she has throughout her hard life.

The daughters want to leave home to pursue their own lives; the mother discourages them. It's a discouraging sight — and a familiar theme of family conflict.

Miller, a solid actress who has appeared on Broadway in *You Can't Take It With You* and on film in *The Pope of Greenwich Village*, provides strong support to the rest of the student cast. She invests her pivotal role with a mother's quiet dignity and unspoken regret.

SIGHING IN the pauses between her angry or complaining words, Miller communicates subtly that Liz has succeeded at nothing in life except the raising of her daughters in an uncaring world — a man's world.

It's a materialistic world in which the possession of a clean white house is a woman's main emblem of status. It's a deceptively nostalgic time in which Liz and her daughters leave their house unlocked when they go to the picture show because they don't want the neighbors to think they don't trust them.

And it's a stressful era of irreversible change in which the Madden family sits around complaining about war-inflated prices: five

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pounds of canned goods sell for all of 9 cents.

THE WOMEN complain frequently, not so much because of any flaws of character, but because — in the limited rural America of the early 20th century — there is no other outlet for their blocked life energies.

"Life is being squeezed out of us, and no one knows why," Liz says, raising hopes that *Ladyhouse Blues* might belatedly develop into a sort of psychological mystery about the death and revival of the female spirit.

No such luck.

Relentless in its emphasis on environmental naturalism, this minor historical tragedy offers no hope to women who had the misfortune to be born in the wrong time and place.

A STRONG sense of character and a strong sense of place — these elements *Ladyhouse Blues* does have in abundance.

But narrative structure? Suspense? An adequate dramatic resolution?

Forget it — despite good work by the cast, able direction by Ed Vaughan and a beautifully detailed set by guest designer David Hammond.

Some humorous dialogue does offer a brief respite from the bleakness. Yet it comes far too little and far too late; not until the first act almost ends is there a line amusing enough to provoke laughter — or for that matter, any other response — from the restive audience.

By its sad but mildly hopeful conclusion, *Ladyhouse Blues* implies that the daughters may escape to a better world, but that Liz will continue to sing the blues forever.

The problem is that *Ladyhouse Blues* is not a song worth singing.

Otterbein College will present *Ladyhouse Blues* tonight and Saturday at 8:15 p.m. in Cowan Hall. A Sunday matinee starts at 2 p.m. For reservations, call 898-1109.

Actress helps celebrate silver anniversary

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

For Otterbein College, Betty Miller's starring role in *Ladyhouse Blues* represents the silver anniversary of its guest artist program.

But for Miller, a New York actress who has appeared on Broadway in *You Can't Take It With You* and on film in *The Pope of Greenwich Village*, appearing as a college's guest artist is a new role.

"It's an interesting experience," Miller said. "It's quite different from anything I've ever done before. For one thing, you're working with students instead of

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professionals. There's a great deal of freshness in their interpretation of the lines."

Although there are fewer hours to rehearse in a student production, the greater enthusiasm of the students helps to make up for the lack of time, she said. Miller arrived in Columbus

Jan. 20, just a little more than two weeks before opening night.

"The students are lovely to work with," she said. "They've just been dears."

In *Ladyhouse Blues*, a "slice of life" comedy-drama which opens Thursday night, Miller plays the

mother of four daughters on the brink of major life changes in St. Louis in 1919.

Liz, Miller's character, is "very kerplunk" in her manner, Miller said, adding that the mother's warmth and goodness compensates for her lack of education and sophistication.

The Kevin O'Morrison play grew out of the 1976 National Playwrights Conference in Waterford, Conn., and was first presented as a staged reading at the Eugene O'Neill Memorial Theatre Center.

Miller compliments Ed Vaughan, the show's director, for being "one of the best directors that I've worked with." Vaughan

is a member of the Otterbein theater department faculty.

She also compliments the students for the "high caliber" of their performance. The Otterbein cast was in rehearsal for two weeks prior to Miller's arrival.

From what Miller has seen of it, Otterbein's guest artist program is "quite wonderful" and "very valuable" for the students.

She's happy to wish the program another 25 years of success.

Otterbein College will present *Ladyhouse Blues* at 8:15 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday and at 2 p.m. Sunday in Cowan Hall. For reservations, call 890-3028.



Betty Miller

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