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381

A Show of Friendship

'Charlotte's Web' is
Otterbein's latest
gift to kids

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

A girl named Fern.
A rat named Templeton.
A little pig named Wilbur.
And a large, gray spider named Charlotte,
Wilbur's friend.

To guest director Pam Hill, *Charlotte's Web* has a clear subtext: "Animals are people, too."

And as storytellers from Aesop (*Aesop's Fables*) to George Orwell (*Animal Farm*) have understood, animal tales can teach important lessons to the human animal.

Children should learn a lot from Charles Strouse's musical version of *Charlotte's Web*, which plays this weekend at Cowan Hall in Westerville. Otterbein College Theatre's production is presented in conjunction with the college's

AT A GLANCE

Charlotte's Web — Otterbein College Theatre's student production of Charles Strouse's musical of E.B. White's children's classic. Directed by Pam Hill.

The Cast:

Wilbur.....	Peyton Dixon
Charlotte.....	Gretchen Hall
Fern.....	Patti Knoop
John.....	Jeff Miller
Martha.....	Mary Randle
Avery.....	Tom Sheridan

Opening night is 7:30 p.m. Friday. Performances continue at 10:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Saturday and 1:30 p.m. Sunday in Cowan Hall, 30 N. Grove St. on the Westerville campus.

Tickets are \$3.65. Call 898-1109.

convince the world that he is "some pig," Hill said.

Strouse wrote the musical in 1989. He adapted it from the play Joseph Robinette created from E.B. White's classic tale.

"The music is what attracted me," Hill said. "The show tunes and down-home hoedowns are really cute and remind me of the music from *Annie*."

Strouse, a prolific Broadway composer, is best known for *Annie* (1977), followed by *Bye Bye Birdie* (1961) and *Applause* (1970). All three won Tony awards for best musical.

His score for *Charlotte's Web* includes *Eating*, Wilbur's amusing song about growing up; *Who Says We Can't Be Friends*, a duet by Wilbur and Charlotte; and *Welcome to the Zuckerman Barn*, an ensemble piece by the gallery of barnyard animals.

"What we're doing with *Charlotte's Web* is kind of fun," Hill said, describing Katie Robbins' costume designs, which clothe the barnyard animals in human clothing.

Otterbein students will fill most of the roles. But three children also will appear in the play: Jessica Grove of Upper Arlington, Ben Isler of Westerville and Nel-Morgan Scheiber of Bexley.

This is the fourth time Hill has directed at Otterbein since graduating there in 1975. She

department of music.

"It's a good show for children, because it deals with issues that a lot of children's theater doesn't address: life and death, making friends with somebody who's not your kind," Hill said.

The 75-minute one-act tells a story of friendship. Charlotte saves Wilbur from the butcher's ax through a "clever plan" to



Ken Chamberlain/Dispatch

From left, Nel-Morgan Schieber, Jessica Grove, Peyton Dixon (Wilbur) and Ben Isler in *Charlotte's Web*.

directed *Night Watch* last summer and *Quilters* twice last year.

Off-Broadway, Hill served as assistant director of Ed Graczyk's *A Murder of Crows*.

Her other credits include *The Folk of the Air*, at Weatherlane Playhouse; *Aladdin*, at the Palace Theatre; *Canterbury Tales* at Wittenberg University; and last year's world premiere of *Dawn of Infinite Dreams*.

Unlike *Sleeping Beauty*, the previous children's show Hill directed at Otterbein, *Charlotte's Web* is "not an old-fashioned fairy tale, but a modern children's piece."

That makes this year's children's show somewhat of a change of pace for Otterbein. But Hill and Tod Wilson, Otterbein Theatre managing director, nevertheless expect a typical audience of about 8,000 people. That would quite likely make *Charlotte's Web* the most popular show of Otterbein's 1990-91 season — for children or adults.

Otterbein's first children's show, in 1961, was *The Emperor's New Clothes*. By 1965, the children's show had become an annual tradition.

A fall tradition

Otterbein College Theatre has presented a children's show for more than 20 years. Typically, about 8,000 (mostly young) people have enjoyed these shows annually during the past decade, making them by far Otterbein's most popular shows:

- 1990: *Charlotte's Web*
 - 1989: *Cinderella**
 - 1988: *Alice in Wonderland**
 - 1987: *Robin Hood**
 - 1986: *Sleeping Beauty**
 - 1985: *Peter Pan**
 - 1984: *The Wizard of Oz*
 - 1983: *Heidi*
 - 1982: *The Masque of Beauty and the Beast*
 - 1981: *Cinderella*
 - 1980: *Alice in Wonderland*
- * Otterbein's five all-time best sellers