

COLUMBUS DISPATCH
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THEATER REVIEW

'Uncommon' nicely sketched

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Wendy Wasserstein has developed considerably as a playwright since *Uncommon Women and Others* — a gracious way of observing that her first play is also her weakest.

There's really nothing uncommon about *Uncommon Women*, a diffused comedy-drama about five Mount Holyoke graduates who came of age during the early 1970s.

Otterbein College's nice ensemble production charts their familiar rites of passage with coy humor.

But Wasserstein, who more recently won a Pulitzer Prize for *The Heidi Chronicles*, only sketches in her sitcom characters' senior-year highs, lows and cutesy in-betweens.

Although the script must have seemed trendy when it premiered off-Broadway in 1979, today it tends to come across as an obvious Me-Decade slice of quirky life.

More women attended Wednesday's well-received opening show than usually show up at openings. It figures. Women will enjoy *Women* more than most men.

At times, the girltalk is frank enough to make males blush. Anastasia Klimaszewski's lusty Kate and Kimberly Kefgen's liberated Rita lead hilariously brazen discussions.

Mostly, this period piece reeks of instant nostalgia. Wasserstein's affluent, educated young women read Doris Lessing and Germaine Greer, ponder taking macrame or bread-making classes and struggle for "relevance" — that blithe catchword of

AT A GLANCE

■ *Uncommon Women and Others*. Otterbein College Theatre's student production of Wendy Wasserstein's early comedy about a college reunion. Directed by Ellen Newman.

Kate Quin Anastasia Klimaszewski
Samantha Steward Patti Knoop
Holly Kaplan Mary Randle
Muffet De Nicola Kim Clay

Diffuse slice of Me-Decade college life of, by and (primarily) for women.

■ Performances are at 8 tonight and Saturday night, 2 p.m. Sunday and Tuesday-June 9 in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

■ Tickets are \$7.75 and \$8.85. Call 898-1109.

the late '60s and early '70s.

Rita refuses "to live down to expectations," naively confident that she and her friends will be "incredible" women — uncommon women — by the time they reach 30. Or failing that, 40. Or 45.

A more mature perspective rarely intrudes, since these flashbacks to academia are framed by a restaurant reunion that takes place six years later in 1978 — not quite enough time for this particular generation to learn that you can't have it all.

Wasserstein's younger alter ego here is clearly Mary Randle's over-

weight Holly, who already suspects that she can't have it all. Randle adds wistful dignity to a second-act telephone monologue that underscores Holly's frustrations.

Mandy Fox's Susie is a goody-two-shoes airhead who loves dating Ivy League men; Sarah Suzanne Hughes' Carter is a taciturn sourpuss who wants to make films about Wittgenstein. Although little more than cartoons, both roles offer many opportunities for laughs. Fox and Hughes deliver.

Guest actress Joy Reilly, who has not performed onstage in too many years, acquits herself handsomely in a small but amusing supporting role. Her Mrs. Plumm, a Mount Holyoke housemother, offers her girls "milk and crackers" lessons in "gracious living" while remaining resolutely blind to what they truly hunger for.

Scenic designer Bryan Campbell's genteel living- and dining-room set glows with feminine pinks and fantasy golds; the subtext of sentimentality is reinforced by Gregory Owen-Houck's burnished lighting.

Guest director Ellen Newman guides the student ensemble well, especially in the more physical scenes. Two favorites: when the girls secretly parody Mrs. Plumm's pompous movements as she acts out an Emily Dickinson poem, and when they dance together to Aretha Franklin (with one of them on air guitar).

Aretha's song? Why, *Respect*, of course. Wasserstein's ironically apt point: That's what women just don't get enough of. Even today.

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'Women' depicts a generation's coming of age

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By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Most theatergoers know Wendy Wasserstein from *The Heidi Chronicles*, which won a Pulitzer Prize, or *Isn't It Romantic?*, her earlier off-Broadway hit.

All one needs to know about *Uncommon Women and Others*, Wasserstein's first comedy-drama to be staged off-Broadway, is that it covers similar territory: the difficulties women face in trying to live up to today's higher expectations.

Fittingly, a woman will direct the all-female cast of Otterbein College's season-closing production, which opens tonight.

"It's very funny and poignant," said Ellen Newman, a Broadway actress and a theater professor at the Ohio State University.

"The women in *Women* talk about boys and sex and what it really means to become what they're supposed to become: the foremost women of their generation."

Five Mount Holyoke graduates meet for lunch six years after graduation to reminisce about their senior-year friendship in 1972. Most of *Uncommon Women*, presented in flashbacks, shows how their youthful dreams and ambitions have been achieved or changed.

"They faced enormous pressure to excel," Newman said. "Mount Holyoke, as one of the 'seven sisters' of the Ivy League, was set up to be the woman's answer to Harvard."

"You had to go out and become the *Wunderkind* of your generation, but nobody knew what that meant."

Newman directed OSU's well-received *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Before arriving at OSU in 1988, she taught theater for five years at Cornell University.

Her Broadway credits include Bianca in *Othello*, opposite James Earl Jones and Christopher Plummer, and Cecily in *84 Charing Cross Road*, opposite Ellen Burstyn.

"Otterbein's young women actors are fabulous," Newman said. "I was amazed by their auditions."

Anastasia Klimaszewski, Patti Knoop, Mary Randle, Kim Clay and Kim Kefgen play the "uncommon" women who resurrect the past at a college reunion.



Ken Chamberlain/Dispatch

The cast of *Uncommon Women and Others* from left: Kim Clay, Patti Knoop, Anastasia Klimaszewski, Joy Reilly, Amanda Fox and director Ellen Newman

Like the women in *Women*, Wasserstein graduated from Mount Holyoke in the early 1970s. She wrote the two-act play in the late '70s. *Uncommon Women* premiered off-Broadway in 1979.

Also uncommon about *Uncommon Women* are the strong female roles. "There are a lot of them, and that doesn't happen very often — certainly not often enough," said guest actor Joy Reilly, also an OSU theater professor.

Reilly, who last performed onstage as OSU's *Auntie Mame* in 1986, plays Mrs. Plum at Otterbein.

Uncommon Women and Others. Otterbein College Theatre's student production of Wendy Wasserstein's early off-Broadway comedy-drama. Directed by Ellen Newman.

Kate Quin.....Anastasia Klimaszewski
Samantha Steward.....Patti Knoop
Holly Kaplan.....Mary Randle
Muffet De Nicola.....Kim Clay
Rita Altabel.....Kim Kefgen
Mrs. Plumm.....Joy Reilly
Susie Friend.....Amanda Fox
Carter.....Sarah Hughes
Leilah.....Meg Chamberlain

Performances at 7:30 tonight, 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday and June 4-9 at the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

Tickets: \$7.75 and \$8.85. Call 898-1109.

"Wasserstein is writing about an era I am familiar with," Reilly said. "She has a rather charming and funny view of the special bond that women form."

Plum, a Mount Holyoke alumna and dorm housemother, tries to pass on to her charges such old-fashioned customs as genteel milk-and-crackers socials — not exactly an easy sell in 1972, when young women were taking the lyrics of Helen Reddy's *I Am Woman* as a feminist anthem.

"It was the end of an era," Reilly said. "Everybody dressed up, drank tea or sherry, and made interesting conversation during those 'ceremonies of gracious living.' But when Mrs. Plum retired, the students voted to abolish the ceremony."

"*Uncommon Women* chronicles a section of American life that's very specific: the coming of age of the intelligent, well-educated children of the affluent."

"Wasserstein is a major woman playwright," Reilly said. "Her plays chart the awakening of women's consciousness, the birth of the women's movement, the recognition that women were looking for something more than just husbands."