

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Otterbein's valiant effort succumbs under own weight

By DENNIS THOMPSON

Suburban News Theater Critic

Otterbein College Theatre gives a valiant effort at an exceedingly difficult work.

The evening ends with an odd dichotomy. The production of *Arcadia* is clearly solid, particularly for a college attempt. Yet it still nearly buckles from its own weight.

Tom Stoppard's complex drama deals with issues as wide ranging as scientific principles and the nature of love.

It delves into Lord Byron and literary mysteries as well as science, mathematics and landscape architecture.

Billed as two plays in one, it is at once a romantic period comedy and a modern mystery.

Handsomely housed in Rob Johnson's stately design, the setting is Sidley Park, a mansion in Derbyshire where the action alternates between the early

1800s and present day.

The early setting finds the home occupied by Thomasina Coverly, a 13-year-old mathematical genius, and her tutor, Septimus Hodge, a man trying to avoid the consequences of various love affairs.

Here, also, are Lady Croom and her guests ranging from relatives to poets.

The modern scenes involve three researchers, each attempting to unearth what happened in the earlier time.

Hannah Jarvis is researching the grounds, Bernard Nightingale is studying Byron and Valentine Coverly is investigating the grouse population.

The actors in the modern scenes are more successful than their earlier counterparts.

Among the early players, only Randy Goetz as Hodge consistently succeeds in portraying the smooth and mannerly aspects of the period. His assured performance is the

best of the evening.

Allison Sattinger has some nice moments as Lady Croom. Liz Beckham succeeds in showing Thomasina's youthful exuberance but has difficulty in conveying the depth of her intelligence.

The three modern researchers are all solidly played.

Ben Stewart, who tends to bring an obnoxious quality to many of his characters, tempers this tendency, making Nightingale cocky, but likable. In fact, Stewart adds a welcome surge of energy with each appearance.

Amber Mellot is a steady force as Jarvis, while Damon Decker brings a wry matter-of-factness to Valentine Coverly.

At nearly three hours with the range of issues, ideas, and time periods, this is a difficult work for the audience as well.

A quicker pace by director Christina Kirk could have made the early going

more palatable. Actors often took long, silent takes which worked for comic effect.

But coupled with the overall leisurely pace it contributed to a lethargic quality.

Perhaps Kirk felt the pacing necessary to allow us to soak it all in. But the three hours seems like three hours.

A periodic scan of audience faces betrayed in some an effort to follow the action and in others an effort to stay awake.

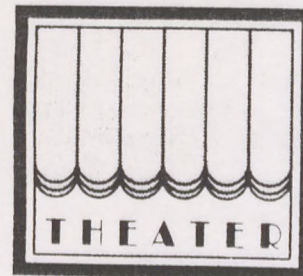
More than one theatergoer who had seen the New

York production has told me that multiple viewings are required to really grasp this. Otterbein supplies a study guide to help the audience through the myriad of characters and issues.

Some spent intermission studying the guide while a few gave up and left.

Those who stayed were rewarded with a crisper second act and the coming together of the puzzle pieces that seemed so scattered in the first.

Otterbein College Theatre's *Arcadia* continues at



REVIEW

8 p.m. Friday and Saturday in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Tickets are \$12. For more information call 823-1109.

Mike Albert celebrates 10 years touring as Elvis impersonator

By PAT KANE

Suburban News Reporter

One day, Mike Albert occupied his entire business life selling real estate and calling as an auctioneer.

The next, without any preconceived notions, he added to it by becoming a full-fledged entertainer.



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FEB-6-99

Mature Otterbein actors meet challenge of chaotic 'Arcadia'

By Scott Phillips
For The Dispatch

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The perfect metaphor for Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* reveals itself early in the first act, when Noakes, a landscape artist employed by an aristocratic family, unveils his meticulous design for an English garden intended to appear unplanned, unkempt and altogether arbitrary.

Noakes' design is a formula for chaos, itself a contradiction in terms. But that's no problem for Stoppard, one of the most brilliant playwrights of our time, a consummate wordsmith with a penchant for transforming the arcana of philosophy and physics into a wickedly funny theater of the mind.

Arcadia, which opened Thursday at Otterbein College Theatre, would mean chaos for most college theater companies. But Otterbein rises to the challenge, and director Christina Kirk and her cast deliver a thoughtful, mature and entertaining production.

Stoppard's focus is Sidley Park, the ancestral estate of the Coverly family. Here Valentine Coverly, the scientifically minded Earl of Croom (Damon Decker), researches the grouse population, while Hannah Jarvis (Amber Mellott) investigates the history of the estate's English garden. Enter Cambridge don Bernard Nightingale (Ben Stewart), a publish-or-perish academic pursuing a tortured thesis based on a misguided conviction that Lord Byron once fought a duel while staying at Sidley.

Stoppard intersperses these scenes of the contemporary Coverlys with those of the Coverlys of 1809. As Noakes designs his garden (a grotesque landscape based on the paintings of Salvator Rosa), the young Septimus Hodge (Randy Goetz) tutors the barely post-pubescent Coverly scion and budding genius, Thomasina (Liz Beckham) even as he cheerfully beds the wife of poet and

Theater review

Arcadia, Otterbein College Theatre's student production of Tom Stoppard's historical drama. Directed by Christina Kirk.

Septimus	Randy Goetz
Thomasina.....	Liz Beckham
Noakes.....	Jesse Wilson
Lady Croom.....	Allison Sattinger
Bernard.....	Ben Stewart
Chater.....	J.B. Reidenbaugh

Classically romantic

Being performed at 8 tonight and 2 p.m. Sunday — and 8 p.m. Friday and next Saturday — in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville.

Tickets cost \$11 and \$12. Call 614-823-1209.

Coverly houseguest Ezra Chater (J.B. Reidenbaugh)

As with most Stoppard, a mere synopsis of plot cannot begin to convey the ideas, wordplay and intellectual energy that animate *Arcadia*.

Throughout the play, Stoppard pits the two great paradigms of Classicism and Romanticism against each other, the symmetry of science and mathematics (exemplified by the Earl of Croom's research and Thomasina's complex algorithms) against the chaotic world of the Romantic (Noakes' Gothically inspired garden and the mysterious offstage presence of Byron).

It seems that for Stoppard, chaos wins. As the contemporary characters seek to impose their neatly formulated hypotheses on the past, it is clear they cannot account for the infinitely complex and unpredictable variables in human behavior and cir-

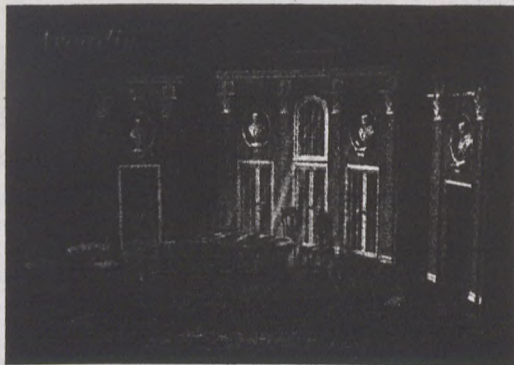
cumstance, variables which send Nightingale's historical scenario laughably off course.

Arcadia can be challenging for audiences, but patience is rewarded. This is no sterile academic exercise; Stoppard manages to fashion an oddly compelling love story out of the chaos theory.

Otterbein's cast is exceptionally even, and the actors, particularly Mellott and Goetz, lend a maturity and gravitas to their roles that is unusual for undergraduate actors. As Thomasina, Beckham evinces a combination of adolescent innocence and intellectual sophistication.

Rob Johnson's Greek Revival set is an exercise in neoclassical symmetry, and Katie Robbins' period costumes are striking.

At one point, Stoppard suggests that the natural decay of the universe toward entropy is not a reason for despair, but an incentive to hurry. Otterbein's *Arcadia* is another incentive to hurry — this time to the box office.



The design for *Arcadia*

File photo

Computers give professor a hand with scenic design

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Scenic designer Rob Johnson had to put on his thinking cap and use computers to solve the challenges of *Arcadia*, the latest Otterbein College Theatre production.

At once a romantic comedy, suspenseful mystery and historical drama, the London and Broadway hit by Tom Stoppard takes place in two centuries but only one oval room of an English country estate.

Johnson tried to give director Christina Kirk "an environment that could be now or a hundred years ago, where the audience won't expect any kind of a linear story about the 1800s."

An associate professor of design in the Theater and Dance Department, Johnson came up with a room whose walls are defined by a series of symmetrical arches, oval holes and busts.



Rob Johnson

"It's a very open design that reflects Stoppard's theme of classicism vs. romanticism, science vs. theology and analysis vs. feeling."

Set in a stately Derbyshire home, *Arcadia* alternates between the early 1800s and the present as two generations of an

aristocratic family and their guests explore the mysteries of love, gardening, history, mathematics and the universe.

"I am reinforcing the characters' debate," Johnson said, "by using a juxtaposition of line, form and color to represent how their contrary notions are part of a duality in our nature."

"Warm, passionate" colors — oranges, ambers and yellows — are juxtaposed with "cool, analytical" blues and grays, he said.

Similarly, the drawing-room walls and windows reinforce the theme of duality by contrasting "positive and negative space, solidness and emptiness."

The goal: to create an expectation that "Anything could happen or appear in this space."

The design also highlights the references to quantum physics, "in which matter can appear, disappear and reappear through time."

Johnson has designed more than 30 Otterbein College productions, including last year's *Moon Over Buffalo* and *Crazy for You*; and several Contemporary American Theatre Company shows, including the lights for next month's *The Fantasticks*. Increasingly, he has used computers.

Arcadia, perhaps his most computer-intensive project, is the fruit of five years of research and development: Johnson has led conferences on three-dimensional, computer-aided design; worked with groups on sabbaticals; and taught classes.

Four classical busts "stare down from their wall positions into the room, as if watching and studying the characters in the play," said Johnson, adding that they symbolize members of the audience.

Each of the busts began as a 3-D computer model.

Pinnacle Engineering of Grand Rapids, Mich., used a computer-aided milling machine to cut the model from dense foam. Otterbein completed the job by making molds and casting four copies.

The finishing touch was to set the room atop a raked stage painted with the center of a spiral galaxy.

Under ultraviolet light, Johnson said, the stars shimmer and the galaxy hovers.

"The play spirals outward. I don't think I've ever had a chance to take a typical period interior and do something so far-out with it."

■ Otterbein College Theatre will present *Arcadia* at 7:30 tonight, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday and 8 p.m. Feb. 12-13 in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$11 and \$12. For more information, call 614-823-1109.

SEPT-6-98

Companies stage safe bets

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Established troupes plan to rely on classics, with only a few risking the new or offbeat in the new season.

Serious theatergoers should have no trouble finding worthwhile plays, with Pulitzer Prize-winners at Contemporary American Theatre Company, Red Herring Theatre Company, Reality Theatre and Ohio State University.

In the season's most anticipated production, CATCO will present the 1998 Pulitzer winner for drama: *How I Learned To Drive*, Paula Vogel's



Broadway Series

Jaston Williams, left, and Joe Sears in *Red, White & Tuna* (Oct. 13-18)

THEATER

touching, wise, witty and briskly metaphoric exploration of the forbidden, incestuous, relationship between a young woman and her Uncle Peck.

Sam Shepard confirmed his status as a premier American playwright with *Buried Child*, a 1979 Pulitzer winner. Red Herring will end its first season at Columbus State Community College with the highly symbolic drama about a divided farm family searching for its roots (April 29-May 23).

Reality Theatre, which did well in 1996 with Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, will stage *A Delicate Balance* (April 15-May 8), Albee's 1967 Pulitzer-winning serio-comedy about an affluent family.

Under Lesley Ferris' eight-month leadership, Ohio State University's theater program is making a serious bid for renewed attention. Although OSU grad Eileen Heckart's recent hip fracture will prevent her from starring in the school's production of Neil Simon's Pulitzer-winning comedy *Lost in Yonkers* (Nov. 11-22), the show will go on with another Equity actress under the direction of Luke Yankee, Heckart's son. A British touring troupe will launch the season with an October residency, and the first local staging of Tony Kushner's Pulitzer-winning *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* will end it in May.

Other recent New York hits that seem promising: *Arcadia* (Feb. 4-13, Otterbein College Theatre), British playwright Tom Stoppard's complex romantic mystery about scholarship and history; *Nixon's Nixon* (Oct. 6-Nov. 7, CATCO), Russell Lees' political satire about a private meeting between Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger in 1974; *Shakespeare's R&J*, a muscular play-within-a-play about teen-age boys re-enacting *Romeo and Juliet* (May, Reality Theatre); and *Moonlight*, Harold Pinter's 1993 drama (Sept. 25-Oct. 4, Women at Play) about a dysfunctional family.

Farce will dominate the fall:

Otterbein College Theatre will launch its season with *Moon Over Buffalo* (Oct. 15-24, Cowan Hall), a 1950s-era backstage romp by Ken Ludwig

(*Crazy for You*, *Lend Me a Tenor*).

The Broadway Series will launch its season with *Red, White & Tuna* (Oct. 13-18, Palace Theatre), another quick-changing profile of the polyester-clad citizens of Texas' third-smallest town. Joe Sears and Jaston Williams will portray all 11 citizens of Tuna preparing for a Fourth of July reunion in this sequel to *Greater Tuna*.

Shadowbox Cabaret, whose high-energy troupe writes and performs all of its comedy skits, will emphasize farce in *Freak Show* (October and November) and its popular annual *Holiday Hoopla* (November and December).

New plays are always a risk, but some risks pay off. That's what makes watching a new work so exciting and potentially rewarding:

Acclaimed director-choreographer Anne Bogart known for her stark stage images and sculptural movements (*The Medium*, *Bob*), will return to the Wexner Center for the Arts to launch its Theatrical Impulse Series with the world premiere of *Alice's Adventures Underground* (Nov. 5-8).

Denison University will present *The Tragical Historie of the Life and Death of Christopher Marlowe* (April 16-24), author-composer-lyricist Peter Pauze's new musical comedy about the last week in the life of Elizabethan England's foremost poet wit and spy.

Meanwhile, Otterbein will stage its sixth annual commissioned play in May (by Bill Corbett, a writer-performer for the TV show *Mystery Science Theater 3000*), and OSU will present the first workshop production of *Feral Music*, (Feb. 17-March 6, Stadium II Theatre), upcoming Thuber House playwright Brian Silberman's new play about a deaf mute locked in a European psychiatric clinic.

Some theater schedules are in flux until several troupes find a new home. Two of the most promising troupes on hold are Metro Music Theatre, reportedly in negotiations for a new space, and the Irish and American Repertory Theatre, which opened this summer with an acclaimed *Molly Sweeney*. The troupe plans to stage a fall play after renovations are completed on its new Raw Space on E. Main Street.



CATCO/Geoff Nelson

Marianne Timmons and Brian Otting in *Mere Mortals* (Sept. 8-Oct. 10)