

Otterbein's 'Crazy for You' is a real treat

By Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

With great Gershwin tunes, fancy-free footwork, solid singing, fabulous costumes, lots of laughs and a giddy boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-gets-theater-and-girl plot, who could ask for anything more from Otterbein College's ambitious *Crazy for You*?

Inspired by George and Ira Gershwin's *Girl Crazy* (1930), author Ken Ludwig and director Mike Ockrent expertly blend romantic comedy and a mistaken-identity farce into one of the decade's most lavish and entertaining "new" musicals.

Perhaps only those who recall the 1993 Broadway Series tour of the slap-happy, dance-crazy 1992 Tony winner for best musical will sense what's missing from Otterbein's large and largely smooth production: a fluid merging of song, story and staging into a seamless whole.

Still, director Pam Hill does a terrific job adapting and scaling down the extremely large musical to fit the student talents, the budget and Cowan Hall, where *Crazy* opened last night.

Inevitably, Hill is forced to make a few less-than-ideal adjustments that occasionally slow down the show for massive scene changes. Rob Johnson's top-notch scenic designs range from backstage on-Broadway to a Wild West near-ghost town. Some of Hill's choices are improvements over the original Broadway show. It does make more sense for the chorus girls to pop out of a phone booth than a car to sing

THEATER REVIEW

Crazy for You, Otterbein College Theatre and the Department of Music's student production of Ken Ludwig and Mike Ockrent's Gershwin musical. Directed by Pam Hill.

Polly Katie Pees
Bobby Christopher Sloan
Bella Zangler Josh Gilliam

Embraceable

Being performed at 8 tonight and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — and 8 p.m. May 7-9 — in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville.

Tickets cost \$12, \$14. Call 823-1109.

and use the telephone.

Although Michael Thomas' enjoyable dance numbers are far less complex and inventive than Susan Stroman's Tony-winning original choreography, Thomas puts his own brand of zoom into *Slap That Bass* and lifts *I Got Rhythm* sky-high.

At Wednesday's student preview, the large dancing and singing chorus was first-rate — especially the Follies girls, in *I Can't Be Bothered Now*, *Tonight's the Night* and *Nice Work If You Can Get It*.

Katie Pees couldn't be sweeter as Polly. She's warm, earthy and refreshingly straightforward as the love-starved belle of Dead Rock, Nev. Her singing (*Someone To Watch Over Me*, *But Not for Me*) is the best of a strong cast.

As stage-struck Bobby, Christo-

pher Sloan dances and sings well, but he milks the role mainly for laughs — not persuasive romance.

Josh Gilliam's Bella Zangler is flamboyantly vain and European. When Gilliam's Bella and Sloan's Bella-disguised Bobby get drunk and meet each other in the saloon, their mirror-image slapstick in *What Causes That?* is hilarious.

Emily Cotton's amusingly aggressive Irene struts her stuff in *Naughty Baby* at the expense of Randy Goetz's fuming Lank. As Bobby's mother, Lauren Mitchell is too young and shrill, but her short scenes work as comic relief.

Above all, this *Crazy for You* embodies a loopy, swooning romanticism. Hill underlines the subtext of many Gershwin songs, which in lyrics and staging offer flirtatious metaphors for lovemaking. Otterbein's production celebrates the rambunctious sexual energy of a New York chorus line colliding lustily and joyously with a lineup of lanky cowboys who haven't seen so many women since the last Gold Rush.

Among the many fizzy grace

notes: desert cactuses that light up suddenly like Las Vegas; the perfect blend of humor and heart in Bobby and Polly's *Embraceable You* duet; Eric Lubkeman's spectacular western and eastern costumes; Dana White's black-light and pink-fantasy lighting; the peppy 26-person orchestra, led by music director Beth Bradstreet with syncopated expertise; the lively first-act finale, in which cowboys tap dance with brooms and on the general store's corrugated tin roof; and the dazzling freshness of the second-act finale.

Given the inherent difficulties of the first local production of an especially challenging musical, Otterbein has done a good job. Despite occasional signs of strain or clunky slowness, *Crazy for You* ranks among Otterbein's best spring musicals and as this spring's best local musical.

CIRCLE CINEMA

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With a little creativity, director fits 'Crazy for You' to Otterbein

By Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

Otterbein College Theatre would have to be crazy to try to do *Crazy for You* as the lavish musical comedy was originally staged on Broadway and on tour. The sets alone would pack the Cowan Hall stage, leaving little room for the singing or tap-dancing.

Guest director Pam Hill, a veteran at staging musicals across the country, could be considered as crazy as a fox. Her approach to Otterbein's spring musical, which opens tonight, is to rethink the sets and props to fit the stage and script.

"We're not trying to duplicate the Broadway version, but develop a new concept that makes it work for Otterbein," Hill said.

"When I saw the Broadway Series tour, *Crazy for You* was my favorite show that year because of the music and dancing, and the way the creators put the 1930s story into a modern context and made it believable for today's audience.

"Any director has moments imprinted on their mind, from when they first see a show. Those are the moments they try to duplicate for the audience, but I like to adapt a show for the space."

For example, instead of copying the Rolls-Royce that releases a succession of chorus girls, "We decided to have them pop out of a 1930s telephone booth," Hill said.

"All 10 girls just keep coming out of the door."

Hill's approach attempts to bolster the number *I Can't Be Bothered Now*, in which the chorus girls answer ringing telephones.

"The idea was to incorporate some changes that fit the telephones.

"With a phone booth, the song starts making sense."

Instead of using a pickup truck onstage to run over a rattlesnake, Hill figured out a more economical way to do the same thing in the *Bidin' My Time* scene.

"Instead, a gun goes off, ricochets off a lot of pots and pans, and then falls on the snake (a puppet)," she said.

Author Ken Ludwig (*Lend Me a Tenor*) and director Mike Ockrent (*City of Angels*) updated *Girl Crazy*, a 1930 Gershwin musical, by rewriting the book and adding Gershwin songs from other musicals. The dance-crazy result won the 1992 Tony award for best musical.

Besides *I Got Rhythm*, *Embraceable You*, *But Not for Me*, *Could You Use Me* and *Bidin' My Time* — all in *Girl Crazy* — the musical includes George and Ira Gershwin's *Someone To Watch Over Me*, *Nice Work If You Can Get It* and *They Can't Take That Away From Me*.

"Older audiences can remember those movies when boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl. *Crazy for You* is like that, only in a modern style," Hill said.

Hill, a busy free-lance director, has staged two other musicals as large as *Crazy for You*. One was *City of Angels*, for the Toledo Rep; the other was *Peter Pan*, for the Albuquerque Civic Light Opera Association.

"Our *Crazy for You* is wonderful and huge, but my No. 1 goal is to get the story line across," she said.

Michael Thomas choreographed the show, including a seven-minute *I Got Rhythm* first-act finale that Hill says "has to be the longest tap-dancing number in history."

"For the performers, it's nonstop. If they're not dancing or singing, they're offstage changing costumes."

A busy director

At Otterbein College, Pam Hill has directed *Once Upon a Mattress*, *The World Goes Round* and *Wind in the Willows*. At Contemporary American Theatre Company, she staged *Evelyn and the Polka King* and *Blithe Spirit*.

Hill's career has taken her to stage shows in New York, Connecticut, Illinois, New Mexico, Tennessee, West Virginia, Michigan and other states.

"I'm one of the few free-lance directors based in Columbus, rather than New York or Chicago," Hill said.

Just before beginning rehearsals for *Crazy for You*, Hill staged *Cabaret* for Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio. After a short break, she will go to Peoria, Ill., to stage a summer production of *Tapestry* at Bradley University.

"Most people who do what I do are usually associated with a theater group of their own, but I do it on my own."

Hill is married to actor Michael Lorr, who plays a supporting role in CATCO's current production of *The Little Foxes*.

"When we're busy, we're very, very busy. The nice part of free-lancing is that we do have off time," she said.

— Michael Grossberg

■ Otterbein College Theatre will present *Crazy for You* at 7:30 tonight, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — and 8 p.m. May 7-9 — in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$12 and \$14. Call 823-1109.

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Don't think about this musical, just enjoy it

By DENNIS THOMPSON

Suburban News Theater Critic

Otterbein College Theatre's production of *Crazy for You* is a smashingly entertaining musical.

The reconfiguration of George and Ira Gershwin's music, tied in with Ken Ludwig's new book, is lavishly entertaining from start to finish.

I am continually amazed at how Otterbein can keep casting these large musicals with consistently strong performers throughout.

Thirty talented students, sparkling direction by Pamela Hill and dazzling choreography by Michael Thomas results in moments that rival anything seen in the Broadway Series.

What I find most surprising is that I'm saying all these things.

That's because I used to be a real snob about musicals. I found them trite, with thin characterizations and what passed for plots being constantly put on hold so people could suddenly break into song.

Crazy for You has everything I hated in a musical.

It's a "gee whiz, kids, let's put on a show" show. It has a plot that can be seen coming from miles away. It has all the ridiculous contrivances. (How come an admitted unknown in show business is close personal friends with all the girls in a major musical's chorus line?)



REVIEW

But somewhere along the line I learned to stop thinking about these things and just enjoy them. And there is so much here to enjoy.

Hill keeps things moving at an almost breakneck pace yet effectively slows the action to highlight a comic moment.

Thomas has the actors mov-

ing like they've danced all their lives.

Eric Lubkeman's costumes are dazzling. Dana White's use of mood lighting is magical.

Except for an initial brief thought that I was at Cedar Point's Frontierland, I found Rob Johnson's huge, varied and revolving scene designs wondrous.

There's a scene in darkness with dancers highlighted in black-light effect. There's a scene between two actors miming a mirror image that could be direct from the Marx Brothers.

From full-bodied chorus numbers to consistently strong solos, the music is marvelous.

Katie Pees' Polly has a particularly strong voice, and Christopher Sloan's Bobby is a fluid dancer. These two may

be the leads, but all of the cast members are stars.

And although the plot never reaches a conclusion but just seems to stop, it's probably not giving anything away to say it has a happy ending.

I used to hate that, too.

Otterbein College Theatre's *Crazy for You* continues at 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday at Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Tickets are \$12 Thursday, \$14 Friday and Saturday. For more information call 823-1109.

Otterbein raises the bar

Gershwin's 'Crazy for You' is a feast

Prepare to be wowed. And entertained. Otterbein's production of **Crazy for You** sets the bar a little higher for college-staged musicals. Acting, singing, dancing, costumes and scenery all come together to create a feast for lovers of sappy plots and snappy rhythms.

Based on George and Ira Gershwin's *Girl Crazy* (1930), this 1992 Tony winner also includes songs from other shows written by the talented brothers. The Depression-era story is just substantial enough to tie together such classic tunes as *Slap That Bass, I've Got Rhythm* and *Embraceable You*.

The derivative plot in a nutshell: Boy meets girl, boy falls in love with girl, boy puts together show to save theater owned by girl's father.

It would be easy to camp up such a clear rip-off of old Hollywood musicals. (As one character says, "Don't you go to the movies? Mickey Rooney does this all the time.") Instead, *Crazy for You* is closer to an homage, taking itself only slightly less seriously than the escapist epics that inspired it.

As directed by Pamela Hill, the story is told with an engaging sweetness. It's also

Theater

RICHARD ADES



told with a sure sense of rhythm—speeding up for infectious tap numbers, slowing down just enough for the odd love ballad or comic business.

While pretty much everything is right about Otterbein's production, the thing that's most right is Christopher Sloan's portrayal of Bobby, the would-be song-and-dance man at the center of the plot. Singing like a young Frank Sinatra and dancing like a young Fred Astaire, he carries off the role with charisma to spare.

As the woman Bobby chases after, Katie Pees isn't enough of a hooper to be a Ginger to Sloan's Fred, but she makes up for it vocally, especially with her commanding, heartfelt delivery of *Someone to Watch Over Me*.

Beyond the two leads, all the roles are performed with flair. In fact, the strength of the cast was underscored last Saturday when the small but meaty role of Patsy was memorably played by understudy Molly Gardina, who usually plays Sheila.

A short list of the production's other charms:

- Rob Johnson's scenery, which is beautiful and substantial, yet mobile, allowing the action to flow fluidly from a New York theater to a lazy Nevada town.

- Eric Lubkeman's costumes, which

THEATER

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perfectly capture the changing locales and levels of reality, including two fantasy numbers.

- Michael Thomas's choreography, which includes soft shoe and tap and is performed on surfaces ranging from solid ground to a tin roof.

Director Hill has created a funny, sexy, inventive production that continually surpasses our expectations—even before



Sappy, snappy and sweetly engaging: Otterbein's production of *Crazy for You*

those stairs rise out of the stage to add more pizzazz to the finale.

The show's only serious flaw is that it will close Saturday. Gershwin lovers who delay calling for reservations could be left out in the cold.

INFO:

Otterbein College Theatre will present *Crazy for You* at 8 p.m. today through Saturday in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Running time: 2-1/2 hours in two acts. Tickets are \$12 today, \$14 Friday and Saturday. 823-1109 (between 1 and 4:30 p.m. weekdays).

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Theater critics choose favorites from a wealth of productions

389
318

By Michael Crossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

So much theater is being performed in central Ohio that even the most enthusiastic critics can't see all of it. That encouraging but frustrating development, typical of big cities, hasn't stopped members of the Central Ohio Theatre Critics Circle from honoring the best of what they have seen each season.

Critics fell short of a majority in any category of the fifth annual poll for the yearlong season that ended June 30. In 1994, the year of the first poll, critics disagreed in every category. A majority agreed on a winner in one category in 1995 and two in 1996. As in 1997, critics' choices overlapped for 1998 but failed to produce a majority — although half did agree on the best musical.

Metro Music Theatre's concert-style "revisal" of *Kwamina* came closest to a consensus, with three votes. Otterbein College Theatre's *Crazy for You* received two votes.

Three performers received two votes each: for best actor, Jon Farris, as the German conductor in Contemporary American Theatre Company's *Taking Sides*; and for

ONSTAGE

best actress, Anne Hannon, the blind woman in Irish and American Repertory Theatre's *Molly Sweeney*, and Lori Cannon, the cuddly title-mutt in Reality Theatre's *Sylvia*.

Other multiple vote-getters: MadLab Theatre's multimedia *Bak-kee*, which won one vote each for best new play and best production of a play; and Red Herring Theatre Company's *Old Wicked Songs*. *Dispatch* free-lancer Scott Phillips, who didn't see enough to participate fully in the poll, joined Mark Passerello (*Outlook*) in praising Red Herring's warm, funny production.

Four shows tied with a scattered three votes in different categories: *Songs*, *Molly Sweeney* and CATCO's bracing *The Little Foxes* and thoughtful *Taking Sides*.

At the Circle's recent semiannual meeting — hosted by Joy Reilly (WOSU's "Theater Talk" commentator) — critics generally ranked the others' choices highly, too. The consensus was that the poll's relative lack of consensus reflects an especially diverse, memorable season.



Matt Sullivan / Dispatch

Jay Wright and Carmen Keels in Metro Music Theatre's *Kwamina*

THEATER TRENDS

The Circle has cited seasonal "worst trends" in the hope of encouraging better trends, but began choosing worst and/or best trends last year to make that hope explicit.

For Jay Weitz (*InnerArts*), the

birth of new theater companies in Columbus reflects both trends. "The best, insofar as it bespeaks the vitality of our theater scene. The worst, insofar as it reflects the triumph of ego over practicality, cooperation and survival."

Richard Ades (*The Other Paper*) also picked a best and a worst trend — although his "best" is ironic: "the decreasing frequency of the Cliche Family's appearances at Shadowbox Cabaret." (To its credit, the Cabaret develops its own comedy skits, but the Cliche Family characters have become tired clichés.) Ades also deplures "silly pop references dropped into a production for the sake of easy laughs." His examples: the 15th-century jester doing a Katharine Hepburn impression in Otterbein's *Once Upon a Mattress*; the title characters in Otterbein's *The Miser* declaring "My mama told me there'd be days like this;" and take-offs on the Spice Girls, Riverdance and the cheerleaders from *Saturday Night Live* in Ohio State University's *The Compleat Works of Wilm Shkspr* (abridged).

For Doug Hoehn (*Columbus Alive*), the worst trend is standing

ovations for unremarkable performances. "The standing ovation used to be a tribute to the exceptional artist in a moment of excellence. Now, any performance just above average assures that somebody's buttocks will be in my face while I give my modest applause," Hoehn said.

Dennis Thompson (Suburban News Publications) faults theater companies that make sales pitches for season tickets at performances. "I realize the economic realities companies must deal with, but these pitches tamper with the 'suspension of disbelief' atmosphere they are trying so hard to create."

Phillips's worst trend — "dwindling audiences for serious plays that lack name recognition" — was inspired by Red Herring's *Songs*.

"Given such a wonderful play and good production, why didn't more people go to see it? Such a production deserved larger audiences."

Mark Passerello (*Outlook*) is concerned about the loss of perform-

ing spaces, especially for smaller companies. His best trend: theaters that are finding ways to solve space problems — such as the Irish and American Repertory Theatre, "which is showing some immigrant zeal in renovating their own space."

I agree with Passerello that the loss of theater space is the worst trend. Let's not forget, though, that many troupes are being pushed out of existing space because of positive developments: the growth of other troupes, such as CATCO and Columbus Children's Theatre.

My pick for best trend, though, is the increasing collaboration among central Ohio theaters, actors and playwrights.

For instance, CATCO and Otterbein, and Reality and Act Out Productions co-produced plays this season, while Red Herring plans to co-produce *Buried Child* in the spring with Columbus State Community College's theater program. Meanwhile, more troupes are joining forces through the Theatre Roundtable to solve common problems.