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Summer season concludes with 'Laughter'

By JULANNE HOHBACH

News & Public Opinion Reporter

389 The semi-autobiographical Neil Simon comedy *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* closes out the Otterbein College summer theater season beginning next week.

The play takes the audience back to the golden age of television, when Simon was a writer on Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*, along with Mel Brooks and others. Simon chronicles the travails of the writers' room, complete with an oddball group of writers.

Laughter on the 23rd Floor runs Aug. 6-10 and 12-16 in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St.

"They have to act goofy to do the serious business of comedy writing."

—Dennis Romer
director

Equity guest actor Phil Kilbourne returns to Otterbein to star as Max Prince, the star of the fictional show that is the centerpiece of *Laughter*. Kilbourne played Polonius in Otterbein's production of *Hamlet* and directed *The Miser* last year. Eight other actors round out the cast.

The play details the end of the show as NBC threatens to cut the show length, budget and even a writer.

Director Dennis Romer said the play appealed to him partly because of the characters, all of whom are in their late 20s and early 30s, which is perfect for a college production. But the appeal also involved the era of television involved, in this case 1953.

"I was always fascinated with that period in television history," Romer said.

The hijinx of the writers and pressure of live television are all part of the fun.

"Mostly, the challenge lies in 'Can we believably recreate the feeling of people being in a writing room,'" Romer said.

"They have to act goofy to do the serious business

of comedy writing."

Acting goofy happens here through dart boards and other diversions, as well as one character who dresses wildly in an attempt to get laughs out of the show's star.

Romer said despite the true-to-life subject matter, *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* is a typical Simon comedy that will not disappoint audiences.

D. Glen Vanderbilt Jr.,

theater professor at Ohio Wesleyan University, is the scenic designer. Marcia Hain is the costume designer.

Performances begin at 7:30 p.m. Aug. 6 and 16, 8 p.m. Aug. 7, 9, 12-15 and 2 p.m. Aug. 10 and 16.

Tickets are \$14 for Sunday and Wednesday shows, \$15 for Thursday and Friday shows and \$16 for Saturday and opening night.

The box office is open 12-8:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday and one hour prior to performances Sunday. The box office will be closed July 20, 27 and Aug. 10. Patrons may call the box office at 823-1109.

STAGE NOTES

Actor relishes role in Otterbein's 'Laughter'

by Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

Phil Kilbourne is having fun punch-lining holes through the wall at Otterbein Summer Theatre.

Kilbourne isn't violating any Otterbein rules of decorum; such mischievous behavior is required by his pivotal role in *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, Neil Simon's semiautobiographical comedy about gag writers writing the punch lines for a 1950s TV variety show.

"These guys are almost aggressively funny," Kilbourne said.

"They live and breathe comedy. They top each other through insult, aggression or general affection."

Kilbourne, an Equity actor and director who will stage Otterbein's *Moon Over Buffalo* this fall, plays the Sid Caesar-inspired role of Max Prince in *Laughter*.

"Max is insane. He's basically Sid Caesar — a man driven by self-hatred, anger at the world, a desire to be loved and to entertain. What comes out of that is a fierce comic genius," Kilbourne said.

"I thought it was fairly fictionalized, but Sid Caesar did take tranquilizers and scotch every night, he did punch a hole in the wall, and they did throw shoes out the window.

"He is manic, but the soul of the guy is sorrow."

Simon, who wrote for Caesar in the early 1950s before turning to playwriting, based his thinly disguised *Laughter* characters on "the giants of comedy-writing," Kilbourne said. Among them: Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, Larry Gelbart (*Tootsie*, *M*A*S*H*), Simon and his brother, Danny Simon.

"They all got their start writing skits and sketches for Sid Caesar's *Caesar's Hour*," Kilbourne said.

Kilbourne moved to St. Paul, Minn., last year because his wife leads Minnesota's growing Theatre at Work troupe. He last appeared in Columbus as Polonius in Otterbein's acclaimed 20th-century update of *Hamlet* and as the title

character in Actors' Theatre's *Titus Andronicus*.

Laughter will be performed at 8 tonight through Saturday and 2 and 7:30 p.m. Sunday at the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. For tickets, call 614-823-1109.

FAMILY APPEAL

Contemporary American Theatre Company has launched a family program.

Each of its 1998-99 productions (except *A Tuna Christmas*) will designate one performance for a "family and fun gathering."

The first family event will be held 6-8 p.m. Aug. 21 in conjunction with *Ten Minute Alibi*, Anthony Armstrong's art deco-era murder mystery.

Families and students who like to socialize and learn about theater may attend a preshow dinner at the Westin Hotel and a discussion with James Bailey, an English professor at Otterbein College.

Tickets cost \$20, including dinner and performance. Call 614-461-1382.

Uneven cast can't wreck witty comedy

By DENNIS THOMPSON

Suburban News Theater Critic

Otterbein Summer Theatre closes its season with a Neil Simon comedy that is successful because of its wit and its star.

Laughter on the 23rd Floor is Simon harkening back to his days as a comedy writer in the '50s for Sid Caesar's *Show of Shows*. It is also reminiscent of early Simon plays that are deluges of one-liners.

The student cast makes up the eccentric group that writes for Max Prince, the star of the television show.

Guest Equity Actor Phil Kilbourne gives a tour de force performance as Prince. His timing is impeccable, and his physicality of the worn yet vibrant comedian is wonderful.

Unfortunately his performance also highlights the disparity between him and the rest of the cast.

For the second time this summer (*Mousetrap* being the other example), Otterbein student actors are trying too hard to be eccentric.

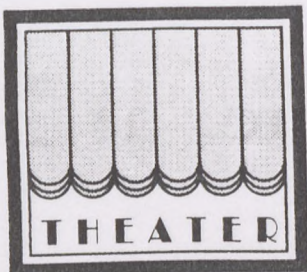
The play is funny, no doubt. But most of the laughter comes from the dialogue, not its delivery.

It is never believable that this is a wild and crazy collection of talented New York eccentrics. Rather it seems like what it is, a group of Midwestern college actors giving a solid if unremarkable presentation of witty material.

There is talent here. Jesse Wilson's portrayal of the Russian, Val, contrasted with his earlier roles, shows the actor has range. Marc Donmoyer is playfully energetic as Brian.

Robin Borovic as Helen has little to do for the bulk of the play but has a nice frivolous moment at the end.

Josh Gilliam is meant to be more subdued than the others as Lucas, the newcomer to the group and nar-



REVIEW

rator of the piece. But he is too bland and never establishes a significant presence.

Ben Stewart plays Milt exactly as he played his character in the Otterbein-CATCO co-production of *Moonchildren* earlier this year. He tries too hard to be glib and comes off as obnoxious and unlikable.

Ben Hauck is Ira, a character not seen often as he is habitually late. In the time he is there, we get little sense of why he would be missed were he not there at all.

Brent Tomer and Lisa Moses are solid as Kenny and Carol but bring nothing of note to their roles.

I'm sounding harsher than I mean to be as this is an entertaining production. Director Dennis Romer knows the humor here and is particularly adept at managing the physical comedy.

But this would also be funny if it were just reader's theater. The script is a gas all by itself, and Kilbourne turns out to be the main plus.

Otterbein Summer Theatre's Laughter on the 23rd Floor continues at 8 p.m. today through Saturday and at 2 and 7:30 p.m. Sunday through—Aug. 16 at the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St. in Westerville. Tickets are \$14 Wednesday and Sunday, \$15 Thursday and Friday and \$16 Saturday. For more information call 823-1109.

THEATER REVIEW

'Laughter,' pain at Otterbein

By Scott Phillips
For The Dispatch

Dying is easy, a famous tragedian once said, but comedy is hard.

Neil Simon, famous comedian, almost certainly would agree. Indeed, as his shtick-ridden and thoroughly sidesplitting *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* suggests, the comic's perpetual smile often masks pain and neuroses.

Not that *Laughter*, which opened Thursday night as the final offering from Otterbein Summer Theatre, wallows in any sad-clown-style pathos. The play, one of Simon's most recent Broadway hits, is a semiautobiographical recollection of the playwright's early career as a television writer for *Your Show of Shows*, Sid Caesar's critically acclaimed comedy program from the 1950s.

Simon was a comedy writer with Caesar's now legendary group of gag-meisters, which included Mel Brooks, Woody Allen and Carl Reiner.

Like Caesar, *Laughter's* Max Prince (Equity actor Phil Kilbourne) presides over a weekly sketch-comedy and variety show. And like Caesar was reported to have been, Prince is a paranoid, often hostile, manically comic genius.

Prince's stable of writers (the play is set entirely in their dingy, 23rd-

Laughter on the 23rd Floor, Otterbein Summer Theatre's student production of Neil Simon's comedy. Directed by Dennis Romer.

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|------------------|----------------|
| Max Prince..... | Phil Kilbourne |
| Val..... | Jesse Wilson |
| Brian..... | Marc Donmoyer |
| Ira Stone..... | Ben Hauck |
| Milt Fields..... | Ben Stewart |

Laugh till it hurts.

Being performed at 8 tonight and 2 p.m. Sunday - and Aug. 12-16 - at the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

Tickets cost \$14-16. Call 614-823-1109.

floor office, a setting ably designed by D. Glen Vanderbilt Jr) is a collection of oddball eccentrics, each of whom harbors a special neurosis.

Head writer Val (Jesse Wilson), a Russian refugee from Stalinism, obsesses about the Communists, while the pregnant Carol (Lisa Moses) vents her spleen over the fascist excesses of the Red Scare.

They are joined by Milt (Ben Stewart), a self-described "whole-sale" comic whose jokes make up in number what they lack in sophistication, and Brian (Marc Donmoyer), a corpulent, whiskey-swilling Irishman whose chief foil is the hypochondria-

cal Ira (Ben Hauck), wayward scion of a family of Talmudic scholars whose symptoms of heart attack and stroke turn out to be a bad case of flatulence.

Rounding out the group is Kenny (Brent Tomer), perpetual bearer of bad news, and narrator Lucas (Josh Gilliam), the youngest of the comics, clearly modeled after Simon.

Director Dennis Romer's cast is generally good, although it has difficulty sustaining Simon's banter in the early scenes. Kilbourne gives an inspired performance, a bitingly funny portrayal of a man who alternates between hostility, magnanimity and incoherence. Kilbourne's Prince masks his vulnerability behind a barrage of nonstop comic spiel.

Also noteworthy is Robin Borovic as Prince's ditsy secretary, Helen. Borovic milks her airhead shtick to the hilt. Wilson's Val is underplayed to perfection.

Short on plot, *Laughter* is something of a throwback to Simon's early days as master of the wisecrack. But it is also a primer on the psychology of comedy, of its inherently subversive nature, and of the tremendous emotional and psychological needs of its practitioners.

Comedy, Simon reminds us, is indeed very hard — and more than just a little bit frightening.