

COLUMBUS DISPATCH

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THEATER REVIEW | FATHER JOY

Whimsical work is refreshing

By Michael Grossberg

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389

Harvey would like *Father Joy*. So would Elwood P. Dowd. And the title character in *Father Joy*, the whimsical work receiving its Midwestern premiere at Otterbein Summer Theatre, also would identify with the gentle Dowd and his invisible rabbit.

Perhaps that's why Otterbein chose to stage this intriguing comedy-drama, which opened Thursday night, after launching its 40th season with *Harvey*.

Both plays employ an unlikely metaphor — and enlist the audience's imagination — to comment on what's really important in life: the "small" and often-invisible acts of kindness, love and compassion that nurture relationships.

Director Dennis Romer and a solid four-person cast find the psychological realism that anchors the flights of fantasy in this long one-act about a college student, an aspiring

► Otterbein Summer Theatre will present *Father Joy* at 8 tonight and 2 p.m. Sunday — and 8 p.m. Thursday through next Saturday — in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$15. Call 614-823-1109.

sculptor, whose love affair with an older artist unexpectedly changes her family dynamics.

The core is in Sheri Wilner's script. Dialogue often generates laughter because of the familiar interplay between family members.

As Abigail, Beth Triffon exhibits the passion of an aspiring artist and the still-shaky maturity of a young adult.

Guest Equity actor Steven Black is excellent as Paul, the environmental artist and 50-something college professor who forges a friendship and romance with Abigail.

Cassie Barker is amusing but also very real as Ruth, Abigail's mother. At Thursday's opening, she expertly delivered some of

the best punch lines, revealing the comforts and discomforts of a long marriage.

As Harry, Luke Dixon makes the most of the father's unassuming role. If Dowd and Harvey were merged into one character, it might be Harry: He's as shy as a rabbit and hides a giant heart. Even under all that makeup, his gentle spirit is never invisible.

The costumes, lighting and makeup help bring the fantasy to life, although the too frequent prop-changing pauses slow the momentum.

Certainly, fans of old-fashioned playwrighting should be willing to expose themselves to such strikingly contemporary work as *Father Joy*.

Even if it falls short of the well-made plays of yesteryear, this modestly affecting piece adds the joy of the new, quirky and fresh to an otherwise mostly predictable summer of central Ohio theatergoing.

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His daughter's the real joy

Otterbein's Beth Triffon gives the year's strongest performance

Thanks, I needed that.

It's been so long that a production really drew me in that I sat down in Otterbein's Campus Center Theatre Friday hoping to be transported.

Thanks to a fine production of a great play, I was.

Sheri Wilner's **Father Joy** is quirky, surreal, funny and touching. Director Dennis Romer's production of the comedy isn't perfect, but it's close enough to make it work.

The plot is a prickly one for a college production, being launched by an affair between a professor and a student. But the relationship that ultimately proves most important is the one between the student and her father, a man who is literally disappearing.

Abigail, a grad student whose only goal in life is to make sculpture of lasting value, drops by her parents' house one day to find her mother in a tizzy. Ruth claims her husband, Harry, is becoming increasingly translucent.

Abigail, not surprisingly, is dubious. Besides, she's too consumed by the relationship she hopes to develop with her former professor, Paul, to pay attention.

By the time she realizes her mother is right, it's too late.

Obviously, the person at the center of the tale is Abigail, whose name is defined as meaning "a father's joy." It's lucky, then, that senior Beth Triffon is on target, giving what may be the strongest performance that's been seen on a local stage this year.

Whether Abigail is reassuring the self-doubting Paul, jousting with her bossy mother or attempting to communicate with her timid father, Triffon always rings true.

Theater

RICHARD ADES



Equally on target is Luke Dixon as Harry, the father whose extreme shyness has caused him to withdraw from his former profession and, to a large extent, from his family.

The other two cast members—Cassie Barker as Ruth and Equity guest artist Steven Black as Paul—take a while to disappear into their characters, but they're 90 percent on target.

Michael Slane's set is a pleasing combination of brick and fabric. A set that allowed faster scene changes would have cut several minutes from the running time, as the action frequently switches locations, but well-chosen interlude music makes the delays painless.

Besides, a theatrical experience this good is so rare that few viewers will be eager for it to come to an end.

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389 Imagination plays major role in one-act about relationship

An absent father is one thing. In *Father Joy*, a father begins to disappear — literally.

Sheri Wilner's drama, receiving its area premiere at Otterbein Summer Theatre, concerns the changing relationship between an adult daughter and her father.

"Their relationship is primary," Wilner said from New York. "I sometimes look at it as a platonic love story, in which they discover each other and get to know who they are."

The long one-act focuses on Abigail (Beth Triffon), a college student whose relationship with

her father takes a strange turn when she becomes romantically involved with her older art professor (Steven Black).

Her father, shy and withdrawn, becomes less and less visible to his surprised wife and daughter.

"You're limited in what you can do onstage, but there are no limits to the audience's imagination," Wilner said.

To suggest the father's disappearance, the actor wears increasingly pale makeup.

"I love using the metaphor... and just suggest the disappearance. It's a way for the audience to participate. All the work gets done in the audience's imagination."

A common phrase prompted Wilner to write the play.

"Abigail is 'looking for a father figure.' That's a cliched phrase in pop psychology and one I've

heard countless times. But I started thinking about it: If she's looking for a father figure, then how would that make her father feel?

"What does it mean for a father when his daughter adopts a father figure? I imagined he would feel as if he were being replaced and was disappearing from her life."

Wilner's career got a big boost a few years ago when critics were wowed by her amusing and smart short plays (*Bake-Off* and *Labor Day*) at the Actors Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival of New American Plays. She recently completed a screenplay version of *Bake-Off* and is working to adapt the short into a full-length play.

After receiving its first full production last year at the Contemporary American Theatre Festival in Shepherdstown,

W.Va., *Father Joy* opened last week in New York for a limited run.

Otterbein booked the area premiere after Otterbein theater professor Dennis Romer and his wife, Doreen Dunn, saw the play in West Virginia.

"I hadn't seen a play like it," Romer said.

He found the disappearing father to be a powerful metaphor about changing relationships.

Writing the play helped her understand better how children put heavy burdens on their fathers to be a "father knows best," Wilner said.

She struggled for a long time with the play's title, which refers to Abigail's name.

"Originally, Abigail meant 'joy' to her father. I use a naming dictionary to name my characters so that their names have significance and support the

play's theme."

More broadly, Wilner said she wanted to explore the ephemerality of art, theater and life.

The character of the professor was based on Andy Goldsworthy (*Rivers and Tides*), an environmental artist who specializes in ephemeral materials drawn from nature.

"Everything is so fragile and precarious and might not be around tomorrow," Wilner said.

"It happens to the father and it happens to the artist, but ultimately it happens to everyone."

The run of performances continues at 8 tonight through Saturday at the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$15. Call 614-823-1109.

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