

ENTERTAINMENT

'Comedy Murders' proves delightful teaser

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

REVIEW

Few will guess identity of the "stagedoor slasher" in *The Musical Comedy Murders of 1940*. No matter. The fun is in the trying and in the slapstick performances that grace Otterbein College Theatre's zany season opener.

Broadway playwright John Bishop's farcical whodunit, which opened last night in an Ohio premiere, offers enough suspicious suspects to confuse anyone.

Yet, Otterbein's well-balanced ensemble cast makes each role a distinct delight. You may be too busy chuckling at this ham-on-wry parody of old B-movies to care whodunit — or how, why, where and what.

Set in 1940 at a secluded New York mansion, *Musical Comedy Murders* opens with the murder of Helsa Wenzel (Cheryl Gaysunas), a blonde German maid. Perhaps it's not giving away too much to note that Gaysunas has a larger role than that initial death leads one to expect.

Actually, Gaysunas has more than one role. She makes the merry most of each. Watching her prance across designer Rob Johnson's deceptively simple mansion library set — first awkwardly, then sexily or menacingly — is enough to elicit an amused smile.

Many other smiles come from

watching a second-rate company of Broadway veterans — hams, all — as they strut for a backer's audition at the blizzard-blocked mansion of Elsa Von Grossenkueten (Heather Huprich).

They think they're there to raise money for their next Broadway show. But Elsa and detective Michael Kelly (Matthew Bartholomew) have lured them to trap the "stagedoor slasher."

Someone had sent three chorus girls from *Manhattan Holiday*, the group's last Broadway flop, on a permanent holiday. Perhaps someone from within the theatrical troupe itself.

Highly affected but appropriate performances are offered up — more precisely, *sent up* — by

Huprich's broadly mannered Elsa, Joshua Wank's manic Teutonic-Irish cop, Kyle Moore's fluttering, composer and Michelle Thompson as a flouncing grand dame of the "theatuh."

As comic Eddie McCuen, Dennis Rapp is always good for a laugh, usually the one not intended by his bad-joking character. He also develops nice chemistry with Jean Childer's Nikki, a plucky chorus girl with unsuspected strengths.

Everyone has his or her moment. But Benjamin Hodges has several hilariously pretentious moments as Ken De La Maize, a hack Hollywood director turned hack Broadway director.

And Patricia Cockburn fre-

quently steals scenes as Bernice, a lush and lyricist.

What's best about this production is its well-choreographed physical humor, deftly directed by Dennis Romer. What's unfortunate is that several cast members don't speak clearly. Some nice jokes are wasted.

By the way, if you do guess the slasher, there's a prize.

Otterbein College presents *The Musical Comedy Murders of 1940* at 8 tonight and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday in Cowan Hall on campus. Performances continue at 8 p.m. Thursday through next Saturday. For tickets, call 898-1109.

Spooof gets Otterbein season off on light foot

1988

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Some play titles are playfully misleading. *The Musical Comedy Murders of 1940*, which opens Thursday at Otterbein College, isn't really a musical.

"It's a mystery-comedy with farcical elements," said director Dennis Romer. "In many ways, it's an Agatha Christie parody similar in style to *Noises Off*."

In other words, almost everything that can go wrong *does* go wrong in a New York mansion packed with secret passages, revolving bookcases, mistaken identities, Nazi spies, dead bodies.

The situation is familiar from countless 1940s Grade-B movies. A group of hopeful actors joins a Broadway producer, director, composer and lyricist at the mansion of Elsa Von Grossenkneuten to raise funds for their next musical comedy.

BUT THEY are threatened by a mysterious "stagedoor slasher." In a still-unsolved case, the slasher killed three chorus girls during the ill-

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starred run of *Manhattan Holiday*, the group's previous Broadway effort.

Musical Comedy Murders, which moved from off-Broadway to Broadway last year after it became a hit, is the first farce penned by Ohio playwright John Bishop.

A Mansfield native, Bishop established his national reputation by writing several serious dramas that found success on Broadway (*Trip Back Down*) and off-Broadway (*Winter Signs, Cabin 12, Confluence, Borderlines*).

Since *Murders*, Bishop has written the "book" or script for *Elmer Gantry*, a new musical that received such rave reviews in Washington, D.C., that it's scheduled to open on Broadway.

Ed Vaughan, artistic director of

Otterbein's theater program, chose *Musical Comedy Murders* for two reasons — and one "good omen."

"Number 1, I always look for scripts that haven't been done in the area," Vaughan said. Otterbein's production, which opens its 83rd season, will be an Ohio premiere.

"PLUS I wanted to start the season off with an upbeat, light evening of theater," he said. "Our audiences enjoy the flavor of the mystery spooof."

That's an understatement. Last summer, *Something's Afoot* was a huge hit at Otterbein. From 1982 to 1986, Otterbein Summer Theatre offered one comedy-murder a year to sold-out audiences.

The good omen was a happy coincidence. The day after Vaughan read the script at home, another copy showed up at work. Independently, Otterbein costume designer Katie Robbins had placed it on Vaughan's desk after being charmed by Bishop's zany humor.

"It's really more of a farce than a

mystery," said Romer, a visiting theater instructor at Otterbein.

Romer played the Marquis in Otterbein's illustrious *Camille* last summer and Brock in *Plenty* three summers ago. He's a familiar TV face from his frequent appearances on *As the World Turns, Search for Tomorrow, All My Children, Hotel, Dynasty, Mike Hammer* and more than 50 national ads.

ODDS ARE Romer's flair for farce will be visible onstage in Bishop's lighthearted whodunit.

"*Comedy Murders* has stock characters and melodramatic moments, so we want to exaggerate them," he said. "In most cases, farce needs to be accentuated with broader strokes, although it still has to be based in reality."

Romer's theatrical career is also based in reality. For now, he seems content to remain offstage directing shows and teaching theater classes.

"I'm a professional actor and always will be," Romer said. "But I'm also a realist. This is a tough business — and a lot of fun."



Dispatch photo

Joshua Wank and Cheryl Gay-sunas in *1940*