

'Antigravity' is full of characters we already know

If the reaction of Friday night's audience is typical, Bill Corbett's *Antigravity* is pretty successful. Or it would be, if the author's main goal were to get laughs.

Since he apparently wrote the new play out of a millennium-fueled desire to wax philosophical, Corbett needs to consider a rewrite. A competent cast can't disguise the fact that most of the characters are too thin and stereotypical to provoke deep thoughts. (Personally, I thought they were also too thin and stereotypical to provoke laughs, but maybe that's just me.)

The action gets under way as a woman named Wendy and a neighbor are watching a TV newscast about damage caused by a recent storm. The scenes of destruction simultaneously fascinate and terrify Wendy, who believes the world and the millennium are in a race to see which will end first.

Soon brother Peter arrives at the upstate New York home, having driven in from the big city along with several friends who think they're there to party. Peter didn't bother to tell them they're actually needed to help Wendy repair the home's storm damage.

As the assorted characters work and play their way through the following weekend, several reveal themselves to be all too familiar. How many of these do you recognize from your favorite TV situation

Theater

RICHARD ADES



comedy or soap opera?

- Neighbor Roy (J.B. Reidenbaugh), the oafish blue collar type.

- Cameron (Jesse Wilson), the snobish milquetoast.

- Eve (Amber Mellott), his unfaithful manhunter of a wife.

- Suzanne (Robin Borovic), the female doormat.

- Peter (Jared Jensen), her oblivious boss.

- Melina (Nikki Hersh), the New Age ditz.

Corbett's crowded stage does include a trio of characters who don't fall into easy stereotypes, but one of them is underdeveloped. Music producer Brian (Randy Goetz) comes across mainly as the latest object of Eve's desire.

Finally, then, we're left with only two characters complex enough to serve as something besides plot devices: Wendy and Gerald, a mysterious stranger who shows up at her house just in time to help organize the weekend's chores. Corbett tries to load most of the philosophical meat of the play on their shoulders, but the weight is simply more than they can bear.

Wendy would serve as a symbol of the thousands who fear the turning of the millennial odometer, except that Corbett blames her paranoia on a chemical imbalance. He also forces her to undergo a transformation so unlikely that actor



More like a soap opera: Jared Jensen and Kelly Reeves in *Antigravity*

Kelly Reeves is unable to incorporate it into a consistent portrayal. (Reeves is good before the big change, though.)

Otterbein senior Damon Decker is more successful as Gerald, giving the stranger a halting speech pattern that suggests a man who is continually inventing himself. It's not Decker's fault that Gerald seems less interesting after his

presence is finally explained.

Just what is the philosophical wisdom Corbett is trying to relay? It has something to do with being willing to let go of what seems safe and familiar, an appropriate sentiment for the end of the millennium.

What a shame that Corbett didn't take his own advice rather than relying so heavily on characters we've all seen before.

INFO:

Otterbein College Theatre will present *Antigravity* at 8 p.m. today through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Running time: 2 hours, 10 minutes (including intermission). Tickets are \$11-\$12. 823-1109 (1 to 4:30 p.m. weekdays).

Telling stories again, playwright stays afloat with 'Antigravity'

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Anything is imaginable in the fun house of Bill Corbett, from anti-gravity to the notion of captive robots making wisecracks at B-movies.

His gift of gab has kept his writing career flying high, with *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* on television and plays on stages around the country.

"My humor ranges from the jokey to the absurd," Corbett said. "I love wordplay and the ability to simulate a realistic conversation onstage."

During the past four years, he said, he wrote about 50 episodes of *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*. He also provided the voice of Crow, the "spindly gold" robot.

"I tend to like the older, black-and-white movies more than the recent color ones," he said from Minneapolis, "because they have more room for social commentary."

B-movies such as *Jack Frost* and *I Was a Teen-age Werewolf* rank among his favorites because they inspired more inventive gags and droll commentary.

The last episode of the Comedy Central series, based in Minneapolis, was shot in

mid-April, freeing Corbett to concentrate full time on playwriting.

"It was a good job," he said, "but I missed the narrative part of the writing because *MST3K* was a joke-telling show.

"That's why I was hungry to take the Otterbein commission. I wanted to tell a story again."

For its sixth annual season-ending new play, Otterbein College Theatre asked Corbett to write *Antigravity*.

"It is a millennial play," he said, "with one character acutely aware of the calendar date."

Set during Memorial Day weekend, *Antigravity* focuses on a brother and sister, trying to repair their home after a storm, and their friends.

"The sister, who has a slight history of mental illness, has a dream that the world will end and thinks all the laws of physics will go ka-blooeey."

She views anti-gravity as "a way to transcend the heaviness of the world."

Through his metaphoric title and millennial setting, Corbett hopes to highlight

■ Otterbein College Theatre will present *Antigravity* at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday and June 3-6 in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$11 and \$12. For more information, call 614-823-1109.

**"My humor ranges
from the jokey to
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BILL CORBETT**

several themes — including "hope vs. despair" and "lightness vs. heaviness."

"In some ways, your hope and despair are a function of your expectations and open-mindedness," he said. "The characters don't know what to do with themselves when their agendas crash or get redirected. In the end, the

play suggests that you have to keep light on your feet and generate the light yourself. External circumstances may be what they are, but it's up to you to maintain a flexibility in life."

Corbett, 38, has written about a dozen plays — including *The Big Slam*, *Cash Karma*, *Hate Mail*, *Manifesto* and

Motorcade — produced in Canada and Japan, and at regional theaters in Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Minneapolis and Seattle.

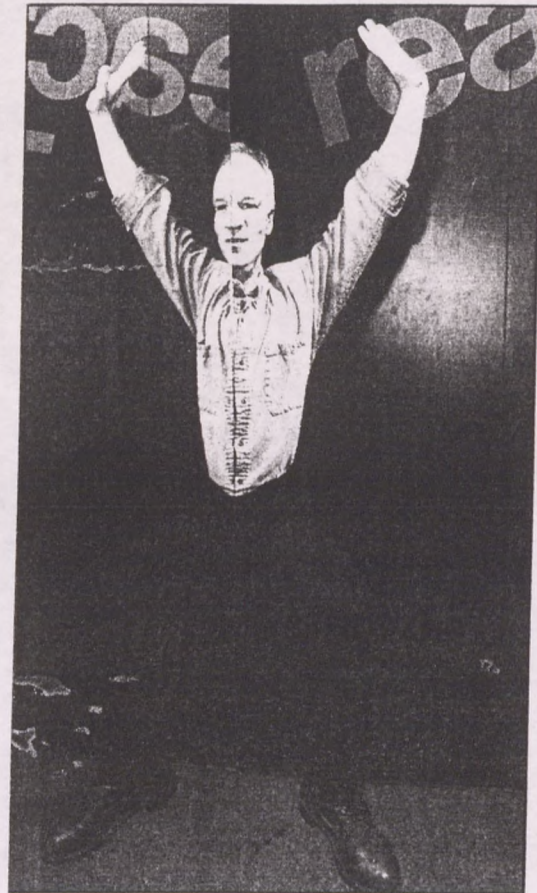
In 1990, his *Down the Pike* won the National One-Act Play Contest at Actors Theatre of Louisville, Ky.

The New York native, who studied playwriting and screenwriting at the Yale School of Drama, is a core member of the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis.

In Minnesota, he has taught theater at Carleton College in Northfield, Hamline University in St. Paul, the University of Minnesota and the Young Playwrights Summer Conference in Minneapolis.

"Even if *Antigravity* goes no further, it's been a great experience at Otterbein," Corbett said during a recent visit to Columbus, where he plans to return for opening night. "With the high level of professionalism and talent of the students, and the intensity of the training, it's more like a graduate, conservatory training program than most undergraduate theater programs I've seen."

RIGHT: Bill Corbett, once a writer for *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*, plays around at Ohio's Center of Science and Industry to illustrate the mood of his new play, *Antigravity*.



Alysia Peyton / Dispatch

TODAY ON THE TOWN

Antigravity. Otterbein College, 8 p.m., Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets: \$11 and \$12. Call 614-823-1109.

The Bodeans, after the Columbus Crew game at 7:30 p.m., Columbus Crew Stadium, state fairgrounds. Tickets: \$10-\$17, including the game, at Ticketmaster outlets (614-431-3600) and the stadium. Call 614-221-2739.

Colin John Band, 9:30 p.m., Thirsty Ear Tavern, 1200 W. 3rd Ave. Admission: \$3. Call 614-299-4987.

Dealer's Choice, Contemporary American Theatre Company, 8 p.m., Riffe Center's Studio One Theatre, 77 S. High St. Tickets: \$20-\$26. Call 614-461-0010.

Pat Dull and His Media Whores, with **Watershed** and **Pop Quiz**, doors open at 9 p.m., Bernie's Bagels/the Distillery, 1896 N. High St. Admission: \$2-\$5. Call 614-291-4127.

Hookahville, with **Ekoostik Hookah**, the **Jazz Mandolin Project** and **Calobo**, 3 p.m., Buckeye Lake Music Center, off I-70 about 30 miles east of Columbus. Tickets: \$35, including parking and camping, at Ticketmaster outlets (614-431-3600).

The Lady Who Couldn't Cry. Women at Play, 8 p.m., Leo Yassenoff Jewish Community Center, 1125 College Ave. Tickets: \$8 and \$15. Call 614-457-6580.

Murder at Raccoon Lodge. Cloak & Dagger Dinner Theatre, 8 p.m., Morse Banquet & Conference Center, 1048 Morse Rd. Tickets: \$29.95, including dinner. Call 614-523-9347.

K.K. Null, doors open at 8 p.m., MadLab Theatre, 105 N. Grant Ave. Admission: \$6.66. Call 614-470-2333.

Rhythm & Food Festival, 11 a.m.-11 p.m., Bicentennial Park, along the Downtown riverfront. Free. Call 614-645-7995.

Shadowbox's Best of '98 — 'box on fire. Shadowbox Cabaret, 8 p.m., Riffe Center's Studio Two Theatre, 77 S. High St. Tickets: \$10 and \$20. Call 614-265-7625.

Twistin' Tarantulas, with **Cheatin' Dogs**, doors open at 8 p.m., Chelsie's, 980 N. High St. Tickets: \$5. Call 614-297-1682.

Humor helps in developing timely drama of 'Antigravity'

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

How easy and shortsighted it is to project fears onto the *Zeitgeist*.

Does life seem hopeless and change too difficult? Blame the approaching millennium.

Such trading on fears adds a trendy anxiety, comical foolishness and menace to *Antigravity*, the sixth annual commissioned play for Otterbein College Theatre.

Yet the title, while resonant, promises more metaphoric weight than playwright Bill Corbett, a former writer for *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*, delivers.

As the second "100-year" storm in a month terrorizes upstate New York and other disasters are reported on television, nine 20-something characters wrestle at a house party with the unbearable lightness of being young adults.

Corbett has a quirky sense of humor and a flair for hip dialogue, which is punctuated by realistic profanity.

The laughs, in fact, save much of the poorly paced and confusing first act, in which a series of seeming strangers invade the home of a young woman.

Wendy (Kelly Reeves), with a chemical imbalance and a history of mental troubles, is obsessed with portents of disaster. Initially a bundle of raw nerves, she is almost laughable in her hyper-emotionalism.

Then, in the second act, Reeves eloquently reveals the roots of Wendy's wounds and her buried capacity for self-renewal.

As Gerald, the only stranger who proves to be a stranger, Damon Decker matches Reeves in initial hyperactivity, passion and ultimately grounded humanity.

As Cameron, a conductor, Jesse Wilson navigates a strong dramatic arc from stiffness to resilience. As Peter, Wendy's cocky brother, Jared Jensen adds welcome energy and a strong personality.

Theater review

Antigravity, Otterbein College Theatre's student production of Bill Corbett's comedy. Directed by John Stefano.

Wendy	Kelly Reeves
Roy	J.B. Reidenbaugh
Gerald	Damon Decker
Eve	Amber Mellott
Cameron	Jesse Wilson
Brian	Randy Goetz
Melina	Nikki Hersh
Peter	Jared Jensen

The unbearable lightness of youth

Being presented at 8 tonight and 2 p.m. Sunday — and Thursday through June 6 — in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

Tickets cost \$11 and \$12. Call 614-823-1109.

Other actors are hamstrung by less-developed characters, although Amber Mellott as seductive Eve and Randy Goetz as laid-back Brian find ample comedy in their roles — especially together.

At first, *Antigravity* comes off as too much of a sitcom (like an episode of *Friends* in which the characters meet again after a long time) — with a comfy living-room set designed by Stephanie Gerckens.

Eventually, however, the cast finds its footing under director John Stefano.

Despite the likely benefits of another rewrite, *Antigravity* finally grounds and liberates its characters enough to begin to approach the apparent goal: the delicate impressionism of a Chekhovian portrait concerning a generation on the cusp of change.

Curtain Call

Re:plays

Anti-quality

OTTERBEIN PLAY STRUGGLES WITH POOR SCRIPT

by Doug Hoehn

Each spring for six consecutive years, Otterbein College has commissioned new plays by budding American writers. This very important venture has produced some outstanding work: *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Picasso Does My Maps* and *Marcus is Walking*. Even without this impressive 50 percent hit rate, the project should continue as a necessary gamble for an institution committed to invigorating regional theater life.

The current play, *Antigravity*, might yet be workshopped into a cohesive and convincing entity. For now, Bill Corbett's comedy is a sad hodgepodge of cardboard characters and inane dialogue. The glimmers of compassion and the extremely slim humor are poor compensation for a lack of authenticity.

The play begins with a forced premise: a group of people are thrown together in a country house so they can have a variety of (yawn) interactions. There are very few consistent character patterns; clever words and phrases fly



From Otterbein's *Antigravity*

out of any mouth that the playwright has on stage at the time. For example, a rough-and-tumble town boy, potentially very funny, occasionally drops four



and five syllable words. This verbosity might play if the character is trying to impress the others, but we draw no such conclusion from the character's behavior.

Corbett gives us an interesting gimmick with a character who has crashed the party and is unknown to all the others, but that person is unwrapped too soon. As

your credentials. Then, walk away from theater for 10 years. Spend three years in any branch of the armed forces. Work three years in a service industry, but not near a college campus. Then spend four years employed in a white collar office environment, preferably in the private sector.

In short, stay away from artists, intellectuals and scholars, oh my. Work with those practical idiots who make life really happen. Pick up their rhythms, their hollowiness, their vitality. Then, buy a word processor and start writing plays.

BENNETT TURF

Meanwhile, down at the Jewish Community Center, the process-oriented company Women at Play, driven by one exceptional performer, presents the original musical fable *The Lady Who Couldn't Cry*. This ensemble-created show is a stylized depiction of theater behind the scenes and of the family life of theater people, especially as lived through the conflicts of a stressed-out casting director and her actress daughter.

Most of the difficulties in the performance are related to the music. With inadequate time to adjust to the acoustics of this space, the singers have serious trouble with volume and projection. This setback is not helped by some singers' lack of vocal training. At the same time that the performance needs better singing, the text needs more songs. The lyrics of composer Daniel Rogers are as amusing as the music is agreeable, and the show would have more momentum as an operetta, with only a fragment of this spoken dialogue.

For example, the first number of the play, a macho man audition bit as a singing Hamlet, should set the tone for the entire play. What Rogers has written is funny but too short by half, and repetitive. And the actor performing the piece has great physical ability but needs vocal coaching. The audience senses that the group takes a good idea over the first threshold and then drops it for a new idea.

Local actress Amy Bennett, playing the casting director, is a Simon of Cyrene who carries the show through the rough steps of its Golgotha. Bennett is the consummate professional, infusing life into dialogue with less experienced actors and taking each solo sequence with great attention to physicalization and units of action. Bennett's puzzled facial expressions alone are priceless.

Director Katherine Burkman and choreographer Alice Mooney have staged some enjoyable fantasy sequences, especially a dance bit in which a dazed and hesitant Bennett is dragged into the infallible world of modern medical examinations. There is also a visually pleasing fly-fishing scene in which two actors with a sheet of fabric create a river. The skeletal scenery by Kaizaad Navroze Kotwal effectively serves the expressionistic style of the production.

Bennett's co-stars may lack her concentration, but they do not leave us

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Uncensored Visions



photo by Greg Gorman © La Eyeworks face: Simon Rex

IMAGE
OPTICAL

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l.a. Eyeworks
TRUNK SHOW
Sat. June 5 1999
noon-10:00pm

ADVICE FOR NEW PLAYWRIGHTS

While struggling through the new play at Otterbein, I made a hastily scribbled note that bears some thought. "People under age 35 have no business writing plays." That is not quite true, because experience level is not intrinsically connected to age. But here is a practical guide to playwrights who want to depict life with some semblance of reality.

Yes, complete the degree, and then the advanced degree. Study with the best academic minds you can find, and work in every aspect of theater. Get