

## THEATER REVIEW | COMPANY

# Young cast sparkles in Otterbein show

By Michael Grossberg  
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Central Ohio's fall theater season is off to a good start with several strong musicals.

The latest and best: Otterbein College's *Company*, which opened last night in Cowan Hall's Fritsche Theatre.

With crowd-pleasing works at Red Herring Theatre Ensemble (*Ain't Misbehavin'*) and Shadow-box Cabaret (*The Rocky Horror Show*), *Company* is in good company. But any show with a Stephen Sondheim score has much richer possibilities for sophisticated melody, witty rhyme, comedy and drama.

Smart and stylish but never out of touch with its passion and angst about the pitfalls of marriage and fears of romantic commitment, Otterbein's production of the 1971 Tony winner for best musical occasionally tops its previous Sondheim revivals.

No other area theater does Sondheim musicals better than Otterbein, partly because the college draws upon the manifold talents of its Theater and Dance plus Music departments.

► Otterbein College Theatre will present *Company* at 8 tonight and Saturday night, and 2 p.m. Sunday — and 8 p.m. Oct. 12-14 — in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$20. Call 614-823-1109.

Director Dennis Romer and music director Lori Kay Harvey weave the disparate personalities of George Furth's rueful book and the complex melodies of Sondheim's gorgeous score into a tapestry of temptation, flirtation, infatuation and reconsideration.

At Wednesday's preview, Drew Aber sang valiantly as Bobby while filling in the gaps of an unusually passive leading role. He found the idealistic yearning, ambivalence and wary skepticism in the 35-year-old New York bachelor who hesitates to marry partly because he sees the downside of his friends' marriages.

Well-paired actor-singers sketch the neuroses of the five married couples who consider Bobby their best friend.

As anxious Amy and loyal Paul, Elizabeth Shivener and Erik Christensen stand out on

*Getting Married Today*, the funniest and fastest song ever written about wedding jitters.

Cassie Barker and Steve Czarnicki click amusingly as Sarah and Harry, whose mock-karate fighting fails to resolve prickly conflicts over their food and alcohol cravings. Their dysfunctional family scene aptly illustrates *The Little Things You Do Together*, wryly sung by Meg Ward.

Also making a vivid impression are David Caamano and Caitlin Morris as a seemingly happy couple on the verge of change; Claire Longest and Matt Johnson as an odd couple wrestling with freedom and responsibility; and Kari Ringer, Selina Verastigui and Sarah Hiance as Bobby's varied but similarly frustrated girlfriends.

College-age actors can seem immature in older roles, but Otterbein's top-notch 14-member cast proves convincing.

The partial exception is Ward as Joanne, a pivotal older role that could benefit from a guest Equity actress. Ward sings and acts with witchy humor as the unhappy wife of tolerant Larry (Lucas Dixon), but her rendition

of *The Ladies Who Lunch* lacks the ravaged authority of age.

The musical staging by Stella Hiatt Kane is seductive, often amusing and occasionally dazzling, from Verastigui's jazz-ballet solo on *Tick Tock* to the razzmatazz of the entire cast brandishing synchronized canes for comical shtick on *Side by Side by Side*.

The 13-member pit orchestra, conducted by Craig Johnson, brings out the colorful textures of *Another Hundred People* (a breathless lament by Ringer's Marta), *Being Alive* (Aber's sonorous showstopper), *Sorry-Grateful* (achingly harmonized by three husbands), *You Could Drive a Person Crazy* (whimsically shared by the girlfriends) and the jaunty title song.

*Company* is receiving extra attention this month among theater fans, with the acclaimed Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park's production beginning Broadway previews. Otterbein's creditable effort is worth seeing, if only as a cautionary example, by anyone who has ever raced into a marriage or run from commitment.

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# Relationships, not special effects, at center of Sondheim musical

By DENNIS THOMPSON

Suburban News Theater Critic

Otterbein College Theatre has long had a spring musical, but this year it's added a fall musical.

The troupe is opening its 100th season with *Company*, the Stephen Sondheim and George Furth musical that was the beginning of a series of collaborations between Sondheim and Broadway director Harold Prince.

The musical opened in 1970, only 36 years ago. But the fact that this, a work with a small, 14-person cast and a simple set, received the 1971 Tony for best musical, without the million-dollar pyrotechnics of today, makes it seem like a long time ago.

So, too, does its theme of relationships, as opposed to the grander-scale stories presented today. I'm not complaining; I actually miss those days when a hit didn't have to outspend and out-special-effect the previous hit.

The only references to its time period are an occasional acknowledgement of societal turmoil, the labeling of people as "square" and a bong. The only noticeable updating is a reference to Prozac.

*Company* looks at life and marriage, showing us five married couples whom we see primarily in relationship to their single friend, Robert. The men envy his single status but also want to fix him up. The women worry about him, and they, too, want to fix him up.

Robert, however, doesn't seem to know what he wants.

He seems to value his women friends more than their husbands do. But when one seems to become available, he backs off.

We see him dating three women. At one point, he begs one to stay, and when she does, he is terrified.

He wonders why he's not married, but we see why more

than he can.

This is a smooth musical, with interesting characters and lyrics, fluidly directed by Dennis Romer. D. Glen Vanderbilt's simple, yet clever, set has a modern, steel-like backdrop of risers behind furniture that slides in and out.

The cast members are all strong singers, and when they sing together, the effect is powerful.

It's a good cast, with several standout moments.

Meg Ward commands the stage in each of her scenes as the brazen Joanne, who is not afraid to share her opinions. She shines in the most recognizable song from this show, *Ladies Who Lunch*.

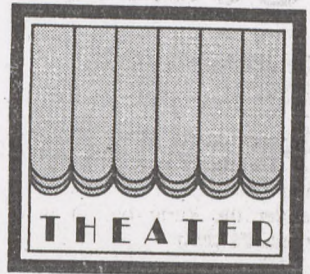
Elizabeth Shivener is delightful as Amy in the scene when she is frantically talking herself out of getting married.

Kari Ringer is riveting as Marta in the song *Another Hundred People*.

There's nothing wrong with most of the performances — there is much vitality here. But something seems out of sync.

Part of the problem is the writing. Each couple has a scene, but usually only one. We barely know these people enough to care about them.

The play revolves around the character of Robert, and each character seems to love him to death. As written, it's a bit overdone — they seem to care more about him than



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they do about themselves or their spouses.

This puts the onus on the actor playing Robert to be a strong, charismatic linchpin. While Drew Aber is a solid actor and a strong singer, he conveys a rather bland personality and often seems stiff here.

We don't sense a chemistry between Robert and the other characters, and several seem to possess a more winning personality than the one they say he has.

Still, this is a strong evening of music with interesting character takes, and a smooth production of a rarely seen work.

Otterbein College Theatre's *Company* continues at 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday in the Fritzsche Theatre of Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Tickets are \$20. For reservations call 614-823-1109.



# Spirited actors complement plays about spirits

A "ghost light" is a bulb that theater folks leave burning all night to keep people from falling off the stage. In the process, it's also supposed to keep the theater's ghosts away.

## Theater

RICHARD ADES



That's the explanation given in **Ghost Light: The Shorts Festival 2006**. But apparently the titled light fulfills only half its duties, because there are spirits aplenty in CATCO's latest collection of new one-act plays.

That's appropriate, given that the works are set in the Hartman, a once-prominent Columbus theater that opened in 1911 and was torn down in 1971.

What's even better is that the spirits and other characters earn laughs aplenty. Of the eight plays, five are gems or near-gems, while one gets by on audacity and nostalgia. As for the other two, director Jonathan Putnam makes sure that spirited performances compensate for the scripts' lack of polish.

Meanwhile, Edith Dinger Wadkins's set, with half-completed (or half-demolished?) walls, does a good job of standing in for the Hartman.

Here are the plays, in the order they're presented:

- *Snake Oil* by Wendy MacLeod

Ed Vaughan is part salesman, part evangelist as Dr. Samuel B. Hartman, who pulls out all the stops to sell the elixir that made him rich enough to build the Hartman.



**A great performance of a witty script:** Ed Vaughan in *Snake Oil*, part of CATCO's Ghost Light: The Shorts Festival 2006

Vaughan gives a great performance of a witty script.

- *Two Clowns* by Scott Tobin

Chris Roche and Alex Beekman are both a scream as actors rehearsing the burial of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. When Ophelia's body bag begins moving, even though it's supposedly filled with a mannequin, the results are grisly but amusing.

- *Merely Players* by Jerry Holt

An old stagehand (Tom Holliday)

introduces a young stagehand (Christina Ritter) to the ghosts of famous "characters" who never actually appear in their respective plays. The concept seems inspired, but in practice Holt runs out of such characters after the much waited-for Godot and Harvey, the invisible rabbit. He tries to make up the shortage by turning the plot device known as *deus ex machina* into a big, farting machine.

- *The Blueballs* by Marianne Timmons

Timmons is a fine actor, but her first playwriting effort is like an extended *Saturday Night Live* skit with R-rated language. Roche and Ritter star as a young couple determined to stage a concert in the abandoned Hartman.

- *Haunted* by Eric Coble

Maya Sayre is almost pitiable as Sally, an inept actor waiting to say her one line in a play while backstage spirits remind her of past failures. Especially funny are Linda Dorff as the spirit of missed entrances and Vaughan as the spirit of mean but on-target reviews.

- *The Death Scene from Edward Albee's The Zoo Story* by Jim Vess

You can see the ending coming, sort of, but the lines and the actors are so funny that it hardly matters. Holliday is particularly droll as the actor who can't figure out why Albee would have Peter stab Jerry (Malcolm Callan) just to protect a park bench.

- *Us Chickens* by Mary Tensing

Tensing's clever conceit is that the spirits of deceased actors can still remain gainfully employed by playing fictitious spirits. The ending is weak, but the rest is a gas.

- *Perpetual Present Tense* by Peter Pauze

Three time periods—representing the Hartman's beginning, middle and end—collide in a piece that celebrates theater's potential while admitting that 90 percent of it just might be crap.

Those keeping score will note that CATCO's latest *Shorts Festival* has a success rate that's considerably higher than past fests.

## Great music, but what's the point?

Just in case you don't want to spend the first half of *Company* wondering what

the point is, here it is: Being in a relationship is difficult, messy and scary, but it's a lot better than the alternative.

Somehow that comes across only belatedly in Otterbein's production. Since Stephen Sondheim and George Furth's 1970 work won the Tony Award for best musical, that probably means Otterbein hasn't gotten the show quite right.

Director Dennis Romer wrings believable performances out of most of his cast, but their characters don't arouse our interest. Maybe it's because they all seem too happy.

That's particularly a problem with Robert, the bachelor at the center of the action.

His friends, consisting of five couples who are either married or about to be married, spend a lot of time worrying about his lack of a romantic partner. But Robert, as played by Drew Aber, seems perfectly happy for most of the production.

And why not? He has little trouble getting himself in short-term relationships, and his friends keep him company the rest of the time.

Aber sings nicely, but his Robert doesn't earn our concern because he doesn't seem that concerned about himself.

At the same time, his friends don't seem as worried about their own relationships as they should. That undercuts the message that relationships are worth the trouble. What trouble, we have to ask?

A telling moment occurs when Peter and Susan (David Caamano and Caitlin Morris) suddenly tell Robert they're getting divorced. They've been acting so affectionate toward each other that we can't help wondering, "Why?"

A groundbreaking musical that's based on a concept—marriage and its complications—rather than a plot, *Company* is hard to get right. It's to Otterbein's credit that much of it does work, particularly in the second act and toward the end of the long first act.

Kari Ringer, as Marta, begins to add a touch of the necessary angst with her rendition of "Another Hundred People," which describes the lonely experience of being single in New York.

A more humorous brand of angst is added by Elizabeth Shivener's Amy in "Getting Married Today" (sung with Erik Christensen) and by Sarah Hiance's April in "Barcelona" (sung with Aber).

But the real turning point, angst-wise, is Meg Ward's boozy and sarcastic rendition of "The Ladies Who Lunch." Too bad it's only two tunes from the end of the show.

Otterbein's *Company* has lots of pretty songs sung by people with great voices. If you can get past the problem that you don't care a fig about those people, the music alone makes it worthwhile.

### INFO:

The Contemporary American Theatre Company will present *Ghost Light: The Shorts Festival 2006* through Oct. 29 in the Vern Riffe Center's Studio One Theatre, 77 S. High St. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays (plus Wednesday matinees at 11 a.m. with tickets for \$11). Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes (including intermission). Tickets are \$25-\$40. 469-0939.

### INFO:

Otterbein College Theatre will present *Company* at 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday at Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St. in Westerville. Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes (including intermission). Tickets are \$20. 823-1109.



# Westerville Life

## Otterbein College

# Theatre department marks 100th anniversary

By JIM FISCHER  
ThisWeek Staff Writer

They must have liked it.

There is no way of knowing for sure whether Professor Edwin Barlow Evans had any plans beyond a one-time staging of Shakespeare's "As You Like It" at Otterbein College in June 1907, but the end result has been 100 years of theatre at the college and the development of a department unique in its composition at similarly sized institutions.

Others along the way must have liked it as well, including longtime department chair Dr. Charles Dodrill, who took over from Evans' successor, John Franklin Smith, and is largely credited with advancing the department into its current form. His widow, Petie, told ThisWeek that when they arrived from Northwestern University in 1958 to take the faculty post, "We took one look at little old Westerville and said 'We're here two years.'"

Dodrill led the department into the early 1990s. Early on, it was largely with the help of Petie, technical director Fred Thayer and now-retired Dean of Students Joanne VanSant.

"We were very green," Petie Dodrill said.

VanSant had already been brought on board by Professor Smith, and continued to do all or some choreography work with the department until 1988. Her first production with Dodrill was "Oklahoma!" in 1958.

"Chuck designed the sets and I did choreography," she said, adding jokingly, "We were terrible."

"(Dodrill) started several programs and really put (the program) on the map," she said.

The program grew, as pieces such as the Guest Artist Program, Summer Theatre, the Children's Theatre program and others were added, ultimately leading to the creation of a department separate from the Department of Speech and the creation of a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree offering in the 1980s.

And still more found they liked it, including current professors and 1971 graduates Ed Vaughan and Denis Romer, who each admitted his tenure on faculty was intended to be short.

"It wonderfully started to snowball," Petie Dodrill said. "We were determined from the beginning to make it a strong program."

As currently constituted, the Department of Theatre is a professional training program within the context of a liberal arts college, according to department chair John Stefano.

## A closer look

The Otterbein College Department of Theatre boasts many notable alumni, including (but not limited to) the following:

- David Graf, '72 — Perhaps best-known as Tackleberry from the "Police Academy" movies.

- Dee Hoty, '74 — Three-time Tony Award nominee for Best Actress in a Musical, and most recently a member of the Broadway cast of "Mamma Mia."

- Rachel Harris, '90 — Numerous TV and film roles, perhaps best known alongside Kirstie Alley in Showtime's "Fat Actress."

- Sam Jaeger, '99 — Numerous film and TV roles.

- Billoah Greene, '01 — Several films, including the HBO original "Everyday People."

- Renata Wilson, '03 — Nancy in national tour of "Oliver!"

- Mandy Bruno, '04 — Currently Marina Cooper on "Guiding Light."

Design technology graduates include:

- T.J. Gerkens, '88 — award-winning lighting and Tony nominee for "Metamorphoses."

- Cheryl Warner, '00 — Production manager for Lighting Design Group for NBC remote broadcasts.

- Steve Sakowski, '03 — "Lighting Dimensions" magazine's Top 10 under 30 list. Also: playwright Carter Lewis, '73, and director/choreographer Dan Knechtges, '94.

"The kids are students first," he said, "but we run the department on the model of a regional theatre, and train the students by treating them as if they are members of a company."

"When I was a student, there was one acting class," Vaughan said. "Now there are 15."

The department typically numbers around 100 majors. Stefano estimated he sees approximately 200 students in on-campus auditions, plus another 150 in regional auditions in New York, San Francisco, Chicago and Los Angeles.

"The depth is so much greater,"



By Tim Norman/ThisWeek

(From left) Drew Aber, Claire Longest and Matt Johnson perform a scene as Robert, Jenny and David in the musical "Company" during a rehearsal at the Fritsche Theatre in Otterbein College's Cowan Hall Monday afternoon. The musical kicks off Otterbein's 100th year of theatre. It will run Oct. 5-8 and 12-14.



The cast from the 1907 production of "As You Like It" at Otterbein College.

Romer said. "We could cast each production three-deep for each role."

Not all majors are on stage, either. Both Vaughan and Romer said the design technology program has grown tremendously.

Stefano estimated that between the regular school-year season and Summer Theatre, the department presents programs to audiences num-

bering 25,000 each year, with roughly one-third coming from Westerville, one-third coming from surrounding Franklin and Delaware counties, and one-third from beyond that.

"It's a symbiotic relationship," he explained. "You want the students to be able to perform to enthusiastic and full houses, and audiences want to see really good theatre at a rea-

sonable price."

Vaughan remains moved by "those moments during a production when you have someone transcend being a student to now being an actor; when you're looking at a piece of theatre, not a piece of college theatre."

"The No. 1 thing is the students," Romer echoed. "To watch them come in as freshman and leave as seniors."

More recent program additions include the expansion of the Department of Dance, regular productions of new works, beginning with "Brothers Karamozov" in 1995, an internship program and the Senior Showcase, developed by Romer to bring Otterbein senior BFA majors to New York City to perform for casting directors and producers.

"(Professional development) was intentional from the time Dodrill and Thayer arrived," Stefano said.

"Chuck always said he had the support of the administration" Petie Dodrill said. "It's a good thing, because he made a lot of demands."

The department's home in Cowan Hall was recently renovated, reopening in 2005 as the Fritsche Theatre in Cowan Hall. The lobby was dedicated in Charles Dodrill's memory.

Otterbein College Theatre will open its 100th season with Stephen Sondheim's musical "Company," Oct. 5-8 and 12-14 in the Fritsche Theatre in Cowan Hall. Tickets are \$20. For a complete production schedule and more information, call the box office at (614) 823-1209.

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Adopt-a-School