

## Quad City Times

### ***Richmond Hills' 'Arsenic' a winning concoction***

By Ruby Nancy | Wednesday, February 21, 2007

Unless it is a show written specifically for children, or sometimes a classic musical or holiday show, you do not see very many kids at a theater production these days.

Other entertainment media, it seems, are considered by many to be more appropriate for our youth.

Considering the content of an average movie or television show, however, this might be a debatable point. In the interest of general harmony, I will definitely leave that issue for another time.



Still, the chance to experience live theater alongside anyone under the age of 16 is a rare treat for me, since our 6-foot-tall baby is almost a grown man and my nieces live in Texas. What a fun night it was for me last Saturday, then, to be in the audience at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre in Geneseo, Ill. A family had brought along kids (who looked to be in elementary or middle school) to see the classic comedy "Arsenic and Old Lace," and they were having a ball.

These youngsters were on the front row, laughing as loud as any of us, and their obvious enjoyment only heightened the experience for everyone else. Of course, if the production had not been so delightful, the result could have been completely different.

This "Arsenic," though, is anything but poison.

A daffy and delightful show about a reluctant and put-upon theater critic who suffers from a pair of slightly dim aunts and a few other family crackpots, this squeaky-clean comedy makes the ridiculous into the sublime. It's great fun for all ages, and director John VanDeWoestyne should be proud of the work his actors do here.

Don Faust stars as Mortimer Brewster, the critic who hates theater and, despite his pessimistic outlook, has fallen for the perky daughter of the parson next door. Faust is funny here — very funny, in fact — and his handling of the farcical elements in this show helps put his performance over the top. VanDeWoestyne has used stage blocking that allows audience members from every angle to enjoy the wonderfully hilarious facial expressions. Faust employs in this role, and the result is truly terrific. Faust also uses a multitude of gestures and plenty of vocal inflection to create this character (and to earn big laughs), and he is enormously successful.

Jean Melillo and Wanda Deitrick play the daft and elderly sisters, Abby and Martha, and though both seemed to struggle once in a while with their lines, their hesitation could almost be read as part of their characters — allowing this to mostly work for them rather than against them. Melillo's Abby is ostensibly the sharper of the two (though with these characters, that is not much of a distinction), and their placid reactions to the mayhem around them just gets funnier as the show progresses.

Plenty of other performers in this large cast do fine work, too, including Julie Gray, whose work as Elaine, the fiancée who can't wait to get out of the parish house, is by far the best work I've ever seen done this character. Tom Morrow (as the lousy plastic surgeon, Dr. Einstein) is a crowd-pleaser with absolutely perfect line delivery, and both David Bailey and Howard Johnson are riotously funny

in their "lonely gentlemen" roles.

This ensemble show has too many other enjoyable performances — and some really great music — that space does not allow a full recounting of, but suffice it to say that this "Arsenic and Old Lace" is simply too good to miss. Make sure you get one of the few remaining seats this weekend.

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## *RiverCity Reader*

### Twisted Sisters: "Arsenic & Old Lace," at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre through February 25

WRITTEN BY MIKE SCHULZ  
WEDNESDAY, 21 FEBRUARY 2007



When the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's current production of *Arsenic & Old Lace* is really rolling, this venerated black comedy (well, *dark-gray* comedy) is absolutely delightful. The problem, though - or rather, the problem with last week's opening-night performance - is that Richmond Hill's production doesn't so much roll as lurch; despite their frequently endearing characterizations, the actors on Thursday evening had so much trouble getting their words out that the show never quite found a satisfying rhythm. The experience was like taking a vacation road trip in a vehicle that keeps threatening to stall: You've

made it to your destination, and you've had a good time along the way, but you're still a little grateful when it's over.

That's too bad, because the performers' stumbling was really my only grievance with the production. Joseph Kesselring's 1939 comedy - which concerns a pair of elderly sisters who put lonely boarders out of their presumed "misery" by poisoning their wine - is an enjoyably old-fashioned farce featuring an extensive cast of eccentrics, the sort of reliable entertainment that can still crack you up no matter how many times you've seen it. (It's *You Can't Take It with You* with a body count.)

And certainly, the sizable audience at Thursday's Richmond Hill production appeared more than happy to be there. The gags received their laughs, the comedic complications were greeted with amusingly audible "Uh oh"s (followed by more laughs), and during several scenes that take place in almost total darkness, you'd have thought the mostly senior crowd was back in grade school, telling ghost stories around a campfire; the initially subdued giggles grew and grew until they became raucous giggles.

Director John VanDeWoestyne clearly knows his material and knows his *audience*, and gets uniformly charming performances from his cast members; there isn't a single one you're eager to see leave the stage. Happily, the most *purely* charming are Jean Melillo and Wanda Deitrick as the sweetly homicidal sisters, Abby and Martha; the actresses terrifically underplay their characters' dottiness - Abby and Martha explain their morbid doings with unflappable, matter-of-fact deadpan - and the show's best, subtlest laughs come from their anticipatory glee at landing upon another potential victim. (And Deitrick's reading of the play's climactic punchline is perfection.)

This *Arsenic*, though, is filled with affable performers: Julie Gray, as the put-upon fiancée to Don Faust's acidic theatre critic; David Bailey and Howard Johnson as prospective victims; and Cal

Taylor, Mike Skiles, Bill Hudson, and Michael Miller as cops of questionable ability. Each of the show's 14 actors appeared to be having a fine time on the Richmond Hill stage, and for some, a *more-than-fine* time.

I wish, though, that they also appeared *comfortable*. But Thursday night found the actors continually tripping over their dialogue: mistaking one name for another; placing words out of grammatical sequence; responding to fellow performers' entire *sentences* before they were supposed to; delivering the wrong line, stopping, and then delivering the *right* one ... . (There were even moments when it seemed as though actors *forgot* their lines; occurrences such as these may make the performers on-stage look rattled, but they turn me, as an audience member, into a nervous wreck.)

No one's perfect, of course, and trip-ups will happen. But in *Arsenic & Old Lace*, I'd doubt if more than three minutes passed without *someone* making some sort of verbal blunder, and this quashed any possibility of momentum; every time the show was developing a rhythm, some momentary *faux pas* interrupted the flow and made the production seem under-rehearsed.

One actor, though, didn't appear the least bit off his game, and perhaps not coincidentally, he appeared to be the one the audience responded to most. (He was certainly *my* favorite.) Tom Morrow plays the slightly crazy, more-than-slightly-drunk Dr. Einstein, and he delivers his gonzo dialogue with such unabashed peculiarity that he proves utterly indispensable. But in addition to brimming with confidence, Morrow made the *audience* feel confident; he was so firmly in character that you knew the pacing wouldn't lag so long as he kept conversing, especially during his scenes with the nefarious Jonathan, played by a sensationally animated and comically menacing Kevin DeDecker. When these two villainous goons owned the stage, the show was everything you'd hope it would be: funny, mildly creepy, and thoroughly assured.

Yet for a production that runs some two-and-three-quarter hours, the duo's scenes together - and the considerable appeal of the other actors and VanDeWoestyne's staging - weren't quite enough to make up for the frequently halting presentation. Richmond Hill's *Arsenic & Old Lace* is perfectly acceptable, and sometimes a lot of fun, but sadly, the only thing that was really being killed on Thursday night was the tempo.

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## Moline Dispatch/Rock Island Argus

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### 'Arsenic and Old Lace' a creepy, yet funny, theater experience By Julie Jensen

A weird family tree grows in Brooklyn in "Arsenic and Old Lace," and the Richmond Hill Players pluck bushels of laughs from its branches.

The play is about the Brewster family in which both money and madness are hereditary. Two sweet, little old ladies find nothing odd about their insane nephew who thinks he is Teddy Roosevelt, and their charitable acts have grave consequences. They ply lonely old men with elderberry wine laced with arsenic,



strychnine and cyanide, burying them in the basement in what Nephew Teddy thinks is the Panama Canal.

John VanDeWoestyne has put this incredible sequence of events together in a way that makes the unexpected expected.

Jean Melillo is Abby Brewster, one of the aunts, and Wanda Deitrick is Martha, her sister. Both are charming. Archie Williams is Teddy Brewster, and he's really funny when he charges up the stairs thinking they are San Juan Hill, blasts his bugle and shouts, "Bully!"

Those bugle blasts in the middle of the night have acquainted the Brewsters with the cops, Officer Brophy, played by Cal Taylor, and Officer Klein, played by Mike Skiles.

Julie Gray is a delightful Elaine Harper, the love interest of Mortimer Brewster, played by Don Faust, and he does a terrific job as the theater critic who seems saner than the rest of the family. Ray Rogers is the Rev. Dr. Harper, Elaine's father, who objects to her involvement with a theater critic.

David Bailey makes a brief appearance as a lonely old man looking for a room to rent. Fortunately, Mortimer chases him out before he lifts the wine glass.

A third Brewster brother, Jonathan, lets himself into the house in the dark of night with his sidekick, Dr. Einstein, and Kevin DeDecker makes this guy really sinister. Tom Morrow is Dr. Einstein, who keeps changing Jonathan's face with plastic surgery. He speaks broken English and seems to be tethered to Jonathan somewhat unwillingly.

Bill Hudson is Office O'Hara, the cop with playwriting ambitions, and Michael Miller is Lieutenant Rooney, who tries to sort things out in this nut house. Howard Johnson is Mr. Witherspoon, director of the institution where Teddy is to be sent upon the death of his aunts.

Constant knocks on the door, lights out, and bodies in a window seat add up to a creepy but funny theater experience.

The set is elegant with period furniture and an Oriental rug, and the costumes look to be 1940s, when women wore hats and gloves when they went out.

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## **Moline Dispatch/Rock Island Argus**

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### **'Arsenic and Old Lace' star has always loved acting** **By Claudia Loucks**

GENESEO -- Wanda Deitrick caught the acting bug young and hasn't found a cure. Not that she'd want one.

"I have always loved acting," Mrs. Deitrick said. "When I was a young girl, I'd entertain my sisters by making up stories and acting them out while they did dishes. I got out of doing a lot of dishes that



way. And when I and my sister, who is just two years younger than me, had to do our farm chores, we always performed them as `someone else' so they seemed to be fun and not work.

"I participated in high school plays during my sophomore, junior and senior years, and really would have liked to pursue an acting career, but thought teaching would be a more practical career, especially through the eyes of my father," she said.

The actress, who stars in Richmond Hill's current show, "Arsenic and Old Lace," has been a part of the Richmond Hill Players theater group since moving to the community in 1975.

Mrs. Deitrick said she is "happy" to have been cast as Martha in "Arsenic and Old Lace."

"She's a fun character to do," she said. "I hope I can do it well so the audience will enjoy her even though she has a weird sense of the meaning of the word `mercy.'"

Ms. Dietrick was born in Iowa, spent her elementary school days in a one-room country school and later attended high school in Monroe, Iowa.

After high school graduation and just one year of college, Mrs. Deitrick taught in a one-room country school for four years.

"During that last year of teaching, I married my husband, Dwight Deitrick, and over the next few years, we had four children," she said.

It was just before the couple's youngest child started kindergarten that Mrs. Deitrick returned to college and graduated from Drake University in Des Moines.

Mrs. Deitrick has been part of nearly all venues of Geneseo's Richmond Hill Players, from helping back stage, to performing and directing and serving on the board.

Her first role on stage with the Richmond Hill Players was when she was cast in "Ah Wilderness" in 1976, and she was in numerous other productions after that first year.

She also has performed in plays at Black Hawk East in Kewanee and with Playcrafters in The Barn in Moline.

"Probably my most favorite roles were as Regina in `Little Foxes' at Richmond Hill, and as the mother in `Steel Magnolias' at Black Hawk East," she said. "I love drama, and I enjoyed doing the southern accents in both of those plays."

The plays under the direction of Mrs. Deitrick were "Luxury Cruise" in 1993; "Too Soon for Daisies" in 1994; "Allocating Annie" in 1995, all in The Barn at Richmond Hill, as well as "Last of the Red Hot Lovers" and "Saving Grace" at the Richmond Hill Players dinner theaters.

"Most of my inspiration and enthusiasm for the theater came from the late Clyde Walter of Geneseo, one of Richmond Hill's veteran directors," Mrs. Deitrick said. "I was in many of his shows, and I always learned from him. His death was a great loss to Richmond Hill Theater."