

BUTTERFLIES ARE FREE



by Frank McGinn

Neptune Theatre has rounded off its successful winter season with a play which I'm predicting will equal, if not surpass, their biggest winner yet. "**Butterflies are Free**" gives the Halifax audience just what it really likes: a cute, gutsy, sentimental comedy bursting with love and one-liners. And Andy McKin's production gives it to them just the way they really like it: straight. If first night crowds are anything to go by, and that's what they are there for, then I see satisfied, smiling customers and plenty of them.

Backstage they must also be smiling broadly, particularly behind the box office. In two, swift seasons John Neville has carved Neptune's operating deficit in half, and the old theatre is once again a major attraction in Halifax. Looking back, we can see that his

secret weapon was good psychology. He and his aides used a judicious amount of publicity to draw the masses into the darkened house. And, having lured them in with big names and fireworks, Neville and his cohorts demonstrated a keen sense of knowing exactly what would please. And good theatre, almost always.

I would therefore like to propose a toast to this happy union between public taste and private enterprise. Long may the playgoers get their money's worth, and long may Neptune get their money.

If I may change hats, however, I would also like to curse the unholy alliance. As the wicked witch who wasn't invited, I am wrathful because

they have dared to overlook me. They have not lately been giving me the kind of play that I like, he thundered.

It all started with **The Master Builder**. Ibsen produces the same reaction in me as a little fire did in **The Scarecrow**—he makes me want to run away screaming. And Tony Randall's pointless, meandering direction did not help. But one fright per season can happen to anybody and I tried to be brave about it. Now it is "**Butterflies are Free**" oozing the cutes and making my flesh crawl, and I have a hard time stifling my cries of horror.

What principally grinds my teeth about this little vehicle is its mushy, crackerbarrel psychology. After surviving the seventies, is it necessary that we once again sit and listen to one character tell another, as a climactic revelation, that her deep problem is a fear of becoming emotionally involved? This is not a dramatic insight, it is a cliché, sorry. The story is full of these coy excuses for truth, as all the characters come to know themselves a little bit better. And the catharsis is too efficient. I don't like to be marched briskly from dramatic high to dramatic high; I

like to have the illusion that I am following my nose, even while I am actually being led by it. "**Butterflies are Free**" works over our emotions as thoroughly as a body parlour rub down and with about as much feeling.

It is a formula Broadway comedy equally divided between sarcasm and saccharine. And some of the lines were memorable, although I can never remember them. In this kind of play the jokes are only grafted onto the action; they could be just as effective if they were recited alone.

If Leonard Gershe were a stand-up comic, instead of a playwright, I would like him slightly more than I now dislike him. He does have a fondness for the cheap shot. (Boy, remarking on his upper-bunk bed: "I'm like a hippie. I sleep high.") And he has one, long, unfair sequence where he sets up a straw man of the "new" theatre (all the actors will be naked, see) and then kicks him to pieces. But, to be charitable, it isn't his fault that he wrote it in the late sixties, jarring as it seems now, and about half his jokes are good, as independents. It is only when they are wrapped around these sticky, stagey characters and used to advance the plot that they become unforgivable.

I have no complaints about this here performance of that play. Ian Deakin seemed to move a little more blindly after he confessed his handicap

than before, but that was temporary. His physical business was generally convincing and he had the lion's share of the good lines, so everybody liked him.

As the spritely imp in the next apartment, Amanda Hancock was charming but for one thing. She was supposed to be a giddy 19-year-old, there were several lines specifically emphasizing this, and that actress is no more 19 than she is 90. She looks great, but she doesn't look like a teenager, and that handicaps her performance.

Joan Gregson was in cool, professional form as the sharp, Scarsdale matron and, in a brief, thankless role, Keith Dinicol did a lovely schmuck.

It isn't the acting at Neptune, or the lights or the sets, it is the choice of material that fries my gourd. These last two have about turned my hair white and, now that next season's line up has been announced, I just don't think I can make it, sarge. "**The Taming of the Shrew**" will be back to make more money, although this time in repertoire with "**Much Ado About Nothing**". And "**The Four Poster**" returns to haunt us. Cozy, comfortable classics seem to be the order of the day and while they may be leading Neptune into the black, they are leading me into the shadow of the valley. That fading gallop you hear is me leaving town on a fast horse.

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