

drama

'Whodunit' and 'Who-will-it be?'

Mystery and suspense will soon fill Carnival Theater's outdoor stage as Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap" springs to life — and maybe death, depending on twists of plot.

Suzanne Stassevitch, a director with previous University Theater experience, is directing the drama, which will be presented July 13, 14, 19, 20 and 21.

Stassevitch points out that the play's characters are images of real people that Agatha Christie has known. They all have their individual guilts and compulsions. In a situation of high stress and tension these "eccentricities" come to light.

"But you can't tell which eccentricities are the significant ones," says Stassevitch, referring to the crucial issue of guilt over murder.

"It's obvious now to the actors," she said, remarking that as a director she has had to make sure that the actors compensate for prior knowledge, "as if they were reading the book for the first time."

So as the play progresses, the audience will have the clues that Christie provided, but they will have the task of sorting those clues, as well.

The show evidently has a fascinating complexity. Director Stassevitch revealed that she will have a set with nine different entrances and exits — all part of a complicated house in which the mystery unfolds.

But Stassevitch was not so revealing about other things. "After all, it is a mystery," she said.

Prospective theater-goers may know, however, that both the victim and the murderer are not known to the audience.

Evidently, "The Mousetrap" is not only a whodunit but a whowillitbe too.

Portraying the assorted suspects will be Jacquie McClure, Linda Bailey, Michele Theriot, Mel Buckner, Jack Wilson, Gary Pillette, John Elliot and Paul Meier.

Tickets are priced at \$2, \$2.50 and \$3. The Carnival Theater box office is open from noon to 5 p.m. every day except Sunday, staying open until 9 p.m. on performance nights.

David Novick



Photo by Phil Waldstein
John Elliott, Jack Wilson, and Linda Bailey perform in Agatha Christie's whodunit, "The Mousetrap."

Inferno: I see it blowing their minds in a quiet way

Go to hell.

But do it the easy way, by taking in one of the premiere performances of "Inferno," an original rock opera now playing at Carnival Theatre.

"Inferno" was written by Randy Bowser (music) and John Belles (lyrics), both of whom are well-known figures in Eugene theater circles — and who both appear, incidentally, in the show itself.

The show traces Dante's infamous journey, accompanied by the poet Virgil, into the depths of Hades, and the entire production is told in song, music and dance.

Although "Inferno" is a "free adaptation" of the Dante original, Belles quickly adds that "everything Dante wanted to say, I think we've retained in ours." Dante had his own private conception of hell, and, consequently, "he put a lot of characters down there just for personal or political reasons — like a noisy upstairs neighbor, for example — and many of these wouldn't come across well on stage, or make sense to an audience today," says Belles. "We've cut some of those weaker characters out and improved a few others, so, even though we've been faithful to Dante's intent, I think there will be a few surprises for those who are familiar with Dante."

"In other words," grins Belles, "if Dante had written his book today, it might have turned out like our show... maybe."

From a technical standpoint, "Inferno" is the most difficult show ever done on the University Theater stage, according to the show's director, Joe Zingo.

To begin with, the cast of 18 also doubles as their own orchestra-combo when they're not on stage. ("Some of Joe's most brilliant choreography is done around the piano stool in this show," quips Belles.) In addition, nearly everyone in the show plays two or three different roles, necessitating some rather desperate costume changes at times.

The single set is actually many sets in one, combining moving sections, incredibly diverse lighting schemes, blocking and use of color slides to depict the various levels of hell into which Dante descends.

To further demonstrate the specialized technical complexity of the show, no less than three assistant directors are being used — one of which is solely in charge of the microphones: two mikes for the orchestra, two permanent on-stage mikes, and six traveling (hand) mikes — which, until recently, continually resulted in a spaghetti network of cords by the end of Act I.

Another assistant director, Lisa Heft, was personally responsible for creating the nearly 50 masks used in the show.

The lighting scheme for the show is equally complex, utilizing a number of special effects and no less than six slide projectors. "There are 32 light cues in the first 15 minutes of the show alone," says Zingo.

The cast of "Inferno" is a highly select group of talent. "About 75 people tried out," says Zingo, "and we took the best 18. As a result,

everyone in the show has a two-octave vocal range and at least a year and a half of dance training."

Because of the cast's extensive background and because of the inherent flexibility of doing a new work, the whole cast has participated in the "direction" of the show along with Zingo, who has acted more in the capacity of "overseer," to make final decisions and insure the show has continuity.

Since the show went into production more than three weeks ago, Belles and Bowser's original concepts of the show have changed in many instances, but they are more than satisfied with those changes. Six new numbers have been added as the show has progressed, to more fully utilize the special qualities and talents of the cast. One song, in fact, was written especially for one cast member.

Are Eugene audiences ready to appreciate rock opera? Bowser, Zingo and Belles all feel the answer is yes.

"I see it kind of blowing their minds in a quiet way," says Bowser. "One of the things that has been such a challenge for us is to make something this subtle end up being so powerful."

Zingo agrees. "I think they'll be really surprised, because it's not a show that's going to blast them out of their seats with a lot of loud rock music. The music is really quite calm, particularly in comparison to the last two rock shows Carnival has done ("Tommy" in 1971 and "St. Joan" in 1972). One of the really great things about this show is its dramatic contrast between the gentle music and the incredibly wild visual action that is taking place at the same time."

Still, Zingo maintains there is a high degree of integration in the show, even though there are several different types of music involved — including some original Moog synthesizer tapes.

And, contrary to popular notions about rock operas (or regular operas, for that matter), many of the show's songs are singable — or at least hum-able, according to Belles.

Following its premiere run at Carnival, the cast of "Inferno" is looking forward to the next hurdle on the horizon: the American College Theatre Festival, to be held this fall in Washington, D.C. "Inferno" is entered in the "original works" division, and the cast is excited and optimistic about the show's chances.

Beyond that, "Inferno" stands a fair chance at some sort of commercial distribution; several inquiries and requests for tapes have already been received from eastern sources.

But before those dreams are realized, Dante will be walking into hell right here on the University Theater stage July 11, 12, 18, 19, 25 and 26. Current plans also call for some repeat performances for University students early during fall term.

All seats are \$2.50 and may be reserved or purchased at the Carnival Theatre box office (686-4191) in Villard Hall from noon to 5 p.m. and until 9 p.m. on performance nights. Curtain time is 8:30.

Scott Barkhurst

Ed Ragozzino: 'The West Side Story cast is jumping'

(Note: As he sits onstage, giving notes on one of the dance numbers in his upcoming production of "West Side Story" to some of the musical's cast, Ed Ragozzino is the center of a lively interchange of ideas, jokes and suggestions. "It's nice to be with a winner," says one of the principals in the show. "It's nice to trust somebody like that, to know that it's going to come out good." Ragozzino seems to have that confidence, too; he clearly has the respect of his cast. In six hours of rehearsals Saturday, he never had to ask for their attention. It was always there.

Yet, Ragozzino exercises a good-humored discipline. His fifteen years of directorial experience in Eugene — at the University, and South Eugene High School, and now at Lane Community College and for the Lane County Auditorium Association — Ragozzino has clearly mastered the art of managing a cast. Clearly, too, he has learned how to give an audience what it wants, since the eight LCAA Summer Musicals he has directed have, in terms of attendance, been by far the biggest thing in Eugene theater for a decade. Ed Ragozzino is an artist and an institution. Here are a few of his comments on his art, his audience, and his current production of "West Side Story," due to open July 27 at South Eugene High School Auditorium.)

There's really no such thing as a Ragozzino musical. That's a handle somebody put on it, but it's just part of trying to sell tickets. I don't set out to make a mark, because I think it's wrong for a director to stamp his shows. The director's work ought to be just to give the play; not to say "Look what I've done!" What you've heard of as Ragozzino style is really just PR talk.

Everybody thinks that my forte is musical comedy. That's certainly not all I do all the rest of the year. It's just that vast summer audience who think I'm the Music Man; and I suppose that's okay. There is a certain commercial value to it. During my college season, I have a responsibility first to my students as performers, in the literature that they're exposed to and get to try. In the summer, on the other hand, my responsibility is first to the audience, and it is, above all, to entertain them. Beyond that, perhaps I have to bring them along

a little — though I never say that blatantly. They don't like to be told they're being taught.

My audience is a pretty good cross-section. It's not composed of the usual theatre-goers. Over the years, we have been able to build an audience of all groups, all types — including some very unsophisticated ones. They may even dominate. A lot of them, all year, don't see any other theater than this. There's that element. Then there's the social element who come just to be coming to the theater. And, they don't really care what they're watching. But, I also have the feeling that we're building a real audience — not just in terms of boxoffice — but by introducing theater to people. And I think that as a result of that, some of them venture forth to straight drama, and go on to other theater.

Audiences are changing. They're getting over-entertained, and demanding theater to use as an opiate. They want to be washed over with good times, and for a few hours to forget Watergate and everything else. It's a bad scene when theater does only that. Theater has other functions.

Then there's the question of the economics of theater, which are rotten. We can probably predict the demise of Broadway as an institution; which is positive, really, because then we will finally be able to spread theater out, and make it not a centralized thing but a national one.

About 18,000 people see one of these musicals in a single run. If you total up all the audiences for the nine shows, we've gone over a quarter of a million. That's a rather unique position, since most amateur theater never succeeds financially. In fact, I think there are very few professional theaters that make money. But, for some reason, we click, and I think our success carries over to all the people who produce theater in Eugene.

And, there's a kind of festival quality about the summer musicals. We take a certain pride in the fact that we have something to which people invite their relatives in from Idaho, and which they plan their vacations around.

I make absolutely no apologies for "West Side Story." I want to do it. I think it's good for the participants, and I think it's good for audiences. So, I'm in no way thinking I've foisted some old-hat thing on them. Zubin Mehta, director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, was asked in a New York Times interview what he thought was the

greatest piece of music. And he said "West Side Story." It has one of the best books, some of the best thematic material to work with, in terms of good drama. And the music is tough. The orchestration is hard. But, I have a fine orchestra, and they get an absolutely symphonic score. At two points in the show it goes to a pure operatic form: the montage in "Tonight," for example, is pure opera. It's more of an opera than it is a musical comedy.

The "Jets" and the "Sharks" could be Blacks and Whites, they could be the Tong Wars. And if you really look at the situation in New York today on the West Side, it's worse than it was. It's heavier, it's uglier. I don't think you can look at "West Side Story" today and think that it's old stuff, that it's passe, it's 'Fifties; but that doesn't make much difference. The two gangs represent the Montagues and the Capulets, the opposing families.

I am treating the play as a period piece, and we are trying to be faithful to the period. We have not updated the lingo, nor changed the costumes. And, actually, it has been very hard to get that look. I could say something like that ethnically this says something about bigotry, but that's a lot of nonsense. I'm doing it because it's the best theater available to me. I'm really not trying to reveal any great social ill. I think that takes care of itself. There's the danger of beating people over the head, and that's offensive.

I think Bernstein and Sondheim began with a love story. The predominance of music is romantic. And there are no subplots. The story of "West Side Story" really is the love story between Tony and Maria; everything else is subsidiary to that. This gives it a universality similar to the best musicals, similar to "Fiddler on the Roof."

We're working inhumanly. We've been working since May 7, from 7:30 until we close the doors after midnight, and we come back the next day, if it's a Saturday, at nine in the morning, and work until three. Unions would not fare well here. I'm working with different people, and I'm exploiting their level of sensitivity and talent. And in every show, if you're doing a show more than once, you ought to work with the particular advantages and disadvantages of the particular company.

But, I love it. And they love it. There's a dynamic mood. That's why this cast is jumping.

Alan Brown



Photo by Phil Waldstein

A romantic fantasy for children

John Savage, Charlotte Riersgard, and Becky Bernhard perform in Carnival Theater's first "11 a.m. Children's Theater" production, called "The Land of the Dragon." The play, which is written by Madge Miller, is a romantic fantasy about a beautiful princess who is rescued from a scheming step-aunt and her conniving chancellor by a wandering minstrel with a pet dragon. Performances are set for 11 a.m. today, and July 18 and 19.