

drama

'Inferno'
uneven,
but
reaches
highest
levels
of
pop
theater



Inferno's "Dame Fortune" played by Teresa Killian

Photo by Phil Waldstein

UT's 'Mousetrap'
an engrossing,
lively performance
of Christie's
whodunit

Suzanne Stassevitch's production of *The Mousetrap* by Agatha Christie is everything a summer-stock play ought to be: its script is absorbing and entertaining, its direction is intelligent and well-paced, and its acting is nearly always fine. In all, it will be hard to find a more lively evening in the next few days than under the tent at University Theatre.

The play is a classic among murder-mysteries. A recently married couple open a country guest-house in the midst of a blizzard which closes all the roads around London and cuts them and their five guests off from the outside. Then the police find evidence which somehow connects the newly-opened inn with a recent murder in the city, and which suggests that one of the guests may be in danger. The couple, their guests, and a police sergeant live out hours together, discovering ever more frighteningly how little they know each other, and, in some cases, how well.

Christie demonstrates quite clearly some of the real possibilities of the murder-mystery genre. In fact, it is hard to think of a recent University Theatre production which absorbs its audience's attention so thoroughly as does "The Mousetrap." Viewers last Friday were very noticeably involved in the play, weighing and considering every word, every action for its significance, noticing and appreciating every acting quirk. Certainly this sort of reaction is exactly what the best performances of the best drama attempt to evoke: and in this limited technical sense, Christie's whodunit gives the best drama some fair competition.

Not that the value of the play lies solely in techniques of suspense—in convolutions of incident, in strategically withheld information and in the fright that anticipated violence can produce. "The Mousetrap" has something more to say. In the words of the detective, Sergeant Trotter, "Since the War, people have been thrown together without

All is not peaceful in Hell.

There is order, and within order there is chaos, one can discern. The medieval underworld has logic, but its incontinence contains inconsistencies.

So too "Inferno," which opened last week at the Carnival Theater. This original production, adapted from Dante's work, has brilliance, order, but an unevenness of realization that runs through content and style.

Composer Randy Bowser and lyricist John Belles have, beyond doubt, created a work of operatic stature, in some ways more sophisticated in texture than classical operas.

But the complexity of thought expressed sometimes leads to confusion. In "standard" opera, it is difficult to miss the point of what the performer is saying, as they often repeat their inane lines interminably—one could indeed view the words as a necessary adjunct to the musical creation.

In "Inferno" however, the music and the lyrics are on an equal footing. While the music occasionally drags, the work as a whole is excellent, spanning the range from discordant to lyrical. The duets, such as "The Lovers," and "Follow Your Star," are particularly delightful. They radiate a beauty which elevates "Inferno" up from musical comedy to opera.

The problems of complexity are illustrated by sections performed by Garrett d'Aloia, who is a remarkably good actor. As Ciacco the Glutton, his lines are not well understood; they come fast, to clashing, surprising music. Yet as Capaneus the blasphemer, his sentiments are clear, in a sort of novelty number.

And, in a paradoxical way, those numbers which are the easiest to comprehend, such as "The Ballad of Capaneus" and the rocking and rolling "Limbo," are precisely those parts of the work that are the least operatic.

They are, however, immensely enjoyable. To a great extent, they are, in fact, reconcilable with the pop-medieval view of Hell. Perhaps the classical poets were, in their way, a rollicking group. In this case, Bowser and Belles have successfully mixed metaphors: the gaiety and barbarity of antiquity are translated into the USA's 1950s.

Given the difficulty of the work, the production itself has only minor flaws, most obliterated by the cleverness and sincerity of its insights.

Director Joe Zingo's choreography is a masterwork, superbly performed. It is consistently good, with sinewy bodies, chaos and despair, fear and pain, the medieval vision of Hieronymus Bosch brought to life—or death, as it were.

For the most part, the individual performances are good, with some standouts, and some puzzlements. As Dante, James Thompson brings a voice worthy of the importance of his role. He is convincing.

Similarly, Paula Bissel's Beatrice could inspire any man to brave Hell, even if her appearances are perforce not very active—visions, especially sweet ones, simply do not cavort.

Virgil, though, is slightly confusing. When called upon for the uninhibited gyrations of the "Limbo" number, Pat McMahon does well. Perhaps the score is at fault, but throughout the rest of the opera,

knowing or being able to know one another. Even a married woman may not discover until one or two years later that her husband has a touch of insanity or has deserted from the army." There is some point to Christie's demonstration of the great number of assumptions about one another on which our daily life depends.

Too, the play presents a collection of delightful and fascinating character-types. There are Paravicini, the good-humored and sometimes sinister Italian who happens into the inn when his car overturns outside, allegedly by accident; Mrs. Boyle, a picky old woman who seems never to be satisfied with anyone or anything—least of all with people who don't know their station; Major Metcalf, a fusty old gentleman recently retired from the army, who has an antiquarian taste for prowling around in cellars; Miss Caswell, who is probably rich, and may be a writer, but who most certainly has spunk and skill in manipulating others and in maintaining her own secrets; and Christopher Wren, an endearing though "nervous" young man who, as a character, must amount to one of the most entertaining and humane queer-jokes ever placed on a stage.

Character-parts are, for a number of reasons, often the easiest sorts of roles for an actor to play. Perhaps for this reason, the most outstanding performances in "The Mousetrap" are in characters who can be defined in terms of one or two idiosyncracies. Of these, the best performance belongs to Paul Meier as Christopher Wren. True, the "nervousness" of the character keeps Meier moving all the time, and his affinities for cooking and antiques—among other things—give him more than his share of comic lines. But Meier has filled out the role to a human roundness quite beyond the caricature it could have been made.

Michele Theriot and John Elliott, as Miss Caswell and Major Metcalf, also demonstrate excellent command of their characters, and bring them to convincing and interesting life beyond the quirks in terms of which Miss Christie has defined them. Theriot's Miss Caswell has all the impatience and pugnacity of a woman determined to make her own life by sheer will-power. And Elliott acts a Major Metcalf who is at once mellow and crusty, sensible and preoccupied. Jack Wilson has, in the same way, taken the rather functionally-defined role of the detective, Sergeant Trotter, and given him an effective measure of rational curiosity and peculiar irrationality.

Mel Buchner is a delightful Paravicini, both in appearance and in

style of delivery. But too often, Stassevitch's direction leaves him merely lurking in the background, distractingly immobile for long stretches of time. It is a little difficult to understand how a character so animated when he speaks can suddenly freeze when his lines run out.

And Jackie McClure perhaps overdoes Mrs. Boyle's feistiness. Mrs. Boyle so failed to arouse any sympathy in me, for one, that I sometimes suspected that she might run into some foul-play—from me if from no one else. It would help the play if Mrs. Boyle were a bit more human and likeable. Not much would be required to bring out her meddling well-meaningness.

The most difficult roles in "The Mousetrap" are those of Molly and Giles Ralston, the owners and managers of Monkswell Manor Guest-House. And paradoxically, the difficulty in those roles is that the characters are so ordinary. Forced to play against so many easily—and well-defined character-parts, the two seemingly normal people in the play tend to come across as insipid unless played with exceptional strength. British theatre accepts such "regular people" as types in themselves, but American audiences cannot generally identify with such an implied norm. Consequently, in such a production as this, the parts of the average middle-class characters need to be created from the ground up. Linda Bailey and Gary Pillette show few signs of having done so, and too often they appear merely to be ready lines. At times it is even hard to tell that they are married to each other.

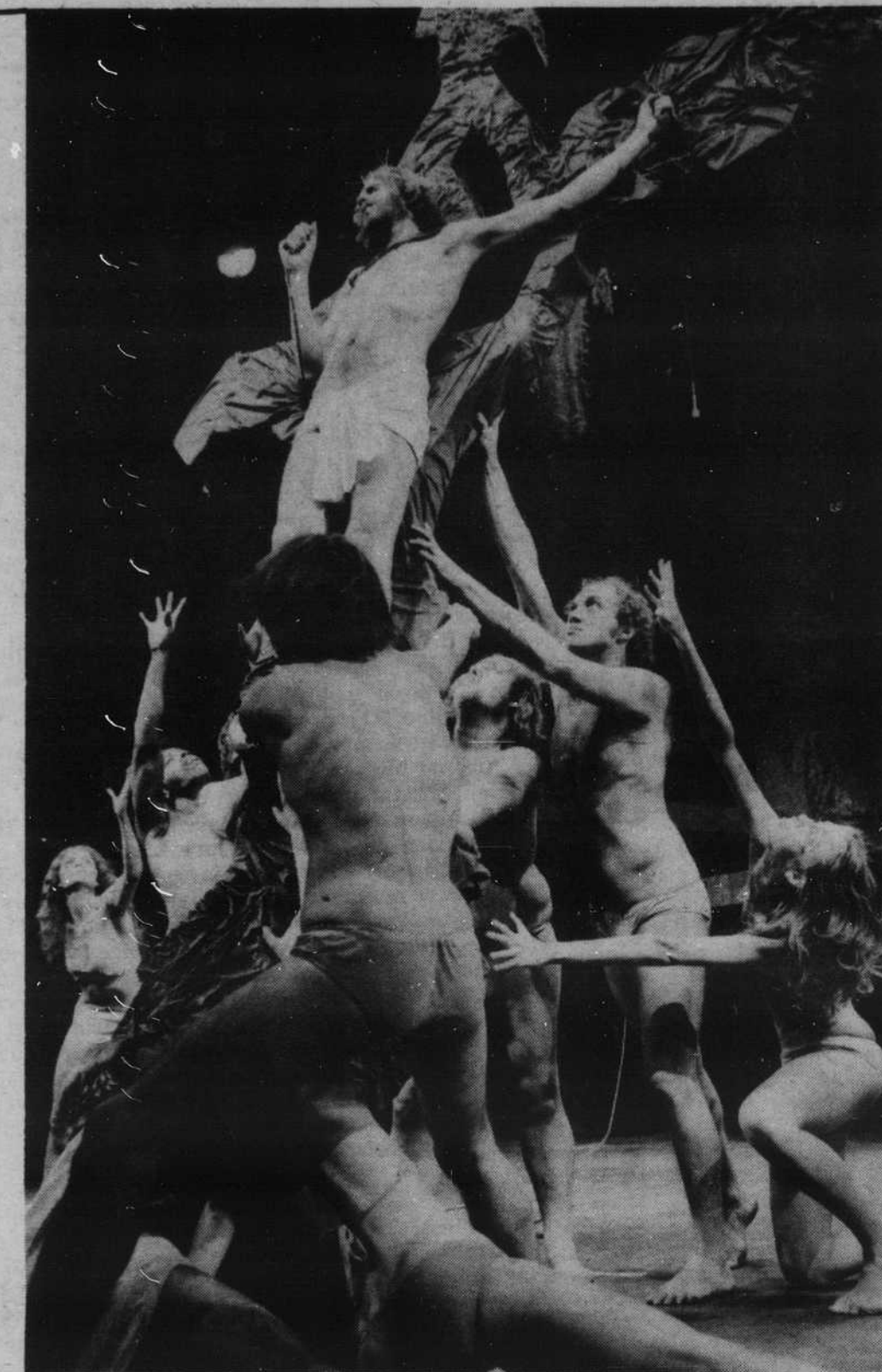
Bailey's character does gain focus as the play progresses, but Pillette never quite establishes much of a personality. Perhaps symptomatic of this is the fact that he never stabilizes his accent, mixing London and Eugene dialects with most unlikely abandon.

Charlie Harrill's costumes are perfect. And John Eliot's set establishes setting and mood very adequately, although it seems alternately cramped and insufficiently closed-in. This is a minor matter, however, and distracts little from the general polish of the production.

Stassevitch and Faber DeChaine, Carnival Theatre producer, are to be congratulated for their choice of "The Mousetrap" as part of this summer's season. One hopes that such an entertaining evening of theatre gets the audiences it fully deserves. The play closes this weekend, with performances tonight, tomorrow and Saturday.

David Novick

Allan Brown



Inferno's "Caiaaphas," played by Randy Bowser

Photo by Phil Waldstein



Inferno's "Virgil" played by Pat McMahon

Photo by Phil Waldstein