

It's fun and games until someone hits jackpot

Broken church bells and a spendthrift wife make this mortal coil a trial for the virtuous vicar Lionel Toop.

But gambling in the vicarage? Lordy.

That's the premise of *Pools Paradise*, the season opener for the Milton Players Theatre Group's 1999-2000 season.

The earthy Mrs. Penelope Toop thinks she's just having a bit of fun through her contributions to the weekly football pool along with the maid Ida and her boyfriend Willie Briggs.

But you know the saying — it is all fun and games until someone hits the jackpot. Or something like that.

That's when the peaceful South England vicarage goes into a tailspin.

At first Mrs. Toop is horrified at her part in nabbing the ill-gotten gains, gambling being a sin and all.

Until she learns just how much gain it is. Then she dispatches Willie Briggs, played with inarticulate cheer by Graham Morley, to London to double-check the results.

In the meantime the vicar is in the race of his life to duck the overheated attentions of parishioner Miss Skillon.

Played by Sharon Beddoes, Ms Skillon sure does love God. And almost as much as the vicar, too.

Enter Reverend Arthur Humphries, played with admirable befuddlement by Tim Beddoes.

He has been called in to take over the church service of the vicar, who has been waylaid by a twisted ankle.

But after finding the church bereft of a single soul in need of saving, he does what any English vicar with time to kill

would do.

He checks his football pools.

Chaos ensues when the two tickets get mixed up and the good lord, no doubt yearning for a little attention, sends yet another holy representative to the vicarage in the form of the Bishop of Lax.

He's played by real-life school teacher Brian Walton. That's mentioned lest anyone think an actual bishop happened onto the stage, so naturally does he assume the role.

The bishop has paid a surprise visit to his niece, Penelope Toop, and is himself shocked to discover that she and her household are all apparently mad.

The comic threads of the Philip King play are deftly woven together by Ida, played with brash, underclass charm by Susan Cranford.

Also worth mentioning is Gary Metcalfe.

As Reverend Toop, he is the gawky, loose-limbed image of outraged innocence that melts into wily cunning when he sees that his busted church bells could be replaced by pools cash.



with IRENE GENTLE

Spot light

Bad timing and accents that come and go can both serve to sink a comedy. But both have been avoided by director Geoff Ford.

Instead, the Players manage to toss out their lines as cleanly and skillfully as fly-fishermen.

The actors also run helter-skelter over the one-room set without anyone crashing into anyone, distracting from the action or blocking views.

It will not be revealed here if the Toop clan win the football pool in the end.

But repairing church property through the wages of sin?

Hells bells, Vicar Toop.

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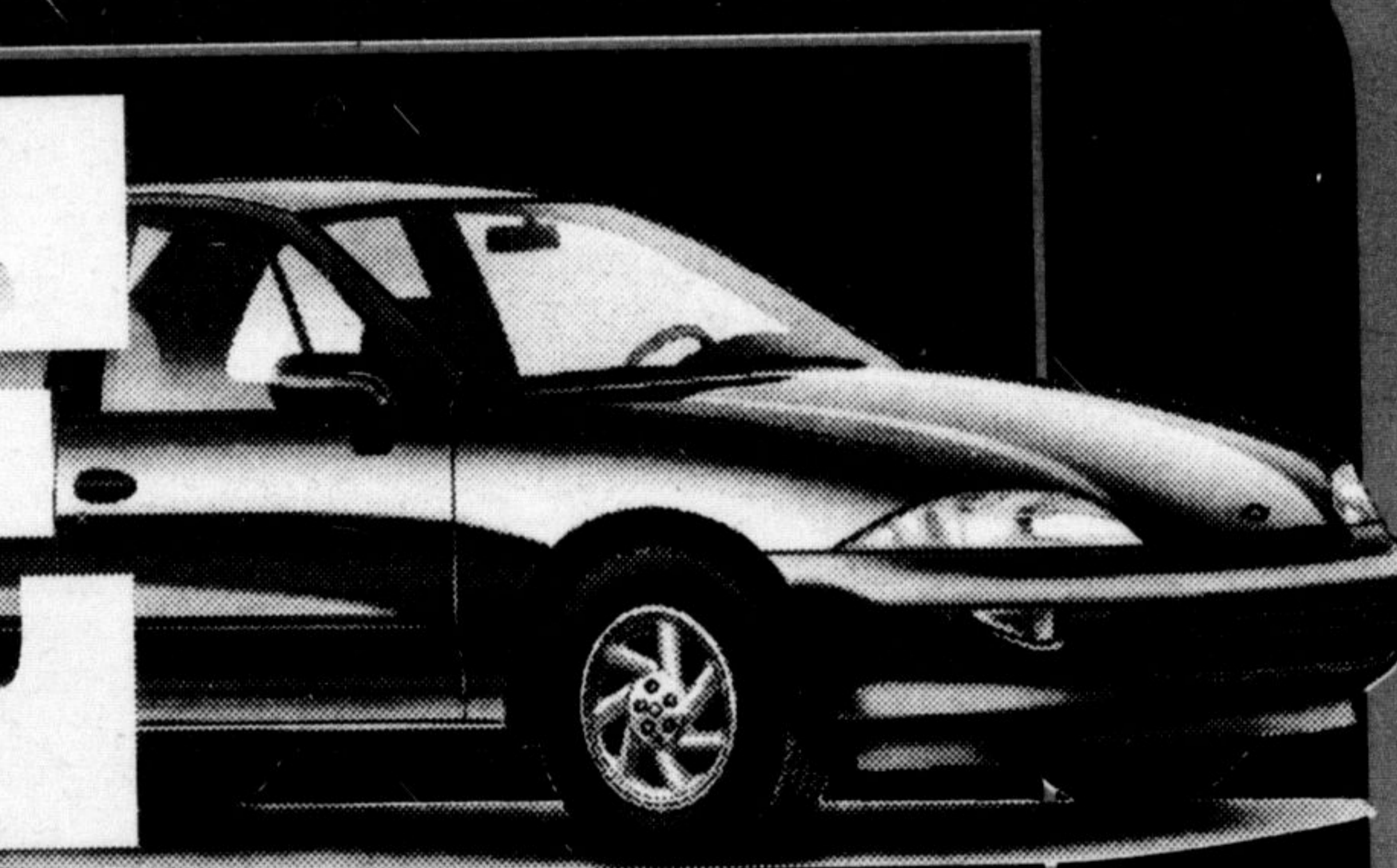
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