

Odd Couple's Oscar and Felix, lovable as ever

Neil Simon is the Holiday Inn of dinner theatre. Audiences wary of surprises know they'll get their money's worth from his witty one-liners and likeable characters.

And so we've had a rash of Simon in recent months. Deer Park Inn's current production of his proven crowd-pleaser, *The Odd Couple*, is the fourth of his popular comedies to be staged locally since January.

And, if it's not quite as polished as Deer Park's admirable *Last of the Red Hot Lovers* a couple of years ago, it's the best of the recent crop.

Direction here is by the sure and deft hand of Teri Hallatt. And this *Odd Couple* is firmly anchored in the experienced professionalism of Paul Saunders and Stephen Day.

If Saunders, a master of Simon's speech rhythms and timing, is not quite at his best here as Oscar Madison, his second best is still funny and assured.

But he seems to have developed an unfortunate mannerism of late (perhaps a carry-over from his concurrent role in *Murder at the Howard Johnson's*) — tagging some of his lines with a nerdish laugh.

This tendency, noticeable in the poker-playing scenes, mercifully disappears in his scenes with Day, where the two play off each other with well-timed panache.

Day neatly overcomes the handicap of his striking physical difference from the two actors indelibly identified with the role of Felix Unger.

Where Jack Lemmon and Tony Randall are short, dark, natty and finicky, Day is tall, blond, curly-haired and boyishly, athletically handsome. But Tony and Jack are soon forgotten as the appealing Day puts his own stamp on Felix.

Little wire-framed glasses, a hurt, bewildered look and a laudable economy of fussiness give us a believable and likeable portrait of a fussy who drives everyone crazy by annoying habits he knows he has but can't control.

Roxanne McKenzie and Lee Clements also put in good work as the twittering Pigeon sisters. These roles can so easily slip into caricature, but McKenzie and Clements are as real and convincing as they are amusing.

Their giggles never irritate and they easily convey the harmony of thought and long familiarity that mark the pair. They are perhaps not as lively as they might be, but this is probably part and parcel of performing only twice a week.

In this production, the players must work to the unfortunate schedule of a Wednesday matinee and a Sunday evening performance. (Ronnie Hawkins holds forth on Friday and Saturday at Deer Park).

With the time gap between performances, smooth pacing and ensemble playing are bound to suffer — at least in the early days of the run. While old pros like Saunders and Day and the talented McKenzie and Clements cope very well in these circumstances, it puts a strain on the less-experienced actors who make up the quartet of Oscar's poker-playing buddies.

Robbie Rox as Murray the cop, Fernando Curcione as Vinnie, Jason Stowe as Speed and John Lewis as Roy the accountant, have all sketched out individual characters for themselves.

But they have yet to effect the ensemble playing that establishes the foursome as

THEATRE IN REVIEW



Elizabeth Wyatt

friends of long standing, as familiar and at ease with each other as the back of their hands — marked or otherwise.

Hallatt's set, with its navy walls and cityscapes backing the windows, makes an attractive and creditable New York apartment. The contrast between Oscar's mess and the spick-and-span results of Felix's ministrations is not as striking as it might be, but this is no doubt attributable to running the first and second acts together without an intermission.

And the floral table cloth, while it would make a nice touch for the final act, is too dainty for Oscar on his own and belies Felix's fussing over glass-rings and coasters in act two.

The *Odd Couple*, one discovers after seeing it again post-television-series, relies heavily on the novelty of the situation for its humor. Simon's one-liners, at least in the beginning, don't come quite as thick and fast as they do in much of his other work.

And after long exposure on TV, the situation is, of course, as familiar as one's own. Nevertheless, it holds up surprisingly well and entertainingly today. Oscar and Felix, as interpreted by Saunders and Day, are as lovable and funny as they ever were.

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