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Long Beach, Cal.
INDEPENDENT /
PRESS-TELEGRAM
(Daily)

'The Birthday Party' Riddle

By RALPH HINMAN JR.
Drama Critic

I never expect to solve the central mystery in Pinter's "The Birthday Party" — but I'll always enjoy trying so long as future performances equal in quality South Coast Repertory's current mounting.

For "Party" is one of those plays — as Beckett's "Endgame" is another — which sends me from the theater with a frustrating feeling that some ultimate answer lurks just inside my consciousness, if only I could pull it out.

Perhaps next time, I always say to myself, the riddle of young Stanley's self-incarceration in a sleazy English beachtown boarding house somehow will be made clear. And the identity of two sinister strangers: do they represent some malignant real-

life agency? Or are they symbolic abstractions representing a hostile, impersonal world man no longer can control?

Or is "The Birthday Party" its author's private joke, a fine exercise for actors but "full of sound and fury signifying nothing."

Perhaps next time . . .

Another pleasure in watching Pinter's Party is noting differing styles or approaches various directors apply to this insoluble enigma.

SCR's Warren J. Deacon — and I hope he'll take this as a compliment — utilizes, but goes beyond many of the short-hair-raising techniques of the young Hitchcock. The emphasis on detail, the banality of life as it's often lived interspersed with sudden tension creates a somber, brooding quality.

Quickly we sense that madness — or something worse — fills this flea bag boarding house where owners Meg and Petey talk of breakfast cereals, the morning newspaper and Stanley, always Stanley.

Ronald Boussem, as that unhappy, thwarted piano player, rarely leaves the house, is hiding from something, but what? He bullies poor Meg (who obviously dreams of herself

as his lover) and is fawningly obsequious in the presence of Lulu, Elaine Landon, the "bird" who lives next door.

Then the strangers, Goldberg and McCann, appear from nowhere in their shiny black limousine. It's Stanley's birthday and Hal Landon Jr. and James Baxes insist on giving him a party.

Tension and apprehension build rapidly as the party moves to a dramatic peak in the second act. Act III seems almost anti-climactic until momentarily, like a furnace door opening and shutting, we view Stanley's private hell.

Fine acting prevails although the English accents emerge rather unevenly.

Rate it 3½-stars; mature audiences. Friday-Sunday performances, 8:30 p.m., 1927 Newport Blvd., Costa Mesa, through Dec. 19.

Variety

STAGE REVIEW

South Coast Repertory in 'Feiffer's People'

Flexible as silly putty, topical as a Harris pollster, neurotic, quixotic, as susceptible to confession as a tap dancer is to a spotlight, "Feiffer's People" had left an imprint upon contemporary stage comedy long before they found their way from the strip frame to the proscenium arch and gave their dialogs a voice other than our own.

Provided with Feiffer's open and pliant text, Costa Mesa's South Coast Repertory adds zippy direction and zesty song lyrics by Warren J. Deacon, punctilious vocal direction by Sandra Mathews-Deacon, a spare and evocative setting by Greg Bolton and high-spot additional material by James Diederich, Doug McEwan and members of the cast. It blends with the polish and precision that have made this company one of the most consistently rewarding in Southern California.

Feiffer's vignettes, dependent upon character, observation and the irony of situations, seldom generate satire sharper than a finger poke. Few of the blackouts are well structured and most do not build to strong endings. Direction compensates to good effect, if limited resource. Having two gentlemen tenderly clasp hands or tweak cheeks is used as a resolution more often than statistical samplings might be able to justify.

Most familiar of the staged works is "Munro," the military adventure of a 4-year-old caught in the

'FEIFFER'S PEOPLE'

A satirical revue based on the works of Jules Feiffer, with additional material by James Diederich, Doug McEwan and the cast. Director: Warren J. Deacon. Designer: Greg Bolton. Choreographer: Matti Lascoe. Lyrics: Warren Deacon. Vocal direction: Sandra Mathews-Deacon. Cast: George Barcos, Bill Brady, Toni Douglass, Mary Fleming, Sandy Marino, Doug McEwan, Cameron Young. Presented at 8:30 p.m., Wednesdays through Sundays, through Sept. 12, at South Coast Repertory, 1824 Newport Blvd., Costa Mesa.

draft. He is played by Steve Patterson, one of the brightest players in the company. Another highlight is George Barcos' impersonation as Uncle Walt's mechanical recreation of President Lincoln, one of several pieces created with special identification for Orange County audiences.

Feiffer's flashes of human foible and fancy demand no less of the others in the ensemble, Doug McEwan, Bill Brady, Toni Douglass, Cameron Young, Mary Fleming, Sandy Marino and Leslie Taylor. Each has his moments of special delight in an evening of sustained and frenzied pleasure.

On Sept. 24, SCR undertakes one of its most ambitious productions, a full staging of the rock opera, "Tommy."

—JOHN C. MAHONEY

FEIFFER'S PEOPLE

(South Coast Repertory: \$8.75 top)

"Feiffer's People," its nine-member cast scooting through the sardonic wit of cartoonist-philosopher Jules Feiffer with additional material by the performers, James Diederich and others, again proves versatility of this Costa Mesa troupe. Warren J. Deacon has directed with fine sense of pace, and the actors limn the Feifferesque attitudes faithfully and spiritedly.

Several of the sketches are outrageously funny. Takeoff on the Lincoln automation (George Barcos) at Disneyland is top laugh maker. Minister (Bill Brady) cranking out Aquarius speech has yocks. "Superman" (Cameron Young) skit is okay, and four-year-old draftee (Steve Patterson) number, with full cast on board, stands out. Off to good start is movie-star-for-governor number (with cast singing and dancing to "Vote for Larry"), but peters out.

Main problem with total show is balance. Two-acter devotes too much of first act to brief blackouts setting Feiffer moods but failing to supply contrast in style. Second act, with more musical numbers (music supplied by tape, with performers singing — a technique that works remarkably well at South Coast because of facilities) and variety of sketches adds zest. Delights include slow-motion study of balloon blowing by Leslie Taylor, folksinger (Sandy Marino) describing her song of the land.

Targets for Feiffer and for interpolated material continue to be Vietnam, FBI, the army, fickleness of love, with late additions of wage-price freeze, Pentagon papers, Santa Ana law enforcers. While the well-regimented cast manages to hit dead center each time, the ball's-eye is becoming frayed from overuse.

Toni Douglass, Mary Fleming, Doug McEwan are also brightly engaged in the project on stage, wearing mod clothes and sneakers and catching their countless cues on the button.

The set, with six large placards carrying Feiffer drawings upstage and wide-open stage area designed for cavorting, is by Greg Bolton. Warren Deacon wrote pertinent lyrics, Matti Lascoe choreographed. It's a pleasant if brief—85 minutes with intermission — romp, ably directed and performed. *Tone.*

South Coast Repertory

'Our Town' rehabilitated

By RALPH HINMAN JR.
Drama Critic

Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" — now weekending at South Coast Repertory — was modishly avant-garde in the 1940s and early '50s when theater groups across the land nearly did it in through overexposure.

It was a standing joke that somewhere, somebody was readying a new mounting of this naturalistic examination into small town American life before the First World War.

Seemingly it was an easy show to do. Sets are minimal, and too few directors required tough-minded, disciplined acting "just ordinary people."

A standing joke became a bad joke as "Our Town" cumulatively acquired a

reputation for being excessively sentimental and-or mawkish. And so the show almost slipped into obscurity.

A brilliant South Coast mounting strips away the years' accumulation of phoniness. "Our Town" now emerges to take its place as one in a handful of great American dramas written and produced in this century.

SCR's efforts deserve the grateful thanks of anyone who cares even remotely for our theater.

This rehabilitation was effected because director Warren J. Deacon, unlike many predecessors elsewhere, obviously believes in the virtues of disciplined stagecraft.

Moving across an artistically bareboned stage, his people become, in fact, the

people of Grovers Corners, New Hampshire, in the lost years 1901-1913. That's real acting — and directing.

The greatness of any drama can be measured, I think, in how well, how honestly and completely it captures the spirit of people in a time of crisis, victory, defeat, transition from one era to another. Or even an "ordinary" time, whenever or whatever that is.

Cronicled here are the last years of a quiet, rural life style; in life, birth and death at Grovers Corners, we see for a fleeting moment what some Americans were like before industrialization irrevocably change the old ways.

Steering us through our look at the village is the Stage Manager, the author's symbol for an all-seeing, all-knowing God. Martin Benson, complete

with slightly nasal Yankee twang, is superb.

Our attention focuses on Emily Webb as she moves from girl to womanhood, marriage, birth and, finally, death at an early age. Theresa Carden brings a controlled artlessness to the role which is the breath of reality.

Other particularly fine performances come from Don Tuche and Ann Siena, Cameron Young, H.J. Parks and Ellen Ketchum.

General family recommendation.

Wilder Revived at SCR

'Our Town' Well Staged

By TOM TITUS

Of the Daily Pilot Staff

If theatergoers come away from South Coast Repertory's revival of "Our Town" with a renewed appreciation of life, the day to day existence of it, then this venerable American classic can once more be counted a success.

It is more than likely that they will, for SCR has taken painstaking effort to insure that this play, dated though it may be, is as compelling and heartwarming as when it was first presented. That all-important "feel" for Thornton Wilder's poetic prose wraps the Costa Mesa production like a warm blanket on a chilly November night.

There are all too few dramatic works dealing

honestly with life in small town America. One must go back two seasons to Lanford Wilson's "The Rimers of Eldritch" presented at UC Irvine to cite another local example. The genius of Faulkner and Steinbeck can be found only in bookshelves and even modern literature can offer little more than the sensationalized stylings of a "Peyton Place."

Thus "Our Town" remains as perhaps the definitive delineation of a portion of our culture which all too rarely beckons the creative muse. And in South Coast Repertory's compelling production, Wilder's marvelously mundane New England community of Grover's Corners returns to life.

Warren J. Deacon directs the SCR version with a sure and sensitive hand, not only exploring the little banalities which make up the rustic existence, but bringing an

"OUR TOWN"

A play by Thornton Wilder, directed by Warren J. Deacon, set and lighting design by Greg Bolton, costumes designed by David Scott, presented by South Coast Repertory Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays at 8:00 through Nov. 31 at the Third Step Theater, 1827 Newport Blvd., Costa Mesa.

THE CAST

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|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Stage Manager..... | Martin Benson |
| Emily Webb..... | Theresa Carden |
| George Gibbs..... | Cameron Young |
| Doctor Gibbs..... | Don Tuche |
| Mrs. Gibbs..... | Ann Siena |
| Mr. Webb..... | Heath Park |
| Mrs. Webb..... | Ellen Ketchum |
| Howie Newsome..... | George Barcos |
| Joe, St. Crowell..... | John Welch |
| Rebecca Gibbs..... | Dierdre Emmes |
| Wally Webb..... | David Emmes Jr. |
| Prof. Willard..... | |
| Joe Stoddard..... | Morgan McKay |
| Simon Stimson..... | Michael Owens |
| Mrs. Scammon..... | Rochelle Savitt |
| Constable Warren..... | |
| Sam Craig..... | Vic Berks |
| Townsperson..... | Sue Flint, Cecile Knudsen |

overall aura of back fence intimacy into play. His task is aided splendidly by Greg Bolton's subtle lighting effects and the authenticity of the atmosphere — chickens clucking in the morning, crickets chirping after dark — which sustains the mood of comfort and satisfaction.

Martin Benson, one of SCR's two artistic directors, makes a rare onstage appearance as the stage manager who manipulates the action and sets the scenes for the mini-drama. Benson reflects warmth and understanding in his multiple roles as narrator, participant and observer; his performance is aloof from the others, yet a part of them, striking the right balance between omniscience and involvement.

The most striking performance of the evening is delivered by an SCR newcomer, Theresa Carden, in the role of Emily whose short young life is the crux of the play. Miss Carden is fresh and appealing in the earlier scenes and painfully poignant in the third act when, after her death, she elects to relive a

day from her childhood.

Cameron Young portrays her suitor with alternate bursts of enthusiasm and youthful petulance. One of the high spots of the play is the scene between him and Miss Carden in the soda shop where the first bloom of romance is born.

Don Tuche is a picture of well-adjusted stability as the town doctor, while Ann Siena is equally strong as his devoted wife who yearns for some change in their life's routine. Heath Park achieves perhaps the best characterization in the supporting ranks as the newspaper editor with a personal analysis of the townspeople, while Ellen Ketchum is bright and true as his wife.

Others making singular impressions are Dierdre and David Emmes Jr. as the younger children, George Barcos as the angular milkman, Rochelle Savitt as the garrulous townswoman and Michael Owens as the taciturn town drunk.

"Our Town" might be best described as the perfect antidote for "Tommy," for two more dissimilar productions would be difficult to find. Both are being performed currently on the SCR stage, with the rock musical running Tuesdays through Thursdays and — due to heavy ticket demands — at 11 o'clock Friday and Saturday evenings, following performances of "Our Town."

A limited three-weekend run of the Wilder classic is scheduled before it is placed into the repertory slot and "Tommy" returns on weekends. Performances are given at 8 o'clock on the SCR stage, 1827 Newport Blvd., Costa Mesa.

SCR Slates
New Class
In Acting