

**'Gamma Rays ... Marigolds'**

# Memory Play Excellent at Laguna

By TOM TITUS  
Of the Daily Pilot Staff

"The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds" is probably the longest title of the shortest play you'll see this season. Its production, at the Laguna Moulton Community

**"THE EFFECT OF GAMMA RAYS ON MAN-IN-THE-MOON MARIGOLDS"**

A drama by Paul Zindel, directed by Warren J. Deacon, set and lighting by Gregory Bolton, stage manager Richard Slets, music by William Wood, presented Tuesdays through Saturdays until April 28 at 8:30 by the Laguna Moulton Community Playhouse, 606 Laguna Canyon Road, Laguna Beach. Reservations 494-0742.

**THE CAST**

Beatrice ..... Annie Wood  
Tillie ..... Gwenda Amy  
Ruth ..... Rachael Arnone  
Nanny ..... Bette Killion  
Janice Vickery ..... Beth Ann Eroen

Playhouse, is also among the year's most impressive.

Paul Zindel's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama is a memory play on the order of "The Glass Menagerie" (also a first effort by a then-unknown playwright) with one ex-



ception—the author himself is not depicted in the story.

Instead he weaves a simple, fragile and deeply moving account of a bitter, brooding mother (patterned after his own) and her two emotionally crippled daughters which leaves a laceration on the heart.

**LAGUNA DIRECTOR** Warren J. Deacon condenses the vast Moulton stage to bring Zindel's play within intimate proximity to the audience. The result, aided immensely by Gregory Bolton's excellent two-level set and soft lighting effects, is a tender drama of human proportions.

The characters themselves are bizarre contrasts. The mother, Beatrice, is a vindictive semi-recluse who deeply resents her role in life; the elder daughter, Ruth, is a sharp-tongued, vicious epileptic battling for her mother's affection; the younger girl, Tillie, is shy and awkward (like "Glass Menagerie's" Laura) but possessed of a brilliant scientific mind.

Annie Wood enacts the mother as a nonstop har-ridan, playing her brassy, vulgar character on a single level and revealing little of the

girl she once was, except for a beautifully nostalgic scene with Ruth midway in the play. Miss Wood overcomes another handicap, that of appearing too young for the role, with a strong, if occasionally overdone, performance.

**THE ROLE OF** the misfit daughter, potentially a casting dilemma, is splendidly performed by Gwenda Amy whose entire demeanor and physical presence suggest the awkwardness of unfulfilled youth. Among her best moments are her narration scenes to the audience which open and close the play on the same brightly optimistic note.

Rachael Arnone is equally impressive as the self-centered older sister whose vitriolic tongue rivals her mother's and whose manner suggests a rehearsal for a nervous breakdown. The breakdown, in the form of an epileptic seizure, occurs at the play's climax in a most gripping and terrifying display of sustained performance.

A symbolic parallel is drawn between the gamma rays' effect on the flowers Tillie enters in the science fair and the influence of the mother on her two girls, also mutations of a sort. Two victims of these side effects are the girl's pet rabbit and the aged, demented boarder, marvelously interpreted by Bette Killion. Beth Ann Eroen as

Tillie's competition in the science fair rates a brief bravo for her amusing and abrasive cameo.

**ORIGINAL MOOD** music, composed by William Wood, enhances the fragile, brittle tenor of the play, although the shrieking noise of a jet airliner which opens each act is somewhat baffling. Bolton's creation of a rundown home which once served as a vegetable store is first rate,

as are his subtle lighting designs.

With "Marigolds," director Deacon and his company have maintained a tradition of dramatic and technical excellence that has marked the Laguna Playhouse's finest season in a decade. The play continues for two more weeks, Tuesdays through Saturdays, at the playhouse, 606 Laguna Canyon Road, Laguna Beach.

## PHILOSOPHICAL, EXCITING DRAMA

## Lagunans Give 'Marigolds' Fine Revival

By BERNARD WEINER

The Laguna Moulton Community Playhouse is currently presenting a superb production of Paul Zindel's 1970 Pulitzer Prize-Winning play, "The Effect of Gamma Rays On Man-In-The-Moon Marigolds." The drama is being presented every night through April 28, with the exception of Monday nights. Curtain time is at 8:30 p.m.

"The Effect of Gamma Rays On Man-In-The-Moon Marigolds is a multi-level work which philosophically deals with both the concept of life and man. Simply, the plot has to do with a divorced widow, her two daughters, an ancient nanny of inde-

terminatable age, and their struggle to survive. Coupled with this is one of the daughters' high school science experiment: the growing of marigolds from seeds which have been subjected to radio-active waves. Symbolically, all of us are the marigolds and life is our gamma rays.

"Like the high school scientific experiment those of us who are overexposed grow, either internally or externally, dwarfed or die. Those, who are mildly subjected to the rays, become beautiful mutants. Like the plants we have double blossoms; we are lush, productive; a wonder to behold. We have changed for the better. While those that are farthest from the rays, who are most protected from life, grow to be ordinary; there is no change between them and their forebearers.

Coupled with this symbolism

are the concept of the past, the present, and the future; the idea of half life versus a whole life; the tenacity of life itself despite its miseries; the growth, expansion, and blossoming of the individual; the validity of science; and possibly, even a suggestion of euthanasia for the physically and mentally dwarfed beings of our universe.

Yet despite the philosophical depth of the work it is still a superb stage piece—a wonderful example of what can be done with live drama.

The entire production makes for a fantastic theater experience. Gregory Bolton has done an outstanding job with both set and lighting. He has constructed an old vegetable store, complete with skyline, which is used as the living quarters for the family and their border. Warren J. Deacon has done a superb job of directing. He moves his actors rapidly and effortlessly through their physical and emotional paces. And finally the acting company is excellent.

Annie Wood does Beatrice,

the mother who has been mentally dwarfed by life. She both loves and resents her two teen-aged daughters, verbally and emotionally tearing at them most of the time with occasional moments of warmth and affection. They are part of the whole of life that has destroyed her life and forces her to just exist. Miss Wood gives a fine interpretation of the role.

Ruth, the convulsive daughter, is portrayed by Rachael Arnone. She gives an excellent, in-depth performance, as the teen-ager with an inordinate fear of death who just barely exists. Her convulsive scene was frightening.

Gwenda Amy is Tillie, the homely and innocent daughter who emerges as the beautiful mutant. Despite the harshness and tedium of daily life she sees all creation as a thing of beauty. She emerges as a warm, human, and productive blossom. Miss Amy gives a superb performance. It is her role and the way she plays it that lifts a depressive drama to the level of being optimistic and almost joyful.

Nanny, the ancient tenant, who has grown far beyond the point of any usefulness and just barely exists, is very effectively played by Bette Killion. Beth Ann Eroen is Janice, the contest participant who is the ordinary person.

er, Friday, April 20, 1973 A

## THEATER-IN-REVIEW

### 'Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds'

"The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds" is probably a classic, the "Glass Menagerie" of Paul Zindel's output. It's a poetic play that professionals and amateurs alike can handle with sensitivity, as Laguna Moulton's current production shows.

This community group has benefitted by a strong infusion of talent from the nearby South Coast Repertory, beginning with director Warren Deacon and set designer Greg Bolton. The five-woman cast is largely from Orange County campuses, several cuts above the 'good-ole-Alice-who-always-had-theater-in-her-blood' level. It's a crisp, unsentimental, literate version of a fine play.

Gwenda Amy, large and gawky, is warmly moving as the daughter whose life is changed by her high school science project. The marigolds she grows from seeds exposed to Cobalt 60 are unpredictably gorgeous; but of course the rays are whimsical, just as often burning or stunting things. This is also true of the lives of Rachael Arnone, as the epileptic, desperately popular daughter, and Annie Wood, the trapped mother who lurches from one money-making scheme to the next, concluding that she hates the world. A remarkable acting: Gwenda Amy seems to open-out, to bloom; she understands, childlike, the beauty of scientific metaphor; she frames the play and gently binds the audience to its universality.

Beth Ann Eroen and Bette Killion are fine in minor roles, the latter an incredibly old \$50-a-month boarder who seems to have been invented by Charles Addams — you can practically feel the moss. Credit that, too, to SCR's Ron Bousson, make-up consultant.

This wise, sad play is lightened by the mother's self-deprecatory humor, her method of coping. Still, you have to agree

with the scientist-daughter: "The atom (Read life, mankind) is a beautiful thing," and with the playwright that one out of three is a good score. "Marigolds" continues Tuesday-Saturday through April 28 at 8:30. at 606 Laguna Canyon Blvd. (714-494-1743) — JIM MOORE

LA TIMES

### STAGE BEAT

## 'Gamma Rays' at Laguna Playhouse

The Laguna Moulton Playhouse's hard, unsentimental look at the characters in Paul Zindel's "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds" is just the treatment needed to offset its heavy debt to Tennessee Williams and its tendency to lower a diaphanous veil of fond recollection over some twisted lives.

It is not an altogether pleasant play. The metaphor of mutation radiates artfully through its structure and development, but at its heart it's cold, constricted and shrill. Annie Wood's strong performance as Beatrice (Betty the Loon), the virago who lays predatorily over the spirits of her daughters, is almost unsympathetic. She doesn't openly play for laughs; the plaintiveness that occasionally spells her dreary bouts of neurotic vituperation seems that of psychic exhaustion rather than a plea for sympathy; her bitchiness is untrammelled and fearsome.

All of it provides a rationale for the oblique directions taken by her daughters, Ruth into the heats of sex and Tillie into cool abstractions of science. Warren J. Deacon's direction is a little chancy, and it works; we're afforded the exultation of a glimpse of light at the end of a bitter experience, and it's revivifying.

Rachel Arnone as Ruth and Gwenda Amy as Tillie seem a bit mature for their roles, but their performances are well-integrated nonetheless. William Woods's fine original score is apropos if undeveloped, and Gregory Bolton's lighting and ramshackle set are first-rate. Bette Killion plays Nanny and Beth Ann Eroen is the insufferable contestant, Janice Vickery. Tuesdays through Saturdays (8:30 p.m.) at 606 Laguna Canyon Road, Laguna Beach. (714) 494-0743.

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## Theater Reviews

## 'Gamma Rays' Radiates Intensity

At Alternative Repertory, the director's sharp focus is complemented by the constrained action and the intimate staging.

May 17, 1995 | T.H. McCULLOH, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

SANTA ANA — Playwright Paul Zindel was still teaching high-school science in the early '70s when his first play opened on Broadway. It was named after a science experiment, "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds." It also was semi-autobiographical. The play's Beatrice, like Zindel's own mother, continually embraces money-making schemes.

The Pulitzer Prize-winner is a sad and angry play by an angry young man. He finds within his own world the heartbreaking frustration that gives the play its core as well as the dim glimmer of hope that gives it its underlying sense of eventual redemption.

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"Marigolds" is not an easy play to stage. Mother Beatrice is unabashedly nasty. Daughter Tillie, the play's heroine, is a dreamer without emotional strength to back it up. The other daughter, Ruth, is a Beatrice-in-training.

In a sharply delineated production at Alternative Repertory Theatre, director Ernest Albert Figueroa uses the simplicity of constrained action to form a miniature portrait of the trio seen darkly through Zindel's cracked mirror.

David Scaglione's evocatively scuzzy setting, lighted with painterly strokes by Looi Goring, helps give the action the isolation it needs. The small ART stage is just right to keep the focus sharp.

Tillie, whose only momentary hope is winning a school science competition with her mutated marigolds, is played by Dina Bartello with a rewarding sense of wonder, laced with a feistiness just beginning to manifest itself. Bartello's adolescent victim will survive, but not without deep scars.

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Laurie Messerly is Ruth, the pretty daughter who is Beatrice's favorite--until the mother's pride in Tillie's achievement violently switches her allegiance. Messerly's image of Ruth's unthinking selfishness and vanity is saved by the underlying charm that has made Ruth popular at school.

The solidity of the production is provided by the controlled power of Gwenda Deacon's Beatrice. Beatrice's frustration at a totally failed life, her inability to handle the smallest trauma and her psychological instability have a jagged, razor-sharp edge in Deacon's performance. The few brief glimpses of perverse humor Deacon allows her only add to the resounding reality of a warped woman who exclaims, "I hate the world."

Kelly Dunn, in two small roles--the ancient crone Beatrice is paid to take care of and Tillie's ditsy opponent in the contest--is as effective as Figueroa's in-your-face take on Zindel's quirky glance at women at war with themselves.

\* "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds," Alternative Repertory Theatre, 1636 S. Grand Ave.,

*Santa Ana. Thursday through Saturday, 8 p.m.; Sunday, 5 p.m. Ends June 18. \$16. (714) 836-7929. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes.*

Dina Bartello: Tillie

Gwenda Deacon: Beatrice

Laurie Messerly: Ruth

Kelly Dunn: Nanny/Janice

An Alternative Repertory Theatre production of Paul Zindel's drama, produced by Kathleen A. Bryson. Directed by Ernest Albert Figueroa. Scenic design: David Scaglione. Lighting design: Looi Goring. Costume design: Abel Zeballos. Sound design: Gary Christensen. Production stage manager: Todd Alan Fuessel.

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