

## The Loonies Carry the Night

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### *Arsenic and Old Lace*

by Joseph Kesselring

Directed by Don Doyle

Hale Centre Theatre, Gilbert

(480) 497-1181

October 14 - November 27, 2004

\$9.00 - \$16.00

**Joseph Kesselring's** *Arsenic and Old Lace* is one of those classic comedy scripts that succeed under most every condition. Its clever and light use of old ladies, madness, murder, and self-referential theatre is a sure hit with all audiences. Because of this, it has been a staple of community, high school, and college theatres since the early 1940s. With no surprise, it appears as the first official production of **Hale Center Theatre's** second full season under the direction of valley vet **Don Doyle**.

When a few of the actors hit their mark with this piece, no matter how many other problems might exist, the audience roars with delight. So it is with this production: The two central wearers of old lace, **Shirley Windhorst** as Abby Brewster and **Alice Bjorklund** as Martha, are strongly presented; **James Melita** earnestly and enjoyably portrays gentle nutcase Teddy Brewster, who imagines himself to be Teddy Roosevelt; and scary prodigal brother, the scar faced Jonathan, is agreeably portrayed by **Gary Stephens**. When four of the main characters succeed, so does the evening. They overcome the other three main character's problems handily.

Doyle's direction keeps the proceedings zipping along seamlessly. His cast executes the blocking in the round quite successfully on **John Autore's** perfectly appointed set. If there's anything that can be seen as wrong with Doyle's contribution, it's that he sometimes allows select members of his cast to try too hard to get laughs.

With a script this yuck-filled, it really isn't necessary to embellish, and those actors mentioned above understand this, modulating their performances accordingly. This is definitely not the case with **Bret Anderson's** offering of central character and youngest brother Mortimer. Anderson chooses to play Mortimer not as a drama critic, but rather a drama queen. After the first moments of relative calm, as events get rolling he kicks into overdrive and remains at this high-octane level until the final minutes of this over two-and-a-half hour show. He offers only two levels: exposition and freak-out. Balancing him is **Katie Healey** as his love interest Elaine. Healey recites her lines as though they are written on teleprompters on her castmate's foreheads. Not surprisingly, Healy and Anderson never come close to connecting on a romantic level; Anderson barely connects with anyone, while Healey connects with foreheads only. In the smaller role of Jonathan's sidekick, the Peter Lorre-inspired Dr. Einstein, **Sean Dixon's** German accent often boards the Berlin/Dublin express, and he's simply too cutesy to buy as a drunken-if-reticent criminal surgeon. He also needs to beg one of the designers to allow him to get rid of that awful red wig.

The remaining ensemble has their high points and low, sometimes in the same actor. As next-door neighbor and father to Elaine, **Steve Mittelbrun's** Reverend

Harper is atrocious, but when he returns at the end as the hard-bitten Lieutenant Rooney, he is a hoot.

In addition to Autore's wonderful sets, **Cyndee Smith** costumes the cast in reasonably period dress. **David Dietlein's** lights are uniform in coverage but cues call attention to themselves much too often, and sometimes seem superfluous.

Despite weakness in a few central characters, this production still incites a lot of laughter. It is a successful, if a tiny bit qualified, way to open the second season of this family-oriented company.