

Hearts of Gold Lamé

Ruthless!

Written by Joel Paley
Directed by Tome Cousin
Theatre at Hartwood
Thru Oct. 29, 767-4738

Drop whatever you're doing, put the dog in the kennel, cancel your weekend plans. The thing you've got to do is get yourself out to the Hartwood Mansion at Hartwood Acres for the play event of the young season: *Ruthless!*, an hilarious musical fable for the '90s.

This campy salute to the movies and the theater is expertly directed and cast by Tome Cousin. No one individually steals the show — they all do in tour de force performances that are terrifically stylish and at times mind-boggling.

Writer Joel Paley has come up with a combination Shirley Temple and the cute little evil Rhoda Penmark from *The Bad Seed* to produce Tina Denmark, an ambitious child, played to the hilt by Eliza Chetlin.

Tina tells her mother, Judy, that she's had a "normal childhood. It's time to move on." Tina yearns for the lead in the school play "Pippi in Tahiti." When she loses to Louise Lerman, she kills her, and because she was the understudy, gets the part.

Tina's conventional 1950's mother, wonderfully played and sung by Sharon Connelly-Schaller, has that Leslie Gore-Brenda Lee hairdo and Stepford Wife gaze.

Egging Tina on is the outrageous talent agent Sylvia St. Croix, played brilliantly by Ted Hoover (and better than the actor in the New York production I saw a few years ago). Hoover is all style and arched eyebrows as he moves across the stage in fabulous dresses. But he is insanely funny in a performance that seems to have touches of Rosalind Russell, Charles Busch, Charles Ludlum, and Mrs. Doubtfire. Yet after all, it's really pure Hoover playing Sylvia as a manipulator with a heart of gold lamé.

Lenora Nemetz is equally sensational in two roles: as Miss Thorn, Tina's frustrated Third Grade teacher, and as the loopy reporter in a Barbra Streisand take-off. She belts her lines with great comic effectiveness, and yet she keeps her focus in a masterfully understated way. Equally delicious is Jon Bickey, playing Tina's grandmother with a wig and a dress from Hell and a singing voice that, like Merman's, soars through the ceiling.

Finally, Gwyneth Welling-Shahen makes a great deal out of poor Louise, the girl who gets the part and departs the planet. In Act II she plays Eve, the scheming ambitious assistant to a major Broadway diva, who happens to be Judy Denmark now Ginger DelMarco.

So if you like your musicals served red hot, don't pass up *Ruthless!* Besides, you don't want to miss Jared Leese's breathtaking costumes, or Tony Ferrieri's stylish sets, or Matthew Shaffer's appropriate lighting. What are you waiting for? For the TV season to get better? Forget it. Go to the theater and see for yourself why Ted Hoover may become the new runway model for the '90s. It's a fashion statement you'll not forget soon.

—Richard E. Rauh

Flyin' West

Written by Pearl Cleage
Directed by Eileen J. Morris
Stephen Foster Memorial Theatre
Thru Oct. 7, 648-7298

The Pittsburgh premiere of *Flyin' West* by Pearl Cleage produced by Kuntu Rep is a delight. A story of African American pioneer women, *Flyin' West*, weaves history, politics, philosophy, and spiritualism together in an old-fashioned melodrama, and it is in the moments of gleeful melodrama that this production is at its best.

There are good guys and bad guys and everybody gets their just desserts as a family of women struggles to hold on to their Kansas land that is as one character says, "big enough for the spirits of all my dead babies to



Ted Hoover

roam." The script, though, finds its best ground in smaller poetic truths, in painful histories, and primal dances that celebrate the timeless connection of women to one another, to the land, and to an ancient spiritualism.

The cast, under the direction of Eileen J. Morris, artistic director of the Ensemble Theatre of Houston, is talented and capable. Chrystal Bates as Sophie Washington, the family's spirited defender, drives this production and is, as always, reason alone to see the play.

The cumulative effect of this production cannot be assessed without mentioning the involved, committed, enthusiastic audience that Kuntu attracts: they cheer and boo, laugh and talk back, and finally leap to their feet in a standing ovation, establishing a palpable dialogue between audience and performance that is genuine theater.

—Melissa Martin

Pippin

by Stephen Schwartz
Directed by Joe Deer
Kresge Theatre, CMU
Thru Oct. 7, 268-2407

Twenty five years ago, *Pippin* was Broadway's bourgeois, slick, insulting reply to the earnest issues of self, posed by the better part of a generation. Today, it just seems irrelevant and vacuous; a tepid take on what we might keep and forsake.

It's not surprising, though, that Carnegie Mellon's student musical theater program would choose to do the play. *Pippin's* got lots of roles for the student players, and doesn't necessarily stretch them past student level work. It's also got a history tied to CMU, having been written by Stephen Schwartz when he was an undergraduate. The only surprise, frankly, is that Mr. Schwartz, in 1968, could have penned the pap this play plies and still gotten his degree.

What thrilled Broadway then seems unthrilling now, especially the painfully long first act wherein Prince Pippin tries to find himself and loses us irretrievably. It's not until the second act that we learn the essence of life according to Schwartz; it "is more than ducks that die."

Chill, you say. This is a play about Charlemagne and his man-child son, not Viet Nam or Chicago or Woodstock or anything like that. Historians say the only three things wrong with the Holy Roman Empire were that it was not holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. Stands to reason a play on the subject wouldn't be about anything much at all.

In fact, all that saves this production from itself are the players who try very hard and the several who succeed admirably (David Ford, Victoria Prescott Reiniger, and those marvelous chorus players). But they're wading upstream because ducks do die, and some plays should follow suit.

—A. Levine