

## Aggie Players twist, turn through 'Deathtrap'

By Timm Doolen

Strong performances and an incredible script make the Aggie Players' "Deathtrap" a play not to be missed this weekend at MSC Summer Dinner Theater.

The play, which premiered last weekend, is a complex, suspenseful play filled with so many twists and turns that it is often difficult to tell what is really going on.

The story: The career of middle-aged playwright Sidney Bruhl (Clay Loveless) is going downhill when he casually tells his wife that he is going to kill a theater student and steal his recently written play, which is named "Deathtrap."

At first, the wife Myra (Julie Oliver) doesn't take him seriously, but all the circumstances are perfect. When the young playwright Clifford Anderson (Steven De Korne) visits the Bruhls to go over the finer points of improving "Deathtrap," nobody sees him going to the house and no other copies of the play exist.

Myra desperately pleads with Clifford not to give into the temptation of killing just to have a good play, even pointing out that her weak heart could not take the shock. Myra also mentions that a Dutch psychic, Helga ten Dorp (Christina Vela-O'Connor), has just moved into the neighborhood, and that she would surely know if there was a murder in the house.

And this is just in the first 30 minutes of the play. The rest of the play is filled with so many plot twists that to give any of them away would ruin the experience for those who have not seen it.

Director Robert Wenck's version of "Death-

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trap" is a bit different than other's I've seen, being much more comical. And it worked. The play, while deadly serious in concept, comes off as a riotously funny situation comedy, due in large part to the eccentric portrayal of most of the characters.

Oddly enough, its strong point (the comedy) was also a slight flaw, because I found myself laughing even during the murder scenes. And although that was probably the intended effect, I thought a little more suspense around those scenes might have made the show a little bit better.

As far as the acting is concerned, Loveless performed wonderfully in the lead part of Sidney, having a sense of timing which is much needed in this comical thriller.

I was not quite as impressed with the performance of De Korne as Clifford who delivered



SONDRA N. ROBBINS/The Battalion  
Christina Vela-O'Connor grips Julie Oliver's hand in "Deathtrap," the Aggie Players' presentation for MSC Summer Dinner Theater. Vela-O'Connor plays a psychic who is seeing a glimpse of the future in this scene.

many lines too fast and even missed some in the second act. Also, while the character is a homosexual and the play was done comically (almost farcically), I think he overplayed the homosexual aspect of his character.

But Vela-O'Connor and John Mabry in the roles of the psychic and the legal consultant, respectively, stole the show during their brief scenes, with eccentric caricatures that fit the mood of the overall play. On the other hand, Oliver as Myra played the part a little too seriously in comparison with the eccentricity

of the other parts.

In all honesty, the strength of the wonderful script by Ira Levin could probably carry the play even if it were a below-par production. But the performances, direction and production are all quite good, and will provide a good evening's entertainment.

The dinner begins at 6:30 tonight, Friday and Saturday, with the play beginning at 8. Tickets for the dinner and theater are \$17.50, and \$5 for just the play. For more information, call the box office at 845-1234.

## 'Caught in the Villain's Web'



StageCenter presents  
summer melodrama

By Julia E.S. Spencer

StageCenter's summer melodrama has been a Bryan-College Station tradition as far back as I can remember. As a kid, I don't know which I liked best: singing turn-of-the-century popular songs, booing and throwing popcorn at the villain, or waiting for the dastardly fellow to shoot the piano player after the curtain call. At Saturday's performance of "Caught in the Villain's Web," however, there was no doubt as to the kids' - and adults' - favorite pastime. Showering the bad guys with popcorn was the absolute, hands-down winner. The cast seemed to enjoy every minute of the buttered-and-salted deluge, and gleefully reciprocated, much to the delight of the audience. (Beware the front row!)

The old-fashioned sing-along on the other hand, was reduced to a few songs before the show, which didn't give the audience as much time to warm up as the longer between-act sets used to. The oltos, or incidental entertainment, were also missing, but the length of the play itself, and the recent death of StageCenter founder and popularolio performer Wendell Landmann may have been partly responsible for their omission.

As for the melodrama itself, "Web" had all the requisite characters and more, each accompanied by the appropriate piano music: a beautiful, naive heroine (Suzanne Shaw), a jut-jawed, lovelorn hero (Joel Mitchell), a ruthless, grasping villain (Heath Allyn), an unwilling accomplice (Tim Newkirk), a woman of questionable virtue (Stacey Noessel), some meddling mothers (Joan Pitman and Phyllis Bess), a friendly doctor (Harold Presley), an annoying younger sibling (Anita Vantreesse), and a seductive French maid (Annie Menzel).

The plot of this turbulent saga of good vs. evil thickens in the house of Mrs. Regina Larkfield, who is feigning sickness so that her horticulture-

mind son Malvern will follow her wishes and marry manipulative Nella Hargrave. Before that can happen, he falls madly in love with Felicity Fair, the amnesia-stricken nurse sent to care for his mother.

Meanwhile, Cyril Bothingwell, a maliciously greedy former attorney, has designs on the Larkfield estate, and uses Brockton the butler's chequered past to force him into service (boo, hiss). He also takes advantage of Felicity's amnesia to falsely claim her as his long-lost wife (boo, hiss!). Only a playwright could get someone out of a mess like this, so it's a good thing that Herbert E. Swayne, whose play this is, was up to the task. The entertaining if improbable end result twists and turns, always staying a few steps ahead of the audience.

The acting Saturday was rather uneven, due to the differences in age, experience, talent and acting style. Actors who began rather woodenly, however, seemed to warm to the material and the audience's copious laughter, and loosened up considerably as they went along. The stiffness of some line readings didn't seriously detract from my enjoyment of the truly funny dialogue, but merely failed to add anything to it.

First-time director Julie Haight extracted especially good performances from Shaw, as the naive Felicity, Allyn as the dexterous villain Bothingwell, Vantreesse as whiny Lona Larkfield, Menzel as the tempting and impeccably French-accented Denise, and of course inimitable KTAM disc jockey Presley as affable, wife-wary Dr. Hugo Belch.

Haight also made good use of the simple 1890s drawing-room set, and touched on all the essential "mellodramer" clichés that avid fans look for. Will someone rescue Felicity before it's too late, and the audience runs out of air-popped missiles? Only time - and next week's Thursday through Saturday performances at 8 p.m. - will tell...

## Texas Music Festival

# Symphonic Brass Quartet continues classical series

By Margaret Colman

The Symphonic Brass Quintet and members of the University of Houston School of Music faculty with pianist Timothy Hester presented an exciting and well-varied program as part of the Texas Music Festival in Rudder Theatre Monday night.

Opening the program was Francis Poulenc's (1899-1963) "Trio for Oboe, Piano and Bassoon." Composed in 1926, it is considered his first important chamber work and contains much of the French grace which typifies his later compositions.

The opening chords in the piano were a bit bangy, but Timothy Hester instantly backed away as oboeist Robin Hough and bassoonist Marilyn Chappell entered, and I realized his introduction was intentional. Hough consistently overpowered the others, and was harsh at times, yet his tone on piano was beautiful.

Chappell had difficulty projecting, which was more the hall's fault than her own, but when she could be heard it was beautifully played.

Hester was joined by his father, Byron Hester, on flute and Jeffrey Lerner on clarinet for Ernest Bloch's (1880-1059) "Concertino for Flute, Clarinet and Piano." The woodwinds faced the audience rather than each other, and I lost

the feeling of communication between players.

The winds' stands were lowered to keep from visually interfering with the audience, but the result was more distracting: the performers had to bend over the music, which meant the visual communication one expects from chamber music appeared lacking.

Notes in the upper register of the flute cracked and notes in the low register of the clarinet were raw, and the phrases were not allowed natural endings. A few unison passages could have used a little more attention.

Despite these problems, the performance was enjoyable, although it did not deliver the emotional impact this piece and, I'm sure, these performers, are capable.

The Symphonic Brass Quintet was the highlight of the evening, presenting works by Alexander Arutunian (b.1920) and Victor Ewald (1860-1935). Both of these Soviet composers drew on folksongs for inspiration.

Arutunian's "Armenian Scenes for Brass Quintet" consisted of four short pieces. The first, "Morning Song," was a gentle prelude, with voices entering one by one to create a rich blanket of sound. The performers were sensitive to one another and to the music.

The "Drinking Song" was complete with slides from the trombone and bawdy crescendos, but

they were approached a little tentatively for the nature of the song.

The opening chord of the "Song of Grief" was faulty, but the group quickly recovered for the next chord. The open tonalities and stark quality were similar to Shostakovich's barren "String Quartet #8."

The final piece of the set, "Wedding Procession," began with muted trumpets alternating back and forth followed by rapid scale passages in each instrument. A passage borrowed from bandstand era brass let the audience forgive the dissonances and applaud with a smile.

The concert concluded with a well-known piece - a common play when including unusual works on a program. Ewald's "Brass Quintet No. 3" was easily accessible. The performance was carefully planned if clichéd, and even a few blundered passages could not detract from the simple beauty of the piece.

The Andante gave the group a chance to show off individual talents with lush solos over a meshed background. The overall sensitivity of the performers was most impressive - so often, balance is distorted by an overeager tuba, but this was not the case. The trumpets exhibited seamless phrases of long held notes, and the phrases were delicately handled, making the Symphonic Brass Quintet a delight to hear.

## A&M professor plays medieval knight

By Holly Becka

Dragons and their ilk are more often associated with knights of medieval legends, certainly not 20th century College Station and Texas A&M's Department of Oceanography.

But Dr. Doug Biggs, an associate professor of oceanography, caught a dragon last week and kept it alive, unlike his knightly counterparts who slayed their dragons. In fact, Biggs' dragon was captured in a net and is on display in a saltwater tank at Pet Paradise in College Station.

While doing research in the Gulf of Mexico, Biggs caught a Sargassum dragon fish hiding under floating seaweed, from which the animal gets its name. The fish, in the genus *Histrio*, is not rare. But Biggs' haul is one of the largest scientists have seen, coming in at a mere four inches.

When onlookers first approach the tank, they probably won't see the fish because seaweed conceals the fish in its tangled, yellow hues.

"The fish is the same color as the seaweed and its body is almost seaweed shaped with the projections on it," Biggs says. "It wiggles the weed-like projections, which serve as fishing lures to attract prey. This fish is a great example of evolutionary adaptation and an animal matching its surroundings."

Another interesting modification to the dragon fish is its fins, which look roughly like arms and



RICHARD S. JAMES/The Battalion  
Dr. Doug Biggs coaxes a Sargassum dragon fish out of its hiding place of a Sargassum seaweed plant in his aquarium at Pet Paradise.

legs. The fish uses these to hold on to seaweed, thereby remaining motionless so it doesn't scare away its food. This denizen of the deep gulps in large volumes of water to eat its prey.

The dragon fish doesn't swim in schools, but instead finds solo contentment in its drifting, Sargassum seaweed. Sargassum is the Portuguese word for grapes; the seaweed has round, "grape-like" gas-filled floats which help it progress along the water's surface.

Biggs and the researchers on the Gyre, a vessel operated by A&M and based in Galveston, were not looking for oceanic life they were obtaining water samples for geochemical research. But Biggs

will tell you that doing research at sea always brings unexpected discoveries.

"It is uncommon to find creatures of the open ocean on the Texas continental shelf," he says.

While the dragon fish usually is found hundreds of miles into the ocean's expanses, researchers found this fish only 60 miles offshore because tidal currents had brought deep oceanic life to the more shallow, coastal waters.

The menacing-looking fish will be displayed at the Brazos Valley Museum when the building's new wing is completed.

"People can learn a lot about ecology from this," Biggs says. "It's the perfect camouflage fish. This is not a hard science thing, it's fun."