

If you bring your sense of humor,

Downstairs Cabaret's 'Nunsense' could be habit-forming

By Emily Morrison

"Nunsense" has burst out of the convent closet at Downstairs Cabaret, in full-length, black pre-Vatican II regalia, and it's an irreverent laugh a quarter-minute — at the expense of everyone from the "B.V.M." on down the line to the mistress of novices and lowly Sister Mary Amnesia.

Be forewarned: you'll have to remember to bring along your sense of humor if you're planning to approach this award-winning, off-broadway musical revue in the spirit in which it was intended. The controversy that's attended performances of "Agnes of God" and "Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You" doesn't appear to accompany this lighthearted spoof as it makes the rounds of major cities with substantial Catholic populations.

Indeed, reviews by Catholic newspapers have been overwhelmingly positive, even though the humor is clearly risqué and certain to offend a few of those whose sensibilities have been buffeted of late by Catholic controversies ranging from screenings of Jean-Luc Godard's "Hail Mary" to the Curran-Hunthausen Vatican censures.

"It's gotten the support of the Catholic community in every city it's played in," says director Jerry Algozer, who cites letters from priests and sisters as evidence of the play's palatability to Catholic audiences.

Cast member Phyl Contestable, who portrays the voluble Mother Mary Regina, sees significant potential for "Nunsense" to serve as a unifying factor, particularly in the face of recent local polarization brought about by the Curran controversy. "It's a chance to just get together and relax a bit, and certainly celebrate the tradition we've all come from," said the popular area actress and former Sister of Mercy after a preview performance last week.

Any brouhaha that surrounds this production may well be thoroughly extinguished by the chorus of belly-laughs that seems to engulf audiences of every persuasion, wherever the play has opened. Last week in Rochester, the talented cast had a primarily secular audience practically rolling in the aisles with a litany of good, ribald fun sprinkled liberally with off-color swipes at "sacred cows" dear to the hearts of anyone who ever attended Catholic school.

The play's thoroughly silly premise centers on a New Jersey convent inhabited by the "Little Sisters of Hoboken," whose inept cook, Sister Julia, Child of God, has managed to fatally poison 52 members of the congregation with tainted vichyssoise. The grisly outcome of this inadvertent culinary mishap leaves four dead sisters stored temporarily in the convent freezer until the necessary funds can be procured to give them a proper burial.

You've got it: "Agnes of God" it's not. Reeling off the painfully obvious one- and two-



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Phyl Contestable (center) as the mother superior does her rendition of the "convent Miranda look," while Terri White (left) as Sister Mary Hubert and Robin Boudreau as Sister Mary Amnesia form her fast-stepping convent chorus line.

liners at a pace so dizzying you scarcely have time to groan, the five surviving "Little Hobos" sing, vamp, mug and tap-dance their way into the hearts of an audience that in all likelihood includes a few "plainclothes nuns" as suffused with mirth as anyone in the gathered company.

As lightweight as the plot appears, there's hardly a moment's let-up in the action. The musical numbers are brilliant, the comical timing of the cast superb, and the set is a pastiche of Catholic-school gymnasium kitsch. Local Sisters of St. Joseph and Sisters of Mercy served as advisors on details of stage set and costuming, according to Contestable, who taught at Our Lady of Mercy High School until last year and maintains her affiliation with the order through her membership in the Mercy associate program.

The Downstairs Cabaret stage is festooned with everything from devotional statues to posters of Marilyn Monroe and James Dean,

a soda shop bar and stools, an exercise bike, and a plaid '50s-model car seat stationed strategically beneath a triptych of hairdryers. The gym of Mt. St. Helens School serves as the impromptu stage for a nun-produced "fund-raiser" aimed at appropriating funds to help the sisters achieve their zany goal of ultimately defrosting their dear departed sisters from the convent deep-freeze.

Touches of divine comedic inspiration include vaudeville shuffles with rosaries swinging, jazz squares in orthopedic high-heels, rulers brandished for the purpose of administering "gentle but firm" corporal punishment to errant audience members, and "the convent Miranda look" (complete with maracas and plastic bananas). A habit-and-wimple-garbed ventriloquist's hand puppet with the appropriate name of "Sister Mary Annette" is trotted out by the immensely engaging Robin

Boudreau as Sister Mary Amnesia, the waiflike charmer who secretly aspires to be a country-music star.

If you like allusion, you'll catch glimpses of "Swan Lake," the Queen of the Night aria from Mozart's "The Magic Flute," George Gershwin, Sophie Tucker, "The Return of the Jedi" and "The Wizard of Oz." And the fabulous Terri White as Sister Mary Hubert, belting out a gospel number entitled "I'm Holier Than Thou," is worth the full price of admission.

"Nunsense" opens October 17 at the Downstairs Cabaret, 151 St. Paul Place, and runs Thursdays and Fridays at 8 p.m., Saturdays at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m., and Sundays at 3 p.m., until further notice. Special rates are available for priests, nuns, ministers and rabbis, as well as groups of non-clerical "civilians." In addition, special performances can be arranged by calling the theater at 262-2300.

St. Mary's Hospital slates 'baby reunion,' Seton Sale

If you were born at St. Mary's Hospital or delivered a child there, be sure not to miss the "baby reunion" set to coincide with the 30th annual Seton Sale on October 25. The sale will be at St. Thomas More School, 2617 East Ave., Rochester, from 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Bring along a St. Mary's "birth diploma" to socialize with old nurserymates and share in a special cake. Special buttons will be distributed to designate every "St.

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In addition to the baby reunion, the sale will offer the homemade crafts and collectibles that have become a St. Mary's tradition.

The gala also includes a silent auction, flea market, health fair and baked-foods booth. All proceeds from the sale will benefit the Family Birthplace of St. Mary's Health Care Services.



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