

Comedy Tonight

'A Funny Thing Happened
on the Way to the Forum'
Wisner Theater

'American Buffalo'/Sherwood Brewing Co.

Donavan Schinkel opens Court Theatre's *Forum* by singing, "Morals tomorrow—comedy tonight!"

Nothing gets in the way of entertainment in the Stephen Sondheim musical, and the results are terrific; *Forum* is a funny, amazingly physical farce with, as Schinkel sings, "something for everyone."

The story: Schinkel's Pseudolus, a Roman slave, promises to win the hand of courtesan Philia (Lise Brown) for his master's son (Bruce Dillman) in exchange for freedom. The problem: Philia has been sold to another.

Eventually, the central plot gets lost in the shuffle, and that's fine; the audience has a wonderful time following the fifteen characters as they muddle through the play, pausing periodically to sing catchy, amusing songs.

In the opening number, the ensemble promises the audience "a happy ending," and they deliver.

The theater-in-the-round production is typically clean, and staging is endlessly diverting—actors sprint and tumble on and off stage without incident, a real feat considering the small playing space.

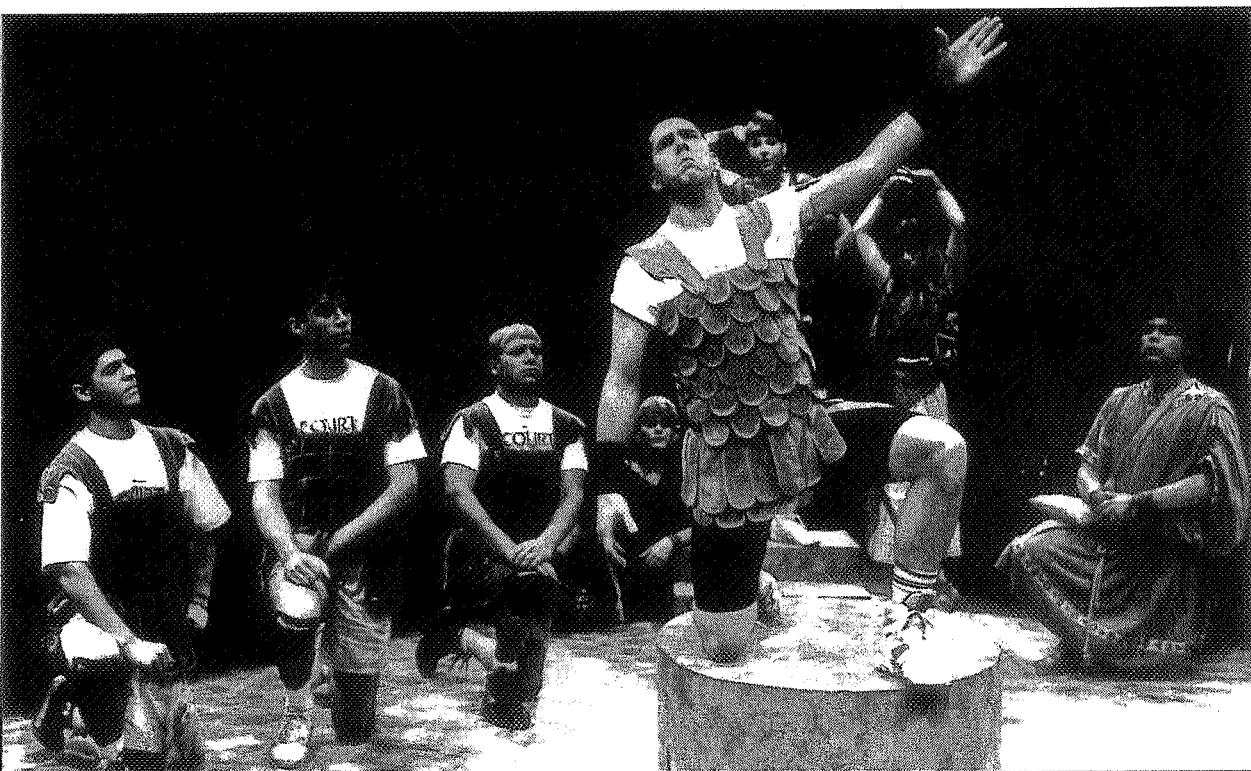
The acting is consistently good, the diverse Court Theatre talents blending together well. This summer's troupe is composed largely of actors best known for comedic roles, which bodes well for the next five shows, all comedies in some sense.

One gets the impression that Schinkel's Pseudolus is supposed to mastermind the whole show, supposed to be the only one who really knows what's going on. Despite robust singing and only a few, forgivable missed line cues, Schinkel simply doesn't command the attention the character needs to.

As usual, Steve Wiecking makes his character the show's funniest. He's simply this town's finest comic actor, a real delight to watch.

As vain gladiator Miles Gloriosus, Ronald Pate—sporting a Hitler Youth haircut—is wonderful, singing his self-infatuated theme song ("I am a parade") strongly.

Audience favorites Tony Bridgers, Michael Gannon and Johnny Lancaster play the Proteans, a jack-of-all-trades crew constantly leaving the stage and reappearing in slightly different guise.



I AM A PARADE Three Proteans, three courtesans and Pseudolus the slave watch in awe—or maybe revulsion—as Miles Gloriosus (Ronald Pate, on pedestal) sings his self-infatuated theme song in Court Theatre's hilarious production of Sondheim's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

Brown, playing the beautiful-but-dumb Philia, demonstrates a gorgeous voice on "Lovely," and Patrick McBride, Paul Stout and the rest acquit themselves as well in both singing and acting.

Forum has been virtually sold out since last Thursday; I suggest anyone interested in seeing any of the remainder of the season obtain tickets soon.

Fulfilling all hopes for Plank and a Passion's *American Buffalo*, director Tim Burruss has compiled an extraordinary show from an exceptional cast, script and space.

The Plank crew—for this show, more or less the three actors and assistant director Charmaine Colvin—has transformed Sherwood Brewery's small back room into an authentic junk shop, with the audience seated on past-their-prime chairs carrying price tags, in the middle of the action as part of the set.

Close attention has been paid to detail in both stage and acting, pointing out how seldom other groups, like Theatre Out of a Suitcase, work up a sweat doing so.

David Mamet's script about three crooks planning to rip off a coin collection pulls no punches. Characters speak in Mamet's contemporary shorthand, and language is harsh, with power shifts and real violence *a la* Sam Shepard.

Though *American Buffalo* is certainly shocking and dramatic, this cast keeps the show balanced, with a surprising amount of humor. The characters are imperfect—even incompetent—and echoes of the Three Stooges are evident.

Burruss as the distracted Donnie is good, and Michael Hannon's eager Bobby is better, but the remarkable Joe Hilsee manages to be astonishingly convincing as the frustrated Teach without upstaging anyone. He's phenomenal.

Hilsee and Burruss pull off characters intended to be twice the actors' ages as they talk about business, relationships, trust, poker and coins.

Mamet isn't for everyone, and the type of people who tend to comprise Court Theatre's audience may find the production disturbing. But this is a powerful production of a kind

rarely seen here; Plank and a Passion have again proven that a niche exists for modern drama in Chico.

—MATTHEW BUDMAN