

# O'Dowd stages ambitious 'Gypsy' Friday, 1/12

■ *The school's production concluded a three-weekend run.*

By Charles Levin  
The Montclarion

Let's face it, staging *Gypsy* at a Catholic high school has got to raise a few eyebrows out there. Don't get me wrong—I don't have a problem with the play. I've always loved it. How could you not?

Arthur Laurents' book, Jule Styne's music and Stephen Sondheim's lyrics tell the story of Rose, show business mother from hell, er ... Seattle. Determined to hang on to vaudeville even though it's evaporating like the morning mist, she partners with Herbie, a sweet man with a bent toward marriage and a fondness for her kids, June and Louise.

But Rose keeps Herbie's marital interests at arm's length while the two of them drag the kids' act around the country—except it's always the same act with the same song ("Let Me Entertain You") and always featuring June—only the costumes and premise change (Baby June and her Newsboys, Farmboys, etc.). Until, one day baby June decides she's no baby and elopes with one of the dancers.

The story's epiphany, of course, is Louise who emerges from clutzy tomboy to salacious striptease queen, usurping her mother's ego in the process. Poor Rose never really saw her kids as the act; she was living her life through her daughters' stage performances. But she's lost in denial. And that's why Herbie eventually walks out (as did three previous husbands).

Needless to say, the story, fused with family drama and just enough sex to keep your interest, has stood the test of time.

And it continued to do so for three more weekends in the hallowed halls of Bishop O'Dowd High School.

Which brings me to a conundrum. Sent by the entertainment editor to review the play, do I fulfill my duties by scrutinizing every last spoken line and sung note? For many of this wonderful ensemble's participants, thespian activities may only amount to a line in their yearbook. Others could be quite serious and talented, but this play might not have their best vehicle. And for most people (of any age when you're starting out) success and excellence does not come overnight.

Suffice to say, I can't treat this like Frank Rich and live with myself the next day. The former *New York Times* theater critic spewed so much venom from his word processor that "60 Minutes" profiled him as having the power to close a show after opening night with one stroke of an enter key (and how could anyone close down a high school show that just closed its run last weekend).

So painfully aware that I sat next to a leading cast member's parent last Friday night, I'll get it out of the way now—a huge E for effort for the entire cast, but a few members deserve a little more.

*Gypsy* is a show that defines whole careers. It did for Ethel Merman on the stage. It didn't for Rosalind Russell on celluloid—a forgettable performance. And it didn't for Bettie Midler on video, but not for lack of talent. Midler's performance was a knockout, but her credentials preceded were well established before that project.

However, it may for 17-year-old junior Sierra Rein, who every sec-

and on stage embodied the intense, self-aggrandizing, show-biz mom. Rein's Rose is every bit the pushy "broad," a theater owner's nightmare who must have everything her own way. She can't commit to milk-toast Herbie (played by Galen Moore), nor will she listen to his admonitions to abandon the dying vaudeville life.

Best of all, Rein elicits the near impossible from a high school performance: she convinces you she's an adult twice her age (and older).

June and Louise — Elyn Marsh and Amiee Perl, respectively — really sparkle in their roles and harmonized well together on "If Mama Was Married." Marsh's June, Rose's favorite to succeed in show biz, complete with cartwheels, painted-on Disneyland smiles and screechy squeals, is so authentic as to be annoying.

From a physical standpoint, O'Dowd's *Gypsy* had all the trimmings: an Arnie Goodpasture's choreography and Kelly Tighe's sets, which later metamorphosed the girls' gym very sparsely from apartment flats to gas stations to Chinese restaurants to numerous theater dressing rooms to the burlesque hall where Louise's transformation takes place.

And speaking of strippers, Mazeppa, Electra and Tessie Tura (K. Qy-Ana Manning, Shannon Shepherd and Amaya Brecher) almost nearly stole the show with "You Gotta Get a Gimmick," their burlesque primer for Louise. How can you resist a line like "bump it with a trumpet."

Another more subtle quality

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about O'Dowd's *Gypsy* is multicultural cast. For one thing, allows a certain amount of historical revisionism that I personally found pleasant. Integrated cast vaudeville were probably rare. Also, one couldn't help find genuine humor in an Asian member bemoaning another evening of Rose's staple diet, Chinese food.

If one valid criticism should be raised, O'Dowd's excellent production deserves better than a cheesy scoring, pre-recorded soundtrack created via computer-recorded sequence samplers and synthesizers.

Either upgrade the quality of the sounds and programming or, better yet, use real musicians (no thought, huh?). There's nothing that replaces the feeling you get from a tight, well-conducted orchestra when it launches into an overture. Unfortunately, it's not a moot point.

Beyond that, as a first timer to O'Dowd play, I can only say thank you to director Dennis Kohles and his cast — great job.