BU Comedies Quick to Please

By BOB DARDEN
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The Baylor Theater's ambitious double-bill of one-act comedies, "A Harlequinade" and "The Real Inspector Hound," inaugurated Theater B in the new downtown complex center in fine style. With director Patricia Cook's usual deft hand, the fast-paced evening of comedy proved a showcase for several exceptional performances.

Terrence Rattigan's "Harlequinade" probably will be the audience's favorite of the two. A broiled comedy on one hand, it's also a gentle spoof on the acting profession. Some of the particularly pointed sips or gaffes had the various drama majors scattered throughout the house laughing uncomfortably.

But that's part of this well-written gem's charm. It's a play-within-a-play. Two popular, though aging, English actors, Arthur (Randal Wilson) and Edna (Mae Makes Noble), are touring "Romeo and Juliet" through the British hinterlands. At one particularly forsaken stop, they encounter curious extras, long-lost daughters, jealous sweethearts, and recalcitrantights.

In between (well-done) rehearsals of the immortal Shakespeare, the couple bittersly operate in a bedroom known only to long-time theater devotees. It's almost like a heaven's worst nightmare come to spotlight life.

But "Harlequinade's" fragile soul belongs to harried director Jack (Christopher Coleman). Besides trying to do his death-level best in dealing with this bizarre collection of egos, he's got to send off his fiancée Joyce (Miss Williams) who wants him to quit and join her father's firm.

Complicating matters, Arthur's daughter Nuriel (Christi Moore), shows up and Arthur finds out he never really divorced her mother Fossie (Edna). As a result, Jack has a rough time handling his relationships.

But the stars — and rightly so — are Randal and Miss Noble. These are larger-than-life characters with the moods of children (in everything except theater). She never passes when she can parade. He never talks, but gestures dramatically. They can't be bothered with trifles (like divorce proceedings) unless they're in the minute of their craft.

Randi delivers the best strong comic lead since his "The Importance of Being Ernest" days. Miss Noble, despite her age handicap (she should be 47 and going to seed instead of 20 and attractive) matches him flourish for flourish.

The various foibles that bedevil them, especially the first half-derriere (Scott Thompson), abrasive Nuriel (Christi Moore) and the befuddled policeman (Brent Blair) are also nice in smaller roles. Coleman and Miss Williams have a bitersweet chemistry in their moments together.

"A Harlequinade" belongs to Arthur and Edna, as does "Romeo and Juliet" and — led by the strong leads — they pull it off with verve and aplomb.

"The Real Inspector Hound" is a somewhat more difficult, darker play. It can be more rewarding, despite some confusing turn of events. Like "Harlequinade," there are plays within plays, and author Tom Stoppard is determined to make things as opaque as possible in a broad slapstick comedy and biting indictment of critical excesses at the same time.

Two porous critics, Miss (Paul Thompson) and Birdfoot (Stephen Petty) are reviewing a new murder mystery. Miss is falling in for the main critic, a writer of considerable fame and prestige. Naturally, Miss both respects and hates him. He's given to lapsed fits of critical verbiage, dropping literary clichés and existential driev like so much dust. Birdfoot is a lecherous old fool, chasing two of the leads in the perfectly awful play.

It's a doozy, too: a muddled, rehearsing trier stereotypes in the classic manner. Felicity (Cathy White) and the stunning Cynthia (Tina Hightower) are both romanced by a handsome, mysterious stranger named Simon J. Scott Evans) is a fog-shrouded English manion. There has been a murder and a grand larceny. Is it one of the three leads? Or maybe the crip pled, emasculated Magnus (Eric Edby), the efficient, hateful maid Mrs. Drudge (Sandra Neckman) in an mysterious body (weedly played by Kevin Nollins berg).

But as the play unfolds, both Moon and Birdfoot are drawn — literally — into the action until Birdfoot leaps at Kafka-esque fashion right into the middle of the play. From there, the good repeats itself with one dangerous difference. Is any part of the production real? Where does the fantasy begin? Stoppard doesn't leave many clues.

THEATER REVIEW

Both "A Harlequinade" and "The Real Inspector Hound" succeed on every level. Fast-paced and funny, only the all-too-frequent inaudibility of some of the characters marred the evening.

The twin productions continue Thursday, Friday and Saturday at 7:30 p.m. in the Baylor Theater. Call 735-1884 for reservations.