

April 8, 2004 Thursday

SECTION: ENTERTAINMENT; Pg. 15

LENGTH: 614 words

HEADLINE: British laughs;
Noel Coward play focuses on a fractious family

BYLINE: NICK ROGERS ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT WRITER

BODY:

Even the best families have "those days," where tempers flare to the fever point and arguments rule conversation.

As weekend guests visit the ironically named Bliss family in Noel Coward's "Hay Fever," Eric Thibodeaux-Thompson says it becomes "a weekend of those days." He's directing the University of Illinois at Springfield's production of Coward's 1925 comedy, the spring production of the 2003-04 season for the university's theater program.

A British comedy of manners set in the era it was written, "Hay Fever" introduces us to the bickering Blisses - matriarch Judith (Beverly Ryan), a retired actress with a flair for making every crisis dramatic; her novelist husband David (Paul Cary); and their handsome but socially sniping children Sorel (Erica Smith) and Simon (Chad Eversgerd).

Each invites a visitor to their home for the weekend, but the guests quickly learn that perhaps the Blisses are offering up more insanity than hospitality. Rounding out the cast are Mallory Houghton, Edward Barnett, Melissa Betty, Brian Trammell and Anna Dow.

"They all really use language as a weapon," Thibodeaux-Thompson says of the Bliss family. "They have the appearance of being cultured or with it, but there's no substance. It's like a social contest to see how little they all can do to get attention, and I think the audience will appreciate those games."

"It really takes the humor from how families can argue or bicker, but everything gets back to fine," says Betty, who plays Myra Arundel, one of the Bliss family's guests. "I think people will watch it and say 'Thank God that's not my family.' "

"Or they'll say 'It is my family' and think it's funny because of that," adds Houghton, who plays Clara, the Cockney-accented maid.

When reading plays last summer to choose for this season, Thibodeaux-Thompson says he thought the time was right for the theater department to showcase this "decisively different world."

"It's beautifully written, filled with sayings from that day that may have been risqu then that are nothing now," he says. "I think it's simple and straightforward, but very effective."

Because all its characters are British, the actors have had to develop accents, and take care to neither make them over-the-top nor barely there.

Thibodeaux-Thompson gave them tapes to listen to and encouraged them to learn their lines with the accent. Some cast members developed their own accent homework methods.

"Monty Python," says Barnett, who plays guest Sandy Tyrell. "That troupe plays around with different dialects itself, so you just have to find one that suits your character. Then you can try it out in your daily life, try out your accent at work."

"Basically, they just have to pay attention to the process and trust it's there, like a second skin," says Thibodeaux-Thompson.

And although it is set in the 1920s, Thibodeaux-Thompson believes "Hay Fever's" comedic chops carry through to take a bite out of today's society.

"It dares to poke fun not only at eccentric people, but all of us in the way we behave one way at work and another way at home with a spouse or sibling," he says. "And all the Blisses have a desperate longing for something somewhere other than where they are. Who of us does not dream?"

"Hay Fever," 8 p.m. Friday, Saturday and April 15-17 and 2 p.m. Sunday and April 18, Studio Theatre in the Public Affairs Center at the University of Illinois at Springfield. Tickets are \$10, \$6 for university faculty and staff and \$4 for university students. They are available at the bursar's office in the Public Affairs Center from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday, over the phone at 206-6738 or at the door.

GRAPHIC: Melissa Betty rehearses a scene from "Hay Fever."

TYPE: LOCAL

LOAD-DATE: May 17, 2004