

theatre reviews

Sam Shepard's dark vision of the disintegration of the American family and spirit was best expressed in his 1977 "Curse of the Starving Class." Like the characters who populate Chekhov's "Three Sisters" and "The Cherry Orchard," those in "Curse..." are forever doomed, the victims of both their own inability to change their destiny and the impersonal powers and forces which seem to manipulate their lives.

The current revival, at Intar, ranks among the finest productions this season, on Broadway or off. Shepard's despairing vision is equally balanced with his mordant, black humor under Robin Lynn Smith's intense direction. There is a clarity to Smith's vision which manages to crystalize Shepard's

CURSE OF THE STARVING CLASS

REVIEWED BY
MARTIN SCHAEFFER

often rambling dialogue, making of it a sort of raw poetry. Performances in this short, three-acter are superb. Kathy Bates, last seen as the despairing daughter in "night, Mother," is the very prototype of the selfish, egocentric mother whose affection for her children takes second place to her own dreams of escape from her earthly hell. She is finely partnered by Eddie Jones's Weston, a husband and father who has lived the past few years in a drunken stupor, unable to raise himself by his own

bootstraps. Bill Pullman's Wesley and Karen Tull's Emma are the two offspring of this marriage. Pullman is both dryly humorous yet chillingly real as he gradually inherits the family's "curse." Tull's bratty reading is perfect even as we realize that she, too, will succumb to the hopelessness of ever leaving her family. James Gleason as Taylor, the lawyer representing the impersonal forces manipulating this dirt-farm family, is chilling in his eel-like cold calculation.

Kudos to Brian Martin's set, a large kitchen made of corrugated tin and scraps of wood and Mark W. Stanley's fluid lighting.

"Curse Of The Starving Class," presented by Patricia Daily and Arthur Master Productions, Inc. at Intar Theatre, 420 W. 42nd St., May 23-open run.

Spoofig

BROADWAY

Cabaret comedy from hit musicals

By HARRY HAUN

CONSIDERING the precarious health of today's Broadway musical, it's slightly miraculous to find *Forbidden Broadway* not only still in business but well into its fourth updated edition at Palsson's Supper Club (158 W. 72d). That's American ingenuity in action, creating something out of nothing, blithely carrying on in the best show-must-go-on tradition.

It hasn't been easy for Gerard Alessandrini, the show's wickedly witty creator-lyricist-director. It has been uphill, you can imagine, when the season's new batch of musicals consists entirely of "Harrigan 'n Hart" and "The Three Musketeers," and they folded before he could get any potshots in. And, since he doesn't play with dead things—there are rules in Broadway spoofing, apparently—Alessandrini is feeling the material pinch as much as Broadway.

The good news is that Nora Mae Lyng, from the original cast of "Forbidden Broadway," is now back in the starting lineup, flashing the best bitch smile this side of Coral Browne as she reprises two classic caricatures she originated: Patti LuPone ("Don't Cry for Me, Barbra Streisand") and Lauren Bacall ("I'm One of the Girls Who Sings Like a Boy").

Of the current cast, Jan Neuberger swings the hatchet with particular authority and wit, making mincemeat of Minnelli ("Poor Liza-One-Note") and a Carol Channing who has been in Dollywood a little too long. Herndon Lackey struts out some "Trouble"-shooting from Prof. Harold Hill ("Friends, the ideal theater's the devil's playground!"). Even the pianist, Fred Barron, gets into the act to do his standard solo spot, a Sondheim lament ("Send In the Crowds").

The best of the new material is a particularly good shot at George Hearn's end-of-the-first-act italics in "La Cage aux Folles": "I Ham What I Ham." And the duet-duel that used to be done by Mary Martin and Ethel Merman has now been reworked rather well into Chita Rivera-versus-Rita Moreno (Rita, who got an Oscar for Chita's role in "West Side Story," says she's doing the movie version of "The Rink," and the claws sprout on cue).

The dearth of Broadway musicals now has forced Alessandrini to induct some non-musical types into the act. The Royal Shakespeare Company prances imperiously by to "The Ascot Gavotte" from "My Fair Lady," and the

green-with-envy song from "Woman of the Year," "The Grass Is Greener," is turned into a lame duet for Neil Simon and Harvey Fierstein. But, ultimately, there's nothing wrong with "Forbidden Broadway" that some solid Broadway hits couldn't fix.

"Forbidden Broadway 1985" is verboten (black) on Monday night, and *Taboo in Revue* has just taken over its second-floor playing area for a 9:30 show every week. Interplay, an industrious young comedy-improv troupe plying their trade the hard way (on you), occupies the same space for an earlier show at 7:30.

There's nothing particularly taboo about "Taboo in Revue," but it is topical, *tres* contemporary and frequently hilarious. And it's pertly performed by a cast that consists of three "Godspell"-ers (Peggy Gordon, Robin Lamont and Leslie Ray) and one "Charlie Brown" (the original in "Snoopy": James Gleason). The women did the writing, but Gleason does the swiping and comes perilously close to running off with the show. I particularly like a little throw-away moment where he's singing "I want to be a part of it, New York, New York" as he's setting up his cardboard house on the street. And he wins again as a party-guest who's pounced upon (derogatorily, that is) by a roomful of man-haters.

To be sure, there's a feminine consciousness informing most of the skits and songs. Most of the spoof-targets come from the Real World—coping, Singles Anonymous, beating the (biological) clock, Barry Manilow, et al—but, for a finale, the company does a nifty take-off of a bad Broadway idea: musicalizing "The Miracle Worker" (it's called "Oh, Helen!").

Interplay is "Six Guys Naked From the Waist Down—and Then Some," an evening of improvisational theater and some merriment. Three women participate, but the fun is fairly concentrated on the men's turf. It's groups like this that'll give us our next Alan Arkin or John Candy. All nine are fast, and some even know how to make the fastness seem funny.

They're all New Faces—save for Tait Ruppert, who shuffled zombie-like through "Diner," quoting dialogue from "Sweet Smell of Success"—and, in this early stage, it's fun to spot sparks which someday might catch fire. Clayton Bartner could, with luck and proper



"Taboo in Revue"

LIFESTYLES

Associated Press



James Gleason, right, addresses Jim Mezon and Melissa Weil in a scene from "Speed-the-Plow" at the Studio Arena Theatre.

Plow: Play's second half belongs to James Gleason as Charlie Fox

Continued from Page C1

ren, enters.

Naively, Karen expresses interest in the theme of the book Bobby is obliged to read ("the end of the world"). He ducks his obligation by giving it to her for a "courtesy read." That evening at his house she reports how great the book is, what a great movie it would make, how it would appeal to the movie population's gut fears of annihilation, and because she's not *that* naive, she uses sex for a persuader.

Next day Bobby informs Charlie he's going to nix the chance-of-a-lifetime gold-mine prison picture to "green light" the effete radiation novel. ("That silver is more powerful than gold; and the circle than the square or the triangle. He thought of architecture. . . .") What follows is the single funniest sustained scene from any recent American play.

It is a beautiful setup. It is situation comedy with a vengeance. What Bobby Gould announces to Charlie next morning is no more, no less than a religious conversion. He's giving up the carnivorous glories of free-reign capitalism. It's like saying, "I give my Stock Exchange seat to the homeless," or, "Take the CEO-ship of Exxon Corp., I'm saving the whooping crane." Charlie is stunned. He is flabbergasted. He is furious. Switching religions is crazy. Worse, it's a betrayal of the American way.

Mamet is an avowed poker player. Bobby is a game in which if

Mamet writes parts for men, no matter that he thinks he writes for woman actors equally well. The pop icon, Madonna, played Karen on Broadway and was roundly abused for it. She's no actress, but the part of Karen is not exactly easy, either. She's really a ploy, sexy and innocently standing for what could be good in the world and not merely good for shareholders. She is there to screw up the bond of mutual exploitation between Bobby Gould and Charlie.

It's not all clear sailing for Melissa Weil as Karen in the Studio Arena production directed by Kathryn Long. Long's eye is wrong on Weil, who's sexy but doesn't take us very far with the rest of it. Long's choice of Jim Mezon as Bobby Gould is not a good one, either.

Mezon, a very fine technical actor, is probably a very nice guy, an ingrained niceness that won't run off on stage no matter how hard he tries. He comes across as too nice for the edge needed for Bobby Gould. You keep thinking he's just pretending, that deep down his Bobby Gould is an OK guy you wouldn't mind dealing with.

What happens is that although

this can be counted a good production — fine set by Victor A. Becker, good lighting by Pat Collins, professional-level acting, etc. — there's a nagging sense over the first half that justice isn't being done to Mamet. After all, Mamet is a very, very funny writer. He doesn't write jokes. How people in his plays express themselves is who they are, is the truth of who and what they are. Lines are given the old professional punch, but they don't crackle like they should, until the second half. Whatever you do, don't skip the second half.

The second half belongs to James Gleason as Charlie Fox. Here is where director Long is as right as right can be. Gleason and Mezon opened the show barking lines at one another like a 1930s theatrical film comedy (and maybe that will smooth out and find its own natural pacing and levels as they get a few performances under their belts).

When we get around to the second half, though, Gleason's Charlie takes over. Gleason comes on strong, spectacularly strong and dead right. He and Mamet are hand in glove in a brilliantly comedic scene.

FEDERAL MEATS

COUPON

trucking

By DOUGLAS WATT

THE GUYS IN THE TRUCK. Comedy by Howard Reifsnnyder. With Harris Laskawy, James Gleason, Mike Starr, Bobbi Jo Lathan, Robert Trumbull, Geoffrey C. Ewing, Lawrence Guardino, Lloyd Battista, Gary Klar. Directed by David Black. Scenery and costumes by John Falabella. Lighting by John Gleason. At the New Apollo.

Is there life in the theater after June 1? Can "The Guys in the Truck," which opened last night at the New Apollo with the name of its departed star (Elliott Gould) still in the preview program I received, make it? I hope so. Howard Reifsnnyder's comedy may be somewhat slapdash, but it's spirited and fun. I'm rooting for it.

Having shown both its merits and shortcomings—but mainly the former—Off Off Broadway last fall, it has arrived on Broadway with many of the key players in their original roles, David Black again in charge of the staging, and with some script changes, not all of them to the good.

THE GUYS in the truck are the technicians in charge of telecasting a football game—this one is between New York and Cleveland—from a mobile unit somewhere out of sight behind the Cleveland stands. The complex operation is masterminded by a director who, monitoring several TV screens, cues cameramen stationed about the field, as well as a pair of sportscasters visible in their box, and alerts New York for commercial breaks.

The plot is elementary but workable. The director, a compulsive gambler in debt and facing possible bone damage by a collector, has been fooling around with a local stripper, an old friend, and may be on the verge of losing his job. All this while he runs the show from all angles.

It's the seeming authenticity of the crew's behavior (the author put in many years as a CBS sports producer) that lends the farcical elements their verisimilitude. That and the playwright's knack, only occasionally shaky, for breezy, funny dialogue. As the morning setting-up scene passes into a lunch break, then to game-time, and to a dramatic goal-line finish that brings an otherwise utterly boring match to an exciting end, you get caught up.

REPEATING HIS role of the director, Al Klein, Harris Laskawy may lack something of the comic flair and lunatic drive the part calls for, but he is a good actor and an engaging one, and he wins you over as he unscrambles both technical and personal difficulties.

Two other players lend particularly strong support: Mike Starr as a goofy,



Harris Laskawy at the controls in "Guys in the Truck"

garrulous slob of a co-announcer, a former pro player doing the color stuff; and James Gleason as a spare, priggish producer, the bossy son of a station exec. The others are of varying quality, though Geoffrey C. Ewing is winning and assured as the assistant director, and Bobbi Jo Lathan has the requisite assets as the stripper, who we see both in the truck and in the stands, where she's joined by the mob enforcer, a poorly cast, poorly written, poorly directed, and poorly acted part.

ROBERT TRUMBULL is amusing as the game announcer, worried about his hairpiece and always at odds with his hulking sidekick, and there is adequate work by Lawrence Guardino as a complaining technician always threatening to go to the union grievance committee.

John Falabella's unit set (truck with a section of wall removed, announcers' box, and section of the stands) is inartistic, and his costumes are suitably garish or severe, as called for. John Gleason's lighting brightens the occasion.

One could wish that Reifsnnyder had been able to pull his play together a bit more tightly in the intervening months, retaining the character of the director's wife while keeping the mobster's antics to a minimum (a drunk scene doesn't work at all). But the guys in the truck are good company for a June night, or a July or August one; for that matter, I wish them luck.

Dad and son day at Symphony Space

Cellist Norman Hollander and his pianist son, David Hollander, will give a joint recital in the Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St., at 8 p.m. tomorrow. The Hollander father-and-son team has played together publicly for over 20 years. Their program features sonatas of Strauss, Debussy and Beeth-

AMONG THE "street gamblers" of New York, one who would underestimate the value of "arguing about the rules" is obviously an advantage in particular important games, but still, it's a particular importance to beat 'em in the argument saying goes, how're you 'em in the street?

And thus it is appropriate that the Stickball Champions tomorrow from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. on West 60th St. between Columbus Ave. and Columbus Ave. sparked an argument over the rules. A friendly argument you take what you can get.

What's happened, a bunch of celebrities, the Noo Yawkers, will be in a tournament, which is part of the Police Athletic Club's 50,000 kids service programs. The thin line of these celebrities doing stickball should be interesting.

"BUDDY HACKETT play with bounces," Ferguson, a PAL co-announcer. "Jake LaMotta I'm amazed at how open he is about what should be."

Besides Hackett, likely participants include Rocky Graziano, Robert Merrill, Vinny, and others. There is no doubt they all feel about restaurant man, for might have a difference there are sure to be arguments, too, equally.

The precise form of the argument may not be decided.



Hackett, left, and

TODAY

American Ballet Theater. "Don Quixote." Met Opera House, 8

Top-selling singles, week's Variety:

1. Flashdance—(Casablanca)
2. Lets Dance—(De America)
3. Beat It—Michael
4. Electric

Burnham-Callaghan Associates, Inc.

News

union man.

His two sportscasters are feuding. Doug (Mike Starr), the game analyst, is whacked up with enough drugs to stock a pharmacy and so hung over he throws up twice on microphone. Les Hammond (Robert Trumbull) is a smarmy old-line pro announcer and more than a bit of a hambone. Both actors are as fine now as they were originally.

The producer, Harvey Olmstead (James Gleason), who only has the job because his father is a network big shot, is a little Napoleon. Gleason is again brilliant in the role. Harvey gets into a power struggle with Al and fired him.

But Al saves the day when this deadly dull ball game suddenly livens up, and the network presi-

dent, like a modern day *deus ex machina*, calls up and sets everything right at the end.

Too much is implausible and we don't really care about the rest of it. This comedy is so tepid it never manages to generate more than a scattered handful of laughs.

The New Apollo Theater is at 234 W. 43rd St., 921-8558.



Carol Rosegg

Harris Laskawy (photo at left) plays the lead role of Al Klein in "The Guys in the Truck." He was Elliot Gould's understudy before Gould was fired. ● Mike Starr (left) and Gary Klar co-star.