

THEATER

Arena Players gives us Manhoff's 'The Owl and the Pussycat'

BY CHARLES J. MORGAN

Bill Manhoff has written a three-act, eight-scene complex property about two people. One is a persnickety fussybudget, a prim intellectual who works as a clerk in a bookstore and who tries his hand at creative writing. The other a flighty, curvaceous rattlebrain and a prostitute whom he has had kicked out of her apartment due to his complaint about her activities to the landlady. She finds out who made the complaint, and storms loudly into his apartment, refuses to leave and there begins the show. The interaction (clash) of the two personalities is the essence of Manhoff's efforts.

The Arena Players Repertory Theatre brings this hilarious comedy to the Vanderbilt Carriage House Theater. Dean Schildkraut, no stranger to Arena Players, has the role of the stuffy, bookish clerk while Cassandra Dupler, who previously played Katherine in Arena's "The Taming of the Shrew," a role in which she ate up the marble/concrete scenery in that outdoor production, was Doris the pussycat.

Schildkraut was precise and cogent in his interpretation of that sort of character. His chiseled features were drawn up in a wearisome act of utter despair. His only smile was a face-cracking grimace. He was the mind-centered individual who believed he could make his way in the world as a stolid single only to have



Photo by Frederic De Feis

Cassandra Dupler and Dean Schildkraut in a scene from 'The Owl and the Pussycat.'

this persona crushed by a semiliterate "actress and model" who claimed she had performed in two TV commercials and who only turned a trick when she was temporarily impecunious.

She was a Porphyrian dichotomy ... essence and existence, act and potency, substance and accident; her self-perception and the real Cassandra. And this tears at her very being. Dupler was explosive, charming, sexy, tough and almost every other emotional facet she could bring to bear on the defensive Schildkraut.

The two confront one another like ... well, the owl and the pussycat. But special mention must be made of the actors' interfacing and serial revulsion. The emotional tension has to explode in favor of one or the other. Schildkraut's skill as a dramatic actor comes into play after a subtle change from within. Dupler's from an acceptance of what she is, but implying that love in the real sense can exist between them. All this is in a hilarious suicide pact where they plan both to jump from the 10th floor of the Plaza Hotel. Her flightiness and his lead-

en seriousness combine to thwart any further thought of self-destruction.

Humor is not lacking verbally either: She asks him to read to her because she cannot sleep unless someone does. He begins by reading the nutrition facts from the back of a box, but she objects. So he begins to recite the Gettysburg Address in a mistake-laden effort. She interrupts amid says it's nice to hear the Declaration of Independence, but he corrects her, saying that it is "Custer's farewell address to the Indians."

In this three-act, eight scene blackout parade, Director Frederic De Feis had his hands full. With blackouts this frequent, one misstep here would open the floodgates of stasis. But he kept it moving with realistic shifting and motion. His interpretive efforts were equally remarkable.

Barrels of kudos are due to Schildkraut and Dupler. Their performance skills marked one of Arena's best efforts; a tight coherent script outstandingly brought to life by these two thespians.

The Arena Players Repertory Theatre at the Suffolk County Vanderbilt Museum's Carriage House Theater, 180 Little Neck Road, Centerport will present "The Owl and the Pussycat" through Jan. 19. Tickets are \$20 on Friday and Sunday and \$25 on Saturday. For more information, call 516-293-0674 or visit arenaplayers.org.