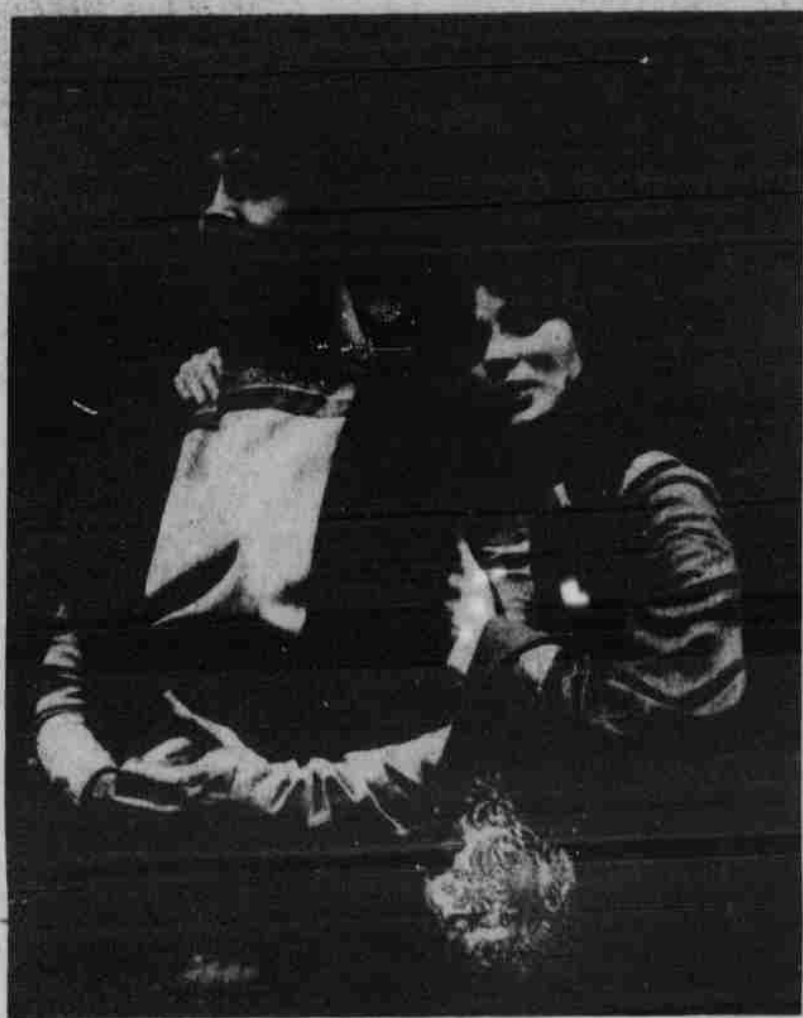


## Abelard & Heloise— intricate masterpiece

Review by Jim Gray

Tragicomedy is a difficult genre to bring across on the stage. It requires a subtle hand to smoothly develop the stark contrasts between humor and disaster. It requires a meticulous sense of timing by both director and actors. But most of all, it requires a sense of direction—the ability to decide where the play is going—and the talent to get it there.



Cindy Wallis, left, as Heloise . . . praises Dana Mills as Abelard.

On all these counts, Howell Theater's production of *Abelard and Heloise* is a smashing success. And that's only the beginning. All phases of director Hal Floyd's production come together like pieces of an interlocking puzzle to make it one of the best things to transpire on a Lincoln stage in years.

Probably the biggest boon to this success is the play itself. Basing his play on earlier books and the letters of Abelard and Heloise themselves, Ronald Millar sculpted an intricate, exhaustive, yet unified study of love and theology.

The play opens on clearly comic notes. In the first portion of the play, Millar even uses stereotypic characters, incongruous speeches and hackneyed, trite situations to firmly establish a comic tone.

While there are heavily important events occurring on stage during this part of the play, they are all treated in a light manner.

In the second act, however, this tone rapidly changes. Through acts of senseless violence, displays of hatred and longing and emotionally disturbing dialogue Millar suddenly hits the audience in the face with the idea that the situation is not humorous at all. All the snickers and giggles of the first act become black comedy echoes of perversion. And the audience rightly sinks into and grips the edges of its seats.

Even the highly philosophical and mentally straining denouement drives home its point—that love and religion are interconnected through complex personal relationships.

The production takes all this into account—pacing, staging, lighting, timing all zero in on and directly hit on the tragicomic effect. Even the few slips in direction—inappropriate laughter caused by misplayed lines, unmotivated switches in character, overdone actions (as in the flogging scene) do not impede the flow of the play.

Generally speaking, the cast handles its audience well. Dana Mills as Abelard and Cindy Wallis as Heloise bring their usual professional shine to the play, adding unparalleled depths to the lovers separated

by the church and traditional clerical celibacy.

Steve Sheetz gives excellent support as the couple's elderly adviser and friend. Equally excellent are minor characters Jen Saunders and D. Chetley Kincaid as the kindly nuns who raise Heloise.

A little more difficult to understand, however, are the characterizations of Glen Cox and Donovan Diez, as a zealous student and a Sancho Panza-ish servant of Abelard. It is difficult to understand why, in the first half of the play, the two portray nearly stereotypic buffoon roles, then without motivation, switch to human, living breathing characters. This makes their portrayals unbelievable if not distracting.

All the lead acting is made infinitely more effective by the presence of minor characters in the dress of nuns and monks constantly peering around corners, reacting to the onstage dialogue. This symbolic omnipresence of the Church proves to be an effectively menacing device.

Rober Mond's extremely versatile setting makes these characterizations even more effective. A starkly impressionist maze of platforms and stairways is topped by gothic arches. The entire central part of the set rests on a turntable, which allows it to turn and appear to be innumerable different sets.

The set, along with Jerry Lewis' explosive lighting and Nancy Myers' subtle yet appropriate costumes all tie together to enhance the play's cinematic sequence structure.

Aside from some impossibly hokey tape recordings, the play was technically excellent. It is unfortunate, however, that in designing and staging the front part of the stage area was allowed to extend too far into the audience, forcing the first three rows of the balcony to miss or lean perilously forward during much of the play's action.

And when a play is a box office smash, like *Abelard and Heloise* is bound to be, those three rows will inevitably be filled.

But take it from a second-row, neck-cranning balcony dweller. It was worth every second of it. *Abelard and Heloise* is a must for any serious theater goer.

## Little Feat keeps truckin' in fine country style

Little Feat's music is so down-to-earth honest that it gives me a big ear-to-ear grin. There are so many mediocre records being sold today—to say nothing of those that are outright bad—that music as unpretentious and well-turned as Little Feat's is just waiting to be embraced.

(I watched the Grammy Awards on TV Saturday night and thought they were a collection of the least talent possible. Had it not been for Harry Nilsson and Ringo Starr, the whole thing would have been ridiculous. As it was, only most of it was ridiculous. So that's why the touch of bitterness today toward the quality of pop music.)

Anyway, Little Feat has been laying out fine sounds for about a year now. Their first album, *Little Feat*, was filled with sliding guitar riffs and songs about driving trucks. It was the kind of record that sneaks up and grabs you by the ears, then shakes your head around until your eyes are kind of popped out, but seeing all the more clearly for it.

Besides that, it had a song, "Willing," that I think is one of the finest ever written.

Their second album last year was *Sailin' Shoes*. And now their third, called *Dixie Chicken*.

The main thing that has changed over the three records is the personnel rather than the sound, and definitely not the personality of the music. The original *Little Feat* was Lowell George, who writes most of the songs and plays guitar and sings; drummer Richard Hayward, and keyboard man Bill Payne. The original band also included former Mother Roy Estrada, now of Captain Beefheart's Magic Band.

For *Dixie Chicken* Paul Barrere has joined up on guitar and vocals, with Kenny Gradney replacing Estrada on bass. Plus Sam Clayton has been added on congas.

The album opens up with the song "Dixie Chicken." It's a good country-rocker telling a seamy "better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all" tale. It's followed by "Two Trains," also a fancy stepper, with lots of high-hat cymbal and slide guitars.

Also, a whole passie of background vocalists step onto the track during "Two Trains." They include Bonnie Bramlett, Debbie Lindsey, Tret Fure (who,

incidentally, has her own album out recently,) Gloria Jones, Stephanie Spurville, Bonnie Raitt and Dan Hutton.

"Roll 'Um Easy" is slow and easy, just like the title. Simply accompanied, the lyrics are about living in sweet harmony: "I have dined in palaces/Drunk wine with kings and queens/But darling you're the best thing/I have ever seen/Won't you roll 'um easy."

## bart becker bells letters



Little Feat

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albums are bad. For one thing, they've got good country and trucking spirit.

And for another, they're polite. None of the instruments or vocals are ever trying to cut in line on anything else.

I don't know if any of the Little Feat players are particularly outstanding individual musicians (although Lowell George, who wrote five of the *Dixie Chicken* songs and collaborated on two others, obviously has something going.) But together they are a fine band, interested in making music to make you feel good, which is what music is supposed to be about anyway.

Side Two opens with "Fool Yourself," followed by "Walkin' All Night." The latter tune opens with a crazy little guitar lick and then moves into a sad story about losing a "South Street Swinger."

"Fat Man In the Bathtub" jumps in with some drum skitting and features some real fancy-dan guitar work. "Juliette" is dominated by soft piano and flute.

The album ends up with "Lafayette Railroad," an instrumental tune. The drums and congas open the song up, working as one unit rather than upstaging one another, as congas are often used. Then a guitar slides in for a fine, languid solo backed by the piano.

All in all, *Dixie Chicken* is a good, solid record. It's not as raunchy as *Little Feat* and it's slightly slicker than *Sailin' Shoes*. Little Feat is not playing soul music, but they are playing some of the most soulful country/trucking/rock around.