

Arts & Entertainment

'Light Up the Sky' glistens with humor and talent

By David Thompson

"Mad sire? Ah, yes — mad indeed, but observe how they do light up the sky."
The Idle Jests

It is from those lines that Moss Hart borrowed the name of his play *Light Up the Sky*. The mad people who shine so brightly are the people of the theater, and in this stylish, hilarious play Hart has captured their light and, at the same time, shown us who they really are.

Light Up the Sky, running at the UNL Temple Studio

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Theater until Feb. 13, has captured the atmosphere of the play extremely well.

Light Up the Sky, which first opened in 1948, has succeeded in its evocation of the prosperity of the post-World War II years and its fast comedies, overflowing with repartee, that reached its height then. The stylish peak-shouldered dresses glitter almost as brightly as the humor in the luxurious hotel suite where the play takes place.

The suite belongs to Irene Livingston, a neurotic Broadway star who is somewhat of a cross between Joan Crawford and Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*. Livingston wants nothing more than "the peace and quiet of an oxygen tent."

She is perfectly played by Joi Hoffsommer, who has all the affectation of the character down pat, right down to calling everyone her "darlings."

Role of Kansas City in development of jazz focus of NETV series

Through the songs, sounds and memories of Count Basie, Mary Lou Williams and Jay "Hootie" McShann, the legendary sounds of Kansas City's jazz will be recalled and re-created on *Swingin' The Blues*, premiering Wednesday at 9 p.m., repeating Friday, at 9 p.m. on the Nebraska Educational Television Network.

The four-part series, produced for national public television distribution by the Nebraska ETV Network and the Mid-America Arts Alliance, features jazz pianist Billy Taylor as series host.

The proud heritage of Kansas City and its place in jazz history are captured on the premiere program of *Swingin' The Blues*, "Goin' to Kansas City." Contemporary performances by Basie, Williams and McShann are featured. Also included are musical segments of Big Joe Turner, a Battle of the Bands, archival footage and historic sound tapes.

The initial program sets up the three succeeding performance/interview programs with Basie, Williams and McShann, airing on the following Wednesdays at 7 p.m., repeating Fridays at 9 p.m.

Count Basie returned to Kansas City with his famous orchestra to celebrate his 75th birthday at a diamond jubilee concert at the Uptown Theater. Recorded on location, the second program in the *Swingin' The Blues* series, airing Feb. 17, includes musical segments from that concert as well as a special interview of Basie by Taylor.

Light Up the Sky is a play about a play, in which Irene is starring. In the first act, everyone is sitting in Livingston's suite on opening night waiting for showtime. The producer of the play, the director, the playwright, the star's mother, just about all the theater caricatures drop in for a visit.

The producer is the man with the bucks. He has no culture but since he has money he figures he's "good for a Cezanne and maybe a Matisse" to impress his friends with. He is played by Kirk Benson, who captures the character's down home attempts at eloquence but is slightly lacking in polish. His pauses between lines hold back the clipping pace of the play. It would be difficult to slow down the producer's folksy humor too much, though. He's got the money and the enthusiasm to "stick a Roman candle in the tired face of show business."

The producer's wife, Frances, is the 1940s predecessor to Flo from *One Day at a Time*. She uses her hubby's bucks to move "into a store like the Soviets into occupied territory." Kathy Morrow does an excellent job playing the crassly humored woman, right down to her red hair. Frances is the pin in the balloon-size egos of the real theater people like Irene Livingston.

Another balloon belongs to Carleton Fitzgerald, the director of the play. Carleton is the man who doesn't know the difference between being off stage and on. He stares off into space with a pained expression on his face as if everything he says is a soliloquy. Christopher Darga provides the most complete characterization in the play as the dramatically overblown director.

All of these people are rushing about in preparation for the play while the young man who wrote it sits around with a Howdy Doody expression on his face. Todd Nelson plays the small-town writer who makes it to the big city. He is "Coolidge with a head cold," the wimpy idealist who has a colorless personality next to the psychedelics of the theater folk. Nelson's wide-eyed expressions and John-boy voice are all appropriate.

Around all of them are the normal folk. Their parts are well acted, but not near as much fun as the other zanies. Geoff Lower plays another playwright who has dropped in on the fun. Lower doesn't seem quite sincere in his part, and his character doesn't come off being very different from the role he had last semester in *Bus Stop*.

Joette Pelster is good as Irene's mother. She doesn't quite look old enough, but she is funny and she teams up with Frances for some of the most comical dialogue in the play.

The set, designed by Timothy Jon Case, is a perfect evocation of the chic, smoke-filled rooms identified with the theater of the 1940s. Janice Stauffer's costumes are ravishing and fit in well with the gleam of chrome and the tinkle of champagne glasses. Julie Pearson's direction is well done, and she handles the performance in-the-round well. The dialogue jumps from actor to actor, and sometimes leaves the rest of the cast hanging when it focuses on two actors, but the pace is reasonably quick.

Hart has not given us simply light comedy, and the play has a lot to say about all people and not just the world of theater. The third act is especially serious in tone, when the young playwright becomes disillusioned with the hypocrisy and affectation of the theater folk. "You saw our best and our worst," they tell him. "That's human isn't it."

In one scene there is the rumble of offstage voices, men talking about hardware and plywood, reminding us of the real world out there. The world of the theater may be a little more flamboyant, but it's basically the same as everywhere else.

Light Up the Sky is a very funny and insightful play. This production is well done, capturing the atmosphere of the 1940s. The actors do an excellent job at playing theater people, who are only slightly more exaggerated versions of ourselves. After all, the theater doesn't have a monopoly on madness; there's a little bit of it, and the light, in everyone.

'Venom' victim of gratuitous violence, poisoned plot and unintentional humor

By Pat Higgins

Venom is a clever corporate ploy to pick up a quick tax loss before April 15.

It is basically an insipid movie with all kinds of gratuitous violence and looks of boredom from the cast. The only redeeming virtue is a large dose of unintentional humor.

This is the kind of movie that is best appreciated on *Showtime* late at night with the sound turned off while



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you and your friends ad lib better lines for the movie than those on the soundtrack. Actually, the marketing brains behind *Venom* should have considered a direct release to the drive-in shock-and-schlock circuit in the summer. *Venom* might possibly sneak by then.

Mistaken identity

The basic scenario here concerns a kidnapping for ransom and the case of mistaken identity involving a harmless garden snake and the deadly mamba — the heavyweight champ of killer snakes.

Venom is basically yet another man-against-beast movie. The music is rather similar to what was used in *Jaws*, which is kind of a dead giveaway as to when the

action is going to begin. Also the sound doesn't appear to be dubbed in properly which makes the characters look like they are speaking in foreign tongues.

Recognizable faces

The cast for *Venom* is basically respectable with a half-dozen recognizable faces although it's absent of any box-office stars. There are enough quality people involved that it should be better than the almost complete yawn that it is. Everybody has to make a buck, of course, so maybe these actors take the money for *Venom* to finance something artistic. Fat Chance.

Nicol Williamson is the top cop involved in dealing with the kidnapers. He looks "downed out" from terminal boredom and it is hard to blame him. Oliver Reed is the heavily-boozing butler and he looks embarrassed to be involved in the whole sorry affair. The highlight of *Venom* is Susan George who gives one of the great extended death scenes seen in quite a while.

Kidnappers mastermind

German film star Klaus Kinski is the mastermind of the kidnapers. He was also seen in the lame *Buddy, Buddy*. At this rate Kinski is not making much of a name for himself in the U.S.A.

Kinski looks sinister enough to pass for the East German advisor to the Libyan hit squad. He blows it then with his Boris Badenov accent which is a real laugh. Steer clear of *Venom*.

Late-night show a bowl of 'television junk food'

Entertainment Tonight is for all of those people who love *People* magazine but hate the trouble of turning the pages. The show delivers a nightly half-hour of Hollywood hype; behind the scenes looks at the latest movies, talks with rising stars, stuff like that. It's the perfect quasi-

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news show for the late-night audience that is trying desperately to find something about which it won't have to think.

Entertainment Tonight can be found at 10:30 p.m. on WOWT (Channel 6 in Omaha) and God-knows how many

other stations on the Lincoln cable channels. Why anybody would watch this with *Saturday Night Live* reruns available on another channel is anybody's guess, but it happens. We seem to have an insatiable appetite for the "hip" goings-on of our entertainment stars, and *Entertainment Tonight* is out to feed that appetite.

I'll give you an example. A recent show featured a segment about a big free concert affair that Charlie Daniels and his band put on every year. They line up a bunch of Nashville acts, but don't tell anybody who they are, and then set out to have a grand old time. Probably a lot of fun. But the good folks at *Entertainment Tonight*, with a half hour to kill, bring on Charlie Daniels for an interview about the concert. Daniels, to no one's shock, says he likes the concert and thinks it is

a good idea. This kind of probing, incisive material dominates the half hour.

But on the other hand, some people I know actually enjoy this kind of television junk food. I mean, how else would they ever have found out how much Glen Campbell's house cost (\$5.1 million, so it's out of my price range), what Englebert Humperdinck was doing now (who the hell cares?) or the first names of that California high school rock and roll group, the Go Go's (which I can't remember now for the life of me).

One person I know says she likes the show simply for its theme song. I know, it's a catchy song, but when it's over there is still 29 minutes of *Entertainment Tonight* to wade through.

And then those announcers... they've got to go. They perpetuate the kind of

happy talk patter that should have died when local newscasts first experimented with it.

Ron and Dixie approach every night's show like they're selling a fleet of used cars, as they try to bowl over the tired and late-night audience with loud and mindless chatter. I just about vomit whenever I see Ron's face bobbing into the television camera with a cheery grin, or Dixie's plastic face framed with that frosted hair. Where did the producers ever dig up those clowns?

But, *Entertainment Tonight*: does have some redeeming value. It keeps Lucy show re-runs out of the 10:30 p.m. time slot. And what's more, it puts the audience in the uncritical frame of mind necessary to truly enjoy Ed Muscare on *All Night Live*.