Good (almost) clean fun

By Peter Coffie

It’s topical, it’s stylish, it’s slick and it will never be performed again despite the fact that it brought two full houses to their feet in ten-minute standing ovations. It is, or rather was, the Junior Show of the Wellesley Class of 1978.

This year’s production, “The Wrath of Grapes (or) All the President’s Men,” drew its story from last year’s future over men in Wellesley dormitories and its structure from the film, “All the President’s Men.” The combination of a topic loaded with off-color puns and inside jokes with a line of development strongly proven a box-office success required only one additional element to yield a sure-fire hit: a junior class with the talent and energy to create, from scratch, a full-scale musical comedy.

That it is done well is remarkable. That it is done well, and done every year, is still more so. That this year’s show was acclaimed, even by seasoned veterans, suggests the accomplishment of a genuine tour de force. Like all good fiction, the book for “The Wrath of Grapes” stars a real-life situation and a few well-directed “what if’s.”

In this case, the questions run something like:

What if someone had decided that the men in the dormitories’ scandal was more serious than history new suggests? What if he had misinterpreted the abduction of Wellesley’s Director of Residence and her replacement by a psychotic Victorian prune? What if the girls got wise?

A lot of good, more-or-less clean fun, that’s what. From the first musical number, “So You’ve Never Had a Beer,” through the last skit — directed, it may be assumed, by the memory of the show — called “Paradise Lost,” in which “representatives” of Harvard, Babson and MIT leapfrogged across the stage while making rhythmic noises out of which only an active imagination could extract an occasional word.

On balance, though, the script was better than good, particularly the scenes in the men’s dormitory space in the basement of Physical Plant where boy meets girl with Cal Q. Later “nursing” away in the background and Brad Cliffe’s sneer threatening to spread wider than his shoulders. Worthy of special attention was Cathy Schwabe in an eminently paranoid characterization of Inner East, the very confidential secretary to Sour Grapes (the previously mentioned Victorian Prune). The latter was played by Blanche Garfinkle, better known to Institute audiences for her work with the Shakespeare Ensemble at MIT.

Mary Anne Byrnes, Script Chairman, appeared as a speed- out freshman of “cosmic” persuasions named Free Spirit. She had one of the book’s best character parts, and played it for full effect. Nancy Faunce, Joan Ashley and Lisa Kearn played pivotal roles as a trio of innocent freshmen: they got the show off to an excellent start and held their own throughout the evening’s two acts.

The choreography was unusually clean and superbly executed and the music — as throughout the show — clear and confident. The jokes were explosively brief, at that point that could be heard — which were in the minority all night.

Not getting a joke in bed enough, at least you can get it exclaimed later. Not even hearing a line that has the first ten rows falling off their chairs is a dozen times worse, and that problem was common to half of the orchestra and all of the balcony. This was particularly true during an apparently entertaining number called “Paradise Lost,” in which even the orchestral musicians seemed to be enjoying the show.

The second act contained a few one-liners at the writers’ expense, at least one of which is worth noting: “I, Brad Cliffe, L.L. Bean, Dart Moos, (referred to Lit Wellesley as a psychotic Victorian prune?’”

Of course, there were more than a few jokes that the audience was seeing a mile away. With a crew of male exchange students referred to at Wellesley as “coeds” in a slight shift from “men in the dorms,” it was not surprising that Brad Cliffe, L.L. Bean, Dart Moos, Lesley Simmons and Calvin Q. Later (call him “Cal” if your stomach can take it) in residence, there’s an encyclopedia of pre-written one-liners at the writers’ disposal.

At the high point of the evening was a song-and-dance number entitled “Henry Ford, Where Are You Now?” by the Freshmen Dancers.

Review