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Coming or going; comedy rules Conroe stages this weekend

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By **Peggie Miller** Performing arts columnist

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Over at Conroe's Owen Theatre, THE CRIGHTON PLAYERS open "Dearly Departed" tonight, while STAGE RIGHT OF TEXAS closes "No Time for Sergeants" Sunday at the Crighton Theatre. Both are pure escapism with top casts.

"Dearly Departed" runs through Oct. 23, blacked out Oct. 8-10 for the Cajun Catfish Festival.

Stage Right's well received comedy that decades ago sent Andy Griffith's career into orbit, recognized American veterans with a complimentary barbecue dinner Sept. 12 on the Crighton stage.

"MICKEY CHILDERS of DARREL'S CATERING generously underwrote the barbecue," play director CAROLYN CORSANO-WONG said. "He has a son in the Navy and wanted to express appreciation, as SR gave active and retired military personnel free admission to our show."

Carolyn said her son MICHAEL WONG, 14, learned a lot that day from veteran JOHN LAWS, who enlisted in World War II at age 15.

As always, some of the best goings-on happen unbeknownst to the audience.

Despite that actor PHIL CLARKE tore a leg muscle on the Wednesday before opening, the show went right on, just as it was supposed to do. "He opted for the obvious solution, a cane," Carolyn said.

"But Phil's role required participation in a vigorous fight scene, so the fight scene in the barracks had to be re-choreographed."

Originally, there was a lot of scuffling, Carolyn explained, with actors jumping on each other's backs. CHRIS STOFFEL learned the feints the day before opening and audiences never knew of the change.

The ironic fact is that Clarke did not injure his leg rehearsing the fight. He just slipped on his way out a door.

If you listen closely to the background music during the brawling barroom scene you might just hear strains of Perez Prado's "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White," a fixture on the 1955 hit parade, soaring to number one on Billboard charts.

One remarkable set was a plane cutaway high above the stage.

"Having the plane up so high actually was a matter of necessity," Carolyn said.

The stage was chock full of other accoutrements like bunks, offices and personnel quarters doing double duty in the play, so there was no where to go but up.

"Unfortunately, the Crighton stage cannot accommodate the moving of scenery taller than seven feet. It rose beyond that, so we couldn't move anything on or off during the performance. We had to stow all that stuff somewhere for the plane and parachute scenes."

The ingenious solution was to "park" the unused set pieces beneath the plane in "garages covered with black curtains" during the in-flight and parachute scenes.

Stage Right continues to grant active duty and retired military personnel, and their spouses free admission to remaining performances of "No Time for Sergeants." However, reservations are required by calling the Crighton box office at (936) 441-7469. The public also may purchase admission to remaining shows at \$17 each or less.

The U.S. TROOP SUPPORT FOUNDATION is collecting items to be sent to service personnel overseas. Requests can be accessed at www.stage-right.org.

The comedy runs at 8 p.m. tonight and Saturday; closing after the 2 p.m. Sunday matinee.

Tonight's opening of "Dearly Departed" is expected to fill the comedy bill quite nicely, as director CAROLE LAMONT puts her talented cast through its paces on the Owen Theatre stage.

The farce observes a dysfunctional Southern family as it copes with the death of a not-so-beloved patriarch. Although feelings concerning the "dearly departed" are mixed, reality must reign is disposing of the deceased in a somewhat civilized manner, or whatever.

Some of this unease is personal like impending bankruptcy, alcohol dependency, and just general orneriness. According to one CP principal, it all combines into a "drop dead funny show" from writers David Bottrell and Jessie Jones, with an ensemble cast that includes MARILYN MOORE, CRAIG CAMPOBELLA, CINDY SIPLE, W. RYAN WILLINGHAM and other favorites.

Although I have not seen this show, I am told it contains some mildly objectionable language and scenes not suitable for youngsters, so be forewarned.

Reserve for \$20 or less at (936) 539-4090; www.crightonplayers.org.

Send people and performing arts news to pegmillr@juno.com or call (936) 448-6455.

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