

# A French frolic opens the Florida Players season

By Michael Giltz

Doors. A lot of doors. That is the essential, almost inevitable ingredient of farce. Last season at the Hippodrome they performed *Noises Off*, a British entry in this painfully funny combination of low-brow shtick and high-minded word play. The actors grimaced, groaned, jumped up and down and wrestled with an errant plate of sardines. But most of all, they opened, closed, pounded on and were pounded by doors.

The play is different, but the doors have returned for *Hotel Paradiso*, the first show of the season for the Florida Players. Premiering last night at the Constans Theatre, *Paradiso* is a "French bedroom frolic" concerning what director David Shelton calls "unlikely people trying to have an assignation."

That polite euphemism for an affair involves the mousy Monsieur Boniface (Jay O. Millman) and Madame Cote (Cynthia Pearson). Needless to say, the overbearing Madame Boniface (Becky Pusta) would not approve, and the attempts of the would-be lovers to arrange a rendezvous result in

hilarious complications. And like all good farce, their complications have complications, and the madness grows.

*Hotel Paradiso* runs until Thursday, Oct. 15 (with the stage dark on Oct. 11), and tickets are free to UF students with a valid fee card. They may be obtained at the Constans Theatre Box Office at the Reitz Union. Tickets for the general public are \$6. Call 392-1653.

With an overwhelming cast of 21 people and an elaborate set, *Hotel Paradiso* poses some exceptional technical difficulties. True, actors do not agonize over their characters ("But *why* am I slamming this door?"), but just keeping people "from bumping into each other" can be difficult. As Shelton notes, "Sometimes I feel like a traffic cop out there."

Farce should be directed "very sparingly, very cleanly, very quickly," and Shelton approached *Hotel Paradiso* with the refrain of "speed it up, speed it up." Like all plays of this sort, it is an infernally complex one, involving — among other things — a man who becomes speechless when it rains, a

troupe of little girls and countless misunderstandings.

Of course, split-second timing is essential, and that is the source of farce's charm. Along with the verbal pyrotechnics of the playwright, much of the exhilaration it offers comes from watching a troupe of players juggling such a complex task. One slip-up and the whole affair would tumble to the ground.

Actors are not allowed the luxury of giving a performance that is mostly successful. They must be on their mark and on time or the web of silliness tears apart.

Such an elaborate affair does not come cheaply, and *Hotel Paradiso* is "an expensive one." But balancing this season's program is *The Dining Room* by A.R. Gurney Jr., which costs "next to nothing," Shelton said. That is followed by a Sam Shepard drama called *Curse of the Starving Class* and the closing show of *The Tempest*, another weighty production in terms of manpower.

In addition to this dramatic fare on the Main Stage of the Constans Theatre, the

Florida Players have some more intimate, more experimental offerings on Stage Too

Those offerings include the pairing of *Virgil's Dream* by Michael Colgrass and *Trial By Jury*, a satiric operetta by Gilbert and Sullivan, in November, and *Starting Here, Starting Now* in February.

The season kicked off last night with the premiere of *Hotel Paradiso*. "We hadn't done (a farce) for awhile," Shelton said, "and it shows what we can do."

Having directed countless productions — including such recent offerings as *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You* and *Scenes and Revelations* — Shelton has had plenty of opportunities to do that himself.

College provides a useful shelter for engaging in theater far from the commercial pressures of the real world, and Shelton is an amiable, chatty man presiding over a loose, friendly cast and crew.

But as he notes, Shelton has worked at UF for "13 y-e-a-r-s," and the easy money of television directing looks mighty tempting. As he put it, "I've done enough for art for now."