

'Arsenic' Characters Given Life

By MARILYN J. SHAW

Add to one gallon of elderberry wine: one teaspoon of arsenic, ½ teaspoon of strychnine and a pinch of cyanide. It makes a deadly thirst quencher, but an excellent line in "Arsenic and Old Lace" which opened Thursday night.

"Arsenic" attracted a disappointing audience of 36 people in the auditorium of the Herman Park Center. The comedy is the final production of the 1982-83 season of Center Stage Theatre.

As pre-publicity promised, "Two sweet little elderly ladies, a bit of arsenic, a few bodies hidden here and there, one brother who thinks he's Teddy Roosevelt was a recipe for an irresistible comedy."

The actors bring the story to life.

Julianne L. Green as Aunt Abby Brewster is as flighty as some older women who are on the brink of senility. Her breezy tone of voice and arthritic walk were held throughout the long 2½-hour production.

Mary Lou Park as Aunt Martha Brewster comes across as the sterner of the two old biddies who don't consider themselves murderers, but rather the bearers of charity and mercy. Yet her portrayal of an elderly woman is more than convincing, as she shuf-

fles rather than walks, making the audience feel poor Aunt Martha had suffered a broken hip.

Kudos, however, must be awarded to Ron Taylor as Teddy and Sean Norris as Dr. Einstein. Both provide tremendous comic relief and make the most of the short time they appear on stage.

Taylor plays Teddy, the nephew who thinks he's Teddy Roosevelt, lives with his aunts and believes the poisoned bodies of lonely old men are the victims of yellow fever. That's quite a prominent disease in Panama, the cellar, where the president oversees the digging of the canal.

His bugle, his black suit and tails and his Panama outfit look wonderful.

Dr. Einstein — not Dr. Albert Einstein — is a quack plastic surgeon who alters the face of the criminal Jonathan Brewster (Lou Gagliano), another of the aunts' nephews.

Norris has the audience in stitches when he fumbles with a dead man, nearly knocking himself out as he stumbles with corpse in hand. Thursday night he ad-libbed "upsy-daisy" in his thick German accent, prodding more roars of laughter.

Jonathan's current face is that of Boris Karloff, which gives rise to further hilarity. Gagliano's make-up adds to his deep, throaty voice as Jonathan, the man who has been carting around a stiff in the rumble seat of his car. His height and apparent strength on stage make him someone to avoid on a dark street.

Nephew Mortimer Brewster, portrayed by Greg Cundiff, is a bumbling theatre critic for a New York newspaper. Cundiff fills the role with emotion — anger, tenderness, shock, dismay and fear.

Director Kaye von Kessel lead her actors professionally, and chose the stronger actors for the principal roles.

Harold McDonald as the Rev. Dr. Harper spoke without emotion; Craig Millard as Officer Brophy recited his lines so quickly that most were garbled; Tim Kunze as Mr. Gibbs, a potential victim, did not portray a 40-year-old man.

Stronger bit roles were played by Janet Baldwin as Elaine Harper, who, despite not looking the part of the preacher's daughter, acted well; Gary Green as Officer O'Hara, who loosened up

after being on stage a bit; Bill Sears as Officer Klein; John Walston as Lieutenant Rooney; and Dr. Bruce Berkeley, who closed the show on a marvelous note as Mr. Witherspoon, the superintendent of Happy Dale Sanitarium.

The rose-colored walls and old wooden furniture of the Victorian living room of the Brewster's home set the atmosphere of the play. The set was designed by Greg Cundiff, who also served as assistant director and technical director. Larna Kunze was stage manager and Debbie Andresen was lighting designer.

Overall, "Arsenic and Old Lace" is an enjoyable night out — and the last performance of Center Stage Theatre until fall.

The show continues tonight, Saturday, and next Thursday, Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. in the auditorium at Herman Park Center. Tickets are \$3 for adults and \$2 for students and senior citizens.