

Family, forgiveness and understanding

Lake Michigan College to stage 'The Octette Bridge Club'

By **RALPH HEIBUTZKI**
HP Correspondent

BENTON HARBOR — You know that a production's made an impact when the language barrier doesn't make any difference — which is just one reason why "The Octette Bridge Club" still holds up today, in its director's eyes.

Calvin McClinton, the director of Lake Michigan College's theater department, first came across P.J. Barry's play about 13 years ago while teaching in Romania.

"A group of students put it on and I went to see it. I was impressed, so I looked it up (and said): 'I want to do this at some point,' not thinking that it would be today," McClinton says, laughing. "I could figure out was going on — I could speak a little bit of Romanian, but I didn't have every word."

However, there was no denying the potential of the material, once he read the play for himself.

"The theme is family — eight sisters who play bridge," McClinton says. "In the course of the eve-



Photo provided

Lake Michigan College's theater department opens its six-date run of "The Octette Bridge Club" on Friday at the Hanson Theater.

ning, we discover what the dynamics (between them) are, and we find out things about each of the sisters. The theme I hope people leave the theater with is understanding differences, and forgiveness."

The play follows the Irish Catholic Donovan sisters over a 10-year span between 1934 and Halloween 1944.

Martha (Kris Behr) tries to hold the family together, but her overbearing personality often clashes with her baby sister, Betsy (Danielle Babcock).

Rounding out the cast are Mary (Lynn Mainwaring-Atilla), the family peacemaker and only unmarried sister; Connie (Meghan Pelkey), the family cut-up; Nora (Carol Orlaske); Alice (Melanie Green), who cares for her ailing sister, Mary; Ann (Robin Hines), who actually hosts the bridge club; Lil (Ana Urbani), the songbird; and Robert Foster (Chris Humphries), a photographer from The Providence Journal.

Much of the story is driven by the various conflicts

between the sisters, McClinton says.

"Just because your views are different from mine doesn't mean you're a bad person, or unworthy of my love and acceptance," he says. "It'll be very interesting for the audience to view this play, because it is a century (old) — but these themes still resonate today, loud and clear."

McClinton planned on doing "The Octette Bridge Club" later this season, but moved it up the schedule after his original choice —

IF YOU GO

► **WHAT:** "The Octette Bridge Club"

► **WHEN:** 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday and Nov. 15-16, and 3 p.m. Sunday and Nov 17

► **WHERE:** Lake Michigan College's Hanson Theater, Mendel Center, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

► **HOW MUCH:** \$7, \$5 for students and seniors

► **CONTACT:** 927-1221 or www.lmcmainstage.org

"Plaza Suite" — didn't work out, because "I couldn't get enough people to cast it," he says.

"'Plaza Suite' is a whole different kind of comedy, because it's very dark — this ('Octette') will be more uplifting, lighter," McClinton says. "There are some dramatic moments, but the audience will come away remembering (the theme)."

Once the scheduling issues were resolved, the cast had about six weeks' rehearsal, instead of eight — but that wasn't actually the biggest challenge of bringing Barry's material to life, from McClinton's standpoint.

"As you know, we are in the business of training ac-

tors," McClinton says. "This play is a challenge for many of them, because they're playing much older characters."

For McClinton's younger cast members, "dealing with a time period that none of them were born in, or knew anything about, has been a real learning experience for them — and a challenge for me, because it means keeping them on point with research," McClinton says.

McClinton expects his older cast members — including Behr, Orlaske and Mainwaring-Atilla — to bring an additional depth of experience, "some of them from that time period," he says. "They may have been children, but the discussions between community members and students have been rewarding."

Now that the rehearsals have run their course, it's time for the actors to take their marks and bring the material to life — which is what makes theater such an exciting art form, in McClinton's view.

"I always tell my students, 'Plays are exactly that — they're meant to be played, not read.' It's strange to read a play, because it's not meant to be read, it's meant to be seen. Come see it, enjoy it, have a good time," he says.