

HOUSTON LITTLE THEATRE

presents

Bettye Hairston and John Shanks

in

# Dark OF THE Moon

A Dramatic Musical Legend

directed by IRL MOWERY

Dec. 6 thru Dec. 19

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Houston Little Theatre, 707 Chelsea



# 'Dark of the Moon' Is Pleasing to Critic

Ann Holmes Says New Play "Probably Most Satisfying" in History of Little Theatre.

BY ANN HOLMES  
Chronicle Fine Arts Editor

"Dark of the Moon," a macabre tale of witches and star-crossed lovers, came to the stage of the Little Theatre Wednesday night for a two weeks' visit—probably the most satisfying occupant on those boards in the theatre's history.

Director Irl Mowery, Set Designer Nione Carlson, and a cast of excellent actors contributed equally to an evening of theatre which definitely abandoned the ranks of amateur theatre.

"Dark of the Moon" is a surprising synthesis of weird happenings in the half world of witchery, mixed with the gay swaying of the square dance and the howling religious rites of the mountain revival.

Authors Howard Richardson and William Berney drew their mountain characters straight from the log cabins and the general stores found on the slopes of the Carolinas, folks filled with superstitions ac-

cumulated through the generations.

It is with this setting that the legend of Barbara Allen, who inspired the beloved ballad of the same name, is enacted. The spectator never quite realizes at which moment reality lapses into fantasy, but the spirited Barbara Allen, "pretty as a June bug in a tin bucket," falls in love with John the Witch Boy.

In order to win the hand of Barbara, the Witch Boy asks the Conjur Woman on the bleak mountain top to change him into a mortal. The Conjur Woman does this with one condition that John may remain a mortal if Barbara Allen stays his faithful wife for one year.

So John comes down from the clouds where he has spent his life soaring with the eagles and marries Barbara Allen in the general store. We don't tell you how it comes out, but we can promise things ain't a bit dull.

John Shanks, already recognized as one of Houston's better young actors, has been excellently cast as the Witch Boy and plays it with the agility to be expected of such a character.

As his mortal girl friend and finally his wife, Bettye Hairston, popular soubrette, leaves behind the frivolity of her Music Hall roles and assumes her difficult acting task with skill as Barbara Allen.

The Little Theatre's stage for "Dark of the Moon" has been filled with actors who handle their character assignments with wit and theatrical know-how.

There are too many to name individually but among those whose outstanding portrayals demand mention are: Al Sadler, whose performance of Preacher Haggler at the shoutin' revival and at times of stress, is admirable; Sherry Billing and Richard Cook as the parents of this hill-billy problem child, Barbara Allen; and John Norman as Barbara's mortal suitor.

A strange and angular choreography by Vivien Altfeld, danced by herself and Carolyn Levy in the roles of the Fair and Dark Witches, contributed to the eerie sense of other-worldness so characteristic of "Dark of the Moon."

And the sets, featuring many a technical trick, designed by the very talented Miss Carlson, proved to be most effective.

"Dark of the Moon" has lighted up the entertainment skies in these parts, and will be visible at the Chelsea Playhouse for 13 additional nights.

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**CAPSULE COMMENT** on the Little Theatre's "Dark of The Moon," which opened last night: Four bells, four stars, four orchids, for goodness sake, see it! Excellent direction, superb staging and lighting, a fascinating story, top-drawer acting. Compares with "Streetcar" as best stage play here in moons . . .

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# Cast for Next Little Theatre Play Announced

Houston Little Theatre Director Irl Mowery Saturday announced the cast for the theatre's forthcoming production, "Dark of the Moon."

Slated to begin a two-week run at the Chelsea Playhouse, December 6, the play is a dramatization of a little-known version of the old ballad "Barbara Allen."

Playing the role of a witch boy who falls in love with Barbara Allen will be John Shanks, who recently returned to this country after advanced acting study in London.

Bettye Hairston will be seen as the play's Barbara Allen. Miss Hairston is a Music Hall favorite of Houston audiences, having taken roles in many Summertime Light Opera productions as a sou-brette.

Jim McCormack will play the role of the Conjur Man, and Frances Farmer that of the Conjur Woman, who, with their incantations, can switch the Witch Boy into human form and back again at will.

Vivian Altfeld, popular Houston ballerina and actress, will create a choreography for herself as the Fair Witch and Carolyn Leeds as the Dark Witch.

Others cast in "Dark of the Moon" are: Carol Rodesney, Clara Bondon, Pearl Hollimon, Jean Johnson, Sherry Billing, Jean Krausse, Pauline Oliveras, Robert Briggs, Lastie Vincent, Jim Ellis, Charles Eppes, Walt Russell, Fred Springer, Richard Cook, Al Sadler, Sam Brooks and Terry Springer.

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# 'Dark of the Moon' Hits New High in Local Theatricals

In the ordinary course of theatrical events, the Houston Little Theatre is listed as a non-professional venture.

That is purely a listing of convenience, showing the casts play for fun or experience, not for monetary return.

For all other purposes, you can write professional in capital letters, and prove your case by pointing to "Dark of the Moon," the season's latest production that opened its Chelsea Playhouse run last night.

Never has there been a more professional presentation in our town since this reviewer has taken over the task of separating the sheep from the goats—in his own opinion, at least.

## Tough One to Play

"Dark of the Moon" is nothing for little boys and girls to play around with. It's a hard, brittle story, with a cruelty untempered by the fantasy woven into it. The humor is unconscious, born of ignorance, bigotry. Its climax is built upon a blind, fanatical religious faith that sweeps morality before it to gain a community point.

All this takes understanding by cast and director. "Dark of the Moon" had it last night, should keep it for the remainder of the 14-night run.

What makes it all the more amazing—if "amazing" is the word I want—is the fact the leading characters were portrayed by two who

have been stamped by the seal of comedy in local productions.

Audiences have laughed long and hearty at the antics of John Shanks and Bettye Hairston in the light, gauzy funny business in which they have been cast.

In "Dark of the Moon" they stepped into serious roles, parts that took dramatic guts, combined with a sensitive reaction to unusual situations.

Especially is this true in the Shanks portrayal. He is a "witch boy" who falls in love with a mortal girl. He persuades a "conjurer woman" to change him into a human so he can wed her. He is placed on a year's probation, and if in that time the girl remains true to him, he is free to remain among men. If not, he must return to his former existence.

## Losing Battle

He and his wife strive mightily, but the workings of two shapely "witch women," aided by the "good" people of the mountain community, make it a losing battle.

Shanks in this dual role had to be convincing as grave robber and tender lover. The transition he handled in such a way one was tempted to toss in a "bravo" or two.

Mrs. Hairston as the wife who hadn't been too stand-offish in offering her favors in pre-marital days, also had a "transition" role. She went from light-hearted girl to heavily-burdened wife, bearer of a "witch child" born dead and burned by fanatical neighbors. Her child-bed scene was as dramatically handled as anything you'll see. She also center-pieced the most powerful scene in the entire play, a church service during which she was forced into breaking her chastity vow made to keep her husband from reverting to unnatural status.

## All Take Bows

There can be no quarrel with the remainder of the cast. Richard Cook was wonderful as the father of the girl, offering sincerity that made the humor all the more funny. Bobby Briggs as one of the neighbor boys also made the most of a good role. Carolyn Levy and Vivien Altfeld added sensuous spice as the two witches who wanted to tear their playmate from the arms of his woman.

Carol Rodesney and Lastie Vincent contributed to the comedy, and Al Sadler was all to be expected as the hell-and-damnation preacher. Sherry Billing and Sam Brooks, mother and brother of the girl, deserved the generous applause given their work.

As a matter of fact, we can write "ditto" behind the rest of the cast: Jim McCormick, Frances Farmer, Clara Bondon, Jim Ellis, Pearl Hollimon, Jean Johnson, Charles Eppes, Pauline Oliveros, Walt Russell, Fred Springer, John Norman, Terry Springer and Jean Krausse.

## Music and Lights

The two-act, nine-scene production was excellently handled through lighting effects that were timed to split seconds. There also were musical interludes (especially a general store songfest) that added to the over-all entertainment.

"Dark of the Moon" is recommended unreservedly as something you should see. If you don't enjoy it thoroughly, then there is something wrong with me.—HOC.