

# Shakespeare Festival delivers a delightful romp through married life

## Theatre Talk

By FRED LIPPINCOTT

J.P. Priestley, a prolific writer in many genres, was one of the most popular playwrights in both London and New York before and just after WWII (he died in 1984). A play of his was revised in London a few seasons back to great success, thanks to an imaginative set and to giving the play, without two intermissions, more palatable to a modern audience.

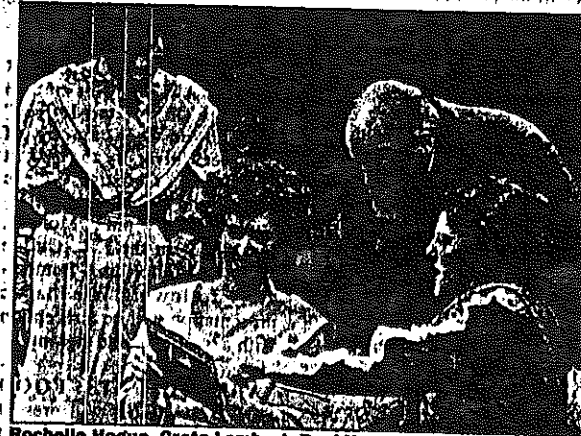
Now, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival gives us "We're Getting Married" (1938), perhaps Priestley's best-known play and a darling of little theater groups all over the world (one set: juicy parts for everyone). Bary Boys (is this his directorial debut for a main production here?) says the play is "great

fun," a satiric view of the English middle class. He includes two intermissions. Certainly he's assembled a stellar cast: Philip Pleasants (very funny with a subtle characterization), Greta Lambert, Jill Tanner, John Woodson, Monica Bell and Sam Gregory to name just the most obvious. These are ASF superstars who never fail to deliver the goods.

The play turns on the thinnest of pretexts: three couples, celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary, who were married together, the same day, discover that their clergyman had not yet gotten his license so they have not, in fact, been married. Resolution of this "conflict," which takes all of two minutes in the final act, is the whole action of the play. A sub-plot concerns two young lovers (intense Brian Furlander and willowy Jenny Sheffer

Stevens), attractive young people, who, guess what? Get together in the end.

The time is the turn of the century (ASF's usual stunning women's costumes are by Christine Turbill; Doug Huszti designed the serviceable set) in Yorkshire in the North of England—a fact that the dialect coach never lets us forget. These folks all have impeccable regular stage accents, designed for maximum clarity, but in attempting to "speak Yorkshire," they so distort language that they are often hard to understand. At the final preview, I missed one whole speech of funny Sonja Lanzener, and even Ms. Tanner was incomprehensible at one point. As Mr. Boys is himself British, he may not always hear when the dialogue is too fast or dialectical for an American audience. It's a little like those Irish and



Rochelle Hogue, Greta Lambert, Paul Hebron, and Jill Tanner in Alabama Shakespeare Festival's production of J.B. Priestley's "When We Are Married," playing in repertory in the Octagon of the Carolyn Blount Theatre through July 25.

Photo special to the Independent

Scottish films that are starting to use subtitles. Be prepared that going to this play will probably involve a little more work than is usually necessary.

Among the newcomers, Traber Burns plays a big, bluff Alderman Helliwell. He has a large voice, which often seems excessive here. In fact the whole show is perhaps too loud for the small Octagon. Rochelle Hogue looks pretty in her costume, but it is not fair to cast her with Ms. Lambert and Ms. Tanner, formidable competition, as the third wife. Student Tarah Flanagan, not for the first time, shows a lot of spunk (and a clear accent) as the maid Ruby.

As this is the only modern British play scheduled for this season, we might have hoped for something more substantial (one commentator says the play "borders on farce"). But a season filled with three Shakespeare plays, including "Troilus and Cressida" for the first time is not designed by managers afraid to take risks. Perhaps they wanted one, sure-fire success.