

# 'Once in a Lifetime' Looking Worn Despite Energetic Cast

**THEATER**/By Hedy Weiss

Reprinted from Tuesday's late edition

**H**ollywood has taken a bum rap for years—portrayed as something between a warehouse and a waiting room in Hell in everything from Nathanael West's novel *The Day of the Locust* to David Mamet's play "Speed-the-Plow" and the Coen brothers' film "Barton Fink."

Old Tinseltown doesn't exactly come off smelling like a rose in the 1930 Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman comedy "Once in a Lifetime," either. But at least those writers captured the cockeyed optimism, the loopy joie de vivre and the utter insanity of the whole Hollywood dream and put it in the proper perspective. Sure, greed, excess and stupidity were bound to triumph there. But who ever said the place was anything but a big, rambunctious funhouse?

Unfortunately, aside from its high spirits, the play (which was written at about the same time Kaufman was turning out scripts for the Marx Brothers' movies) has little going for it these days aside from a streak of nostalgia and a few funny bits. At least that's the impression one gets from the Court Theatre's revival, which opened Monday night.

Charles Newell, whose dazzling production of "The Triumph of Love" last fall set the stage for him to assume the artistic director's chair at Court, has once again given a "classic" a cleanly modern staging, with speed and high energy as the hallmarks. But despite the efforts of a large cast that buzzes in and out on roller skates, bicycles, scooters and flying crutches, "Once in a Lifetime" seems more tired than exuberant. And though it may have set the pace for Hollywood satires in its



Kathy Santen (from left), Mervon Mehta and E. Faye Butler are appealing and energetic in Court Theatre's "Once in a Lifetime."

## "Once in a Lifetime"

■ 7:30 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Sunday. To Oct. 30.

■ Court Theatre, 5535 S. Ellis

■ \$20 to \$26

■ (312) 753-4427

day, six decades later its day has come and gone.

The show is set in those heady months just after the first "talkie," "The Jazz Singer," became a sensation and made silent film stars with great faces but terrible voices obsolete overnight.

George Lewis (Sean Grennan), May Daniels (Kathy Santen) and Jerry Hyland (Mervon Mehta), are a New York vaudeville team with failing fortunes who decide to head for Hollywood and set up a school of elocution for the vocally challenged. Jerry has the ambition, May has the smarts and

George, a dimwit, has the kind of Gumlike idiocy it takes to make it big.

John Culbert's set is a sleek, polished-wood, Art Deco environment that makes all the world a soundstage, framed by a grand, light bulb-studded marquee. And the live piano underscoring, composed and played by Charles Berigan, gives the whole show the feel of an early movie.

The principal performers are first-rate, including Grennan, who plays dumb in a most appealing way, and Santen, whose natural charm and melodious speaking voice would see her through anything. But of course it's the writer who must steal the show. And as Lawrence Vail, the New York playwright who is literally driven mad by his invisibility in Hollywood, Harry Althaus is a hoot.

Unfortunately, this production tries to be a Starstruck Express, but the play is on the local track.