

Rogers, Hart launch ITC's fifth year

By BETTE CONROY

"Rogers and Hart — A Musical Celebration," which opened last Friday and will run through October at Illinois Theatre center, also marked the start of ITC's fifth straight season in the business of entertaining south suburbanites.

An all-musical revue, the production stars Laura Moore, Mib Bramlette, Jeff Coopwood, Ron Relic, Etel Billig and Steve Billig, who also directed.

The performance is a joy to witness and hear, since the late Lorenz Hart's song lyrics may never be matched in American music for their sophistication, satirical humor and touching poetry. Also, if any of the later songs written by Richard Rodgers with Oscar Hammerstein may strike some music buffs as a bit too "monumental" or even saccharine, they should take themselves to ITC and give a listen to some of the bold, brassy, sardonic and wryly romantic music turned out when Rodgers was collaborating with Hart.

LIKE A FINELY tuned relay team, the six performers take star turns in performing the memorable repertoire, both in solo numbers and in several smashing duets.

Ms. Moore's shining versatility is evident throughout the show, as she tells us in song "Thou Swell" and later duets with Coopwood for the cozy "Blue Room" and "There's a Small Hotel."

Coopwood, a talented young singer new to ITC audiences, does a beautiful job with "Lover" and amusingly teams with Ron Relic for "It's a Lovely Day for a Murder."

Relic, who has a flair for blending humor with sex, duets with the lovely comic Ms. Bramlette on "I Could Write a Book," and scores movingly with one of the most haunting love songs ever written, "Where or When."

PERFECTLY ATTUNED to Hart's lyrics is the "sly wink" approach Ms. Bramlette lends to her lighter numbers, such as her duet with Relic in "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World." She also demonstrates dramatic feeling with her "Ten Cents a Dance."

Steve Billig's "My Funny Valentine" is interpreted by an actor getting much more out of those wistful lines than mere singers can usually reveal, and Etel Billig sings the droll saga of a much-married tootsie whose sole aim in life is "To Keep My Love Alive." And, together, the couple nastily convey that "Everything I've Got Belongs to You."

Each performer shines in several other Rodgers and Hart melodies and the entire ensemble congregates often to perform such numbers as "Syracuse" from "The Boys From Syracuse," which is one of the most rousing moments of the entertaining evening.

Musical direction was by Jonathan Roark, who was enthusiastically applauded by the opening night audience, but to describe in advance the shimmering Art Deco set created by the innovative Vernon Push or Leslie Smith's co-ordinated costuming would spoil the surprise in store for showgoers planning to catch ITC's season debut. Suffice to say, a visual treat awaits that no 1930s' aficionados should miss.