

The Country Wife At York

By Michael Christ

In these days of mass production, theatre still remains a hand-crafted art. While the modern film and record industries endlessly duplicate their products to recoup the financial cost of personnel and production, theatre is always financially burdened by never being able to dispense of the necessity of a live cast and an attendant crew. Consequently theatre has never been a profit-making enterprise and has been dependent on the state, church, and the wealthy benefactor throughout its history.

To help understand the long, detailed process which goes into the making of live theatre, we will follow the development of the upcoming Theatre Department productions of Wycherley's *The Country Wife* which appears in Burton Auditorium from February 6th to the 10th.

The process begins in the 1670's in Restoration England with the creation of a comedy of social manners by William Wycherley. Even today the theme of the play remains a frank treatment of social and sexual intercourse.

The Country Wife is principally the story of one Mr. Horner who devises a scheme of posing as a eunuch in the hope of being trusted to the company of married women. The husbands involved are delighted with the prospect of having the gelded Mr. Horner shepherd their wives away from the hands of would-be adulterers. The wives too, are delighted with their new companion when he proves *not* to be a eunuch. Depending on one's viewpoint, Wycherley is either cynical, or highly practical, in his grasp of society.

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For our purposes the play may be regarded as having been in suspended animation since it was written, over 300 years ago. The play, which is distillation of the playwright's experiences and observations, can be brought to life again in our times by recreating the essence—not necessarily the entirety—of the environment which first brought it into being. The challenge for everyone involved will be to recapture the essential humours that will spark a dusty playscript into living, three-dimensional theatre.

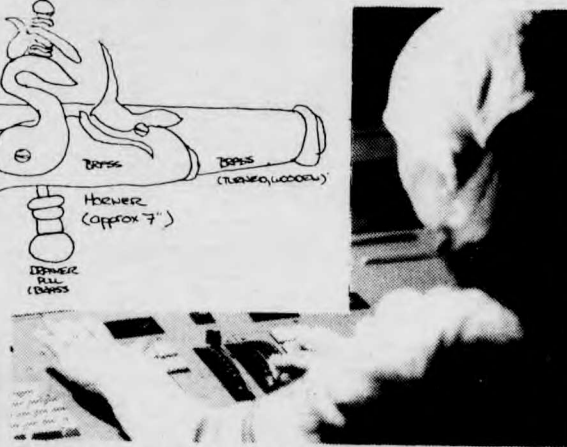
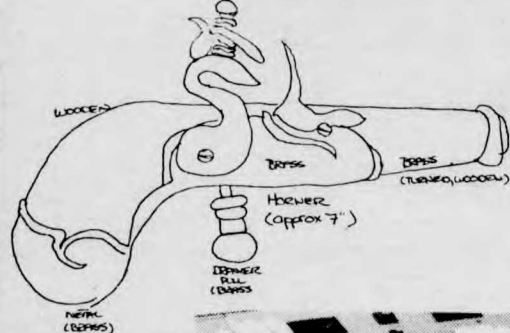
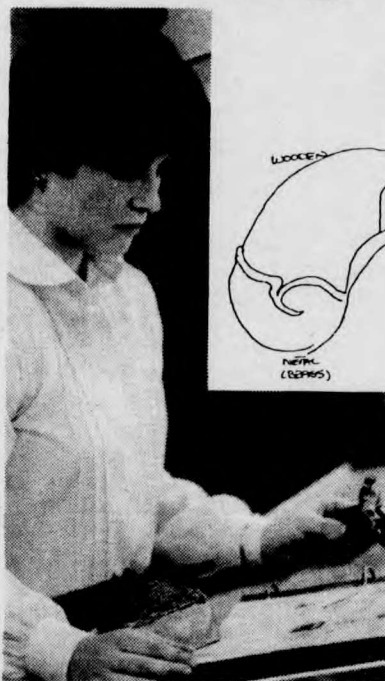
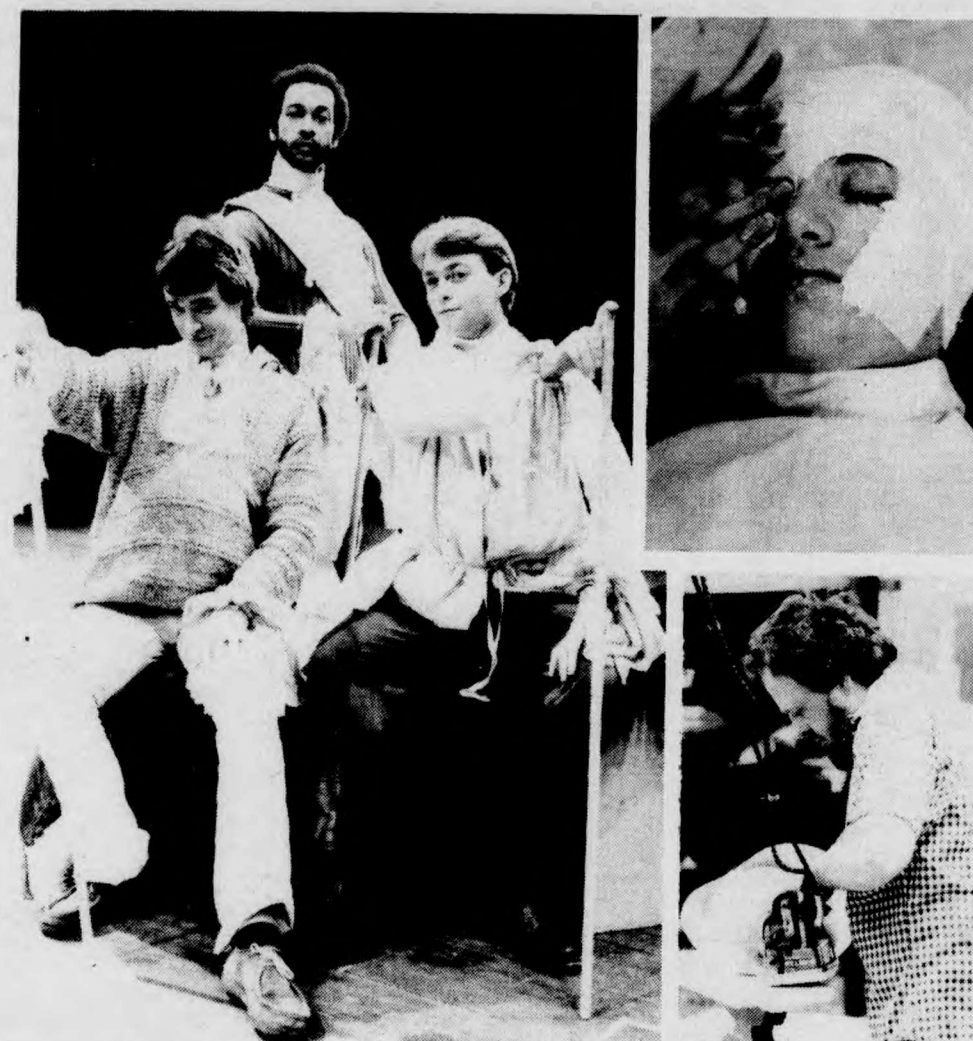
It is sometime last August. Faculty director Neil Freeman summons together student-designer R. Bruce Specht and student-dramaturge Mimi Mekler to begin plans for a play that will not appear before an audience for five months to come. The period of research and development begins and each person will proceed in their separate but interconnected duties under the guidance of the director.

Designer Specht begins his research of the period. His studies will include aspects of dress, architecture, and interior design.

The style of the Restoration, he finds, is an odd case in counterpoint: the dull-hued and sombre remnants of the Puritan age contrast with the new and more vibrant creations of the Restoration which followed. The director had pointed towards a Brechtian style of design in his concept, which is to say, he was looking for a design with fragmented set elements which would rely heavily on banners to state the setting of the play. The resulting design utilizes a Puritan-hued hanging set which will create a neutral frame to catch the audience's eye and prevent it from wandering away into the cavernous wastes of Burton Auditorium.

Costume designer Jill Johnston will then be allowed to counterpoint the subdued set using the rich colours of the period costume to demand the audience's attention. As designer Specht proceeds to design lighting for the show he will remember the cardinal rule that no element of design or effect must be allowed to upstage the rightful place of the actor in the eye of the spectator. Both designers will then begin a catalogue of designs which will detail and enumerate every item in the physical production of the play; patterns, scale models, blueprints, and lighting notations will provide additional guidelines for the technical process.

The largest body of students is to be found busy in the construction of set and props under the guidance of faculty members



(Clockwise from top left) Actors David McCann, Paul Harrington-Smith, and Dean Smith; actress Lisa Reitapple is fitted for mask; David Pequemat; Karen Matthews, Maggie French-Kokko at computer lighting board; Cathy Bruton compares prop with designer's sketch (r). Photos: M. Christ and B. Segal.

William Lord, Keith Bradley, and Ted Ross. Michael Whitfield will supervise lighting.

Modern theatre has a vast array of materials at its disposal. As well as conventional wood, plaster, paint, canvas, and papier mâché, the scenery shop must be equipped to handle vacuum-molded plastics, hand-laid fiberglass, and the welding and brazing of metal stocks. The prop shop handles smaller items under the watchful eye of props mistress Cathy Bruton. She is responsible for the faithful execution of the designer's concept once they have left the drawing board.

Meanwhile, David Pequemat is overseeing the activities of his students in the costume shop. Derived from illustrations, paintings, and patterns from actual 17th century clothing, the designs of Jill Johnston slowly come to life on the cutting-room table. Even

with patterns from original garments, the fitting of a costume to an actress who is both stouter and taller than her historical counterpart, is still an arduous task. The fancy collars and other ornamentation of the period—a time before the invention of the sewing machine—requires special techniques not usually practised in the fabrication of modern garments. Alterations are seemingly endless and will continue right up until opening night.

The dramaturge is a rarely-used title in North America, the functions of the dramaturge are better known under a number of aliases: literary manager, assistant director, research assistant, script assistant...and still others. Mimi Mekler's first task as dramaturge will be to thoroughly research the play and its times and to attend to areas of the script which have failed to yield meaning in the light of her research.

Angus Braid and his playwriting students are to help rewrite the play. Topical references no longer intelligible are deleted or modified, some characters are built-upon others carefully removed. In the end, almost ten per cent of excess fat is pared from the script. This activity parallels the work of John Welch as he polishes an original musical composition which he has created to accent the play.

Thus far, the course of events closely mimics the workings of professional theatre. When the time for casting arrives, the theatre school becomes readily distinct from the professional theatre.

In the professional theatre the director often views casting as the most important element contributing to the success of his play. To compromise in the selectinn of even one key actor may seriously compromise the overall finish of the entire enterprise. A big-budget director may search the whole continent in order to avoid the compromise of miscasting.

In a theatre school the emphasis is not on the end product—an evening's diversion—but on the process of training the actor. The play is used as a framework in which the actor can exercise his skills and broaden his range. This difference in philosophies is translated into a seemingly perverse approach to casting.

Director Freeman purposefully places his actors and actresses in parts they will have to grow to fill. Actor Paul Harrington-Smith has played mainly older men in the past, in a

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typical approach, the director will ask him to play both a young lover and an old grandmother. The actor is faced with the challenge of bridging the barriers of sex and age which separate his two roles. For Paul and the other fourth year students, the skills they acquire through creative problem-solving will last longer than the sound of clapping in a university auditorium.

The Country Wife is a *style* play, which is to say, the actor must spend a great deal of time recreating the manners of the age. Actress Debbie Stenard, like her fellow actors, will become a minor authority on 17th-century English life. She will visit several libraries, listen to period music, view period paintings, she will even consult Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* for its meticulous recreation of 17th-century life in motion. John Oxley will add to this knowledge by coaching her voice to follow the rhythms of Wycherley's speech, Jill Courtney will teach her to move her torso and brandish her fan in accord with period fashion. The actor must deliver all these historical niceties, interpret the character, and remember the script - all at the same instant.

The period of research and development comes to an end as the play approaches opening night.

The publicist, Pat Callaghan, will arrange for posters, publicity, and will ensure everyone involved receives credit for their work in the program. As the director finishes his work with the actors he will recede from the picture and the stage manager will become the sole authority behind the curtain line. The house manager will attend to the seating and supervision of the audience and the technical crew will don their headsets to coordinate the lights and music in the playhouse. The play by now has taken over five months to come into being, most of it in the planning stages, the actual rehearsal time has been less than one month.

The making of a play is an expensive enterprise in terms of both time and money. The monetary rewards are meagre, even in professional theatre. I have tried to indicate what various people do in the process of live theatre. I have not indicated why they do it, or why they would work so hard for so little monetary gain. The reward of theatre is the sheer satisfaction of finding personal expression in a hand-crafted process which might one day result in the production of a play by which our age will be known to future generations as Wycherley's is known to us.