

Burton to host bunnies and yuppies

York's graduate theatre students are going public next week with productions of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *In The Boom Boom Room*.

By REBECCA CANN

The Merry Wives of Windsor, according to Professor Neil Freeman of the theatre department, "deals with the Elizabethan yuppie. It's a black comedy, Shakespeare's revenge on the yuppies." Freeman, an expert in the analysis of rhythms and word patterns in the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays, is directing *Merry Wives* for the Graduate Theatre Company. Set in a contemporary health club, the production opens next week in Burton Auditorium, playing in repertoire alongside David Rabe's *In the Boom Boom Room*.

The contemporary setting is part of an attempt to make Elizabethan aspects of society relevant to a modern audience. "Nobody understands the pernicky little details of Elizabethan life," says Freeman. "We've done minor re-writes to make it more understandable, and subplots have been expanded." Much of this expansion takes place between scenes without dialogue, but the subplot involving the characters of Doctor Caius and Sir Hugh Evans (Parson Lou in this staging) has been expanded with dialogue written by a Canadian writer, revealed in name only as The Dark Horse of the Sonnets.

Conceptually, *Merry Wives* easily fits a contemporary time-slot. It deals with a "mistrust of foreigners, mistakes between men and women, and general mistrust between people," according to Freeman. "*Merry Wives* is the only citizen comedy Shakespeare ever wrote. Villains, bourgeois, working class, the religious, the gentry, professionals, young and old; there is no range like this elsewhere." Because Shakespeare's stereotypes are not all comprehensible to a modern audience, the graduate production includes in its twist of characters an Arabian businessman, a Rastafarian, a rock musician, a rich scout master and an oriental parson (as opposed to Welsh) among other surprises.

In his production notes to cast and crew Freeman has "This Play" written in large bold letters, and beneath it is written "there is no such thing." *Merry Wives*, according to Freeman, is a series of episodes as opposed to a play, filled with entrances and exits and scenes with eight or ten people. "It's the nearest thing to a modern film script that period has turned out," states Freeman. "It's the most vicious play to rehearse because it's so bitty." The last time *Merry Wives* was produced was two years ago at the Stratford Festival. The director was replaced two-thirds of the way through the rehearsal period as the result of stress.

Rehearsals for this production have been filled with game-playing and clown work. "Rehearsals have been delightful and very funny," states Freeman. "They've been free-wheeling rehearsals in order to find the spirit of the actors." Freeman has been working with the actors on the structural implications of punctuation in the text. "*Merry Wives* is unlike any other Shakespeare play in its style—it's quite witty," states Freeman. "The main problem for

By PAULETTE PEIROL

Go-go dancers, bisexuals and brutality in Burton Auditorium? What, you may ask, are York's graduate theatre students up to? Among other things, such as classes and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, they are busy fine-tuning rehearsals of David Rabe's *In the Boom Boom Room*, to be presented at York next week (March 25 and 27).

Written in 1972, *In the Boom Boom Room* is very much rooted in, yet explorative of the social trends of the 1960s. Its characters are influenced by their "new awareness" of sexuality and morality, astrology, pop-psychology, and feminism. This "awareness" often becomes absurd, as when Chrissy, the main character, complains, "So we got this stuff way up high like sending down rays at us, and we got this stuff way down deep like sending rays up at us, we don't know anything about any of it... I got maybe my Id under Jupiter—my Superego thing under the influence of Mars..."

Yet Chrissy, being played by Gayle Murphy, is a complex character. Her dream of being a dancer turns to

disillusionment when she graduates from the local A & P to become a go-go dancer in the "boom boom room." Meanwhile, her relationships with men confound her as she struggles to deal with the realization that she was sexually abused as a child. In the depths of her despair, the impoverished Chrissy feels like little more than the product of a failed abortion.

In the Boom Boom Room is anything but a tribute to '60s nostalgia. Director Steven Gregg, a graduate student, says that many of the issues raised in the play are still pertinent to a contemporary audience, most notably those of child abuse, gender stereotyping, and choices for women.

Gregg's first inclination was "to update the play and change the locale to a strip-joint." He found however, that the specific choices (or lack of them) that each character makes are dependent on the social conditions of that time. Meanwhile Gregg hopes that people will question "if things are really any better today." Gregg notes, for example, that "people are more aware today of what Freud has done to women. Also, people who have been sexually

abused now have more choices such as group therapy or homes for battered children."

Stage manager Jennifer Emery acknowledges that "the play is very racial." Yet both Emery and Gregg feel that by keeping the play set in the 1960s the audience will feel distanced enough to view it objectively. "Hopefully this alienation will help to excuse the prejudices in the play," says Emery.

Much of the past three months of rehearsals have been spent discussing various topics raised in the play and also experiencing them firsthand. David Burgess, the play's dramaturge, brought in books, music, and fashion magazines from the period, and also did research on incest, child abuse, wife-beating, and transvestites. The cast even visited strip-joints downtown, in the hope that "they'd get enough of it to become inert and also get a feeling for the clientele," says Gregg. Anne Wooten, who has taught jazz dance classes at York, was also called in to help choreograph the play's dance scenes.

The 11 actors involved found it difficult to juggle rehearsals with

classes, auditions and *Merry Wives* rehearsals. While they are trying to work in accordance with Equity regulations, which allows for no more than 8 hours of rehearsal per day, in actual fact, classes count as performances leaving only 5 hours a day to rehearse both plays. "That only amounts to 1 1/2 Equity days (12 hours) per week," says Emery, "and the problem is that you need the intensity of an 8 hour block."

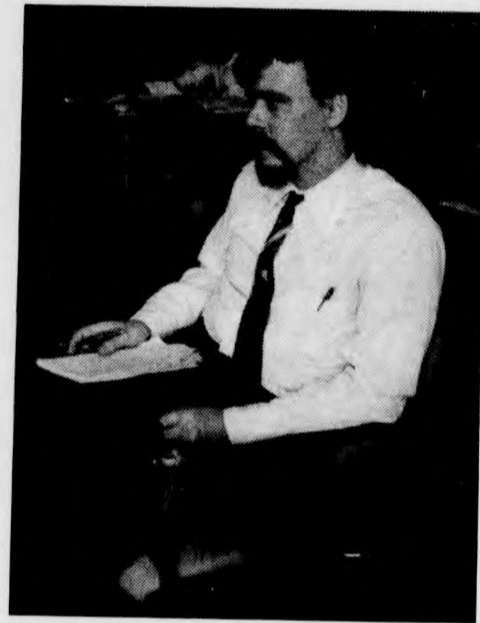
Meanwhile, other graduate students are working on sets, lighting, and costumes for the *Boom Boom Room*. Both *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *In The Boom Boom Room* are using a basic "unit set" designed by professor Maxine Graham. It is a large pentagon-shaped raked platform with smaller platforms on it, and includes assorted step units and boxes which can be positioned differently for each play. This unit set, and also the specific set elements must be adjustable, for they will be used not only in Burton Auditorium but also in the smaller Robert Gill Theatre downtown for later April performances. Emery notes that the unit set must be "fairly neutral" in order to define various spaces and accommodate each plays' needs.

The specific *Boom Boom Room* set is being designed by Monica Dechene, a 4th year student. It involves free-standing door frames and a raised bar in the background. The side-seating in Burton Auditorium will be closed off in order to afford more intimacy between the actors and the audience.

As with *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, music is an important element in this play. "It was a very particular era of music," stresses Emery, "and a lot of what goes on in Chrissy's head is based on this music." The production will use 3 speakers spaced about the stage, enabling the sound to literally move with Chrissy.

In The Boom Boom Room involves "a slow degeneration," describes Gregg, "and the decor, acting, and lighting changes with it." For instance, the bar and the people in it get sleazier as the play progresses. However, Gregg intimates, the end of the play is not wholly pessimistic.

"Any time I'm working on a theatre project, I'm always asking 'what am I going to do when it's over?' It's like a black hole..." Emery muses. Yet Gregg says, in anticipation of next week's performance "It's never quite there until it's there."



Which play is this?: Grad students Gayle Murphy and Barry Yzereef during rehearsal for *In The Boom Boom Room* while director Steven Gregg (above) watches on. Actors are doubling up with roles in both plays next week in Burton.

modern actors is getting them to trust the words, the emotion the words contain, and to avoid over-motivation."

Freeman blocked the movement for the production in a four-day period, "to give people enough time to explore their characters and then nail it down. But when we started blocking," says Freeman, "all the language use disappeared. The actors have slipped back into twentieth centuryisms. I think they're terrified, which is what I'm trying to do, to make them feel responsible. Shakespeare does not depend on precision by the director; the actors are riding free."

"I have my own idea of what the play's about," states Freeman, "but I'm not trying to direct towards that. What I'm trying to do is let the audience see what they want, whether it be sexist, feminist, silly, vicious, a great sadness or a great leveller." But ultimately, Freeman states, "I don't want the audience to get into 'the Shakespeare mood.' I want the audience to get off their uppers."

Neil Freeman's intention to get the audience off their uppers is being carried through in part by Fine Arts student David Cauthery. Cauthery is composing music for *The Merry*

Wives of Windsor and his specialty is electronic music. Tucked into one of his pieces for the play is a collection of pieces of some of Beethoven's symphonies—played backwards.

Cauthery has composed music for both theatre and film in the past. Last year he worked on the theatre department's productions of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Hostage*. But *Merry Wives* has been the best experience to date. In describing his work with Neil Freeman Cauthery states, "He lets you know what he wants without telling you what he wants—he gets his concept over to you."

"In shows I've done in the past the directors haven't given me any idea what they've wanted, I've been completely on my own. In the film work I've done I had to conform to what they asked for—they gave me specifics."

Cauthery calls the preset music for the play a "soundscape." "A lot of people have trouble considering electronic music, music," states Cauthery, "a soundscape is a three-dimensional piece using music and sounds—a landscape of music."

The preset soundscape is filled with spacy, airy sounds, overlapping voices and guitar and bass. Halfway through, the sounds of squash-

playing are suddenly recognizable—the nautilus machines of a health club, the sounds of people grunting and straining. Eerie, hollow sounds reverberate in the ear—then something is speeding towards you in a narrow tube. It's squash playing recorded backwards.

"*Merry Wives* is a very callous play, a cold play," states Cauthery, "I'm trying to capture the callousness of a health club—the sounds are very harsh. I wanted to take the sounds of a health club and build it into a composition, create a music piece concrète" (acoustic and found sounds arranged on tape).

Originally Cauthery was going to be onstage throughout the play as the musician but, he says, "I would have had to write my music around being onstage. Also the style of music I was writing didn't carry enough energy through the scenes—Neil wanted his actors to go very fast." As a result the music played in between scenes is a wide collection of pre-recorded music by various artists. Included are Tom Waits, Patsy Cline, Elvis Costello, Robert Gordon and Link Wray. "The only stipulation was it had to be quite bright and fast," states Cauthery.

The backwards Beethoven is included in Cauthery's composition

for the fairy scene. "Neil wanted something that would build tension, starting out calm at the beginning and then turning into absolute bedlam." Cauthery used recordings of Toscanini with the NBC symphony orchestra. "I wanted the sound of an orchestra halfway between tuning up and doing a very long cadenza," states Cauthery, "and I liked the tones and harmonic frequencies of Toscanini's recordings. I chose him because he does the most callous interpretation of Beethoven—there's no subtlety, no quiet bits. Toscanini likes to jump all over everything."

The resulting music is image-inducing, from space-ships to millions of gaping mouths. As Freeman pointed out, "fairies no longer frighten people." Cauthery's music aims to bring a dated scene into an emotional present.

The final piece Cauthery worked on concludes the show but he refuses to say more than "it's a surprise." His comment sums up the possibilities of the graduate production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*: "Neil and I decided we wanted to hit the audience with this very strange thing." It seems unlikely that next week's audiences will be bombarded with only one.