

It was a masterpiece that drew attention from across the Eastern Seaboard. The New York Times called it one of the three things to see while in North Carolina, and its artistry not only drew crowds, it helped change lives.

"The Shepherd's Song," written by North Carolina native Clifton Britton, was a different kind of Christmas story, focusing on the lives of the adults in the story.

Britton's masterpiece was revised at least six times over the 14 years it was performed. The actors in this production were not quickly rising Broadway super-stars, or even hardened theater veterans.

They were students.

These "Goldmasquers," who News-Argus Sports Editor Jack Lee said "brought Broadway to Goldsboro," awed our town with professional-grade productions, were invited to put on a performance in New York City, and earned top honors at Chapel Hill.

"The Shepherd's Song" quickly gained fame as the town's first "legitimate" drive in. For many years, it was performed on top of the Terrace Room between the old hotel and shoe store on Center Street. The students would set up their sets and lighting and perform right there while the audience members watched from the street.

Soon it was decided that the audience and students would be much happier in the auditorium of Goldsboro High School. The warm and comfortable seats combined with better lighting opportunities led to this decision.

"The Shepherd's Song" ran for 14 years before Mr. Britton became ill and production ended. After that, it seemed this was a story that would only be told over cookies and milk to eager young children on Christmas Eve.

It wasn't until several years later that Phil Baddour, a former little Shepherd Boy, discovered his old script. Jack Kannan, executive director of the Foundation of Wayne Community College, wanted it. Soon, other scripts turned up and "The Shepherd's Song" was on its way to being restored. Bert Allen took all of the revisions and collaborated them into what he felt was the best compilation, says Margaret Baddour, a WCC instructor and one of the actresses in the production.

The new version lasts a trimmed 45 minutes, compared to the earlier hour and a half to two hours.

It was decided that the revival of the show would be a tribute to Mr. Britton in honor of his work and contributions to the community.

Many of his actors were young people in need of direction, Ms. Baddour says. Mr. Britton brought them in off the streets, and worked tirelessly offstage and behind the scenes to better them through the arts. For example, when the Goldmasquers were invited to an out-of-town theater conference, he made sure they were all dressed properly, even buying some of his young actors proper clothing.

Mr. Britton had a vision: to unite these young people despite their varied interests.

Uniting people within our community is one of the reasons that Mr. Kannan was so excited to do the project. He wanted to bring people to our campus to see what we are all about and to develop relationships, he said.

The new cast, a combination of newcomers and veterans from WCC, local high schools and the community, include Humanities instructor Margaret Baddour as Anna; WCC graduate Tessa Brannon as Rachel; WCC students Parker Harris, as a messenger and a shepherd; Shawn Moody as Ezra, Nathan and a soldier, Reynold Meraz as Abner and a shepherd, and Julian Shelton as Joseph; Eastern Wayne student Hallie Hulse as Sarah; Spring Creek High School student Jeremy Sanders as Stephen, Wayne Country Day student Cassie Broach as Mary, Charles B. Aycock High School student Michael Atkins as Reuban, local lawyers Phil Baddour Jr. as the Rabbi and Geoff Hulse as Joel.

It is expected that this production will be the most successful of the Foundation's ventures, some of which have attracted hundreds of people.

Perhaps that should be no surprise. After all, it's not often that you get the chance to remember a man who made such an impression on his community that people work to see that neither he, nor his legacy, are forgotten.

Top left, Jeremy Sanders and Parker Harris at rehearsal; top right: an earlier performance of "The Shepherd's Song"; bottom: the view from the street of the original performances.

