



Renowned novelist Thamus Wolfe stands tall in the title role of his own original play, "The Return of Buck Gavin," a feature of the first Playmakers season in 1919.

Playmakers

Strongly traditional, traditionally strong

The Carolina Playmakers, in their strongly traditional but traditionally strong 53 seasons, have staged a stable history of theatrical achievements.

They have performed over a thousand plays on Playmaker stages in Chapel Hill and across the nation on film.

They have introduced to national theatre the outdoor historical drama through such productions as Paul Green's "The Lost Colony."

They have provided training for many notable writers, technicians, directors and actors who have since distinguished themselves.

And, in recognition of their efforts, they have continually received state and national acclaim, the most recent award being the American Old Company Award of Excellence for the production of "Woyzeck" presented in March at the American College Theatre Festival in Washington, D.C.

Their past is a rich one, filled with memories of distinguished alumni.

For instance, novelist Thomas Wolfe ("Look Homeward, Angel") once wrote and acted in plays for the group, as did other well-known writers—Francis Troy Patton ("Good Morning, Miss Dove"), and Betty Smith ("A Tree Grows in Brooklyn").

Television and cinema personality Andy Griffith, was Koko, the Lead High Executioner, in a 1948 production of Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Mikado." Broadway and film professional Sherrill Strudwick strode the Playmaker stage in roles from "The Tempest," "Ten Nights in a Barroom," and the folk play, "On Dixon's Porch," in 1927. Whoopi, the active television and movie performer was a familiar Playmaker in 1933. And Walter Terry, "Saturday Review" dance critic, participated in Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Paul Green's play "The House of Connelly," in the fall of 1933, while the next year, in another

Paul Green play "Shroud My Body Down," Vermont Ripper, former editor of the "Wall Street Journal" and now-to-be UNC faculty member, strolled on stage as "one of the young people."

All of these past memories, however, owe their existence to the original Playmaker, Frederick Henry Koch (nicknamed Prof. Koch), who came from North Dakota to UNC in 1918 to teach drama and in 1919 to organize the Carolina Playmakers.

At the "Tar Heel" reported, "The Carolina Playmakers, Professor Koch explained in his lecture last night, will begin with a University Community organization, to be open to all students and members of the community who show ability in any branch of dramatic art—acting, playwriting, scene painting, costumeing, and any other form of stagecraft."

The prime purpose of the organization will be the production of original plays dealing with North Carolina life and people and the promotion of such playmaking in North Carolina.

Thus were the Playmakers launched into an era of primarily producing what Prof. Koch called, "folk plays," a theatrical form new to the American theatre.

"The term 'folk,' as we use it," said Koch, "has nothing to do with the folk play of medieval times. But rather it is concerned with folk subject matter with the legends, superstitions, customs, emotional differences, and the vernacular of the common people. For the most part they are realistic and honest, sometimes they are imaginative and poetic."

Such folk plays almost exclusively characterized Koch's tenure (1918-1944), which was also highlighted by national tours by the Playmakers, the dedication of the Playmakers Theatre (formerly the University Bath House) equipped with seats for the student body of 3000 in 1925, publication of many of the original folk plays, and formation of the Department of Dramatic Art and of the Carolina Dramatic Association.

In the same tradition, Samuel Selden, author of over ten books on the theatre, followed Prof. Koch as chairman of the Department of Dramatic Art in 1944, but according to author-playwright-critic Walter Spearman, a Playmaker himself and author of the definitive history, "The Carolina Playmakers: The First Fifty Years," Selden's interests were also academic as well as creative.

Selden, of course, wanted to sustain the reputation of The Playmakers as the leading exponent of the American folk play, but he also wanted to give his department a seriously needed academic respectability, to raise the academic standard of the courses, and to steer The Playmakers into the mainstream of the American academic community, Spearman writes.

Meanwhile folk plays and original full-length plays continued in performance during Selden's years as chairman, an era keyed by the dedication of the Forest Theatre to Prof. Koch and the 40-year Celebration in 1958.

Harry Drew, a Playmaker practically from the beginning, became chairman in 1959, phasing out the folk play (except to inaugurate on original and professional Broadway plays, setting up the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree program and planning for the 1968 50-year Celebration until his death in 1968).

Thomas Patterson became acting chairman, presiding over the Celebration and gaining legislative approval for a new Playmakers Theatre in 1971.

Arthur Houston, named chairman this year, is responsible for the building's construction, and—with his tenure—a new era in Carolina Playmakers history begins.

Producing Playmaker plays requires research, practice

A Carolina Playmakers production begins as a building idea, develops with research under the director's eye, begins to grow as rehearsals and technical flowers at stage rehearsal, and is hopefully ready for appreciation at opening night.

Aristophanes' "The Birds," the Playmakers first offering of the 1970-71 season premiering October 7, is a case in point.

As a building idea, "The Birds," the story of two Athenians hoping to use the Universe, was initially hatched last spring when staff director Dr. Patricia Barnett learned that the play would definitely be a part of the coming season.

Realizing that the project would be an involved undertaking requiring the Forest Theatre, she immediately pumped into the research and discussion stage. "The Birds" was to be the first Greek comedy produced by the Playmakers in many years.

Ideas floated freely as she discussed the play with her newly assembled staff.

Jim Utallender, choreographer of last year's production of "The Boy Friend," was chosen to plan dances and create movements. Tommy Rezuto, veteran Playmaker and a director in his own right, was named set designer. Mary Davis, costume designer for many past Playmakers attempts, assumed the responsibility for "The Birds."

And Mike Tuorman became stage manager—a job Dr. Barnett views as necessitating "all the virtues of a good actor, carpenter, electrician, and technician. And maybe he ought to be able to juggle, too."

Dr. Barnett made visits to the Classics Department. "They were very helpful, and we discussed the idea

that with an Aristophanes, one of the things we must achieve is a sense of beauty combined with some of the wildest slapstick faces that you can get." Achieving this balance, however, required some careful thought in various directions.

Which script to use (critic Walter Kerr's acting edition will be used), what kind of wings to use for the birds (they must not get in the way of the lifts in the dances), which types of music to play, what kind of fast-drying

Story
by
Bruce Mann

body paint to use, and what to do about electricity sources in Forest Theatre were but a few of the problems considered.

What made finding solutions for the problems so vastly more complicated, of course, was the simple fact that a decision such as "Can the dancers be barefooted?" required extensive consultation.

"We had several meetings on this barefoot question. We really couldn't find a kind of shoe which would both look like a bird and be handsome. We also considered the surface they would have to dance on and the problem of splinters."

Director, stage manager, choreographer, stage

designer, and costumer were all involved in the ultimate decision to stage the dances barefoot.

September soon arrived, and tryouts were called for the first weekend of the school year, followed by a read-through the following Monday.

"The Birds" were off and running, with nightly rehearsals which are still continuing in the outdoor theatre, despite natural (rain) and unusual interruptions (King Nyle, Ruler of the Invisible Universe, met the King of the Birds at a surprise visit Sept. 21).

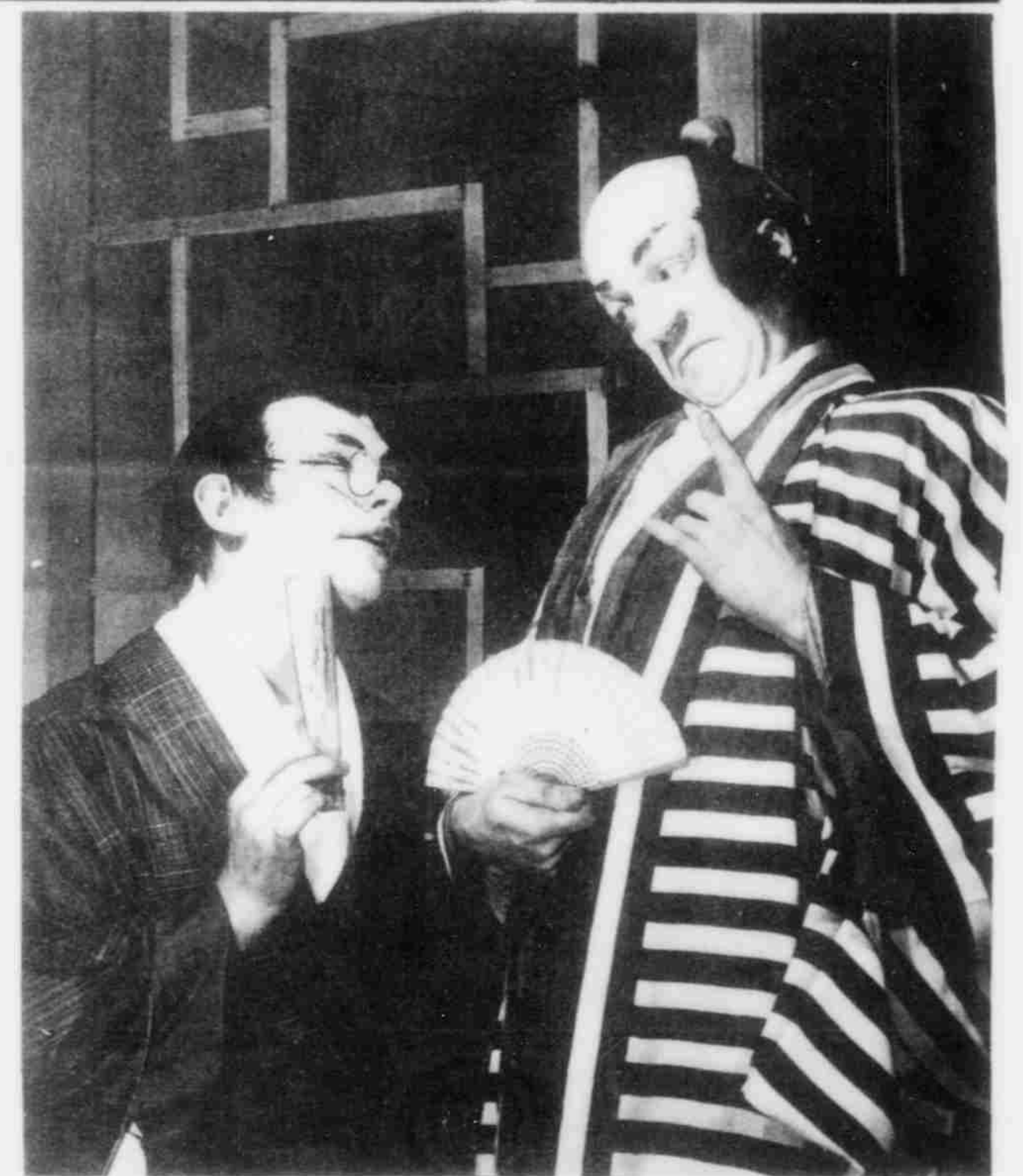
For the director, the blossoming stage is now approaching, and the various problems of integrating all the elements into a purposeful whole must be finally met.

"Of course, one of the problems here is that it's an enormous show, and I have to keep my finger on everything—at the same time I don't want to get such a tight grip that the creative talents of the people involved cannot be exercised."

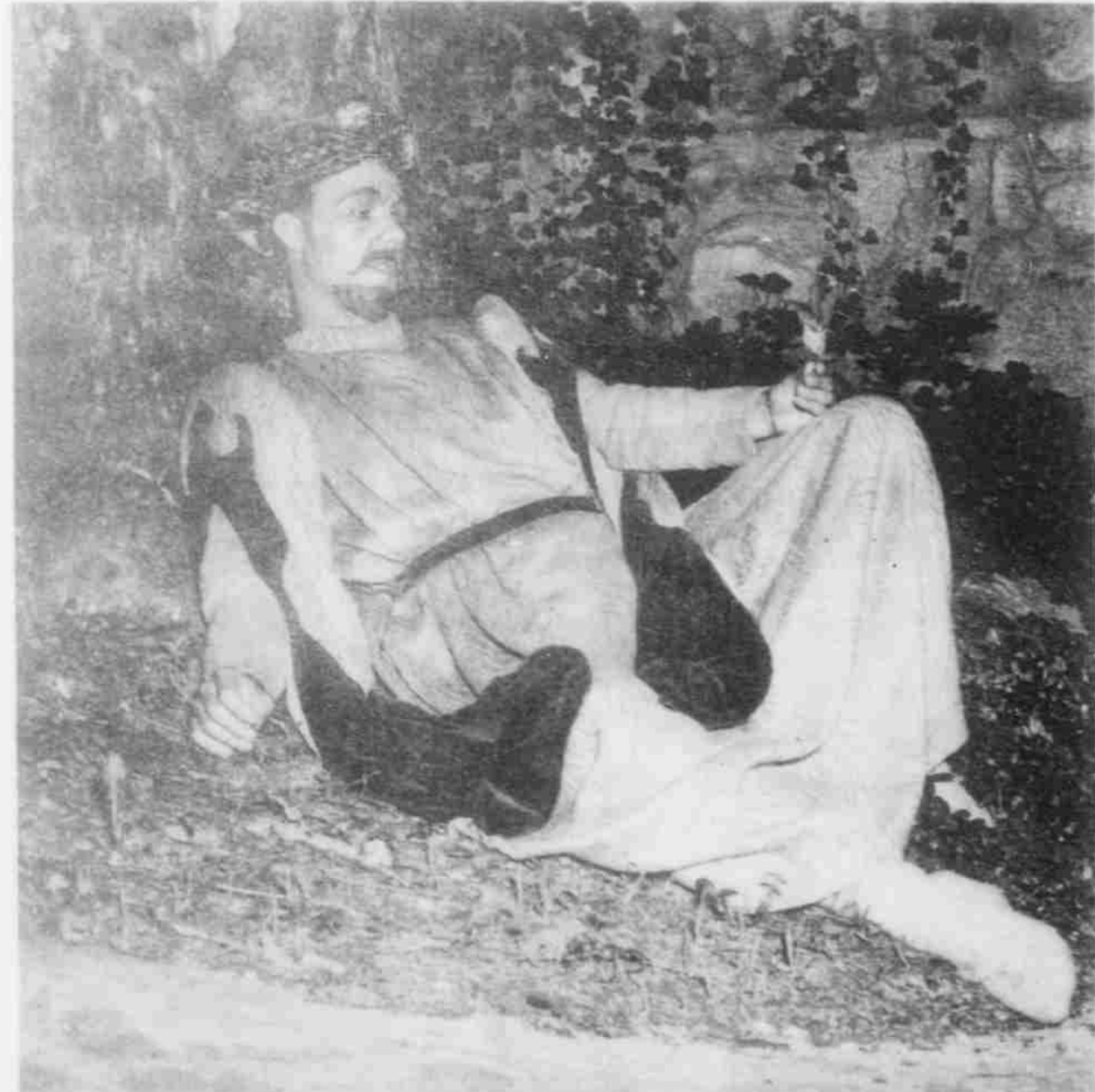
Also, at this time, a typical Playmakers requisite arrives on the scene—worry.

"At this point I'm always worried, I'm always desperate. But it goes from moment to moment. Now, I will see something happen—the chorus doesn't come in on (one or somebody took a step to the left instead of the right)—then I think that it'll never work or somebody up there hates me or if it rains. Then the next moment they'll do something so absolutely perfect that I think, ah, it's going to be great!"

It's an understandably dramatic statement at this stage. Only a dress parade, technical run-through, and two dress rehearsals separate "The Birds" from their opening flight next Thursday.



Andy Griffith, television and movie artist, (L), receives advice from Sam Hirsch (R) in the 1948 Playmakers production of Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Mikado."



William Hardy in "As You Like It" (1949)



"The Birds" rehearse in Forest Theatre.



"The Fantasticks" gather together in 1964.