

Playwright praises Playmaker's production

Rigid censorship improves theatre —Richardson

by Robin Clark
Features editor

Howard Richardson visited Chapel Hill last weekend to witness the Playmakers' production of 'Dark of the Moon,' a play he co-authored over 30 years ago. The play was first produced on Broadway in 1945 and has never been out of production since. In the following taped interview, the native South Carolinian and UNC graduate recalls some memorable episodes in his long career as a playwright, talks about the theatre in general and appraises the Playmakers' production of 'Dark of the Moon.'

DTH: The obvious first question... Richardson: ...is how did I like the Playmakers' production of my play? I thought it was excellent. I particularly liked the leading girl who played Barbara, Deborah Phialas. I don't think any actress I've ever seen has been better in the part, and it's a tough, tough part.

DTH: What about the part of the witch boy? Richardson: The witch boy is a flashy role, but almost any competent actor can get away with it, whereas the character Barbara has so many facets. A psychiatrist once told the

actress who played the part on Broadway that his patients had started talking about 'Dark of the Moon.' He thought that was sort of strange so he went to see it and then he could understand why: the character embodies every basic feminine fear—the fear of rape, the fear of having a child, the fear of death, the fear of infidelity, the fear of miscarriage, the fear of having a monster child.

DTH: Did you write all those fears into the character?

Richardson: Oh, no. It was completely subconscious. DTH: The 'Ballad of Barbara Allen,' the story on which you based your play, was it so complex psychologically?

Richardson: There was no 'Ballad of Barbara Allen.' That's all my own invention, and in a way it was a mistake. It just sounded good at the time to say it was based on a folk legend, so I did.

DTH: Where did you get the notion for such a bizarre play then?

Richardson: It's based on an archetypal story that runs through all folk mythology, including the Jesus Christ legend—the archetype of the godhead who impregnates a mortal.

DTH: From what I've read, that archetype got you into a little trouble.

Richardson: Yes, we were trying to make a motion picture out of the play but we got put on the Catholic Index. They (the Catholics) had what they called the Legion of Decency back in the forties, which gave an okay to a property or withheld it. If they withheld what they called the Seal of Approval, no one would touch it because they knew it would be listed as a motion picture that no Catholic could go to. Well, the Catholics didn't object to the obvious put-down on the Baptist church in the play—after all, the Catholics have not great love for the Baptists—but the fact that it dealt with a supernatural character who impregnates a mortal...that happened only once, they said, and you better believe it.

DTH: Oh well, some archetypes aren't as

popular as others. Richardson: I think the archetypal nature of 'Dark of the Moon' had a good deal to do with its success, too. Jesus Christ has never had a flop. Another historical figure that has the same quality is Abraham Lincoln, with the rags to riches story. He was crucified and then went on to postmortem glory.

DTH: It seems that you've hit upon a formula if it works.

Richardson: It's not an original idea of mine, of course. I'm quoting Jung, who believed in what he called "universal archetypes."

Another one that almost never fails is the story about a mother who is not a mother in relation to a son who is not her son. It's 'Auntie Mame,' for instance, which was first a novel and a big hit. It later became a play that was a big hit. Then it was made into a movie that was a big hit. The movie was then turned into a musical that was a hit, and the musical again became a movie, which was a hit. It's that off-beat quality that makes it work; and you can just name the successful stories and plays in which it applies.

DTH: Does Jung's theory of archetypes work in reverse?

Richardson: If you mean can you start off the other way around by saying that you're going to write a story about a mother by saying that you're going to write a story about a mother who is not a mother and a son who is not her son, I don't think it works that way, no. You get your idea and then test it against the archetype. If your story parallels an archetype then you're on better ground than if you start from scratch. I'm sort of schizoid. In my own writing I toss all theory to the wind and do it my way, which more often than not is the wrong way or I'd have more hits.

DTH: 'Dark of the Moon' opened on Broadway in 1945 and has been running somewhere, virtually ever since. Certainly that constitutes a hit.

Richardson: In spite of its great success and popularity through the years, from a literary standpoint it has very seldom gotten hurray notices from the critics. Last year it was the

third most often produced play with music in academic theatre and the seventh most produced play of any kind, according to a survey the American Theatre Association did. And critics sometimes praise the direction or they praise the cast, but it's always been thought of as a nice, pleasant, folk drama with a chance for a lot of singing and dancing.

DTH: Does it make you mad when a director transforms 'Dark of the Moon' into a rollicking musical on the same intellectual level as, say, 'The Sound of Music,' or 'Oklahoma'?

Richardson: It makes me madder when some director is talking about 'Dark of the Moon' says, 'oh, I changed that line because I was afraid we'd get a laugh there.' I think that to be moved in other directions the audience first has to have a release through laughter. Lots of successful even tragic plays, 'Death of a Salesman' for instance, has laugh for laugh as many laughs as 'Harvey.'

DTH: The juxtaposition of comic and tragic scenes in this production left me off-balance. Is that what you intended when you wrote the play?

Richardson: Yes, and the play has a very bitter, negative ending that is even more startling, but it was cut from this production. In the very end when the witch boy becomes a witch again, he turns back and looks at Barbara, the dead girl, and he doesn't recognize her. He grabs her by the hair, pulls up her head and says, 'I wonder who she was.' Then he kicks her in the ass and she rolls off the rock and falls, in the London production, in this horrible, grotesque position with her dress pulled all up almost to her crotch. Then the witch boy gives this wild scream, leaves the stage and down comes the curtain, over this dead body.

DTH: Speaking of dead bodies, whatever became of 'Play with a Dead Body'?

Richardson: Oh, God. That's a long story, too, so far without a happy ending. It was the last play my partner Bill Berney and I wrote



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called a showcase production. I may try to get 'Play with a Dead Body' produced that way.

together before he died. It's a comedy of murder, and it still hasn't been produced.

DTH: The title intrigues me. Can you tell me something about it?

Richardson: 'Play with a Dead Body' is very autobiographical. Two ne'er do well characters, who were based on Bill and me, decide to take this wealthy woman for her money, which was based on a gal who invested in one of our Broadway flops. Well, this gal had murdered one of her early husbands and been locked up for a bit. She was a very wealthy beer heiress, whose name I will avoid mentioning to keep us both out of jail. So, what we said we should do is one of us marry her, and since she had already been locked up for being crazy once, we'd claim that she tried to commit murder again and it would be simple enough to have her carted off to an asylum somewhere and to cash all her securities before she got out. So the play grew out of what might have happened if these two characters, whose morals were less than they should be, had been able to pull it off. Naturally, they couldn't.

DTH: Are you still planning to produce the play in New York?

Richardson: I've always hoped to, but Broadway today is in such a state that they are not looking for new, unproduced, original plays. Almost without exception the plays on Broadway are the results of other productions somewhere else that have proved themselves successful—either in London or through off-off-Broadway where they work their way up. For the last four years, every prize-winning play has been originally produced in the off-off-Broadway theatre, done on a shoe-string with the actors and actresses donating their talents in what is

DTH: You wrote a number of plays for tv at one time, why not try to sell the play to one of the networks?

Richardson: There is no television theatre anymore, aside from sit coms (situation comedies). Now back in the fifties, television was where some of the most exciting original theatre was done, live from New York.

DTH: How did writing for tv compare to writing for the theatre?

Richardson: Live television at its best combined the best elements of cinema, radio and theatre. The writing was very formula in a sense in that it had to be timed almost to the second to allow for commercial breaks. There was no video tape back then so everything was live. There were also very strict do's and don'ts of censorship.

DTH: Do you really think it's still theatre when you have to do all that?

Richardson: My point is yes indeed it is still theatre. The best work in theatre comes under the strictest of censorship and the tightest of structures. It's like that famous quote of the American poet Robert Frost: "Writing free verse is like playing tennis without a net."

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Cigars are not for her

by Dan Fesperman
Staff Writer

Editor's note: this is the first in a series of personality profiles focusing on the candidates for Mayor in Chapel Hill and Carrboro.

When most people think of small town mayors they think of the 'Mayberry' image—a frumpish, overweight male who smokes fat cigars and has a disposition that would make a lemon pucker. Ruth West, who is running for mayor of Carrboro, is small, female, friendly and doesn't smoke cigars.

Reliable sources say that she is between 63 and 65, but West, who looks closer to 50 isn't saying.

The fact that she doesn't look like a political figure has hardly kept her out of politics. "One of the great loves of my life is politics," she said, "and I've been involved in politics since before I was old enough to vote."

She was initiated into the political arena at age 20, when she worked with one of Franklin Roosevelt's presidential campaigns (but she wouldn't say which one).

Since then she has been active in numerous other political campaigns. She has also served as chairperson of the North Carolina Democratic Precinct, and as a member of the Carrboro School Board and the Governor's Citizens' Committee for Better Schools.

She said her love of politics was inherited from her father, who "was a politician to the Nth degree." Her father was a judge in her

hometown of Webster—a small mountain community that was then the seat of Jackson County.

When the county seat was moved away from Webster during her childhood, so was the county jail. Her family used the abandoned jailhouse as their part-time home. "In the summer we'd live on the farm and in the winter we'd live in the jail," she said, "and it was one of the most beautiful buildings that you'd ever want to live in."

West recalled the political campaigns of Webster with a laugh. "They were a completely different breed," she said.

She said that "the elections up there were something," and that "a lot of people carried their guns when they went to vote."

West said she knew many notorious politicians in Webster, but that she'd "better not talk about them because I go back there sometimes."

She said that lifestyles in Carrboro are completely different from lifestyles in the mountains—where West spent countless hours rafting and swimming in ice-cold rivers with her ten brothers and sisters, and where she said that "everyone knew what everyone else was doing, even though they might live on the other side of a mountain."

"The people of Carrboro will come to your aid in a moments notice," she said, "and even though you might not see some people for a while, you still know that they're your friends."

She said that the growth of Carrboro needs to be examined carefully so that the town will not lose its small town atmosphere and friendliness.

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