

T H E A T R E



The cast of 'Tintypes' performs a musical number ... the play is one of the Broadway shows scheduled to visit Chapel Hill

Outlook bright for local theater

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Editor's note: This is the first article of a two-part series. Part one focuses on theatre in Chapel Hill; part two will look at theatre elsewhere in the Triangle.

What is the general mental impression you conjure up when someone mentions "the theatre" — no, not the kind where you see movies, but the real thing, spelled with the funny ending? For many incoming freshmen, it may be their school's spring production of *Oklahoma!*, altered to accommodate an all-girl cast with the music arranged for the school's jazz band in the orchestra pit. For returning Carolina students, a likely image is a scene from one of the many Broadway shows brought to campus by the Carolina Union.

The Broadway on Tour series is, for most people, the "big event" of the theatre year in town, if for no other reasons than its visibility and its rarity. This year, the Carolina Union has contracted to have four shows appear on the stage of Memorial Hall: the musicals *Barnum* and *Tintypes*, as well as the "straight" plays *Amadeus* and *Master Harold*... and the boys.

Barnum is a circus musical about P.T. Barnum, the master showman of the 19th century. While not absolutely based on fact, *Barnum* does remain faithful to the character of its subject.

Tintypes is more a musical revue than a typical book musical. Rather than telling a story with songs, the play simply presents a small cast singing songs of the early years of the century with little regard for anything in the way of organization except the general mood created by the songs.

Amadeus, like *Barnum*, treats a factual character in the light of popular legend. When Mozart was busy composing in Vienna, his main competition was the court composer Antonio Salieri. *Amadeus* takes this rivalry and adds the now-disproved theory that Mozart's mysterious, early death was the result of poisoning by Salieri. The story, told in flashback from Salieri's deathbed as a confession, provides the framework for a powerful study of the psychological effects of guilt.

To close the season, Athol Fugard's indictment of South Africa's apartheid policy, *Master Harold*... and the boys, puts in an appearance. This thought-provoking play raises the point, by implication, that everyone is racist to some degree because of the nature of society.

This is the fifth year that the Union Activities Board has scheduled the Broadway on Tour series in an attempt to supplement and complement the offerings of local theatre groups. Broadway on Tour presents the latest plays from New York and London, while most area companies stage either established plays or new plays which will eventually go on to New York.

Some former ticket-holders have expressed concern because they have received no notification of the season's offerings. The fact is that the season has only recently been put together, and as yet there is still no

date set for the performances of *Master Harold*... and the boys. This is due mostly to the physical workings of putting the season together.

Companies — there are three or four main ones — contract to buy the rights to take a current Broadway show on tour, and make all the arrangements for casting, set building, and travel. But this year, most of the plays which were touring and available to the Union were holdovers from last year — *Annie* and *Children of a Lesser God* among them. *Barnum* and *Tintypes* were available early on. When the tour of *Amadeus* was formed, most cities with series similar to the Union's had already contracted all their shows for this year, so the Activities Board was able to book a show that otherwise might not have played in Chapel Hill. As for *Master Harold*... and the boys, there is still the possibility that Chapel Hill will not see the usual "bus and truck" tour, but rather a higher-caliber national company, which would go on to play the Kennedy Center in Washington.

Evita had been considered as a possibility for this year's season, but the production proved unworkable, taking 19 hours to set up in a theatre. If a simplified setting can be developed, *Evita* may still come to town next year. Other possibilities for future seasons include *Woman of the Year*, *Sophisticated Ladies*, and *Forty-Second Street*. Don't hold the Union to those shows, however. Booking a touring play is a chancy business, and availabilities are constantly changing.

But one need not wait for Broadway on Tour's quartet of stops in town to see high-quality professional theatre. Working out of the UNC department of dramatic art, and using a number of the department's students and faculty, the Playmakers Repertory Company looks forward to an especially varied season this year, with plans to make theatre more accessible to students.

PRC's artistic director, David Rotenberg, will direct the company's season opener, *Life on the Mississippi*. *Life* will be the first full-fledged musical produced by PRC since its beginnings six years ago. Based on Mark Twain's autobiographical account of his years as a river boat pilot on the Mississippi River, the show was written by native North Carolinians and will feature a popular local band, the Red Clay Ramblers.

The remainder of the season includes productions of *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, *The Greeks* (a two-part cycle adapted from several Greek tragedies by the Royal Shakespeare Company), and *Pygmalion*.

At PRC, students seeking to become actors can learn the craft from seasoned practitioners. Under the guidance of the faculty, students participate in operating the technical side of the plays presented. Graduate students in the drama department often take part onstage. Exceptionally gifted undergraduates occasionally find their way to the stage, too. All of the creative staff and most of the actors are, however, professional.

A special student discount policy goes into effect this season at PRC. For \$15, a student may purchase a pass which entitles the holder to five admissions. These may be used whenever seats are available, and a stu-

dent is not limited to seeing each of the five plays one time. You could opt to see *Life on the Mississippi* five times, or to see one play three times and another twice — the possible combinations are, obviously, quite extensive.

PRC began in the fall of 1976, expanding on the long and illustrious history of the Carolina Playmakers. Dr. Arthur Housman, then chairman of the department of dramatic art, decided to turn the Playmakers into a professional group for the benefit of the department's students. Working with Tom Haas, a drama professor who became the company's first artistic director, Housman established a company which would perform six plays annually. The major failing of PRC as originally structured was its stifling repertory — the same plays that could be found in most college theatres, community theatres, and dinner theatres.

Since current artistic director Rotenberg took over last year, wiser choices of repertory and wider use of students in all phases of production have streamlined the company. Whereas Haas wound up with two or three failures every season, last year's series of plays found only one production that did not meet with critical and popular success.

This year's PRC season has been cut to five plays. This allows the department of dramatic art, which shares its production facilities with PRC, to add one play to its season of all-student shows. The department plans to present *The Three Sisters*, Anton Chekhov's examination of a family whose world is destroyed as they stand by without acting to stop it; *Star-Crossed Lovers*, a pop musical rooted in material from Shakespeare's sonnets and plays; and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Bertolt Brecht's play dealing with the struggle between two women for custody of the child one bore and the other raised.

Drama students and other local performers also put on a number of plays in the department's Laboratory Theatre, a studio production group which allows for a wide variety of experimentation. This year's production schedule in the Lab, as it is known, has yet to be announced. Last year's season featured everything from classic full-length works by Sutton Vane and G.B. Shaw to one-act plays by Tennessee Williams and Sam Shepherd.

Off-campus, theatre is booming at the Art School in Carr Mill Mall. The Gallery Theatre began in 1976 and presents four to five plays annually. Because contractual arrangements are not yet complete, only two plays have been announced to date: *Tribute*, a father-son reconciliation story, and *A Christmas Without Santa Claus*, a children's musical. The Gallery Theatre operates under conditions similar to those of UNC's Lab Theatre, but with a greater technical capacity.

In Chapel Hill alone, hardly a week will go by this year in which some group will not be producing a play. And most of this theatre will be, you can bet, of good to excellent quality. But fear not. For the times when nothing is happening in town, there is enough going on in Durham and Raleigh to keep the avid theatre-goer happy and occupied.

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