

# Playmakers boasts a varied and exciting history

By KAREN ROSEN

How many theatres in the United States have histories just as exciting and varied as the plays they have staged? Ford's Theatre in Washington certainly qualifies, since Abraham Lincoln attended a fatal performance within its walls.

A few months before Lincoln was shot, Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman was on his march to the sea and he quartered his horses in a theatre-to-be: the Playmakers Theatre. It was a library at the time, and its bookcases made a crackerjack stable for the Michigan cavalry. About 115 years later, James Reston Jr.'s new play, *Sherman the Peacemaker* made its debut in the former library.

Remove the stacks, and you could have had a dance hall. Not a bad idea, but it had already been tried in 1849 when the building was constructed. Named the University Ballroom, it aroused ire because people were not too keen on dancing back then.

Instead of wasting the building, university officials quickly renamed it Smith Hall, after the man who financed its construction, and turned it into a library.

The building, designed by New York architect A.J. Davis, had the distinguished look a hall of learning deserved. Davis combined unusual touches with the Greek classical revival style. The walls were made from 205,000 bricks that were fashioned and fired in Chapel Hill. Then the bricks were plastered and marked to resemble stonework.

Davis knew the value of cheap labor. He found a convict in the state penitentiary who carved capitals of wheat, ears of corn and tassels on the columns, a far cry from the Greek Corinthian acanthus leaves. Davis paid \$10 for labor and materials.

Renovations were just completed on the theatre costing \$170,000.

At the same time students were poring over their studies on the main floor of Playmakers, the basement was being put to other uses. One part served as the chemistry laboratory. The other was the campus bathhouse.

Later, University officials hatched a plan to house another strange combination within the building walls. Playmakers became a law school, and an agricultural experiment station. The station conducted analyses of mineral waters, research into a method for making vinegar, the growing of sugar beets and the value of pine straw and cowpeas. These were noble efforts, and later agricultural experiments were turned over to North Carolina State University.

If the Tylenol deaths had occurred in North Carolina several decades ago, investigators

may have turned to Playmaker's occupants for help. Some of the earliest experiments in modern criminology were conducted by the local coroner there. He instigated studies to identify poisons used in murder and suicide cases.

In 1925, the building finally found its true calling. The Carolina Playmakers, under the direction of Frederick H. Koch, had become so successful that they needed a theatre of their own. The trustees gave them the hall, and Smith Hall became the first state supported theater in America that was dedicated to the development of native drama.

Among Koch's proteges were Thomas Wolfe and Paul Green, whose namesake houses half of the Playmakers Repertory Company's shows.

Wolfe, of course, is famous for the line, "You can't go home again." He did not make it to honor his old playhouse, but nine famed alumni journeyed to their old stomping grounds in September to rededicate their training stage after its facelift. Dr. Matt Powers on the soap opera *The Doctors* (James Pritchett, an Emmy winner for his role), Cooter on *The Dukes of Hazzard* (Ben Jones), and a new face on *Dallas*, Fay Hauser, who also appeared in *Roots II*, are faces familiar to T.V. viewers.

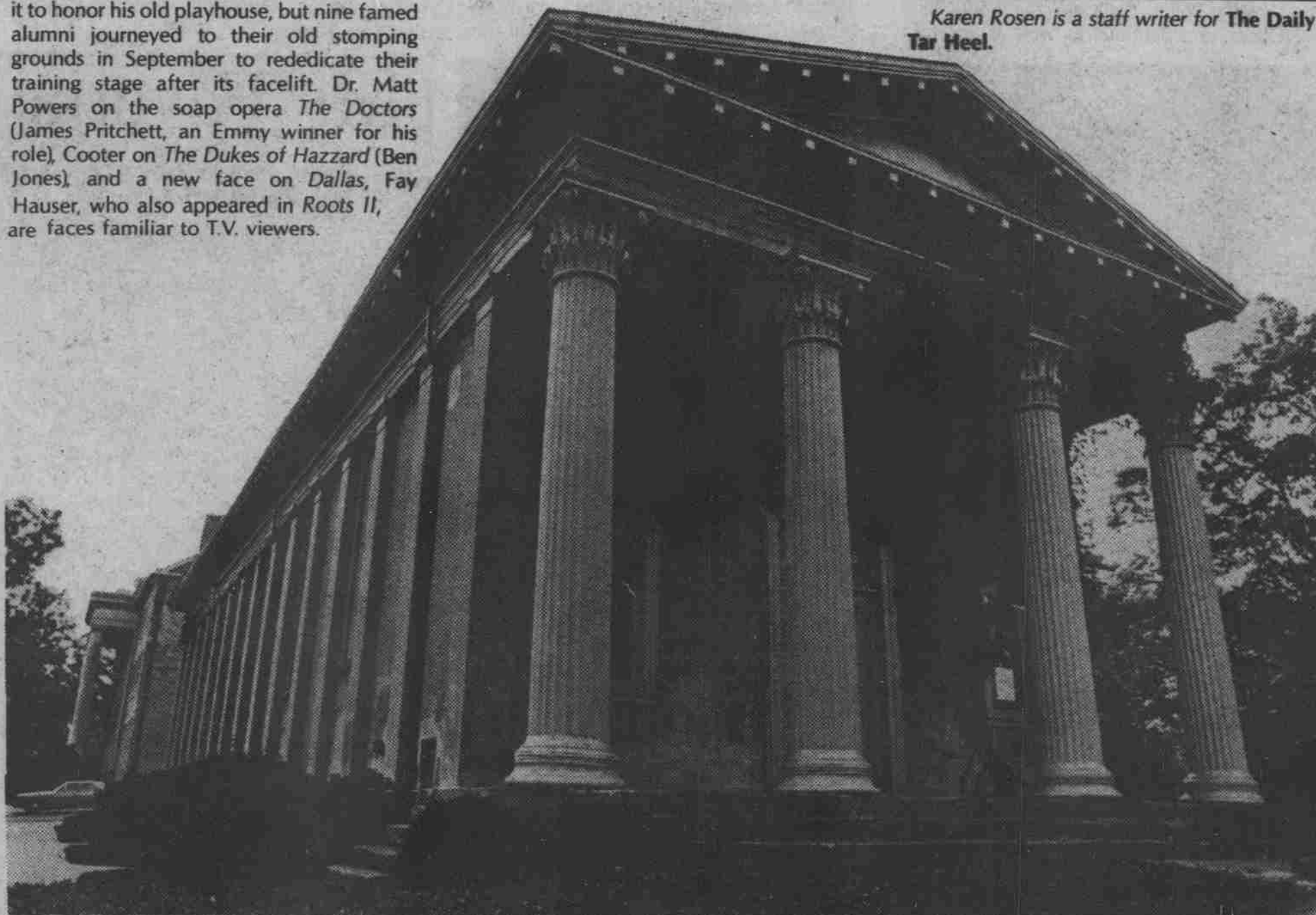
The other returnees have performed so many roles that it's impossible to identify them with one character. Sheppard Strudwick's credits include more than 50 feature films, and he was the first Playmaker to garner national acclaim. Eugenia Rawls appeared on Broadway in *The Little Foxes* for more than 1,000 performances and has starred in three recent one-woman shows. George Grizzard was an Emmy winner for *The Oldest Living Graduate* and originated a role in Broadway's *Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* He received a 1982 Alumni Distinguished Award. William Trotman was the former director of the UNC Institute of Outdoor Drama as well as an actor, director and teacher. Chapel Hill residents Foster and Marion Fitz-Simons also acted and taught, Foster appearing in Paul Green's *The Lost Colony*.

Nationally-known alumni who did not make it back to their theatrical roots (besides Wolfe) included Andy Griffith; Louise Fletcher, Oscar winner for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*; band leader Kay Kyser; composer Richard Adler; and novelist Betty Smith.

The Playmakers Theatre is still bustling with set builders, harried directors, technicians, and emoting actors. *Three Sisters*, the department of dramatic art's first production of the season, recently finished its run, just in time for the cast and crew of PRC's *Moon for the Misbegotten* to move in. The Eugene O'Neill drama opens Oct. 27 and runs through Nov. 14.

Small wonder that in 1974 Playmakers Theatre was designated a National Historic Landmark. Much of its mystique still lingers.

Karen Rosen is a staff writer for *The Daily Tar Heel*.



Playmakers Theatre at one time was called Smith Hall, after the man who donated money for its construction ... before it became a theatre it was a law school and a place for agricultural experiments



Renovations on the Playmakers Theatre were recently completed ... classical Greek revival style accented with unusual touches



In 1896, the University Library was in Playmakers building ... stacks were later removed to make the building a ballroom