

Ramblers, 'Kudzu' Cartoonist Make Musical

BY MELISSA MILIOS
ASSISTANT ARTS & DIVERSIONS EDITOR

Two gems of southern culture, Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Doug Marlette and National Public Radio favorites the Red Clay Ramblers, have teamed up to bring an innovative blend of music, drama and a comic strip to the UNC stage.

"Kudzu," a full-length musical based on Marlette's acclaimed comic strip, was adapted for stage by Marlette and the Red Clay Ramblers' Jack Herrick and Bland Simpson and will run April 25-28 in Swain Hall. Today from 3:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. in the studio hall of Swain Hall, Marlette and Simpson will lead a discussion on bringing the strip to the stage.

Drawing his inspiration from characters from his early days in small southern towns, Greensboro-born Marlette said Wednesday in a phone interview that he had been considering adapting "Kudzu" for the stage since the strip's conception almost 15 years ago, around the time the staged comic strip "Annie" was gaining critical acclaim.

"I always knew the strip had lots of

Kudzu A New Musical

Swain Hall,
Studio 6,
Thurs., April 25,
8 p.m.; Sat., April
27, 2 and 8 p.m.;
Sun., April 28,
3 and 7 p.m.
Tickets \$15 for
adults, \$7 for
students

theatrical possibilities," he said. "It's very rich in character, so I thought it would translate well to stage. The theater is really like a big comic strip, if you think about it."

Both Marlette's strip and the production take humorous looks at the changing social climate of the South, the evolution of the region from the "Confederacy" to the "New South."

"It's a coming-of-age story — a love story — where Bypass is actually a town representative of the entire South's coming of age," Marlette said of the play, which is set in the comic strip's fictional southern town of Bypass.

Collaborating with the Ramblers has created the perfect chemistry to bring the characters off the page, Marlette said. "The

whole process has been so totally cross-pollinated. It's been a really natural process. We are very much attuned to each others' spirits."

Simpson, who is also a UNC creative writing instructor, agreed, saying the transition from comic strip to musical was an easy one. "None of it is unrelated — in the conceptualizing or the writing or the performance of the piece," Simpson said. "You can't be there without conviction and energy."

"Bland was actually the pioneer of what is now called 'musician's theater,'" Marlette said. "What it does is bring the orchestra out of the pit, brings them on stage and makes them into actual characters in the performance."

Bad Acoustics Tarnish Good Acting in 'Chess'

A slowly building momentum carried the Pauper Players' production of "Chess" to dramatic heights Thursday, as the 26-member cast of the musical took a look at love, politics and the game of chess during the Cold War.

Directed by Nigel Williams, a junior from Great Britain, the cast of "Chess" proved the game was, in fact, stronger than its players. Despite a degree of awkwardness early in the first act, the cast was eventually swept into the script's powerful current, toward a compelling, heart-wrenching conclusion.

Set during the 1986 and 1987 international chess tournaments, the musical uses the board game as both a backdrop and a metaphor for East versus West, for war versus peace, for love versus politics. The players' conflicting motivations serve the same ends; but, as the characters lament, there really are no happy endings.

As American Freddie Trumper, freshman Mark Kaley was a vision of celebrity arrogance, his strut and large movements barely concealing an insecurity and depth eventually revealed in a touching solo number. Kaley's matter-of-fact and, at appropriate times, harsh singing voice added character to his role, taking Freddie from caricature to human-being status.

Junior Tally Sessions gave a subtle performance as Soviet Anatoly Sergievsky, making the character at once likable, empathetic and enigmatic. Just as Kaley's voice fit his character perfectly, so did Sessions'; he sang with a clarity and sincerity, a richness and formality, that gave the perfect voice to a troubled Anatoly.

Perhaps the most heartfelt performance,

however, was senior Melissa Levine's portrayal of Florence Vassy. As the pivotal character in the show and the romantic interest of both men, Levine's Florence displayed strength and vitality, offering no apologies for her emotions, but rather finding her home in them.

Despite the quality dramatic performances, much of what makes "Chess" a stage favorite — namely, the music — was tragically lost in the rafters of Old Playmakers Theater, as the cast struggled to gracefully overpower the stifling acoustics of the theater. The phenomenal combination of the music of ABBA-ites Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus and the lyrics of Tim Rice, the "Chess" score is rich both in sound and style, but much of the performance's impact was lost to muffled lines or overamplified instruments.

Particularly disappointing was the lack of volume on Kate Martineau's solo as The Arbiter; her full, obviously beautiful voice was barely audible over the synthesized rhythms of a full-cast dance number.

The cast as a whole, however, worked symbiotically on the larger numbers, most notably during the scenes where the company portrayed journalists hounding the chess players about both their professional and personal lives. Members of the company also gave memorable, slapstick performances as bureaucrats during Anatoly's defection and as drunken members of the Soviet chess machine. As Pauper Players' final production of the 1995-96 season, "Chess" delivered quality theatrical and musical entertainment.

The company will be holding interviews for next season's administration staff today through April 24 from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. Sign-up sheets are available at the Union desk.

Campus Calendar

MONDAY
CAROLINA TAR HEEL VOICES AUDITIONS will be held today through April 24. Sign up at the Union desk. Call Brian Kahn at 968-6025 for more details.
3:30 p.m. - 5 p.m. "KUDZU" DISCUSSION in the Studio Hall of Swain Hall. Authors Doug Marlette, Bland Simpson and Jack Herrick and director Marcia Milgrom Dodge and the Red Clay Ramblers will lead an informal discussion about this new Southern musical based on Marlette's award-winning comic strip.
4 p.m. - 6 p.m. HAZING AWARENESS WORKSHOP in 209 Manning Hall. Stop in for more information.
6 p.m. UNC LORELEIS AUDITIONS in the Union.
7:30 p.m. STUDENT AMBASSADOR PROGRAM GENERAL-INTEREST MEETING in Union 206. The SAP seeks to match up students to serve as liaisons from UNC-CH to the people of the state, and members of N.C. Legislature. Sponsored by UNC student government.
"RHYTHM ALIVE: A JOURNEY INTO THE SPIRIT OF PERCUSSION" presented by the UNC Marching Percussion Ensemble in 107 Hill Hall. Admission is free, and there will be audience participation.

Lab! Theatre Ends Fourth Set With Musical Bang

Engaging and energetic, "The Fantasticks" closes the Lab! Theatre's fourth set with a musical bang. The first musical staged by UNC's experimental "black box" theater in at least seven years, "The Fantasticks," written by Tom Jones and Harvey

LILY THAYER

Theater Review "The Fantasticks"

Schmidt and directed by senior Sean Williams, makes creative use of the small stage space it has to work with. The result is a successful union of fine acting and able singing — a dynamic theatrical experience that is also satisfying musically.

The small venue, three-piece orchestra and tight cast lend to the accessibility of "The Fantasticks," a show that by its lightly satirical tone is already an audience pleaser. In fact, Williams, a veteran of musical theater both on campus and off, has made the actual dimensions of the Lab! even smaller than usual, to match those of the Sullivan Theater in New York where "The Fantasticks" has been running continuously since 1960.

The low-key, high-profile trio of James Amler and Ian Williams on acoustic guitar and Sharon Miller on piano provide appealingly rough accompaniment to songs ranging from the reflective "Follow" to the

rambunctious and very funny "Rape." Meanwhile, the cast of eight players is effective in their common mission to entertain and enliven the audience.

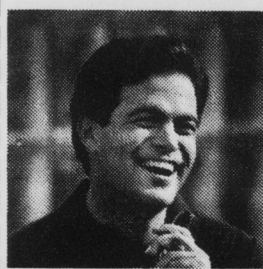
Particularly entertaining is Williams himself as the Narrator of the story — a takeoff on "Romeo and Juliet" based on Edmund Rostand's early "Les Romanesques" — doubling as the contrived and conniving professional abductor El Gallo. With his characteristic wide eyes and mock-theatrical movement, Williams is hysterical, alternately odious and endearing. Strong-voiced and dynamic, his energy drives the show. Coming from a strong musical background as well, Will-

iams' wife Tamara Davis plays the Girl, Louisa, as a winsome and willful creature who would be a terror if she weren't so lovely. Davis' voice is clear and strong — occasionally to the point of overwhelming other singers — and she provides an amusing counterpoint to the happily-ever-after heroine. As the Boy, Matt, who lives in the house on the other side of a great wall erected by her father and his mother and with whom the Girl has of course fallen in love, Brandon Cuicchi is goofy and awkward — just as he should be.

"The Fantasticks" goes up in the Lab! in Graham Memorial basement today at 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. and Tuesday at 5 p.m.

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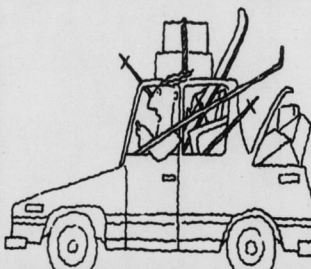
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