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Acting Their Age

PlayMakers Repertory Company, the oldest in the state, looks back on 25 years of theater



Beth Hylton, left, and Marc Alexander Stern play slapstick servants Georgette and Alain in Molière's "The School for Wives." The 17th-century verse comedy opens PlayMaker Repertory Company's 25th anniversary season.

COURTESY OF PLAYMAKERS REPERTORY COMPANY

PlayMakers Celebrates Past and Future in Anniversary Season

BY GEOFF WESSEL
Staff Writer

The year is 1975. The Vietnam War is ending and, for the first time, UNC enrolls more women than men. And on Jan. 25, PlayMakers Repertory Company stages its very first play, Arthur Miller's "The Crucible."

Twenty-five years later, Chapel Hill's oldest professional theater group is among the most prestigious in the state, Artistic Director David Hammond said. This season's six plays reflect the company's history, from its origins at the beginning of the century to its goals for the future.

The company traces its roots back to the Carolina PlayMakers, a nonprofessional group formed by University President Edward Kidder

Graham and Professor Frederick Koch in 1918. "Professor Koch's theory was that everybody had a play to write," said William Hardy, who worked with Carolina PlayMakers as a graduate student in the late 1940s.

"Out of it came the Carolina folk plays — plays about ordinary people that became a tradition of the PlayMakers."

The Carolina PlayMakers company was also the birthplace of UNC's Department of Dramatic Art, one of the oldest in the nation.

The Carolina PlayMakers nurtured writers like Paul Green and Thomas Wolfe, a founding member of the company born 100 years ago this October. Wolfe's play "The Return of Buck Gavin" appeared on the group's first playbill.

PlayMakers Repertory Company will be producing Ketti Frings' dramatization of "Look

Homeward, Angel," Wolfe's most popular novel, in honor of both the author's centennial and the company's anniversary.

The 25th-anniversary season will also feature "The Crucible" and Shakespeare's "All's Well That Ends Well," the two plays PlayMakers Repertory Company performed in its first year of production.

Other plays, such as its current production, Molière's "The School for Wives," reflect the company's historical commitment to fostering creativity, interest and participation in drama for students and community, Hammond said.

Hammond, who has been with PlayMakers for 16 years, said the company has changed in many ways over 2 1/2 decades.

"It's evolved steadily," Hammond said. "The seasons have expanded, the audience has grown

by more than six times what it was, there's been a continual investigation of the integration of training and the work."

Hammond said training had been a priority from the beginning, but that the company would stress outreach even more in the future. "It's a wonderful combination of very skilled professionals and young artists, where artists can grow because the kind of work we do is actor-dependent. The actor is really at the heart of what we do."

Hardy's wife Martha Nell Hardy, who attended graduate school with him and later performed occasionally in PlayMakers, said she remembered benefiting from the training the company offered.

"Young people had to learn all of a sudden how to cut it in a professional group," said

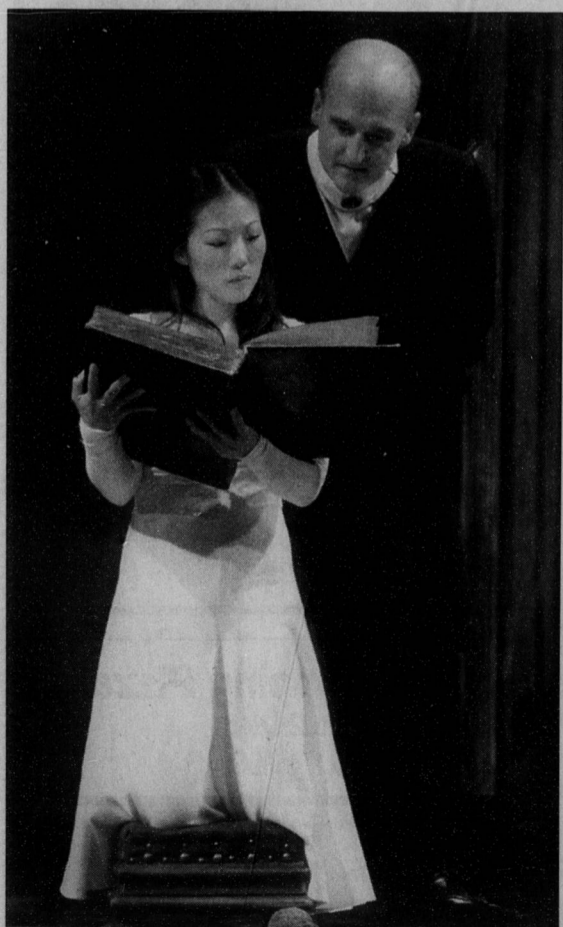
Hardy, whose full-length play "First String Concerto" was produced in 1950 by the Carolina PlayMakers. "Most professional actors are pretty disciplined. The kids, when they work with a group like that, learn what they have to do."

Hardy will be returning to the company to act in the production of "Look Homeward, Angel."

Hammond said other future goals included sponsoring a series of symposia on topics ranging from writing drama to strategies for reaching wider audiences.

"We're doing more outreach," he said. "We are interested in an ongoing relationship with our audience."

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COURTESY OF PLAYMAKERS REPERTORY COMPANY

Jealous Arnolphe (Ray Dooley) instructs his protégé Agnès (Hannah Moon) on how to be an ignorant wife in "The School for Wives."

Molière's 'School for Wives' Delights With Humor

PlayMakers kicks off its 25th season with hilarious wit

BY JEREMY HURTZ
Assistant Arts & Entertainment Editor

PlayMakers Repertory Company's silver anniversary season takes off with a highly enjoyable staging of "The School for Wives" that draws out serious elements while maximizing the play's humor.

In the first great verse play from 17th-century French playwright Molière, the action centers around the unraveling of middle-class nobleman Arnolphe's scheme to marry the perfect wife — one he has raised from toddlerhood.

Arnolphe (Ray Dooley) has molded his charge, Agnès (Hannah Moon), into a respectful, naive seamstress on the premise that idiots are less likely to cheat on their husbands. The day before he plans to wed her, he learns of the (perhaps successful) attempts of the foppish stallion Horace (Noel Velez) to bed her.

Moon and Velez prove themselves handily in depicting Agnès' childlike ignorance and Horace's sly zest.

But the show is Dooley's. His versatile physical presence provides the play with riotous slapstick. Even more impressive comic timing lends punch to

Arnolphe's neurotic rantings.

The play's hilarity might also be attributed in part to the excellent translation from the French — both because it was an important factor in drawing Hungarian director László Marton to stage the play in English, and because of the considerable merits of the translation itself.

Rendered into English by two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Richard Wilbur, these couplets contain a range of puns, from gleefully cheeky to deviously subtle.

Many of the play's double entendres rest on Arnolphe's fear that he has been cuckolded even before his wedding: "Alas, I'm trembling; I fear some further blow/One can discover more than one wants to know." Later, Agnès naively defends her hospitality toward Horace: "How could I have the conscience to deny/The succor he required, and let him die?"

Also masterful is Marton's direction. He has directed this play many times before and understands it intimately.

Marton first staged "The School for Wives" in his native Hungary, which was then a communist country. He uses various devices to imply a parallel between Arnolphe's intentional stunting of Agnès' intellectual development and the way communist governments often keep political ideas from the reach of their citizens.

This layer of meaning integrates so flawlessly with Molière's characters and situations that one can almost imagine it to be the playwright's original intent. Yet Marton's symbols are so

subtle — Arnolphe's house, for instance, is surrounded by an iron gate that rolls back like a curtain — one could watch the play happily without catching on.

The veteran director closes the second act with a wordless interplay between Arnolphe and his house. This can't be found in the original, but it splendidly maintains tension during intermission.

Strokes of dramatic genius like this one, coupled with powerful comic sense, make Marton's innovations most welcome. For instance, he makes one brief exchange — involving the throwing of a flowerpot at Horace's head — work

hilariously. The act is meant to occur off-stage; Wilbur advises in his translation's introduction against attempting to portray it. Yet in Marton's hands, it becomes a highlight of the show.

It is ironic that, though Marton has slyly injected into "The School for Wives" a message that is in some respects anti-communist, this play seems to exist socialistically — it belongs equally to two writers, one actor and a director. If Hungary had this much success with the shared-property system, the iron curtain might never have fallen.

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