

Playmakers Celebrating 50th Anniversary

By SAMUEL SELDEN

In the beginning days of America, the principal questions that preoccupied the minds of thoughtful people in our young country were two: how to conquer the savage wilderness and how to build among men and women from many different backgrounds a working democratic society. There was very small room in virile citizens thinking then for anything as "fancy" as the arts. An inclination to be more than just casually interested in music, painting, dancing, or especially "playacting," was regarded as effete: for a man to put his heart into one of the esthetic activities was an unfortunate sign of weakness—a kind of acknowledgment that he lacked the vigor or the skill to wield an axe or to wrestle with the law. So, for many people of that period the world of the arts was viewed as a world to be avoided.

A typical attitude of the late 1700's was that expressed in the diary of a young Bostonian, Josiah Quincy, Jr., who had just gone to see a play in New York: "I was... on the whole much gratified, and believed that if I had stayed in town a month I should go to the theatre every night. But as a citizen and friend to the morals and happiness of society, I should strive hard against the admission, and much more the establishment of a playhouse in any state of which I was a member." Educators of the time agreed with Mr. Quincy. President Timothy Dwight of Yale declared that the stage was "an evil so great, contagious, and extended" that it "ought to get universal opposition in its progress."

A few years later in the South, General William Richardson Davie, leading trustee of the new University of North Carolina, wrote to his friend James Hoag: "As to acting plays at the University, I think they are by no means as well calculated for improvement in elocution as single speeches, and I believe this will be found to be the result of experience of every college either in Europe or on the continent... If the faculty insist upon the kind of exhibition, the trustees must interfere. Our object is to make the students men, not players." It would be interesting to know what kind of shock would have affected the General's mind if he had been informed that about a hundred and fifty years later some of the most virile of the athletes at Carolina would be taking regularly accredited courses in playmaking, and going on to careers in acting, and that the Governor of the state would publicly recognize that summer shows, in larger part initiated, planned and directed from the University, were providing to visitors from out of state one of the most profitable and worthwhile attractions to this area!

Between the letter-writing of General Davie and the close of the First World War the public attitude toward the theatre in the South had undergone changes. What stimulated a most forceful interest was the addition to the faculty of the University of North Carolina in 1918 of a little man in a Norfolk jacket, with a pipe, a dog, and an infectious smile. He was Frederick Koch, soon to be called affectionately by his student simply "Proff." When he talked his eyes sparkled. He was crazy about theatre. There was no question in his mind about the legitimacy of its being developed on a university campus!

Within an extraordinarily brief time, "Proff" had organized a playwriting class—the first one was made up of several girls and Tom Wolfe—and established a band of actors and technicians who adopted the name of "The Carolina Playmakers." The Playmakers produced the tragedies and the comedies written by the playwrights. From time to time the group trouped their literary products through the state, then through neighboring states, then to such far away places as Massachusetts, New York, Florida, Texas and Missouri. The audiences were delighted. So Professor Koch's work grew.

Since friends in the towns and cities of North Carolina showed so much interest, "Proff" and the University's Extension Division established a Bureau of Community Drama, and school and community groups, stimulated by the "playmakers' staff. The Association, under the present secretaryship of Professor John W. Parker, is still very much alive. It holds an annual State Drama Festival at the University, sponsored by the Carolina Playmakers and the Carolina Dramatic Association. In 45 years the Association has held 45 state and 344 district festivals in North Carolina; 1,493 play productions have till then embraced by the English Department, was set up in an independent Department of Dramatic Art. The Carolina Playmakers was its laboratory and producing arm. Staff members were added, specialists in Playwriting, Acting, Directing, Scenery Design, Construction and Painting, Costuming and Business Administration, as well as Dramatic History and Literature, and a whole new program of graduate studies was added. More students enrolled. When Professor Koch died in 1944 Samuel Selden

took over the chairmanship of the Department. As an increasing number of men and women came to be given, with an estimated attendance of 220,000 people, of whom 71,000 were participants (playwrights, actors, directors and technicians.)

The early spirit of the Carolina Playmakers—a spirit which has continued to infect the group through the years—was stated by Mr. Koch: "From the first we have thought of our Playmakers as a fellowship of young people working happily together toward a single ideal—the making of a communal, a people's theatre in America." The organization is governed by no rules. The emphasis always has been on creation and experiment. The plays students have written and produced have been of every kind—tragedies, comedies, satires, farces, realistic and fantastic works, plays with and without music, short and long. Besides the original pieces, the Playmakers have staged standard works, both classical and modern, in addition to many studio exercises from every period of theatre history.

Professor Koch's first handful of writers and producers was very small—a kind of family gathering. It was so small that a wedding, and the arrival of a first child was regarded as a family event. It became a tradition for the first baby born to a Playmaker couple to receive a silver spoon. Very soon the tribe had increased so greatly, and the crop of new babies had become so numerous that the practice had to be abandoned. The jeweler could not keep up with the orders for spoons.

Beginning as a small activity in a little room of the old University Library, the creative efforts of "Proff" Koch's students grew until they became a major enterprise. In 1936 the dramatic curriculum,

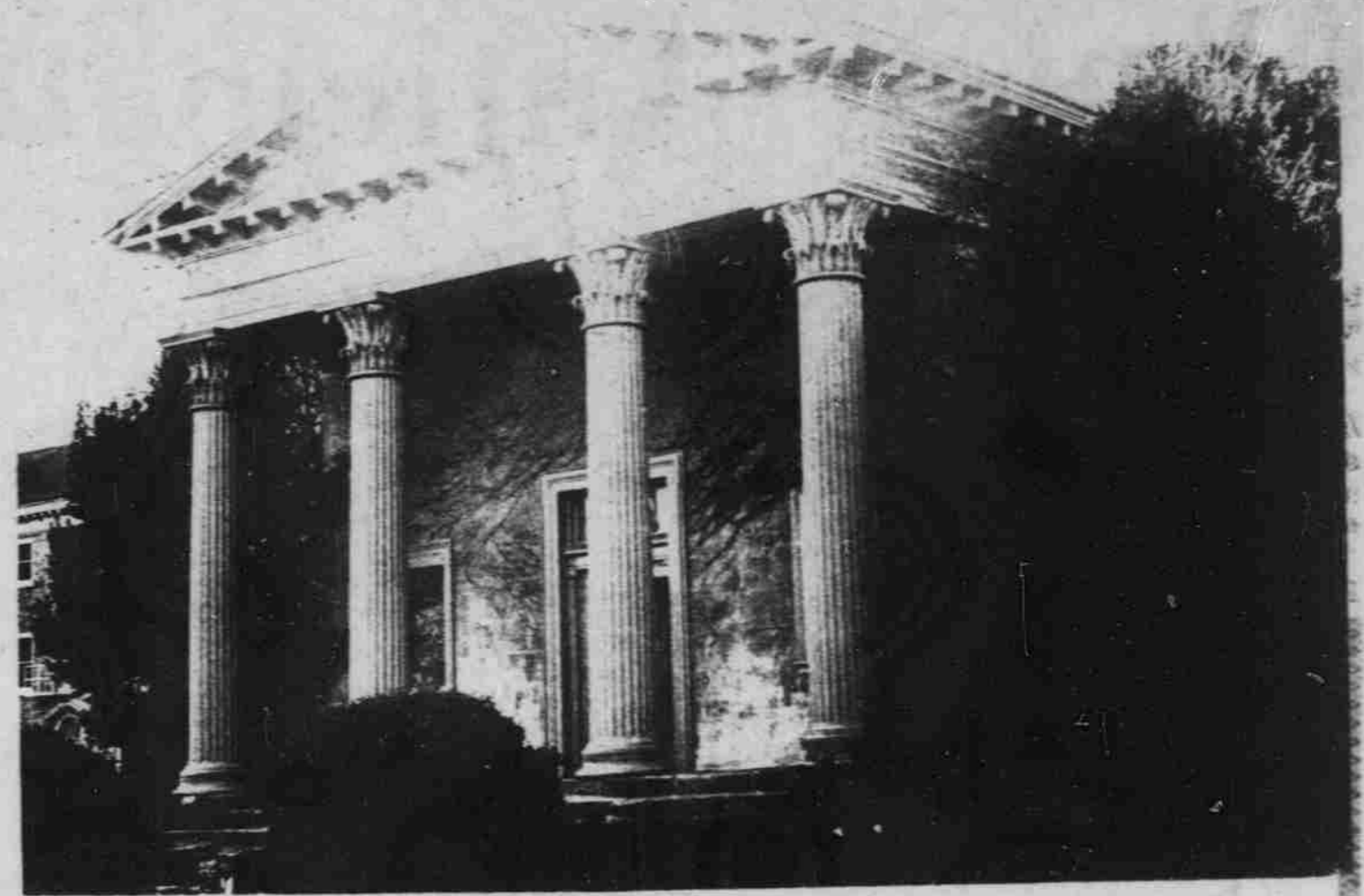
Chapel Hill from all over the country, the influence of the Department and the Playmakers spread widely. There are now more than 6,000 alumni. If former students return to Chapel Hill for a reunion planned for next Spring, from all the areas of the world in which they now live, they will be coming from nearly every state of our country—including Alaska and Hawaii—and from England, Germany, Japan, Norway, Denmark, China, the Philippines, Canada, Mexico and Chile.

Among those artists and administrators—actors, authors and others—who got their start here, will be Shepperd Strudwick, stage and motion picture star; Douglas Watson, stage and television veteran; Andy Griffith, television celebrity; Kay Kyser, retired now; R.G. Armstrong, Broadway and Hollywood actor; Sam Greene, singing leading man; Whitner Bissell, T.V. regular; Eugenia Rawls, New York actress; Jim Pritchett, television star; and Robert Dale Martin, casting director of New York C.B.S. television; and among the playwrights will be Paul Green, Pulitzer Prize winner; Dick Adler, collaborator on "The Pajama Game" and "Dama Yankee"; Kermit Hunter, writer of outdoor dramas; Josefa Niggi, fiction writer as well as dramatist, Gwen

Pharis Ringwood, Howard Richardson, Arnold Schulman and others. A number of those who once studied playwriting at Chapel Hill have become novelists and critics, and we hope to see them at the reunion—such people as Betty Smith, Frances Gray Patton, Daphne Athos, William Hardy, John Ehle, Bernice Kelly Harris, LeGette Blythe, Jonathan Daniels, Sam Hirsch, Brock Brower and Max Steele.

Among others who should come are Walter Terry, dance critic; Paul Nichell, director; Nananne Porcher, lighting authority, and many others. One of the areas into which the work of The Carolina Playmakers has shown the greatest expansion through the years is that of the outdoor historical play. Called both "epic" and "symphonic," it is produced annually through fifty to sixty performances in a big amphitheatre designed especially for it. Although it makes extensive use of such pageant elements as singing, dancing and colorful crowds, it is strictly a play in the fact that it employs a plot and centers its story on one or two principal characters.

Paul Green started the series of symphonic dramas with "The Lost Colony" on Roanoke Island in 1937. It was written for a celebration of the 350th Anniversary of the coming to this continent of the first English band of settlers in



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1587, and is still being performed every summer. Other historical plays, which followed it were "The Common Glory" (about Thomas Jefferson and the Revolutionary War) by Mr. Green at Williamsburg, Virginia; "Unto These Hills" (about the mountain Indians' long struggle for citizenship) by Kermit Hunter (at the time of the writing a graduate student at Carolina) at Cherokee, North Carolina; "Horn in the West" (about the

pioneers) by Mr. Hunter at Boone, North Carolina. These were followed by other plays by Paul Green and Kermit Hunter, then dramas by other authors in various parts of the country. Most of them are still running. With the exception of "The Common Glory," the early plays were directed by members of the Playmakers faculty—Harry Davis, Kai Jurgensen, Sam Selden. The casts and the designers, costumers and technical assistants for several of the

shows are still drawn in large part from this University. Over the years more than 4,000,000 spectators have attended these outdoor plays. The interest in the epic (symphonic) type of production has become so great that a permanent, full-time organization, the Institute of Outdoor Drama, headed by Mark Sumner, has been set up in Chapel Hill to give advice to communities desiring to stage similar works in their localities.

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