

# Jon Mezz

## 'Indians' director as artist, conductor, performer

by Bruce Mann  
Feature Editor

It was Rachmaninoff day at the Coffee Shop, the lush music ("violins dipped in syrup," said the interviewee) enveloping an informal interview with Jon Mezz, new drama faculty member and director of the Carolina Playmakers new production of Arthur Kopit's "Indians."

"Second piano concerto," Jon quipped, momentarily interrupting the steady flow of theatre talk.

A pianist himself, Mezz, who resembles King Nyle in miniature, continuously punctuated the afternoon's conversation with reactions to the background music. "Oh God," he murmured when the familiar strains of the Prelude in C sharp minor echoed through the place.

Mezz is very sensitive to musical rhythm, dynamics and flow in all the arts, and especially in drama. Earlier this year he directed two of the UNC Opera Theater productions. Once as a rehearsal technique he conducted an entire rehearsal of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" with imaginary baton in hand. "Indians," his latest interest, is of the same mettle—a choreographed performance, "a mosaic with no intermission, continually flowing."

"It's brilliantly constructed—one of the most exciting pieces of theatre to come out of the '60's," he added, sounding a bit much like an overimpressed critic. But Mezz was speaking like a proud father; "Indians" had just survived its first run-through or "wallow-through," in Mezz's vocabulary, and to his mind, it will be a "good show."

The theatre lobby this week will be set up as a museum with a display of various Indian relics. Look for movies of the original Buffalo Bill Wild West Show. A Playmaker first-hawkers will sell popcorn, which "may

be freely consumed during the shows."

"The experience of the play will start as soon as the audience enters Graham Memorial," comments Mezz. "The lobby is a visual counterpart to the spirit of the play."

Mezz describes the play as a "raucous, funny and moving look at Buffalo Bill," and his "schizo" conflict: William F. Cody, who wants to help the Indians, and Buffalo Bill, "Whose Wild West Show is the perpetuation of an image of the American West which ultimately destroys the Indian."

Highlights of the show will include sharpshooting acts, trick riding and Indians' dances performed by such familiar characters as Sitting Bull, Wild Bill Hickock, Geronimo and Annie Oakley.

"A monster of a play"—the cast numbers 37—"Indians" promises to be the biggest production in years and certainly the largest to be mounted in the Lounge Theatre.

Leading the cast will be the Buffalo Bill of William M. Hardy, local drama critic and professor of Radio, Television, and Motion Pictures. Sitting Bull will be played by Stephen Henderson, former Julliard actor and a recent graduate of the North Carolina School of the Arts.

Masterminding the operation is Mezz, an eternal performer—he never turns off—a spoken word mezz-merrier who literally lives his profession.

He refused to talk until almost four years old, but "once I started talking, they couldn't make me shut up."

His theatrical career began with King Midas at age 6 or 7. And Mezz soon matured to the second romantic lead in "Seventeen," in which he had a "beautiful love duet with a girl I happened to be going with at the time." Another memorable role was Jonathan Brewster in "Arsenic and Old Lace," the original Boris Karloff

part. "Karloff was my real hero," Mezz admitted. When he died last February, it "was like losing a real friend."

Mezz was headed to medical school, but constantly doing many plays and musical comedies ("I just adore musical comedy. I get very upset with people who consider it a bastardized form of theatre.")

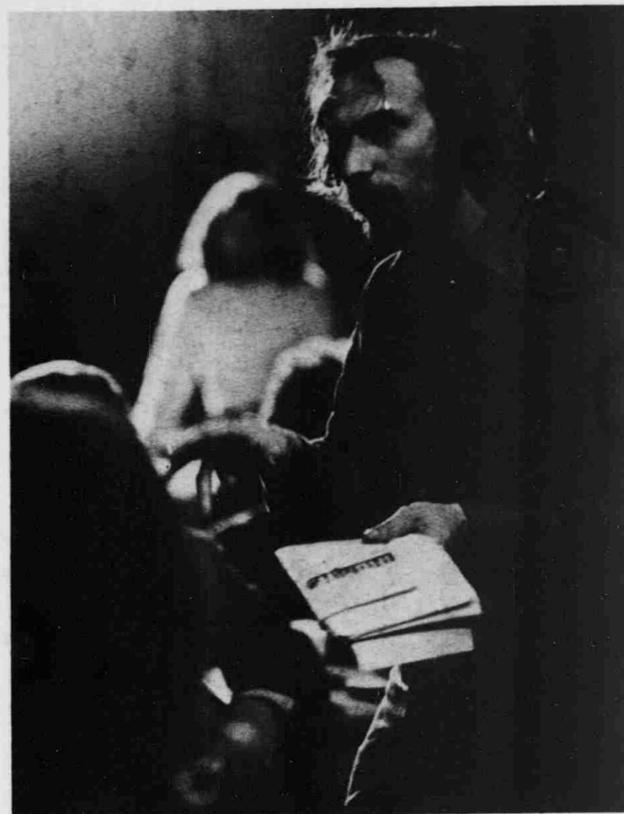
One day in his junior year at the University of Rochester, Mezz awoke to the realization that his interests were theatrical and not medical, and he began to concentrate his efforts in theatre. There was a readers' theatre production of "Alice in Wonderland," a big success with "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," and then followed roles as the girl's father in "The Fantasticks," Andrew Aguecheek in Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night," and numerous others. All during this time, Mezz was moving into directing—"it's a 'power' trip; I won't deny it."

His master's degree came in 1968 and his doctorate four years later, both from the University of Minnesota. There were roles in "Romeo and Juliet" and Chekhov's "Three Sisters," performed one summer on the Minnesota Centennial Showboat, docked on the Mississippi River.

Mezz and his wife, Brenda, were married on the boat. And now the two are in Chapel Hill, both working in theatre—Brenda Mezz is a member of the professional Carolina Readers ensemble.

Mezz feels that "the essence of theatre is production." He loves to teach, but considers play production one of his important responsibilities. Vivaldi interested in local theatre, Mezz wants to build a new, loyal, interested theatre audience.

"Indians" runs nightly at 8 through Sunday. Tickets may be purchased at the Carolina Playmakers Business Office at 102 Graham Memorial or at Ledbetter-Pickard in downtown Chapel Hill. Admission is \$2.50.



Jon Mezz

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