

Playmakers' 'Indians' dazzling

"Indians" gave Wild Bill Hardy his best role in years, the Carolina Playmakers their greatest hit in many moons, and local audiences a new director, Jon Mezz, who unlike the white man, can deliver as much as he promises.

Unfortunately, Arthur Kopit's shallow script continues the all too prevalent contemporary trend in drama of relying more on dazzling form and structure than on literary content (witness "The Executioners" and "And the Old Man Had Two Sons" on this campus and "That Championship Season" and "Much Ado About Nothing" on Broadway).

Too often during the evening, vulgar displays intruded (for example, the Indian Sun Dance with on-stage blood). Too regularly the mood melted into simple sentimentalism—"We did have fun, you and I, didn't we?" Buffalo Bill tritely asks Sitting Bull.

But Mezz, with his large and talented cast led by Chapel Hill critic and professor William Hardy, managed to turn the limp content into moving, bravura theatre, more than just a two-hour reenactment of "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee."

The drama hinges on the theme of illusion vs. reality. Like "Little Big Man" before it, "Indians" sets out to de-mythologize conceptions and leave the naked truth.

The United States' illusory promises become fraudulent in central core scenes which link all the digressions: a council between agents of the Great Father in Washington and Sitting Bull, the last Indian holdout.

Buffalo Bill, a folk hero, is revealed not as the Indian friend he so wants to be, but as a schizophrenic traitor who, like Kit Carson, only succeeds in

Bruce Mann



Feature Editor

destroying the Indian. (Shots ring out. Buffalo, the Indians' food supply, die as we in the audience crunch our popcorn. Our orientation flips from illusion to reality as American sportsman Buffalo Bill Cody arrives on the scene, shouting "a hundred shots, a hundred buffalo.")

Even the setting of the play is itself a painful illusion—Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show—given a detailed reconstruction by lighting and set designer Gordon Pearlman (no doubt his best work) with Indian displays in the lobby (by David Thompson), hawkers selling popcorn, rough-hewn wooden bleacher seats, sawdust in the arena of the Graham Memorial Lounge Theatre, and American flags flying everywhere, waving Manifest Destiny in our faces.

"Indians" shows that in reality, the Wild West Show was but a mere romantic conception of the West, illusory and unrepresentable. Annie Oakley (Betsy Sidden) couldn't hit the broad side of a barn yet was hailed as a sharpshooter. Indians were peace-loving peoples, not savage beasts of the desert. And Buffalo Bill was no wild Indian tamer.

"Indians" is highly episodic, a fluid Pareschi game of plots. Director Mezz paced the show quickly and kept the lines of thought clear.

Each scene was carefully composed

with special attention to detail. On the plains, grasshoppers sounded off. At the scene of Indian massacre, actors carried a billowy white sheet onstage, set it down, crawled on top, and assumed attitudes of death on the suddenly snowy terrain. Scenes involving Buffalo Bill and the President (George I. Rand) had very contemporary overtones. And musical director Thomas Brosh's selections, ranging from string quartet to brass circus music, subtly embellished the setting.

Mezz's cast romped through "Indians" with alacrity and circus-like spirit.

William Hardy was the ego-driven Buffalo Bill, who came West with the railroads and became a legend on paper and in the arena, where he perpetuated the myth of the Indians and of the Wild West. Hardy was gravel-voiced and proud and did wonders with what little the script gave him to communicate Buffalo Bill's cumulative realization of his inherent schizophrenia.

Stephen Henderson's moving portrayal of Sitting Bull stood with Hardy's as the evening's best. Henderson's euphonious voice prayed for the return of the buffalo and aimed a terrifying tirade at the pale-faced Council. "We shall live like the white men," he proclaimed—with carriages, food, shelter, servants, and

other modern conveniences. Warren Johnston's John Grass, the youthful spokesman of the holdout Indians, expressed both repressed feelings of vengeance and earnest desire for peace. His turning the Wild West Show's illusory Sun Dance into bloody reality was well-done (though a cheap theatrical trick).

The Wild Bill Hickok of Graham Marlette was physically right on line; he looked the part of the gunfighter who died with a full house in his hands and a bullet in his back. His coarse language and Pat Paulsen expressions added much comic relief. Another romanticized Wild West figure, he turned a playlet before the President and his wife into a murder scene by killing journalist Ned Buntline (played with aggressive impishness by Ned Shifman).

"Indians" was a real showpiece, featuring a cast of 37, including acrobatic roughriders, a sincere and deeply moving Chief Joseph (Dal Greer Jr.), and numerous characters of the recent past: Billy the Kid, Geronimo, Red Cloud, and Annie Oakley (a real shoot 'em up female superstar).

Sam Allen's costumes, down to the last 10-gallon hat, and Valerie Stancik's galloping choreography added to what was a very complete night in the theatre. From entrance to exit we were surrounded with the play's subject matter.

"Indians" showed the Playmakers alive and well on the way to re-mythologizing their image as one of the country's finest performing university troupes.



Sharon Wells plays Armande, one of Moliere's "Intellectual Ladies" ("Les Femmes Savantes"). The comedy runs Feb. 22-25 and March 2-4 in Branson Theatre on the East Campus of Duke University. Daniel F. Berkowitz directs the Duke Players in this theatrical attraction of the Duke University Moliere Festival.

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