

How do Chapel Hill plays make it to the top?

By PAM BELDING
DTH Contributor

How does a show which premiered in Chapel Hill make the big time? *Isadora Duncan Sleeps With the Russian Navy* and *Hot Grog* may not be playing at the Place Theatre on Broadway, but they have successfully left the Hill and gained recognition from the real world. *Hot Grog* opened at the Kennedy Center in Washington on March 15 and will run through the 25th. *Isadora*, which premiered in New York in January, received praises from renowned critic Clive Barnes.

Chapel Hill has given birth to three original works in the past three years. *Isadora* and *Hot Grog* are the most recent productions; *Diamond Studs*, written by the authors of *Hot Grog*, was the first.

Despite the different origins of *Isadora* and *Hot Grog*, the two productions initially shared a director, Tom Haas, who is the artistic director of the Playmakers Repertory Company (PRC).

Spurred on by the tremendously encouraging success of *Diamond Studs* in Chapel Hill, Chattanooga, Tenn., and New York City, authors Jim Wann and Bland Simpson of the band Gravy Boat wrote *Hot Grog*. Haas had directed *Diamond Studs* when it premiered in Chapel Hill at the Ranch House two years ago.

Wann once again approached the Playmakers for help with *Hot Grog* and walked away with three PRC actors (Donna Davis, Dallas Greer and Maggie Tucker) in addition to Haas. The premiere was again at the Ranch House in February of 1976. Charles Horton of the Chapel Hill



Isadora Duncan Sleeps With the Russian Navy and *Hot Grog* both premiered in Chapel Hill and have since gone on to other cities. The scene here is from the Playmaker's Repertory Company's production of *Isadora*.

Newspaper described the show as "a real swashbuckling musical adventure that has all the ingredients of a Southern version of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, replete with mistaken identities, girls masquerading as boys, villains and heroes, all against a backdrop of shipwrecks and sandy islands." The plot weaves fact with fiction as it tells the story of a group of real N.C. coastal pirates together on one ship.

And where did *Isadora* come from? The

PRC, created in 1975 as a professional, nonprofit acting company, has an affiliation with the Eugene O'Neill Memorial Center in Connecticut. The center is a nonprofit organization which encourages and promotes new American writers and their plays. During the summer months, 12 playwrights have the opportunity of seeing their plays performed script-in-hand with no production facilities.

Isadora was one such script written by Jeff Wanshel and performed during the summer of 1975. That fall, *Isadora* was included on the PRC schedule as part of the "second step" program with the O'Neill Conference.

In the "second step" program, the PRC or any other professional acting company

involved with the program, chooses one or two summer plays and performs them with a set and costumes. Thus, the playwright can examine and review his play as he watches professionals work with it and receive exposure at the same time.

Isadora spans the entire lifetime of the legendary dancer. Bob Morrison of the Raleigh News and Observer described the Chapel Hill production as "a work of poetry and power, and dark shadows and sunshine, a work of deftly staged vignettes like changing patterns in a kaleidoscope...It was *Isadora*."

Born in Chapel Hill, *Hot Grog* and *Isadora* grew up and went to the big city. Several months ago Wann, Simpson and Cassandra Morgan (star of *Hot Grog*) went to New York City with a few Gravy Boat members and gave a small cabaret presentation of *Hot Grog*. "We called up all sorts of people," said Morgan. Among those who came was the New York City director and producer Ed Berkely. Impressed by what he saw, Berkely contacted Stuart Ostrow, a commercial producer who funds a nonprofit organization called the Music Theatre Lab (MTL).

The MTL enables new writers to bring their musical shows one step closer to a commercial production. The MTL at the Kennedy Center was formerly a museum and has just recently been converted by the Ostrow Foundation.

The theatre seats 112 people. The foundation pays all production costs and all 10 members of the cast and the five piece band receive the same fee. "It's enough money to get by," said Morgan. However, she said there is not much financial attention paid to setting and costumes.

The show was cast in New York City because that's where the major talent is to be found, said Morgan. "All of the actors who auditioned were either sent by agents or

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Wednesday		
noon and 2 p.m.	Films from the National Endowment for the Arts Bread and Puppet Theatre parade	Room 217 Carolina Union Franklin Street
late afternoon	Lucy Lippard slide lecture	100 Hamilton Hall
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7 p.m.	Andrews, Lippard, Oppenheim and Walker discussion	Ackland Art Center Auditorium
8:30 p.m.		
Thursday		
9:30-10:45	Michael McClure lecture	111 Murphey
noon and 2 p.m.	Films from the National Endowment for the Arts Creative writing workshop with Michael McClure Dennis Oppenheim's audio-visual display	Room 217 Carolina Union 2nd floor Greenlaw Faculty Lounge Ackland Art Center Auditorium
2-4 p.m.		
5 p.m.	Michael McClure reading	111 Murphey
8 p.m.	David Tudor's sound patterns	Hill Hall
9:30 p.m.		

called specifically by someone," said Morgan. Director John Haber and choreographer Patricia Birch collaborated on *Diamond Studs*. Birch has also done *A Little Night Music* and *Grease*.

Haas directed a showcase performance of *Isadora* at the American Place Theatre (APT) in October to test its reception. It was overwhelming. The APT is one of the country's most distinguished off-broadway theatres, concentrating only upon new American plays. Haas took the production back to the APT in December for five test performances which were received just as enthusiastically. As a result, a show was put together in three weeks set for a January 20 opening with an extended run policy.

Marian Seldes left *Equus* to play in the title role. Open Equity (actor's union) auditions were held for the chorus.

And what changes has the "big time" wrought on these two productions of Chapel

Hill origin? Tickets at the APT for *Isadora* are \$6 as opposed to the \$2.50 charged by the PRC. However, the PRC's prices have since changed to \$4.90. Managing Director of PRC Joseph Coleman said, "the New York audience has seen it all. You never know what's going to impress them." However, Clive Barnes didn't have to put much effort into thoroughly enjoying himself at a performance of *Isadora*.

Although *Hot Grog* will not be raking in admission charges at the Kennedy Center (admission is free), the actors are professionals. Wann and Simpson will be sitting in the audience this time around. "It's the first chance they'll get to function as writers exclusively," said star Cass Morgan. "The perspective that they'll gain is immeasurable," she said.

The show won't automatically go to New York City, Morgan said. "However, we're fairly certain something will come of it—hopefully an album."

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