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## Playmakers' background features famous actors, excellent drama

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Paul Green, Thomas Wolfe, Sidney Blackmer, Andy Griffith, Louise Fletcher, Frances Grey Patton, Betty Smith and Richard Adler — all are a part of the tradition. Professors and professionals Earl Wynn, William Hardy, Walter Spearman, Martha Hardy, Tommy Rezzuto and Paul Nickell — all are contributors to the legend.

They were all here and they were all Carolina Playmakers.

Names that command respect on Broadway, in Hollywood and at the library once appeared on UNC playbills. Faces that half the world recognizes in a flash were once sighted daily on this campus.

The Carolina Playmakers have brought international fame and recognition to UNC and to Chapel Hill, and, perhaps more importantly, over the years they have begun and developed literary and theatrical traditions of excellence and innovation that have become hallmarks of the American Theatre.

In less than 60 years the Playmakers have come a long way. It began in 1918. Despite some carryover then (in certain university circles) of Puritanical attitudes toward theater of any sort, Dr. Edwin Greenlaw, the head of the UNC English Department felt a need for drama at the university and across the state. He thought he had found just the man to come to Carolina and develop a dramatic branch of his department. A remarkably energetic and enthusiastic teacher at North Dakota, Professor Frederick Koch (soon and ever after to be known as "Prof Koch" at UNC) was invited to North Carolina by Greenlaw.

The English department chairman had been intrigued by reports of Koch's "Dakota Playmakers" and eagerly wrote the young professor, "You will have the greatest opportunity here to carry out the work you have developed. The foundations have been laid; we need now a man who can devote himself to building on them." For years "Prof" did devote himself to UNC, and to creating and nurturing his Carolina Playmakers. These were Koch's "young Americans," fledgling thespians who wrote, designed, performed and played together. These Playmakers energetically pursued the "drama of locale" that was Prof's dream. The young writers took the lives they, their neighbors and relatives were living in

communities all over North Carolina, and fashioned the details of these lives and these communities into plain, honest dramas — "folk drama" as it came to be called.

The Playmakers wrote their own plays. "Write what you know," Koch told them. And by doing just that, two early Playmakers, Paul Green and Thomas Wolfe, rose to early fame and literary acclaim.

The Playmakers designed and built their own sets and costumes. And they did not let the fact that they had no theater to perform these plays they were making stop them. The Playmakers produced all manner of theatrical stuff — from one-acts to pageant extravaganzas.

They played for their fellow students and for their teachers. They performed for their townsfolk. They took their plays all over their state and even "up North." The legends and characters that were the talk of small towns across North Carolina became the celebrated conversation of even the "Big Apple" through the Playmakers' truck tours.

This early era of playmaking at Carolina is the era that originally earned the group their fine reputation. This was Prof's era — an era characterized by Koch's enthusiasm, energy and excitement.

During the latter part of Prof's era the Playmakers acquired a theater (on occasion losing parts of it to a fire in 1938 and later to Hurricane Hazel) but always patching up and going on with the show. Under Koch's influence the Playmakers also instigated the outdoor drama craze — a continuing movement in American theatre.

Prof died in 1944, and one of the most exuberant eras in the history of the Playmakers seemed to go with him. A series of dedicated chairmen of the department of dramatic art followed Koch. They were similar to Koch and to each other in their devotion to the development of American theatre — but vastly different in their foci.

Samuel Selden had been Koch's helpmate and confidante, and became his successor. He was chairman from 1944-1959. Selden was noted as a technical craftsman and credited with raising the academic standing of the drama department.

Harry Davis, who ruled from 1959-1968, was known as the visionary (with a dream of a resident repertory company) and the expander (of enrollment in the department).

When Davis died, Thomas Patterson took over just before the big 50th

anniversary celebration that Davis planned. Today Arthur Housman is the department chairman.

As recently as the early 60s the Playmakers have gone through uncharacteristically conservative and somewhat unexciting periods, but now, as they approach their 60th anniversary under chairman Housman, they seem to be experiencing a rebirth of the original exuberance, the energy, excitement, and enthusiasm of the original Carolina Playmakers.

With the establishment of the Playmakers Repertory Company (the PRC — affiliated with Actor's Equity) the South gains a first class regional professional theater, and North Carolina promises once more to become a leader in American theater trends.

At last an adequate production facility for the Playmakers is in the works. The Paul Green Theatre will be located on the UNC campus, near the storied Forest Theatre (a survivor of the later Koch era) on Country Club Road. The new theatre will seat 503 persons and is scheduled for completion late this fall (although the PRC will not perform there until the fall of the '78 season).

The Dramatic Arts Department's Laboratory Theatre productions, often experimental in character and featuring drama students in major roles will continue to provide needed contrast with the varied but for the most part "box office favorite" selections of the PRC.

In addition, according to PRC Secretary Sandra Darnell, the Playmakers hope to work through the Carolina Union in setting up a third production group composed of UNC students, faculty and townspeople. "We don't want people to feel that the professionals (the equity performers in PRC residence) are edging them out," adds Darnell.

The Playmakers have always been deeply rooted in the Carolina soil. A UNC student does not have to be a professional actor or an experienced theatregoer to become a part of the tradition. The Carolina Playmakers are proud of their professionalism — they enjoy their numerous claims to fame — but they also seem to realize that they have always derived their unique character and hardy spirit from the Carolina people. The Playmakers return to their roots again and again for artistic nourishment and rejuvenation. Famous or not, they continue to be proud of being just plain folks.