

A play designed for undergrad art majors

By FRANK BRUNI
Staff Writer

For the undergraduate dramatic art majors who last year lamented exclusion from many of the major UNC stage productions, *Loose Ends*, which opens Wednesday, is more than just a challenging play. It is an answered prayer.

The play, written by Michael Weller and directed by Ben Cameron, represents the first of the two mainstage productions that will be reserved for and mounted by undergraduates this academic year. The two-play guarantee represents a new format designed by the department of dramatic art to meet the educational needs of undergraduates.

"We have finally worked into a pattern of two mainstage productions for undergraduates, one each semester," said Milly Barranger, chairman of the department. "What's so unique about it is that the undergraduate is given all the professional support that the Equity actor gets."

Actor's Equity is the professional actors' union. Barranger added that such an advance commitment allows plays to be selected not only on their own merits, but on the basis of the talent available in the department. "We're selecting these shows very carefully, picking shows not for ourselves but for the students that are going to be involved."

Loose Ends tells the story of Paul and Susan, who meet after college graduation and whose relationship the play traces over eight years of personal change, mounting concerns with success, and conflicting intentions. Cast members agreed that the play's emphasis on character, its abundance of good roles intended for young actors, and its

setting in the 70s made it an ideal choice for undergraduates.

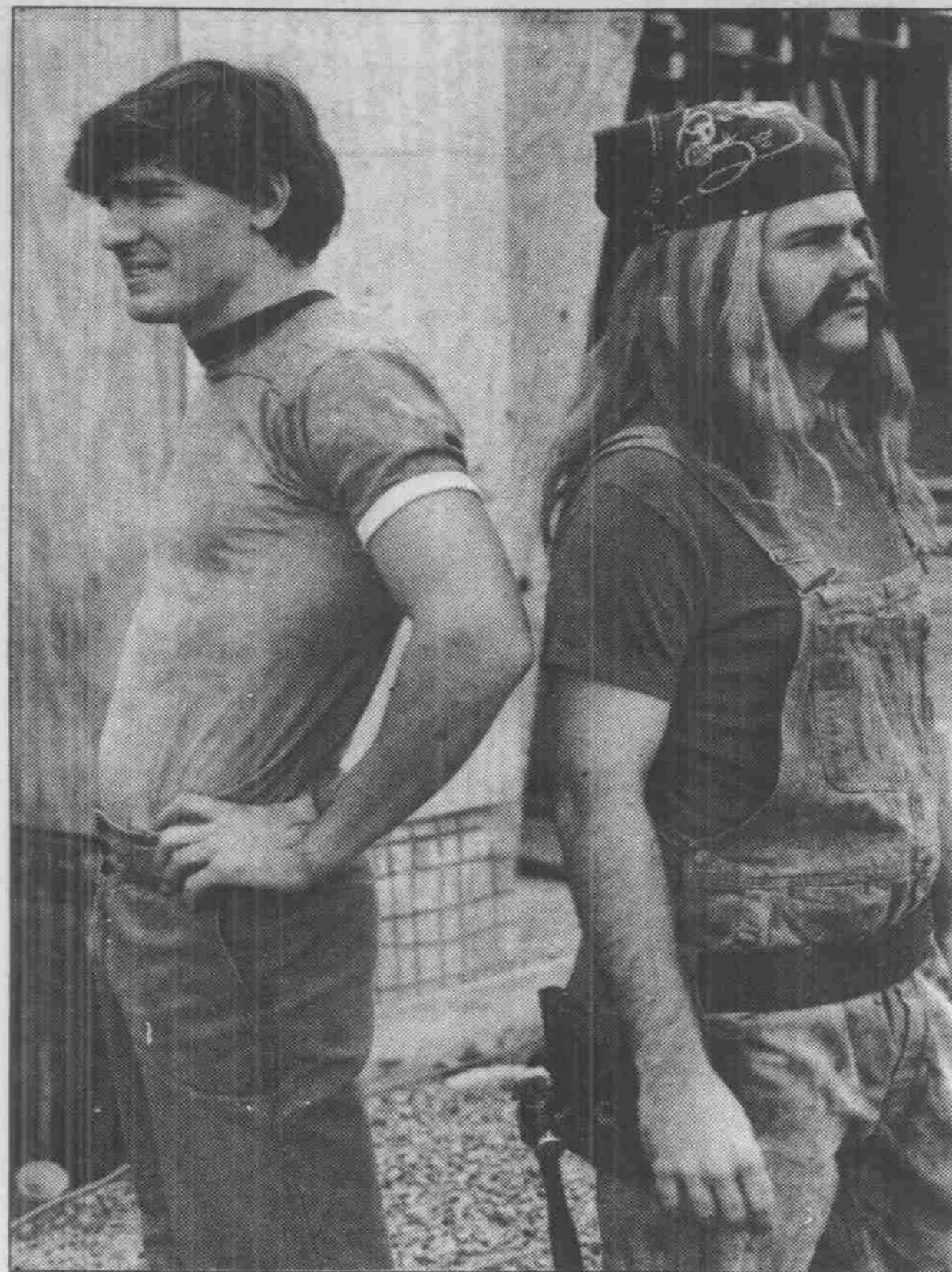
"I think this kind of piece is excellent for student actors — the character work is specific," Cameron said. "It's a good training text."

Cameron, who graduated from UNC in 1975 and subsequently attended the Yale School of Drama, is the man at the helm of the undergraduate dramatic art majors' concerns. He was hired last year in connection with requests by undergraduates for an adviser not linked to the graduate program. Cameron will direct the spring undergraduate production, and he is faculty adviser for the Laboratory Theatre, an outlet designed for undergraduate students. In addition, he teaches three classes in the department and is literary manager of the PlayMakers Repertory Company.

Cameron is excited and optimistic about the department's response to the discontent among undergraduate majors. "It's a statement of the faith the current leadership has in undergraduates," he said. "The department wants to re-invest time and money into the undergraduate program."

The undergraduates involved in *Loose Ends* more than appreciate that fact. "We don't often get these resources and the feeling that we have the whole department behind us," said Jennifer Deer Johnson, a senior from Atlanta, Ga., who plays one of Susan's close friends.

Joe Cincotti, a junior from Fort Bragg who plays Paul's workaholic brother, stressed the importance of this kind of opportunity for the education of the drama student. "It's not merely



Steve Maler and Mike Wilson are at 'Loose Ends' over love

an outlet for undergraduate actors," he said. "It's an essential part of the learning experience."

Susanna Rinehart, a junior from Chapel Hill who portrays Susan, stressed Cameron's role in making the experience of working on the play so educational and special. "I really think this is happening because Ben's so enthusiastic and confident in us as

actors," she said. "He's made the rehearsal process a process of development and growth."

Loose Ends will be performed by the department of dramatic art at 8 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday and at 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday in Playmakers Theatre. Call 962-1121 for ticket information.

Film shows today's farms

Ivy Hilliard

Review

to the subject matter that makes her so convincing as Jewell.

Like the strong women of this year's first popular "farm" movie, *Places in the Heart*, Jewell keeps her family going when things are at their worst. As she stands out in the frosty cold with a baby on her hip, telling a government official she will not give up, her red-faced desperation becomes a kind of battle cry for all those in situations like the Ivys. But the farmers' victories seem temporary at best.

Director Richard Pearce, whose film *Heartland* profiled Montana immigrants at the turn of the century, has a good feel for his subject. He doesn't try to glamorize a farmer's life, nor does he make it seem one of hopelessness, despite the film's subject.

Veteran character actor Wilford Brimley plays Otis, Jewell's crusty father, with his usual aplomb. Newcomer Levi Knebel, who was plucked right off an Iowa farm to play the Ivys' teenage son, manages a performance of surprising sensitivity. Also very effective are Matt Clark as a sympathetic loan officer bullied by his boss, and Jim Ostercamp as Cowboy, the retarded son of a bankrupted farmer.

With its good performances and direction, *Country*'s biggest problem would have to be that it wavers a bit too much between being a family story and being a farm story. Obviously, the film intends to be a story about farmers, but the strengths of the performances are such that the film focuses more on these individuals than on the farmer in general.

Nevertheless, *Country* is a film that needed to be made, and the fact that it was made so well is icing on the cake.

Once upon a time, America was a land of farmers, but it is no fairy tale with a happy ending. Today, many farmers no longer can afford to stay on their land. Families are uprooted from land they have owned for generations and driven to bankruptcy by no clear-cut fault of their own.

Take the farm of Jewell and Gil Ivy in *Country*, a film with a message about the plight of American farmers.

Gil (Sam Shepard) and Jewell (Jessica Lange) were once childhood sweethearts. They are the picture-perfect farm family with three beautiful children and upstanding values like helping out the neighbors and going to church every Sunday.

Unfortunately, Mother Nature does not appreciate these strengths. After a tornado wipes out much of the Ivys' crop, the bank and the farm loan association decide (and with good reason) that the Ivys are overextended and unlikely ever to catch up. The government gives them 30 days to pay up their \$96,000 loan, and the trauma that follows almost shatters their family and their way of life permanently.

Visually, *Country* sometimes appears as bitter as the Iowa winds that sweep the landscape. It is not a movie with much action, except the sudden and realistic tornado. The people in the film are plain-spoken and rugged. Even Lange and Shepard, two of the most charismatic and beautiful stars working today, slip into their plain personae like they fit into the dowdy clothes they wear. It is just these traits that give *Country* its emotional wallop.

Shepard, who studied agriculture during his only year of college, is ideal for the role of Gil, and in the film's less serious moments the chemistry between him and Lange, who also form a real-life couple, shines.

Lange co-produced *Country* with screenwriter William Witliff, and perhaps it is her deep commitment

Professor: the black writer's effect on society

By LIZ SAYLOR
Staff Writer

"Much of the history of race relations in this country is painful, but suppression of pain doesn't do any of us any good," Dr. Trudier Harris said. The author and associate professor in the UNC English department said black writers throughout history had a definite impact on society through their descriptions of the ordeals blacks had faced.

Harris's most recent book, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals*, examines why black authors often describe blacks accused of crimes, hunted down and then lynched, burned, castrated or subjected to other methods of torture. These violent scenes occur in past and present short stories, novels and poetry by black authors, Harris



Dr. Harris

said. The "rite of exorcism" is the identification of something in a community as evil and the removal of that evil, Harris said. In the past, whites in charge of communities identified blacks as an evil needing removal, she said.

The argument that lynching was done to prevent black men from violating white women was an excuse to keep blacks from becoming prosperous, Harris said. "Lynching was a social-psychological control designed to keep black people in their place."

Black writers are "ritual priests" who try to keep these horrors in the open and say, "You don't have to be afraid anymore," Harris said.

Contemplating these horrors also can put things in perspective and help one better understand reality, she said.

Harris said she noticed male black writers were preoccupied with describing violence blacks suffered, while female black writers dealt with topics such as lynching less stylistically and less explicitly.

"I consider myself part of a new

generation of black women writers creating a body of critical material that young black women in 2050 can pick up on," Harris said. "We're building tradition but also continuing old traditions. We're making things clear for the future and any scholar working on black writing in the future."

Born in Tuscaloosa, Ala., Harris received her master's and doctorate degrees from Ohio State University, where she specialized in English, history and folklore. She taught full-time at the College of William and Mary in Virginia and came to UNC in July 1979.

Harris wrote *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*, which will be released in 1985 and *From Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature*. With Thadious Davis, associate professor of English at UNC, she co-edited *Afro-American Fiction Writers After 1955*, which is part of a three-volume series. She now is writing *How I Got Off the Mourners' Bench: Folk, Popular and Literary Tales of Religious Conversion and Moms Mabley and American Humor*.

"I'm interested in how black writers have treated maids... as Charles Chesnut portrays a maid in 1901, for example," Harris said, discussing *From Mammies to Militants*.

She interviewed women who had worked as maids in Alabama, Virginia and Chapel Hill and studied the history of black domestics. She concentrated her work on maids in her hometown of Tuscaloosa. Harris said her mother and some of her aunts had been maids.

"For many of these women, domestic work was their first occupation," she said. "I'm interested in anything that affects the (black) literature," Harris said. "Black writers are really tied to

their history."

Not all black American writing is realistic, she said. Alice Walker's writing, for example, moves away from realistic representations, Harris said.

But these writers still must understand their historical background, she said. "It's necessary to know where we've been."

The "Black is beautiful" social movement in the 1960s had "a definite effect on society," Harris said.

"Those writers were called out of the literary realm to be political spokesmen," she said. "The voice of a black writer is as a priest or spokesman in some instances... They were put in the forefront of changes."

Although whites are willing to learn about blacks, whites and blacks still walk on opposite sides of a "chain-link fence," Harris said.

"Many people don't know black people as a people and a culture," she said. This is the biggest problem blacks face today, Harris said. To combat this, she said, "We're always proselytizing, letting the world know we're there."

While the eventual solution to the problem is an individual matter, the gap can be bridged through writing, culture and university, a place to learn and trade experiences, Harris said. She said her classes and writing were her ways of sharing her culture with others.

"People still have to extend their knowledge beyond universities," Harris said. "There has to be a practical application. This is why I'll always have some life in my literature, never write in a vacuum without some historical background."

"Some students can go through four years here and never be in a class with a black student, never be exposed to other cultures," she said. "There's a certain privacy in our existence; we think we have it made, where there may be others down the hall who may not."

The best ways to improve black-white relations are "sharing, curiosity about each other," she said. "Then you let go of preconceptions you've had before."

"I'm very concerned about the very casual attitude students have towards learning," Harris added. She would like to see students be more serious because they will control the future, she said.

"Students are here to be students 24 hours a day," Harris said. "I'm supposed to be a teacher 24 hours a day."

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