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Arena Theater in Villard Provides Place for New Stage Techniques

By Gail Savage

Last spring with the production of "Good-bye My Fancy" University drama fans saw a type of theater new to the campus—arena theater.

The play, staged in room 104 Villard, represented a recognition by the University drama department of the importance of the "in-the-round" production in the modern theater.

Audience Circle

In the arena theater the audience is seated in a circle surrounding the stage, which is on the same level. Persons sitting in the first row are close enough to touch the actors.

The idea of the arena theater is supposed to be recapturing in spirit, the primitive drama around the campfire.

The first drama productions in Greece were in a circle, before

buildings were erected for a theater. The theater gradually restricted the audience to one side only. This is in relatively recent times—3,000 to 4,000 years ago, according to Horace Robinson, director of the University theater.

Number of Variations

There were a number of variations of the same circular theater in the medieval and renaissance theater. The circus dramas of the 18th and 19th centuries were an example of these. The circus dramas played in a type of hippodrome with audience surrounding the sawdust stage.

The recent impetus to the arena theater started with Gilmore Brown at the Pasadena Community theater. Brown used a small building called the "Playbox," and gave arena productions there a number of times.

Washington Builds Arena

Glenn Hughes of the University of Washington was familiar with Brown's approach and had the Penthouse theater built with WPA help about 1936. This is the first and only building which has been erected exclusively for arena type staging.

To Hughes goes the main credit for popularizing for amateurs and professionals the now accepted drama staging of the arena theater used throughout the United States. Most theaters now produce an arena theater show in their regular season.

Others Built

Since the Penthouse theater was built a number of theaters have been built for arena but none utilize it exclusively. The stage can be shifted to various parts of the room with various sides to the audience.

The University of Oregon became interested in the arena theater from the University of Washington's success and has produced arena shows since 1938 or 1939, some eight to ten arena plays.

Oregon's Arena Shifted

Prior to the present location of the arena theater the arena productions were held in various locations on campus. Among these were McArthur Court, the old YW-CA building and the AWS room on the third floor of Gerlinger hall.

The present building was proposed in 1948 and there was an effort to have included a large lobby to be utilized for arena productions. This lobby was taken out of the plans, however, because of excessive costs.

Villard Room Requested

When it was apparent the lobby would be impossible, the theater directors requested 104 Villard, originally planned to be two classrooms, made into one large room, to be eventually equipped to serve as an arena theater. Equipment would be provided later by the University. The arena theater is now relatively finished. The first major production, held in it last spring was "Good-bye My Fancy". "Petticoat Fever" and "The Second Man" were produced this season.

"We realize that this theater is not adequate because it can only seat approximately 132 people and therefore requires an extensive run to accommodate the more than 1700 season ticket holders," Robinson said.

One Production Annually

"It is felt that any university theater which fails to produce that kind of training for its students is failing to recognize one of the most significant production styles of the 20th century," Robinson continued. "Therefore we propose to present at least one production through each year so people can have that training opportunity," Robinson continued.

As a playing style, actors enjoy it as a contrast to conventional staging, but most indicate they like the arena productions as well or better than picture frame staging, Robinson said.

The historian Sallust once wrote of ancient Rome's island colony in the north: "The poor Britons, there is some good in them after all—they produce an oyster." As early as 80 A.D., oysters were exported from the Thames estuary to Rome.

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