

'Pandora-monium'  
comes to Max's  
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# THE Friday EDITION

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Arts and Entertainment

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Grant McKernie, head of the University speech department, appears suddenly from the back of Robinson Theatre, 10 minutes before rehearsal. He's wearing a brown wig, white skirt, high heels and foam-rubber breasts the size of honeydew melons. Everyone cracks up as he darts into a side exit with a flurry of quick, dainty hand gestures, muttering all the while in a British accent.

Up on the stage, actor Doug Chausow spies McKernie coming up the wing and leers as McKernie flits by. "Where ya' been all my life, baby?" he inquires.

"Come up and see me la-tah," McKernie shoots back with a haughty toss of his head.

Along with McKernie, several actors are warming up onstage in light blue foam appendages that transform their figures into cartoon caricatures. In a few minutes, amiable director Jack Watson cues the players into the first act of Richard Sheridan's 18th-century classic, "The Rivals."

The idea to costume the actors in exaggerated body forms was conceived by the director and costume designer Alexandra Bonds during the initial planning of the play, a University production that opens tonight at the University's Robinson Theatre.

"It was based on an idea that we got from looking at editorial cartoons from the period. They had all these caricatures of people, which is kind of how the script is written — people being exaggerations of certain characteristics," says Bonds, an associate professor of theater arts.

Bonds says her designs for "The Rivals" were inspired by 18th-century political cartoonists James Gilray and Thomas Rowlandson, whose works she tracked down with the help of reference librarian Richard Heinzkill.

Bonds received an award from the U.S. Institute for Theatre Technology for her costuming of Moliere's "Tartuffe" last season.

The actual task of creating her designs for "The Rivals" proved an interesting challenge for her and the costume shop crew, but Bonds says she's reluctant to ever tackle a job this tricky again.

"To have to make a coat for someone that big (she points to an enormous foam structure for the figure of a character named Sir Lucius O'Trigger) is really a challenge to figure out how to cut it so it still looks like a person," she explains. "The shape of it is so outsized and distorted; you've got all these different bumps and curves to shape around."

"The point is to let people know that we're doing it to stress the comedy of the show. It's going to be pretty funny, and pretty spectacular too, because this is a real unusual approach."

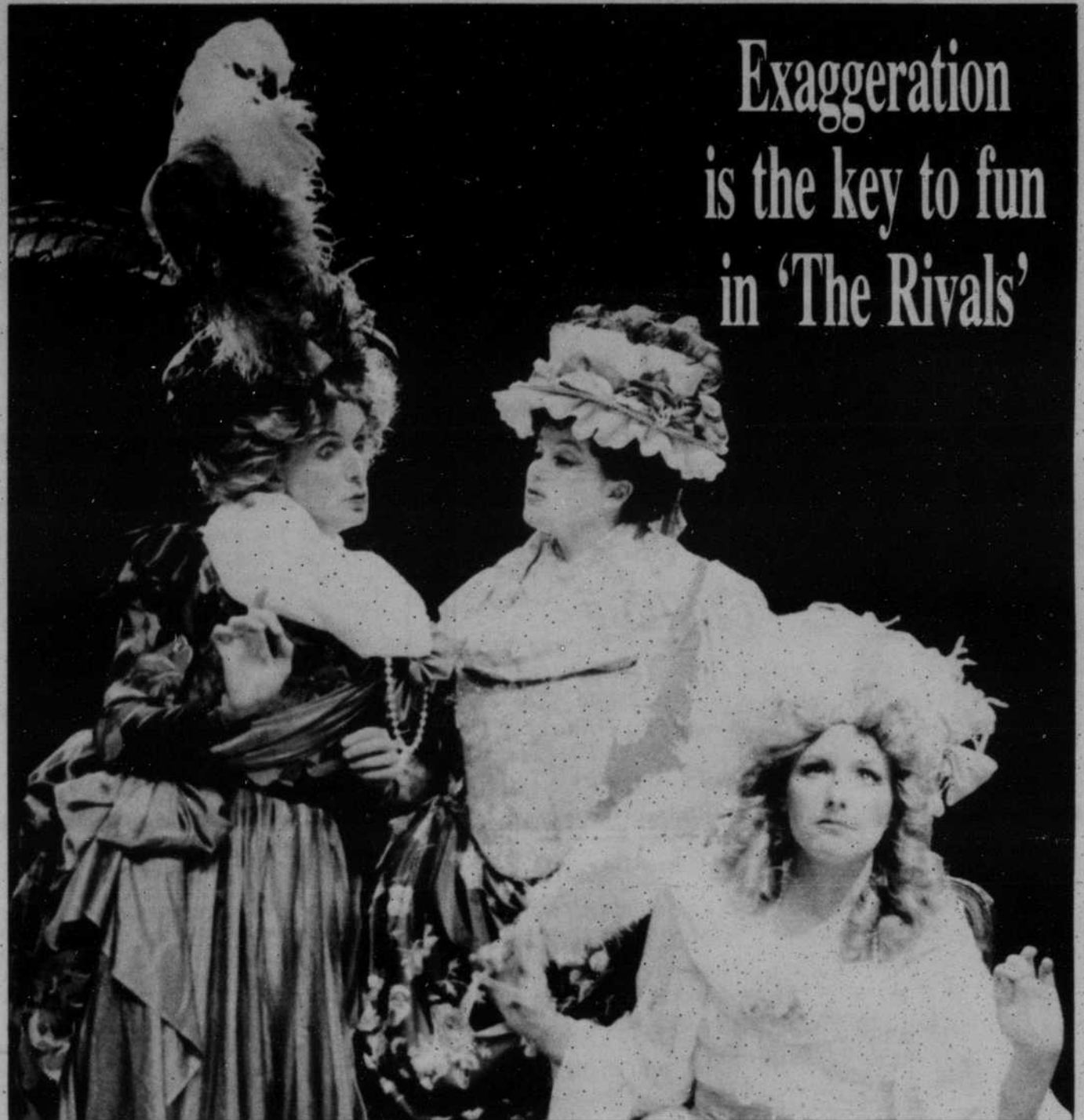
The actors have been rehearsing in the body-forms for over a month, and Bonds says they have found them comfortable to work in. At least one actor, however, has different views on the subject.

"Let me tell you that wearing a corset and high heels five hours a day is destroying my spine," McKernie laments. "As you know, I have this huge bust. And it means I can't see my feet, so I can't see where I'm walking. The corset is pulling me at the center and then I have a huge dress and there's a train at the back of the dress of two feet more, and put me in high heels — it's a recipe for tragedy."

But if McKernie is in pain when he's in costume, he certainly covers it up well. During rehearsal he moves gracefully in his outfit, even though the role of Mrs. Malaprop demands a manic performance.

"I've wanted to be in one of Sandy Bonds' costumes ever since I've met her," McKernie says. "This one is a little bigger than I anticipated, however."

"The Rivals" is a satirical comedy about romantic entanglements of the aristocratic class at the English resort of Bath. The script involved the use of three different accents and costume shop manager Nancy Julian,



Exaggeration  
is the key to fun  
in 'The Rivals'

Dustin Hoffman, look out — your "Tootsie" is about to be upstaged. Waiting in the wings is Grant McKernie (far left), University speech department head, who portrays Mrs. Malaprop in "The Rivals." Pictured with McKernie are (standing) Kim Anderson as Julia and Barbara Pitts as Lydia. Richard Sheridan's classic play opens at 8 tonight in Robinson Theatre.

who had studied acting and vocal training in London, was hired as vocal coach for the actors.

"The people have worked hard and done what they can accomplish in a short amount of time, because really I'm asking them to do things that take nine months or a year to master," Julian says.

Watson is confident, however, that the audience will find the actors' accents more than satisfactory.

"We're still honing (the accents). I don't think we'll be flawless, but we'll be good," he says.

Of all the people involved with "The Rivals," perhaps none has felt the impact of the play on his or her life more than McKernie. In the process of preparing for a female role, he found it impossible to achieve a credible performance unless he actually lived the part to some extent. After an intense study of performances by English actresses Maggie Smith and Dame Edith Evans, from whom he picked up the many delicate hand gestures that he uses for the Malaprop character, McKernie went out and bought himself a wig and several articles of modern female attire. He learned the art of applying make-up and started going to rehearsals dressed as his own version of Tootsie.

"That was very scary. Very, very frightening," McKernie states emphatically. "But it was also really helpful, and I think the director would agree that that was probably the time when the character really started to grow."

"I have spent more time preparing for this role than I have, I think, in any role that I have done for at least 10 years. It's very important for me to be honest to the character and who she is so that it's really meant."

"Everywhere I go these days I watch how women

move, how they talk and how they think," McKernie says, "so that I can hopefully integrate some of that into the character."

It will probably surprise no one to learn that McKernie often has trouble keeping Mrs. Malaprop under wraps during his offstage role as associate professor of speech.

"It's terrible," he says with both mortification and amusement. "A couple of people who are working on the production are also in one of my classes and just yesterday they came out of class giggling because I now am doing some of my hand gestures in my lectures. Even the accent is beginning to creep in."

And then, McKernie says, there are those strange metaphysical moments during rehearsal when he finds himself wondering if the men around him find him attractive. "Then I think — wait a minute, what am I doing this for? It doesn't make any sense."

Despite the identity problems the role has occasionally precipitated, McKernie admits he's having the time of his life playing Mrs. Malaprop.

"I adore her. She's hysterical, she's funny and she's perversely witty. I suspect that a month from now when it's all over, I'm going to miss her a great deal."

"The Rivals" opens at 8 tonight in the University's Robinson Theatre. Tickets are \$5.50 for the general public, \$4.50 for seniors and students, and \$3.50 for University students. Tickets may be ordered by calling The Robinson Theatre box office at 686-4191 from noon to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday. "The Rivals" will continue its run March 1, 6-8, 14, and 15.

Story by Patrick Low  
Photo by Maria Corvallis