

to write down his words: "Finish your novel on your own time." Elliott comes by some of his comic skill genetically: his father is Bob of Bob and Ray. (The elder Elliott has a hilarious "Action Family" cameo as a hot-dog vendor who brawls with the hero—a rather confrontational approach to the Oedipal conflict.) Chris's knack for humor showed early, according to his father; at five years he punned that a traffic jam on Atlantic City's Michigan Avenue made "Michigan Impossible."

Elliott is too busy enjoying the present to worry about the future. At 26, he says, "I'm doing exactly what I wanted to do when I was 16." His personal life is rewarding; married last year, he and his wife are expecting a child (conceived, he suspects, the night he and other Letterman writers won their third Emmy). Professionally, Elliott will continue to grapple with the risk of his dangerous humor: that the audience might not be able to tell the difference between acting bad and bad acting. "That's the challenge—and it's also the fun," he says. Then he fretfully adds, "So, do people really think I'm bad?" Twenty minutes later he says, "Tell them I'm not bad," without a trace of humor. "I'm not bad. I'm actually OK." Then, big smile. Firm handshake. He heads back to Daveland.

JOHN SCHWARTZ



KENT HANSON—TBO

Oedipus wrecks: The Elliotts duke it out in 'Action Family'

THEATER

Far-Off-Broadway

The road to the Broadway stage has long led through cities like Boston, Hartford and Philadelphia—where a new show's kinks could be worked out before a confrontation with New York drama critics. Now it appears that Durham, N.C., is becoming another way station. Neil Simon's current smash hit, "Broadway Bound," made its bow last fall in Duke's 611-seat Reynolds Industries Theater. That was the second pre-Broadway run at Duke in 1986: the Jack Lemmon revival of "Long Day's Journey Into Night" played in March.

Why Durham? The campus provides an ideal setting for a theatrical tryout. Producers can take advantage of lower production expenses, lots of energetic, cheap student labor and an intelligent, receptive audience. Duke provided rehearsal space and the Reynolds Theater free, a hotel discounted rooms for the show's staff and two local auto dealers loaned cars. "They were really able to concentrate on their work, totally free from commercial pressures," says David Ball, director of

the Duke drama department.

Amenities aside, what brought the plays to Durham is the affiliation between Duke and Emanuel Azenberg, producer of both "Broadway Bound" and "Long Day's Journey." A major theatrical producer (he's handled all of Neil Simon's plays since 1972), Azenberg has lectured at Duke for the past five years, and his daughter graduated from the school in 1985.

Local audiences responded enthusiastically to both productions—the plays sold out 90 percent of their runs—but the special beneficiaries were Dukies. A series of open meetings and seminars with cast

and crew drew hundreds of students. A handful of lucky ones (about 100 applied for 18 spots) interned on chores ranging from building sets to balancing books.

Stephanie Heller, a senior English and political-science major, combed every antique store in Durham in search of genuine 1940s props for "Broadway Bound." Katie Stevens, another recent Duke alum, was hired on as a paid production assistant after her work on Simon's play in Durham. And John Gromada, a 1986 grad, composed scene-change music for the tryout of "Long Day's Journey"—and had the thrill of seeing his compositions accompany the production all the way to New York.

Interns may have had the

most pure fun, however, when rubbing elbows with the pros. Heller, for example, took actress Linda Lavin (the female lead in the play and TV's "Alice") to lunch. Apprentices also conducted tours and arranged golf games—even took members of the company to fraternity parties. "We tried to make them feel like any old undergrad," says sophomore intern Lisa Little.

Coming attractions: The mutual benefits didn't end when the company struck the set. Thanks to a percentage of the box-office takes at tryouts plus benefit performances of "Broadway Bound" in Durham and New York, Duke established the Neil Simon Endowment for the Dramatic Arts to the tune of \$100,000. This fund will bring professional actors and crew members to Duke to teach and mount productions on a regular basis. Meanwhile, there are plans to bring three more plays to Durham in coming semesters. "It just seems to me that doing the play at the university services the community, the students, the faculty and the show," says Azenberg. "I can't find a negative in it."

CHRISTOPHER M. BELLITTO with
MICHAEL MILSTEIN in Durham

It got there: 'Broadway Bound' worked out kinks at Duke

MARIO RUIZ

