

Excitement Mounts Behind Scenes of Shakespearean Festival

Cast Struggles With Production Problems

By Bill Force
Mail Tribune Staff Writer

Anyone venturing inside the vine-clad old chautauqua shell in Ashland last week would have thought the 10th annual Shakespearean festival was due to come off the next day. He would have found the place a nest of seething activity, peopled with nondescriptly costumed actors, sweating electricians and carpenters, overalls, gardeners and shirtless, wildly gesturing directors—each apparently unaware of the existence of the others.

The sun-bathed, grass-carpeted amphitheater has sprung to life again for another summer of resurrected Elizabethan drama. Several score intensely interested young actors are rehearsing roles for plays that will delight hundreds of tourists and local residents next month when the curtains are drawn apart on another festival of Shakespearean plays, "played as Shakespeare might have seen them."

Intensive Rehearsals
Though the Shakespearean festival is still a month away, the tempo of rehearsals and preparations has hit a near-hysterical pitch. Afternoon and evening, every day, the hardworking troupe of talented young people labors through a back-bending routine that probably no other summer theater in the world would dream of attempting. This festival cast is not preparing one play for a week's stand—it is slowly moulding into shape four different plays to be presented on four successive nights—an almost unheard of feat.

The magnitude of the task can hardly be imagined by anyone who has not witnessed the painstaking attention that is given to every line, every gesture and every awful glance in each scene of each lengthy play.

One of last week's rehearsals of "The Comedy of Errors" gives an idea of the sweat and toil involved. Downstage are two actors, library volumes of Shakespeare in hand, pencils poised to make notations. Standing in front is Director Richard Graham of New York, stripped to the waist in the hot sun that beats down on the concrete pavement of the arena. With him are Technical Adviser Dr. Curt Zimansky of the University of Iowa, a speech coach and a script-holder.

The actors start to read their parts. Perhaps they speak a dozen lines before Graham cuts them off to suggest that a position be changed, that a smile is wrong or that there is inadequate motivation for some movement. The actors make careful notes in the margins of their books and then start the passage over again. This time the speech coach calls a halt. One of the lads has said DIS-COURSE. He should have said DIS-COURSE. He tries again but still does not give the word its proper Elizabethan syllabic accent. After several attempts the coach is satisfied the prosody is correct and the rehearsal can continue.

Must Understand Parts
But not for long. A few lines farther along in the scene an actor comes across an unfamiliar word or an abstruse phrase. "I don't understand that," he complains, and for one of these actors to act out a scene without understanding its full meaning would be unthinkable. Here Dr. Zimansky goes to work. From a long background of academic research into the Elizabethan period, he provides the needed information. Every member of the cast, with Dr. Zimansky's help, understands the role he is playing, its meaning, purpose and sociological and artistic background.

This process goes on endlessly through the long hours of rehearsal until a flawless finished product of artistic effort is presented to impressed audiences who have little conception of the hours or tedium that have gone into each of the four plays.

Fluff Absent
For the 10 years that the Shakespearean festival has been produced in Ashland, the little group of scholars in charge has maintained an uncompromising devotion to one aesthetic ideal: Shakespeare must be presented free of any theatrical fluff not present at the time the Bard himself presented his plays to the irreverent Elizabethan-age audiences.

Angus Bowmer, the guiding spirit behind the festival, explains that this principle is so unorthodox it astounds contemporary producers. They consider that Shakespeare stripped of all but its elemental muscle would be devoid of audience appeal. Bowmer has found the opposite to be true and a couple of amazed directors from the Globe theater in San Diego were so impressed with his success two years ago they have inaugurated a program that is the Oregon festival's only imitator. (They, however, have not been able to achieve the repertory-type program practiced here.)

On Broadway, productions of Shakespeare are billed as "revivals" and the producers attempt to enhance the original beauty of the plays with leg art, anachronistic music, and theater techniques utterly alien to the spirit of Shakespeare. In Ashland, Shakespeare has passed beyond the stage of revived entertainment. It is now firmly established tradition, as well as one

of Oregon's top-ranking tourist attractions.

Problems Presented

This year's schedule is putting an added strain on the production staff in regard to dance scenes, music and costume. For the comedy, "As You Like It," Bowmer has ordered spectacle. The play is usually presented straight from the script, including a somewhat unbelievable ending. "We're not certain," he said, "but from the historical sources that are available, we think that Shakespeare probably would approve of the spectacle-type ending to show that the final scenes are not intended to be believable."

A court masque, a kind of grand entertainment common to the Stuart court of old England, will be called for and most of the problem has been dumped into the lap of Miss Carol Eller, a part little brunette from Stanford university who is the festival's dance director. "We're going to work on this all summer and it should be pretty spectacular," she enthused.

Does Choreography

The choreography for the two dances that will be used by Miss Eller herself. Though she knows you won't understand what she's talking about, the youthful instructor will patiently explain that the two dances are based on pre-classic forms—allemande, bourree and gigue. She will point out further that they will be a combination of court and country style dances using eight dancing girls. Miss Eller has some historic basis for her choreography but it is obvious that her close acquaintance with Shakespeare—she is also a member of the cast—will do much to assure dance sequences in perfect harmony with the spirit of the production.

Working with Miss Eller on this particular problem is Howard Greer of Fresno who is composing special music for "As You Like It." His compositions are being orchestrated for Elizabethan instruments such as the recorder, the veil d' amour, and other instruments such as the french and english horns that come about as close to approaching instruments of that period as any modern musicians have at hand.

Lavish Costumes
Despite the wealth of dramatic talent and inspired direction that is available this year for the festival, the plays would still lack much of their popular appeal if it were not for the lavish costumes that complete the picture of Elizabethan opulence and pageantry.

In a workshop so filled with color that the eye is almost stunned at the sight, the festival association's costumer, Doug Russell, and a crew of seamstresses are surrounded with silks, laces, brocades, velvet and upholstery fabrics that will be used to recreate costumes that would dazzle Queen Elizabeth herself. Though years of research and careful study of source materials go into Russell's designs, he admits that his costumes are not absolutely authentic; they are not intended to be.

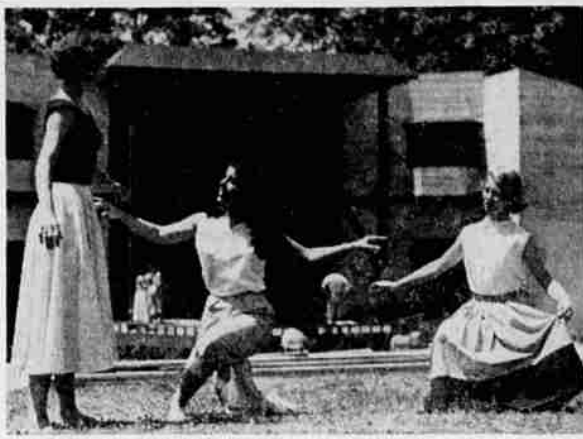
Ideas Don't Jibe
"If we used true Elizabethan costumes," he said, "they'd be laughed off the stage because they wouldn't jibe with what moderns consider to be beautiful and graceful." So the medieval form will be retained while

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Second Section

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DANCES PERFECTED—Miss Carol Eller, left, dance director for the Shakespearean festival, is shown here coaching two of her dancers in one of the sequences of the grand finale of this year's production of "As You Like It." With Miss Eller are Delores Bagley, center, and Mary Jane Pitts.—(Bob Mallon photo.)



INES AND GESTURES POLISHED—These three Shakespearean players are pictured during one of the rehearsal periods that go on hour after hour in the Shakespearean festival's Elizabethan theater in Ashland in preparation for the first production, billed for August 2. These three earnest actors are, left to right, Phil Hansen, Suzanne Lamerre and Ann Lauder.—(Bob Mallon photo.)

at the same time humoring modern taste with brilliant colors and luxurious draped effects.

The responsibility for this delicate design problem lies with Russell, a young (23) Stanford university graduate who will join the staff of Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh next September. Besides designing costumes for the Ashland production—he expects to have to make about 180 new costumes this year in addition to some of last year's that will be refurbished and repaired—Russell is instructor of a class in costume design at Southern Oregon college. His workshop is used as a laboratory for his students.

New Problem

This year Russell has a new design problem to cope with. The play "Antony and Cleopatra" is, of course, one written by an Elizabethan Englishman about Romans and Egyptians. Which period or locale are the costumes to reflect? Designer Russell has decided to incorporate elements of all three into what is expected to be a unique effect.

Each play presents a special problem, it seems. For the historical plays, in line with a policy long adhered to by Bowmer, costumes will reflect the historical period depicted by the play but "will not violate the taste of the Elizabethan theater," to use Russell's words.

For "The Comedy of Errors," Russell plans highly stylized costumes with bold, bright, solid colors. They will be in keeping with Bowmer's interpretation of the comedy.

For the most part, Russell says he relies on the paintings of classical subjects by Veronese as patterns for his costume designs. Each costume is first sketched out by Russell himself before it is turned over to the

Summer Work Slated At City's Schools

Additional playground surfacing, installation of walks and curbs, general improvement of grounds and some interior renovation is included in the summer work program of the city schools, Superintendent E. H. Hedrick has reported.

He said the additional surfacing is being done at the four grade schools and the junior high. In general the outdoor work is completing odds and ends provided for in the bond issue for school expansion and improvement, Hedrick stated.

Ruch Girl Is First Queen Contestant At Jacksonville

Jacksonville, July 1—First to enter the Jacksonville Gold Rush jubilee queen contest is Dorothy Winningham, Ruch, sponsored by Taylor Drug store, Jacksonville. Others signing are Jeannie Sletten, announced by Ben's Food market, Jacksonville, as candidate for that store; Mavis Johnson of the Applegate, sponsored by Fluhrer's bakery; and a "mystery" candidate entered by the Golden Arrow Trading company. Identity of the mystery candidate is not to be disclosed until a short time before closing of the contest, according to her sponsor.

Four more sponsors, making a total of eleven, have signed up to enter contestants; Helen's Cottage Kitchen and Lulu's cafe, Jacksonville; Ashland Lions club, Ashland, and the Golden

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FROM JOE COLLEGE TO ELIZABETHAN GENTLEMAN—Douglas Russell, left, is fitting Fred Whited with an elegant medieval costume like dozens of others Russell is creating to transform casual collegians into ladies and gentlemen like those who peopled the courts of Elizabeth's England. On the wall in the background can be seen some of the sketches Russell has prepared as guides for his crew of seamstresses.—(Bob Mallon photo.)

sary. After 10 years of festival production, they are beginning to grow immune to obstacles.

Wilda is also charged with carrying out the ideas of the directors in the construction of stage settings—only they're not settings, he says. When asked, "Well, then, what are they?", he appeals to Bowmer for an answer. After a moment's thought, the director says, "Let's call them 'suggestive set pieces.'" In other words, the painted "flats" common to the modern stage are foreign to Elizabethan theater techniques. Only the bare essentials of a scene appear on

the stage to suggest a far more elaborate setting. Audiences seem to have no difficulty in using their imaginations to fill in the blanks.

Those who crowd the picturesque theater on the Ashland hillside August 2 to 24 to enjoy polished performances will see little that would reveal all the work that went on behind the scenes weeks before opening night. To them the whole thing will appear effortless and spontaneous and that fact alone is tribute enough to those responsible for Oregon's rarest entertainment treat.

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Cool and restful, this natural park, constructed and landscaped by Andrew McLaren, the man responsible for the famed Golden Gate Park, features a zoo with many fascinating animals and birds. The kids will love it!



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