

Behind the Scenes

By Cray Pixley

ENTERTAINMENT WRITER

You may have seen the Aggie Players' productions of the rousing Gilbert and Sullivan musical, "The Pirates of Penzance" or the sentimental comedy "Same Time Next Year," but you may not ever have considered the work or planning involved in putting a production onto a Texas A&M stage.

These shows didn't just happen. The preparations for a production often begin months before any audience is sitting in the theater seats.

In the fall semester, the five directors in the Theater Arts Department decide what plays will be a part of the Aggie Players' forthcoming season.

"Initially, we think about what shows we want to do for the upcoming season according to experience, and the kind of genres the directors are interested in," says Dr. Roberto Pomo, associate professor of theater arts.

"Then at the end of the fall semester we meet and each director writes down his five choices of shows that he would like to see done.

"The second step is deciding what choices will enhance the season's bill. We need to have one piece that is classical, one that is a comedy, one that is tragedy, a contemporary piece and an experimental one.

"We then try to fit our choices within the perimeters of the shows that we must offer to the public."

Pomo says the final and most difficult stage of planning the Aggie Players' season is deciding what show would promote students' educational growth.

"We (directors) look at the students we have in the theater department or participatory non-majors," he says.

Pomo says the directors consider whether the play has enough roles for women as well as men and if the department has students who have the experience to handle a period piece such as Shakespeare or Moliere.

"If we don't think we have the experience, we delete that particular show," he says. "Student participation is an important component in our decision of what shows we will do."

Once the season's schedule is set, auditions for the particular shows are conducted throughout the school year.

Auditions are open to all students, and theater majors are required to audition for all shows. All interested students are advised to be familiar with the play auditioning.

"In my case, I ask the students to be familiar with the script and to do a one-to-two minute monologue of their choice," Pomo says.

"They also have the option to do a scene with another student. Then the director decides who are best qualified students for the roles."

The second step is call-backs, during which the actors read from the play's script. In some cases, the director conducts interviews and then casts the play.

Pomo says an interesting aspect of theater at A&M is that theater majors and

non-theater majors have equal chances of being in a production.

"A lot of non-majors audition and get the parts," he says. "Some then go on to become theater majors or go on their merry way in business or the sciences."

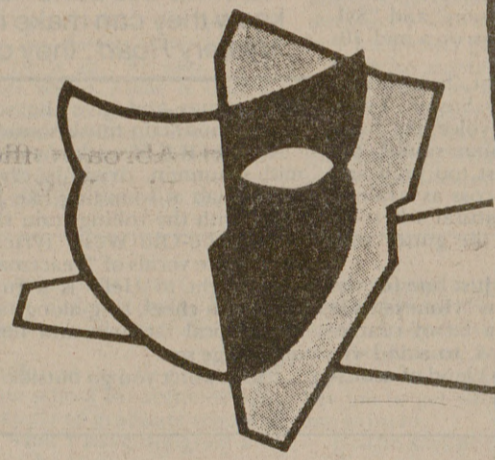
"It usually has worked out very well when non-majors have been in shows. They have been hard-working and have brought a new perspective to the art."

Each show has a rehearsal period that lasts about five weeks before opening night. The cast rehearses in its lab theater for the first three to four weeks before moving to Rudder Forum or Theater.

"During the rehearsal process the director focuses on the actors' vocal and physical control, blocking the play and characterization," Pomo says.

"We want the actors to achieve a strong sense of characterization for the role. It depends on the play, but some directors ask the actors to research their parts to help understand the social situations around that character."

The cast rehearses about two to four hours every day. At the same time the cast is in rehearsal, the costume crew is busy de-



The Aggie Players

signing and building (sewing) costumes. Make-up and hairstyles are being designed, and the technical crew is working on the set design, lighting and props.

Costume design and construction varies from show to show, but it usually all begins with a discussion between the director and costume designer, says Susan Kelly, a lecturer in theater arts and one of the faculty costume designers.

"The director and designer talk about the show — how they see it, envisioning the mood," she says. "For 'Imaginary Invalid,' Roberto (Pomo) wanted lots of color, vividness and quickness of movement. I went to paintings and different historical books to get a feel for the period."

"We decided not to set 'Imaginary Invalid' in Moliere's time and placed it instead in the 1790s," Kelly says.

"Then we talked about the colors and settled on purples and pinks. We looked at palette books and reacted to the colors. I showed him (the director) what caught my

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Photo by Phelan M. Ebenhack

Makeup designer K.C. Rabensburg applies a second coat of makeup to Billy Thomas, a sophomore theater arts major. Thomas plays

Argan, the lead in "The Imaginary Invalid." Rabensburg is also a sophomore theater arts major.

Theater students learn to love working out of the spotlight

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K.C. Rabensburg is always on the go.

She often is rushing from one rehearsal to the performance of an entirely different show, overseeing make-up and hair preparations or

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tooting bulging portfolios of past productions for which she has designed costumes.

Rabensburg, a sophomore theater arts major, generally is not one of the Aggie Player members who is seen on the stage. She works behind the scenes as a technician. She has been a makeup and hair designer, lighting designer and stage manager for many Aggie Players shows this season.

For Rabensburg, the choice between acting and working behind the scenes is not a simple one to make.

"I came to A&M to act, but I've gotten rooted into the technical aspect of theater," she says. "I'm not saying I don't like it, because that wouldn't be the truth, but once they (the theater department) find someone they can trust, sometimes they don't give you the opportunity to act."

"I haven't had a role since last year," she says. "The faculty tries not to let this happen, but it does happen. I would like to act and work technical, but I don't have that chance."

Rabensburg says her schedule on the technical part of a play has made

it impossible, in some cases, to have a part in acting in a show.

"I was already committed to being stage manager for 'Same Time Next Year' and wasn't able to be a part of two other productions that I would have liked to have had role in.

"I'm not slighting being behind the scenes because that is what I like to do," she says. "I plan to go to grad

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— K.C. Rabensburg, theater technician

school in the technical field, but I would like to work on acting by being in a show."

She does act in other shows, such as fellow theater arts majors' plays, the Aggie Players' Monty Python skits and Sully's Satire Theatre.

"I've had a chance to do it all, lighting, costumes, sound, set, hair and makeup," Rabensburg says. "At A&M, there is a chance to try everything and see what you like. At UT, students have to decide by their sophomore year whether they will act or work technical."

In recent productions, Rabensburg designed makeup for "Imagi-

nary Invalid," hair and makeup for "Another Antigone" and costumes for St. Michael's private school in "Ruddigore." She also was a member of the lighting crew for Elenco Experimental's "In Vitro."

"It's hard to decide whether I would like to do lighting or acting," she says. "I loved working on the lighting of 'In Vitro,' because that is the lighting that everybody would like to do. It was a fun show to light."

Rabensburg's schedule is enough to make even an energetic person wilt.

"I go to class from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m., then have lunch, and from 1 p.m. till whenever a show starts I'm in the shop," she says. "If a show is on, I'm working on it from about after lunch until midnight."

Last summer she worked 25 hours each week in the costume shop. That did not include time spent preparing for or working during the shows.

But Rabensburg is quick to assert that her work isn't just slaving away on a show, but dedication toward something she enjoys.

"I love it," she says. "It's not work, it's fun."

At the moment, she is compiling an application and portfolio to audition for a technical assistantship next year. With an assistantship, Rabensburg would be paid for some of her work on the next season's shows.

In many ways, technical work carries more responsibility than acting.

"I have to be on the ball because if you are assigned to a job, then you are responsible if something goes wrong," she says. "Most of the shows



Photo by Phelan M. Ebenhack

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Senior Leigh Ann Truly finishes painting a prop under the supervision of Jimmy Humphries, technical director and set designer for the Aggie Players.

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