

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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In the .. Black Box

By Justin Evans

Undergraduate theater at Columbia has had to move on its own steam. Although Columbia is situated in the theater capital of North America, Columbia College offers no theater department to aid its aspiring actors and directors. Until last winter the campus did not have a facility specifically for undergraduate performances. Plays do manage to go up at Columbia—eight student plays were staged last spring alone.

Student-written shows such as Columbia Players' "Three Themes and a Duck," Columbia Musical Theatre Society's "Lightning Park," the comedy "A Trip to Malaysia," and "An Evening of One-Acts" by Columbia Dramatists have all appeared on campus within the past year.

In addition, the Variety Show stages student-run productions annually.

Sixteen student groups have access to the new Alma Schapiro Center for Theater and Music in Schapiro Hall, but the artistic leadership of undergraduate theater remains ambiguous.

School of the Arts students Blake Seidel and Michael Mariano have been employed by the University to run the theater full-time. Seidel and Mariano not only hold workshops for student groups but also help them put on productions, the closest students may come to the study of theatrical production.

"We help the students realize their artistic vision. We basically condense a little theater major," Seidel said.

Students also gain experience on the technical aspect of staging a play in the black box theater, Seidel said.

"What the [student theater] groups have learned is that along with all the lofty, academic ideas of theater comes the production aspect," he said. "It's just as important to learn the technical aspect; it expands your capabilities."

While students have access to the experience of these professionals, students must seek the assistance, Seidel said.

"The students have to come to us. We can't force help on them," he said.

But while the students using the black box theater have access to professional experience, training in the dramatic arts must be more comprehensive, said

Elizabeth Swain, Barnard associate professor of theater.

"Through theater history you get a basic understanding of theater," she said. "The theater itself is a laboratory in which to do your work. The laboratory without the knowledge is useless."

While Barnard offers several acting and theater history classes and has three professors in theater on its staff, Columbia College offers no course of study in theater.

Undergraduate theater at Columbia has lost some of the kick that one might expect from young people, Swain said.

"I'm amazed at the conservative choices of student productions. I think this department has made more radical choices than the students—and we're old fogies," she said.

Students could be more aggressive with the material they produce, Swain said.

"[Student theater] is not getting out there and saying what's going on," Swain said, suggesting that perhaps students will follow the creative example of late student playwright Alan Contini, whose play "Positive/Negative" focuses on the AIDS issue and opens in Schapiro Theater this week.

"I don't see student theater doing that very much—I'm stunned," she said.

There is some reluctance on the part of student directors to place themselves under the direct guidance of faculty,

however.

"It's really rewarding to work with undergraduate groups," said Ethan McSweeney (CC '92), a member of Columbia Players which is currently preparing Shakespeare's "The Tempest" for performance. "We have the opportunity to work entirely on our own. By no means do we want what Barnard has, where everything is totally mandated by the department."

"We learn what it takes to put up a whole show," he said. "There's no professor to take up the slack."

McSweeney makes it clear, however, that producing projects independently is extremely difficult.

"Financially, it's a hassle. A few other students and I have been putting up \$100 to \$200 apiece to get costumes we need," he said. "You see, you can't get cash from the University. Event approval around here is more geared for people doing bake sales."

But the apparent bureaucracy involved in acquiring approval for production is not necessarily the result of artistic alienation; student directors themselves seem cautious in their approaches.

Sam Turich (CC '92), president of Columbia Courtiers, advocated a more organic approach to producing plays.

"The thing you've really got to concentrate on is the pacing and the acting," he said. "Worrying about how the play looks is not going to make it good. My attitude is that the play itself is the most important thing. I don't know if a synthesis of artistic gloss and dramatic integrity can be reached at this stage."



COURTESY MARCELLA ECKELS

A scene from a production at Barnard's Minor Latham Playhouse