

# LET US ENTERTAIN YOU

By Carol J. Burr

Year after year, OU's Irv Wagner assembles a group of talented young people dedicated to performing the music people love to hear, from show tunes to rock 'n roll. After a school year as local ambassadors, the Broadway Gala cast launches a whirlwind summer tour to take the Sooner gospel abroad.

On stage in Holmberg Hall. In the Oklahoma Memorial Union Ballroom. In auditoriums and banquet rooms throughout Norman, Oklahoma City and surrounding communities. In the concert halls, town squares, local theaters and city parks of Europe. For the past seven years, whenever the occasion requires musical entertainment, the call has gone out for Broadway Gala.

The Gala, which grew out of a 1984 School of Music theatrical production based on Broadway show tunes, is an ensemble of show-biz-struck students under the direction of the indefatigable Irv Wagner. Among the singers, dancers and instrumentalists are some music majors with professional performing aspirations. The balance come from all other segments of the student population; for them, the Gala performances are as close to Broadway as they ever will get.

Potential cast members audition each fall, when even former members have to compete for the available slots. The only membership requirements are talent, a compulsion to perform and a willingness to devote countless hours to rehearsal, travel and performance. In return cast members receive some form of scholarship aid and an opportunity to participate in the summer European tour.

Wagner will take his group almost anywhere that University representation is desired—student recruitment banquets, donor luncheons and dinners, campus variety shows, civic and church events. But wherever they are booked, the Gala entertainers are keenly aware that they also are salespersons for the institution.

A David Ross Boyd professor of trombone in the OU School of Music, Wagner has all the teaching, research and performance credentials of the distinguished academician. His nationally noted OU Trombone Choir is one of the school's most popular ensembles. He was a conductor/arranger for the Oklahoma Symphony Orchestra's Pop Concerts and the Sooner Scandals Orchestra, and he is an accomplished jazz musician.

But the professor is also a first-class showman with an irrepressible sense of humor who believes that enlightening audiences and entertaining them are not mutually exclusive objectives. His Broadway Gala shows are designed to set toes tapping, bring a tear to the eye or a lump to the throat, and finally to send the audience away humming the tunes—but with an enhanced image of the University that



For Broadway Gala's Tina Silva, left, "Everything's Coming Up Roses."

is training such bright, talented, energetic young people.

Wagner creates a new show each fall, combining the group's stock-in-trade show tunes, both current and past, with old pop favorites, folk songs, even some rock 'n roll. Once when a promising opera student from China joined the cast, Wagner inserted an operatic aria that brought down the house. Another favorite soloist for several years was the towering graduate student, Naymond Thomas, whose glorious bass voice rattled the rafters with his signature number, "Old Man River."

Most Gala shows have a touch of patriotism, and the last two, naturally enough, have had a Centennial flavor with Oklahoma observing the 100th anniversaries of both the territorial land run and the University's founding in 1989 and 1990 respectively. Wagner was particularly eager to take his "100 Years of American Music" show to Europe last July and August.

The 1990 trip marked the fourth consecutive European venture for the Gala, a tradition born of Wagner's own passion for travel abroad and his desire to introduce college students to new places, cultures and people. A well-practiced tour guide who has taken a variety of musical groups to Europe since 1982, Wagner always admonishes his young companions to be "sponges" in unfamiliar surroundings, to shrug off the inconveniences and minor discomforts and to take home every ounce of knowledge that can be gained from international travel and performance.

Such an attitude not only makes for good tourists but also spills over into the actual performances; these kids become real troopers. They come into communities most Americans have never heard of, and by the time they leave, the townspeople know all about the University of Oklahoma. In Thiaucourt, France; Bad Neuenahr, Germany; Thun, Switzerland; San Remo, Italy; and dozens of other European cities and towns, the Sooner singers are welcomed back year after year.

The trip is not an easy one. In 19 days this past summer, the Gala visited 23 cities and towns in seven countries, most for overnight, others for only a few hours. After landing in Lon-

don and crossing the English Channel by ferry, travel consisted of long bus rides, broken by visits to spots of special interest, with Wagner contributing a running commentary. Along the way, the students gave six full concerts and a number of impromptu performances. A seventh special performance and neighborhood party had to be canceled because of the illness of the local host.

"This definitely was not a trip for the weak in spirit," violinist Kristen Hussey admits. "We saw an awful lot in a short period of time."

Singer Kristy Van Burkleo, who with twin sister Kelly have been featured Gala performers for three years, agrees. "This wasn't just a vacation; it was a lifetime experience. You had pretty mixed emotions while you were doing it—you loved it/you hated it, you wanted to stay/you wanted to go home. But in the end, we all had such a good

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time because of Irv. There wasn't one thing that wasn't well organized. He's so knowledgeable, giving us the history, showing us what's a necessity and what's not."

The students travel for half-fare with private donors providing tour scholarships. Even with the cut-rate, however, most make the trip on an extremely limited budget, the high prices in London, the first stop, being enough to cause hastily revised per diems.

Wagner fills up the bus with other family members, University faculty, alumni and friends, several of them doubling in the Gala orchestra. It only takes a few days on tour for the generation gap to disappear and the bond-

ing to begin. Last summer, the ages ranged from 14-year-old Oklahoma City St. Mary's junior high cellist Heather Wells, traveling with her mother Sandy, to retired faculty member Louise Moore, 84.

"We were kind of surprised at how well we got along with the older people," OU sophomore Phil Thomsen confesses. Of all the performers, Thomsen probably made the biggest adjustment. A student at Oklahoma City University recommended to Wagner by a mutual friend, he didn't know anyone in the group at departure from Oklahoma City. Shortly after returning, however, he transferred to OU, auditioned and is now a regular member of the '90-'91 Gala.

The students took very seriously the quality of their performance and its reflection on the University. After a summer layoff, with a few new faces in the cast, the first rehearsal in London was a minor disaster. Alarmed that they had forgotten so much so quickly, the Gala members gave up their free night on the town to stay in the hotel to practice. Amazingly, several of their older traveling companions volunteered to remain to put them through their paces.

A second rehearsal on board the ferry from Dover to Ostend, Belgium, was equally remarkable. Up top in the wind and the mist, the Oklahomans soon attracted a crowd and ended the session with a sing-a-long with the Europeans, who knew most of the words to the American songs.

Music proved to be the universal language throughout the trip. "It didn't matter whether they could speak English or not," music major David Ballard says. "It's just like students in the U.S. learning to sing opera in Italian or German but not knowing exactly what the words mean."

Ballard was easily the most adventuresome of the group, seizing every opportunity to try out his college French. Invited by an employee in the San Remo hotel to join some young Italians at a disco following the Gala show, Ballard quickly found himself right at home with the way his new acquaintances dressed, sang and danced. "They were just like us."

Four other cast members had a similar experience in London. Having elected to forego an evening at the



*Broadway Gala director Irvin Wagner, left, goes over last-minute instruction with veteran performers Doug Liner and Caryn Hickman before the annual dinner theatre that kicks off each performance season for the OU student entertainers.*

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theatre with their fellow Sooners, Wendy Wright, Candy Davis, Elizabeth Bashara and John Crane returned from dinner out to encounter a group of young Irish tourists who were staying at the same hotel. Together they sought out a "typical English pub."

"Everyone was very friendly," Crane recalls. "It was great to get away from the tourist attractions and meet the people—people of all ages."

Meanwhile, in the theater district, other Oklahomans also were experiencing British hospitality. Joanne Floyd and Doug Liner had grabbed the last two tickets to "Aspects of Love," while five other students had found tickets to "Miss Saigon," the high-dollar London stage hit. But Ballard and Katie Woolsey were practicing economy. "We were going to 'Rocky Horror Picture Show,'" Woolsey says, "because we really couldn't afford 'Miss Saigon.'" But David really loved that music, and he was feeling sad that we couldn't go."

Stopping at a book store to buy the "Miss Saigon" sheet music, the two were overheard discussing their disappointment. "This fellow came up to us and said his girl friend hadn't shown up," Woolsey continues, "and he gave us his box seats for 'Miss Saigon.'"

"We were 10 minutes late," Ballard adds, "but I already knew all the music

by heart from listening to the CD."

Earlier in the day, some of the OU students joined the spectators outside No. 10 Downing Street, home of then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Striking up a conversation with the London policemen standing guard at the street's entrance, they mentioned that they were from Oklahoma. Challenged by the bobbies to sing the song of the same name, the Gala group responded with a spirited rendition, to the applause of the other Downing Street visitors.

The part of the trip that had caused the students the most concern—staying in individual private homes in the small French town of Thiaucourt — turned out to be everyone's most memorable experience. "We couldn't speak their language," Caryn Hickman recalls of surmounting the language barrier, "but we communicated."

The citizens of Thiaucourt were the most enthusiastically pro-American Europeans that the group encountered. Taken and subsequently destroyed by the Germans in World War I, the town was liberated and rebuilt by the American General John Pershing. The U.S. government built a monument on an overlooking hill and a military cemetery nearby. This occupation/liberation scenario was repeated by the Nazis and U.S. General George Patton in World War II.

The students were visibly moved by the story as recounted by their Thiaucourt host, Jean Georges, as they stood within the massive monument and later by the retired U.S. Army noncom who oversees the immaculately groomed cemetery with its perfectly aligned white crosses.

"It was hard not to cry," Kristy Van Burkleeo says. "I never fully realized what America means to me. And there were all those people who died for me and for my parents and their parents."

At both sites, the Gala members sang "America" and "The Star Spangled Banner." There was no audience. They sang for themselves and for those young Americans of their same age who went to Europe and never came home.

The show in Thiaucourt was in sharp contrast to the performance the previous night in the up-scale German resort town of Bad Neuenahr. The Kur

Theater in Bad Neuenahr was a thoroughly professional facility. The audience was very receptive but with typical German reserve—although the teenagers were waiting with autograph books when the Oklahomans emerged from the theater. In Thiaucourt, the Sooners were the first entertainers to visit the new sports arena, a large metal gymnasium short on stage accouterments but long on hospitality.

The gym, draped in U.S. and French flags, was jammed for *the* event of the Thiaucourt summer. The women of the town served refreshments, and a local folk dance group entertained the Americans during intermission. The audience could not have been more enthusiastic.

"When we sang our national anthem at the end of the show," Hickman recalls, "they stood and put their hands on their hearts."

"We got more response to the national anthem than we would get in the U.S.," Toby Branum insists. Branum was so carried away by the reception that he and several of the other men gave their red bandanas from the "Oklahoma!" number to the children who mobbed them for autographs after the show, leaving the cast bandanaless for the rest of the tour.

The evening ended with the concert sponsors and the host families breaking out champagne for a post-theater party that lasted well past midnight.

"It was thrilling," Woolsey says. "I love to perform, but I know that I don't have what it takes to become famous and have people asking for autographs. But these people were so excited to have us there."

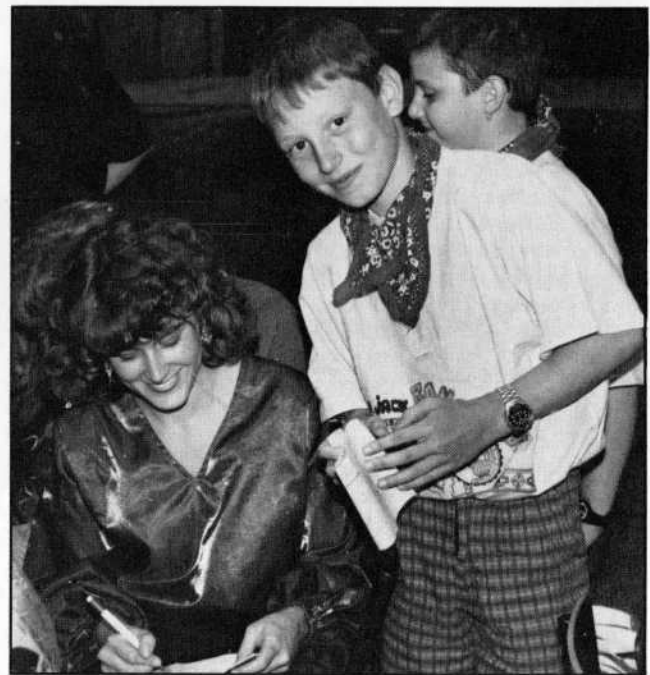
"They treated us like we were famous or something," Hickman adds.

The Gala performed under a wide variety of conditions for the balance

of the tour. After appearing in an international music festival in the town square of the picturesque river resort of Thun, Switzerland, the group was booked into an outdoor amphitheater in San Remo on the Italian Riviera, a former palace in Florence, a U.S. Air Force Base movie theater in Aschaffenburg, Germany.

On a side trip to Bonn to see the birthplace of Beethoven, the students strolled across the town square where an empty stage was just too much to resist. Amazed Sunday idlers around tables at nearby sidewalk cafes were treated to a brief, spontaneous "Surfin' U.S.A." from the OU show.

The itinerary called for a neighborhood party and concert in Cologne at the home of Wagner's good friend and bus driver on all his previous European tours, Tim Verbakel. Terminally ill with cancer, Tim had been unable to accompany the Oklahomans on this



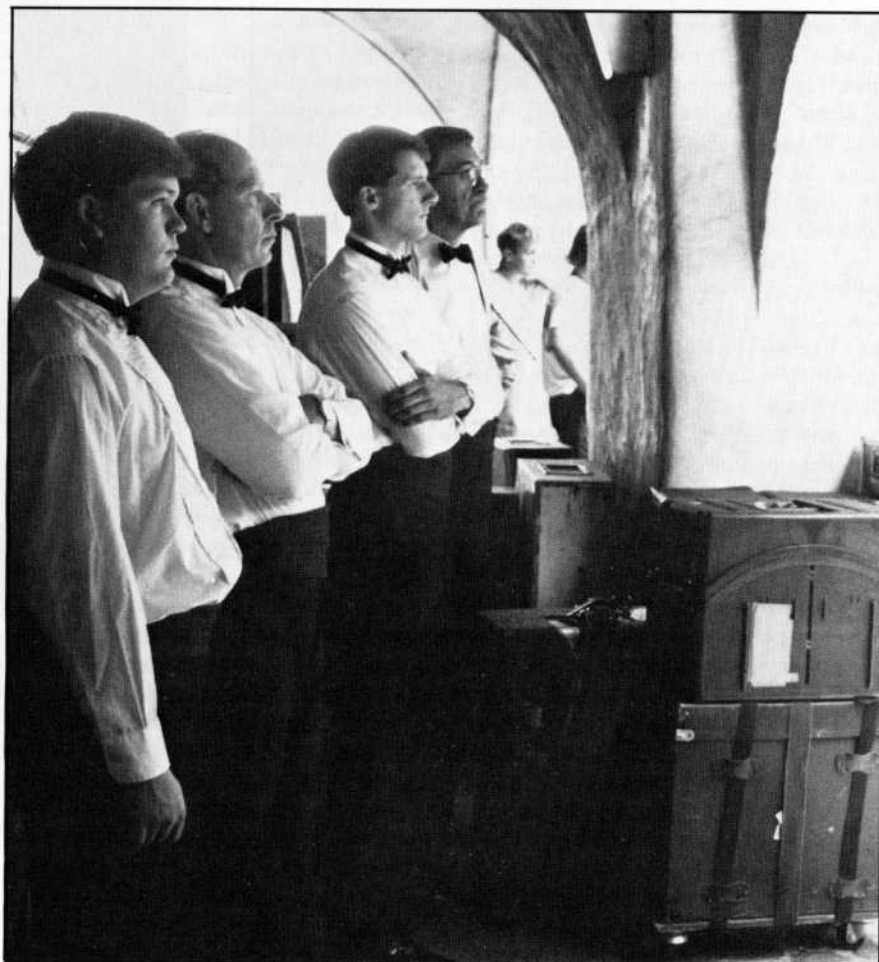
*Above, following the show at Thiaucourt, Katie Woolsey autographs a program for a young French fan proudly wearing a red bandana souvenir from the "Oklahoma!" number.*

*In the photo at left, the touring Sooners pose at the Eiffel Tower. Grouped around Kelly Van Burkleo, are Elizabeth Bashara, left, John Crane, Joanne Floyd, Caryn Hickman, Kristy Van Burkleo, David Ballard and Wendy Wright.*



*ABOVE: The Gala cast rings down the final curtain on the '90 tour. From left, front row: Natalie Steele, Kelly Van Burkleo, Wendy Wright, Caryn Hickman, Heather Wells; middle row, David Ballard, Elizabeth Bashara, Kristy Van Burkleo, Katie Woolsey; back row, Roy Hickman, John Crane, Phil Thomsen, Toby Branum, Candy Davis, Doug Liner, Kristin Hussey, Joanne Floyd, Justin Lewis, and Jerry Smith.*

*RIGHT: At the music festival in Thun, Switzerland, Irv Wagner, second from left, waits offstage with orchestra members Justin Lewis, Stewart Corbin and Richard Hilbert.*





*James Harper's crowd-pleasing "If I Were a Rich Man" highlights an honor student recruitment banquet.*



*The Gala chorus line addresses the songs of the Roaring '20s in their journey through "100 Years of American Music." This performance in Florence, Italy, was staged in a former palace, one of the University tour's more sumptuous settings.*

trip. At the last minute, however, his condition was deemed too grave for the group's visit.

Tim's replacement driver, Karl Heinz Frank, quickly became the Gala's biggest fan, struggling daily to load and unload not only the luggage but cellos for Marjorie Cornelius and Heather Wells, Richard Hilbert's drums, Judy Gorton's keyboard, Roy Hickman's bass, Jerry Smith's clarinet, the violins of Brenda Wagner and Kristen Hussey, the trombones of Natalie Steele and Justin Lewis and the trumpets of Stephen Pearce and Stewart Corbin.

The family feeling that bound the travelers together was nowhere more evident than when performer Woolsey celebrated her 21st birthday and popular fellow traveler Doris Bratton her 75th. Everyone shared Branum's excitement when, on a 30-minute tour of the casino in Monte Carlo, he hit the slot machine for \$600.

If they had had any doubt, Branum also proved the small-world theory to his colleagues with a leather jacket, made in Italy, which he proudly purchased in Switzerland. Inspecting his handsome acquisition back at the hotel, he discovered that the made-in-U.S.A. buttons bore the seal of the state of Oklahoma.

The trip was not without trying times, such as a record heat wave and no air conditioning through France and Italy and a few minor illnesses. The darkest moment came in Paris when news came of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Largely cut off from English-language news, apprehension mounted as the group toured the concentration camp at Dachau and prepared to board their American Airlines flight home from Frankfurt.

But safely home, attention turned to more familiar, more immediate concerns—the Greek rush week already in progress at OU, enrollment, the beginning of classes, auditions for the new Broadway Gala and the dinner theater that annually begins its season. And if the world is still safe for travel in the spring, Irv Wagner will be full of plans to introduce a new group of Oklahoma's most talented young people to his favorite European haunts.

Wendy Wright won't be along next time, but she already has grasped the Wagner philosophy. "I love being on the stage; you just can't get me off there," she says. "But realistically, I'll never make it to Broadway. My real talent is to teach, to pass on to children the thrill of performing. Hopefully they can take it and run with it." @

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