



Alumni Forum

ALL THE WORLD NEEDS A STAGE

Mack Scism (above), director of the Mummers Theatre and an alumnus of the University, discusses the role of the community theatre in America

By MACK SCISM

AMERICA HAS excelled in the creation of new appliances, the devising of short-cuts, the contriving of fresh angles and ingenious packaging. Our achievements in slang, in gadgetry, in musical comedy, in skyscraping remain unrivaled. And we have too a private face of which to be proud. Against a Coney Island must be set a Walden Pond. Against the mindless "ticky-tacky" housing developments must be set a Frank Lloyd Wright. P. T. Barnum and publicity bred a burning need for privacy. The nation of Babbitt and Rotary begot, as well as an impulse to join, a compulsion to turn away. All backyard parties are not used for cookouts and nauseous togetherness rituals; in some few, men of soul and sadness gather. We have our private poetry as well as our public address system.

So it is in the center panel of America's creative life that there is a strange sense of inadequacy and incompleteness. What America has lacked creatively is a vigorous and forceful art that can be accessible to a great number of people—an art that will be spacious, permeating; thrilling sounds without loudspeaker overtones; illuminating vistas without technicolor; penetrating ideas without sentimentality.

The basic task then in creating a resident professional theatre in America is to try to fill in that vacant center panel in America's creative life by building theatres that will be more than vain pleasure domes; by producing plays that will be more than just the shortest distance between two hours.

So it is the repertoire that becomes the most important link in the chain that binds a theatre and its audience together. Its selection is one of the theatre's greatest responsibilities. The repertoire embodies the ideas which are considered important for the theatre to communicate. These ideas should be stimulating, penetrating, pertinent, universal. The works presented should be those which arrest the mind and reach the heart as they explore and celebrate the human condition; works which develop in man concern for the welfare of others, wonder at the astonishment of living, responsibility to our times, sensitivity

to our problems, and the great ideas of freedom, justice and equality.

Occasionally the audience will reject a play. This is inevitable. In the theatre, progress is impossible without risking failure. Each exciting work produced is a risk, but to ignore the challenge and refuse to produce at a risk is to remain a pale echo of the courage of others. Some plays will receive a mixed reception. And why not? Not all people like the same house, car, cigarette, food or book. Yet they all may greatly enjoy home-life, driving, smoking, eating or reading. So it is in the theatre. You may not like a particular play and yet still love the theatre. A theatre of purpose and ideals cannot let popularity stand alone as the measure of success.

Every play produced should be entertaining. This does not imply a play must always be funny. To entertain in the theatre is to afford the audience the chance to live vicariously, to find self-discovery through forgetfulness of self. This absorption into the life of a play may be an amusing experience; the experience may be shocking, heartbreaking, infuriating. It may move audience to tears, roll them in aisles, incite them to riot. The experience may be anything so long as it isn't boring. A tragedy, a history, a poetic drama as well as a comedy can entertain by drawing the audience into its special world holding its attention.

The responsibility then is to find the repertoire which fits the facilities of the theatre, lies within the scope of its company, is of value either by virtue of its universality or by its pertinency and probing illumination of a contemporary theme, and will at the same time promote the high ideals for which the theatre exists. If there were no such ideals, if there were no love for fine plays—that is, plays which are not watered down in their meaning, softened in their impact or pandering in their appeal—then there would be no theatre as we understand it: a great spa for the mind and the spirit whose function is to give its audience a true sense of life, of “man in the most important moments of his existence,” as Gogol said. If the theatre does not fill this requirement, it is only a commercial enterprise. *END*

from big top to bigtime

Mack and the Mummies

Mack Scism graduated from the University of Oklahoma in 1947 with a degree in engineering. Since then he has engineered the rise of one of the nation's leading theatrical groups—the Mummies Theatre of Oklahoma City. In deserting the slide rule for the stage, Scism and his band of actors have met and overcome a theatre-trunkful of lean days and adversities. But the future for the Mummies Theatre couldn't be brighter. Scism has seen the group struggle from a “bankroll” of \$8.40 at its beginning in 1949 to a more affluent situation today. In 1962 the Mummies Theatre received a Ford Foundation grant of \$1.25 million with the stipulation that Oklahoma City citizens come up with three-quarters of a million. The \$750,000 was oversubscribed. The Mummies will soon move into a 600-seat house and a smaller in-the-round facility for contemporary productions and children's theatre.

The new theatre will be a far cry (nay, an anguished wail) from the first Mummies site. While a teacher and chairman of the speech department at Capitol Hill High, Scism and some friends who shared an interest in drama decided to begin a dramatic group. With great plans and little capital, they dragged a borrowed circus tent to the corner of 24th and Eastern in Oklahoma City. A week before they planned to open with *The Drunkard*, they erected the tent and found one end rotted away. On opening night they were \$600 in debt just for canvas.

Scism recalled the early days in a *New York Times* story: “We raided the city dump for stage equipment. We prowled through vacant buildings all over the city. I guess we even took a few things here and there, sort of on loan. We piled it all behind the tent, then put together a stage and sets and opened on schedule.”

Across the street, however, was a Baptist Church which did not appreciate play-acting. The members picketed each performance, and Scism and the players were called “lewd persons and purveyors of licentiousness.” Each week the Mummies players appeared before the city council to argue for the right to continue despite injunctions brought against them by the church. They beat the Baptists in court but a heavenly opposition almost did them in: Wind. Wind which threatened to rip the tent from its moorings. “At least it proved we were not lewd,” recalls Scism. “How can you be lewd with a book in one hand and the other holding down a tent?”

“We were dreadful nuisances though,” Scism admits, “but we reveled in all the consternation and became dreadful exhibitionists. The furor made for potent box-

office publicity. They were marvelous days, really.”

After the season they showed a profit of \$800 and moved into the Hall of Mirrors at the Municipal Auditorium. After four years there, the Mummies saved \$6,000, and with it they moved in 1954 to their present location, a warehouse at Main and Western.

The yearly budget has grown from \$5,000 to \$100,000, the audiences to 6,000 per production and the yearly offerings from one to eight. A children's theatre was added in 1958. That year Scism was one of ten American directors awarded a \$10,000 grant from the Ford Foundation for study and travel abroad. He spent a six-month tour with European repertory theatres and was guest director at the Finnish National Theatre.

In 1960 he was one of the founders of the Theatre Communications Group, an organization of American and Canadian resident professional theatres. In the future these community theatres will work together in exchanging actors and productions.

Oklahoma City citizens are delighted that the smell of grease paint ruined a good engineer.



Edgar V. “Judge” Springer shown here in his role as Mr. Frank in *The Diary of Ann Frank*, is a graduate of OU, teaches a course in drama and is a member of the Mummies repertory group as both actor and director.