

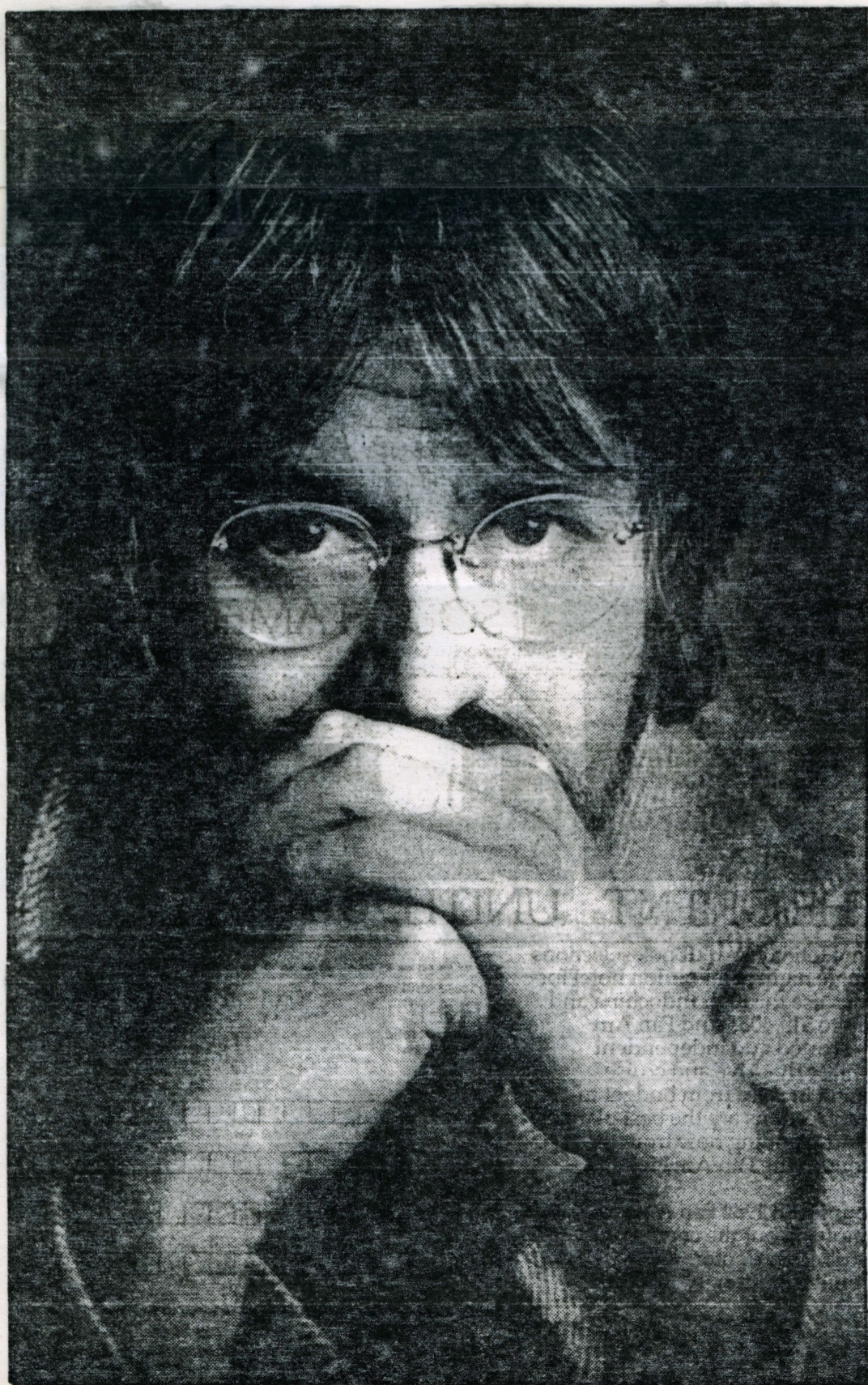
HE WORKS WITH LSU'S DUNCES

Frank Galati is directing his own adaptation of 'A Confederacy of Dunces' at LSU's world premiere

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WORKING WITH LSU'S 'DUNCES'

┌ This is experimental every step of the way; there's no precedent. It's all from scratch, which is both exciting and frightening. ┐



Photos courtesy LSU

DIRECTOR FRANK GALATI (left).
CHOREOGRAPHER PETER AMSTER (above).
COMPOSER EDWARD ZELNIS (below, seated at piano).



Franks Galati is a victim of circumstance, and the situation finds him happy, cautious and excited.

In town to direct his own adaptation of *A Confederacy of Dunces* in the LSU Theatre's world premiere Feb. 24, Galati is in the midst of this unique venture thanks to past associations that ultimately fall into the age-old right place/right time category.

"At about the same time the book was published several years ago by the LSU Press, Dr. Gresdna Doty of the LSU Theatre faculty read it and thought what a marvelous stage adaptation could be made from John Kennedy Toole's extraordinary novel," explained Galati, a professor of interpretation at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., whose directing and stage adaptations have given him a national reputation. "She and I had worked together at various times in the past, having been introduced through mutual involvement in the American College Theatre Festival."

Dr. Doty sent Galati a copy of the novel, which he found brilliant and very funny. *A Confederacy of Dunces* won the 1980 Pulitzer Prize in fiction, a decade after its author committed suicide. Set in New Orleans, it follows the adventures of Ignatius J. Reilly in his revolt against the 20th century. Galati quickly notified Dr. Doty of his interest in the idea of an adaptation. The main question was what would be done, how and when.

One consideration in the process was that the LSU Press had, in the interim, sold the film rights to the story. Luckily, a stipulation in that agreement allowed for a university-mounted production to be presented at LSU. Clearly, the eventual evolution of *Dunces* from best-seller bookshelf to center stage would take place on the LSU campus under the auspices of LSU Theatre.

Last summer, Galati came to Baton Rouge to lecture on the aesthetics of chamber theatre as part of an LSU theatre department seminar on contemporary theatre. At that time, preliminary meetings were held to explore the prospects of an LSU Theatre-commissioned world-premiere production of *Dunces* in the 1983-84 season. The decision was made, and Galati returned home to arrange for his absence.

On his mind was the schedule — an opening in early 1984. That left six months for the entire project to unfold.

"I was particularly careful in carving this novel into a production," Galati said. "It was essential to maintain Toole's characters intact while translating the story line and plot into stage terms. This was an incredible challenge, as the book's length and complexity of plot made it necessary to 'collapse' a lot of the action into a manageable time frame for theatre."

"During one of our discussions here in Baton Rouge last summer, we looked at some of the initial problems the story's adaptation for the stage might present," Galati said. "One of my major concerns was the numerous locations in the book and how quickly the action moves from one to the other. I had already rejected the idea



“I have been ever so gentle with the story. I respect it terribly, as created by Toole. We’ve tried not to bruise the characters, to compromise any of the work in any way. We don’t want to disappoint the story’s fans.”

of a narrative figure or chorus to bridge the necessary setting changes, and I offhandedly mentioned that if it were a musical the problem would be solved, as music turns the gears in a story on stage.

"The more I thought about it, the more the music idea seemed right, particularly since *Dunces* is set in New Orleans, which has such a richly diverse musical history. Music immediately became an essential element to the show, and it was a natural thought progression to then wonder 'What if the characters sang?' This was both a problem-solver as well as a creator."

The dilemma of scene shifts was solved with the introduction of music to the production, but the additional time required for the songs in a full-blown musical comedy presented another obstacle in condensing the lengthy, complicated book into a play-turned-musical.

Another major obstacle in the initial process was the confrontation with what Galati calls Toole's "untranslatables," the writings of Ignatius in his private journal and the letters from his former girlfriend, Myrna Minkoff, the only emotional relationship Ignatius has in the entire book.

"I had several meetings with the people holding the movie rights to the book, and the first thing they wanted to ask me about was how I'd confront these two things," Galati explained.

"Ignatius' private writings were very funny at times, and I didn't want to lose them. Myrna is in New York, involved in all kinds of radical activities which she relates to Ignatius in her letters. Although she figures into

the story only for a brief moment toward the end, it is important for Myrna and her relationship by mail with Ignatius to be shared. But neither his private writings nor her letters translated effectively to the stage."

With a smile of knowing secrecy, Galati said that both of the "untranslatables" have been met and conquered, but he understandably does not want to relate how prior to the show's opening.

The Chicago connection

While Galati carved away at his script and lyrics, composer Edward Zelnis began working on the show's music. Soon, choreographer Peter Amster was busy devising choreography for the production while LSU Theatre faculty member Nels Anderson was sketching preliminary set designs. Robert Shook began his lighting plots, and professional actor Scott Harlan was secured to play the title role of Ignatius.

Zelnis, a Chicagoan and Northwestern graduate who, among other things, was Eartha Kitt's musical director for several years, has worked with Galati on other projects. Northwestern alumnus Amster has been a professional dancer who in recent years has gained applause in the Chicago area for his directing, choreography and musical efforts.

Anderson, an LSU theatre department faculty member, got his master's degree from Northwestern while Shook is considered one of the top lighting designers in the Chicago area

and designed LSU's production of "Hamlet" last season. Harlan studied under Galati at Northwestern before embarking on a professional acting career in New York.

In short, when Galati arrived in Baton Rouge to begin work on the show, he led the Chicago connection into LSU's Music and Dramatic Arts Building.

"I am fortunate to be surrounded by such a remarkable assemblage of recognized, award-winning theatre professionals," Galati said. "We are also very lucky to have the services of Dr. Tanberg of the LSU theatre faculty, who is designing the costumes, and the music faculty's Victor Klimash, who is our musical director."

Diverse music moods

The music became a subject of great interest and concern as the production's creation progressed. With Ignatius' love of classical music and the show's late '60s time frame in mind, the musical moods of the show fall into three basic categories: classical, contemporary (late '60s) and indigenous styles of New Orleans.

"The orchestra will be comprised of three distinct groups," Galati said, "a Baroque ensemble, a rock combo and a Dixieland band."

In October, Galati and Zelnis were in Baton Rouge for several days and saw approximately 200 actors, actresses, singers and dancers from LSU and the community audition for roles. After auditions, Galati returned to Evanston to continue work on the script, returning to LSU just before the start of the 1984 spring term to begin rehearsals.

"This is an extraordinary group," said Galati of his cast. "As Peter Amster said the other night, we have a 'cornucopia of talent' working on the show. They're amazingly gifted and devoted to the project. Remember, this is a new musical, with all the attendant problems that go with a never-done-before work."

The cast totals nearly 60, complemented by a 25-piece orchestra, three stage managers and a backstage crew of more than 25, all pulling together 2½ hours of theatre in *Dunces'* final form.

The Feb. 24 opening date is nearly here, and what has been a project of some two years will for Galati and all involved with *Dunces* see fruition. No one is more aware than the show's director/adaptor of the significance that *Dunces'* world premiere on the stage carries.

"We're not opening in New Haven. What we do in rehearsals and present on opening night we have to live with," Galati said. "This is experimental every step of the way; there's no precedent. It's all from scratch, which is both exciting and frightening."

"I have been ever so gentle with the story. I respect it terribly, as created by Toole. We've tried not to bruise the characters, to compromise any of the work in any way. The book has a tremendous following, and everyone who has fallen in love with it has his own individual ideas of what each character, each place and each situation is like. We don't want to disappoint the story's fans."

Dawson Corley is a regular contributor to Magazine.

'Dunces' tickets on sale

Tickets go on sale today for the LSU Theatre production of "A Confederacy of Dunces."

Additional performances have also been scheduled, making a total of 12 shows, all in the theater of the LSU Music and Dramatic Arts Building.

Opening night for the musical comedy is set for February 24 at 8 p.m., followed by 8 p.m. perfor-

mances February 25, 26, 28 and 29 and March 1-4. Matinees are scheduled for 2 p.m. February 26 and March 4. A preview performance will be given February 23 at 8 p.m.

Tickets on sale at the LSU Union box office, will be priced as follows: \$5 for students, \$7 for senior citizens and LSU faculty and staff, and \$10 for the general public. The Union box office is open from 11:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday through Friday.

Strong drama program needs better theatre facilities

By ANNE PRICE

The LSU Theatre has come of age and achieved a great deal of community recognition and support in the past few years, particularly with the highly popular production of "A Christmas Carol" and the upcoming premiere of the musical version of *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

This continuing excellence points up graphically the university's need for better facilities for a strong and growing program on campus. At present, the speech and theatre department shares the old Music and Dramatic Arts Building with the School of Music, and all departments suffer drastically from lack of space and equipment.

A proper theatre center, well designed and appropriately located on campus, would help LSU climb another rung in its struggle up the ladder of excellence.

When the new music building, now under construction across the street, is complete, the tension will be somewhat eased, but many problems will remain.

The new music building will provide a theatre for practice and small performances, but the Opera Workshop will likely continue to require the existing University Theatre, which is the correct size for young voices. And if music and theatre continue to share space, the theatre still needs its own new facility.

"We definitely need our own theatre center," said Dr. Gresdna Doty, director of LSU Theatre. "We now have no rehearsal space comparable to the size and shape of the stage. At best we have two weeks rehearsal before each production, which is not enough for student actors and workers."

"We had to rent the Southdowns Elementary School Gymnasium to rehearse "Christmas Carol," and we have no room approaching the size of the stage to rehearse "Confederacy." What we really need is unshared space, for rehearsal and performance of theatre productions at LSU."

Other needs

Dr. Doty says that the department really needs three kinds of theatre space to keep pace with modern theatre techniques and productions. The University Theatre is a proscenium stage and is the only thing available at the school.

“The university still has some lake-front sites, and what could be more appropriate for a theatre?”

"We are locked in to producing shows suitable for a proscenium stage, and that doesn't meet the needs of students," she said.

Ideally, the department should have the proscenium stage, a thrust stage and a "black box theatre," which is a large, adaptable space without permanently fixed seating so that the space can be manipulated to accommodate different kinds of productions. Much contemporary theatre requires this flexibility, and students who have no experience working in this kind of area are hampered in efforts to work in professional theatre.

Repertory company

Perhaps most important of all for the growing department is the need for more space for students and for student-directed and produced plays, Dr. Doty said.

"The only place we have for student productions is Theatre 150, which is also proscenium stage only and very small. Students are forced to work in a style not always suited for what they want to do."

Long term, innovative planning for a first-class university would also dictate a new step for the theatre department. Establishment of a professional repertory company in connection with the theatre program would not only bring national stature to the entire university, but benefit the entire state of Louisiana.

There is now no professional theatre in the South between Atlanta and Houston, with the exception of the limited Alabama Shakespeare Festival. A modest, by government standards, investment and careful, long-range planning for excellence could put LSU in the company of Yale University, Florida State and the University of North Carolina, which presently do have repertory companies attached to their theatre programs.

In line with the current LSU effort to climb the ladder of national excellence, thinking big in terms of the LSU Theatre could be a major rung in the ladder.

"It would be wonderful for

our program and for the area," Dr. Doty said in reply to a question about the feasibility of such a project. "This would be an ideal situation for M.F.A. students who could serve as apprentices to the company. And this area deserves to have a professional company."

Good location

Dreaming about a possible theatre center on campus brings up the question of location, and it does seem that a truly attractive setting would add to the value of such a facility — perhaps even with some parking for theatre patrons?

The university still has some lake-front sites, and what could be more appropriate or appealing for a theatre?

The public has recently exhibited a great deal of support for the LSU Theatre, spurred by the quality of recent productions, and this is a strong indication of future increased support for programs in a new and attractive setting.

If such a theatre is built, it should be designed by a qualified theatre architect, and should be placed on a suitable site. Maybe the university should consider reserving a lake-front tract for such a future development.

Public support is evidenced by recent contributions, which have made such outstanding productions as "Christmas Carol" and the "Confederacy" premiere possible.

A grant from Ethyl Corporation helped make "Christmas Carol" possible, and the department has received grants from D.H. Holmes and Franklin Press, as well as numerous grants from private individuals, to help with the "Confederacy" production.


"This ("Confederacy") is a labor of love for everybody," said Dr. Doty. "It is a very big effort, and very hard for both crew and cast. There are 25 scenes in the show and an awful lot of locales to identify."

The show will have 11 performances, opening Feb. 24 and running through Sunday, March 4, with matinees on Feb. 24 and 26. A paid preview will be presented on Feb. 23.

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