

WHY THE SHOW MUST GO ON

BY SALLY ANN FLECKER

## GIVE MY GRAND ROUNDS TO BROADWAY

**L**ois Pounds Oliver (MD '65) still regrets the floating chickens. Not the floating chickens per se. The chickens were great at the Saturday night performance of *Coldfinger*, fluttering down so softly from the great catwalk above the stage in the Stephen Foster Memorial Theatre. In fact, those live chickens were practically a showstopper—not only for the surprised audience but also for the startled cast. The chickens descended at the close of the first act, during the “Womb at the Top” number (sung to the tune of “Milk and Honey”), a satirical homage to Magee-Womens Hospital. Those 17 men singing their hearts out, and done up as heavily pregnant women in blond wigs, had no clue that the show was about to take a fowl turn.

The idea to use poultry to ratchet up the silliness of the skit had come late in the game—after the show’s Friday-night performance. One of the stagehands, who grew up on a farm, remembered that if you dropped a chicken from on high it would flap its ineffectual wings and ease itself to the ground like a dandelion wisp caught in the breeze.



What, besides Mylar, has made *Scope and Scalpel* sparkle for so long? (Shown here, the 1969 *Medic Hair* production program cover.)



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FROM LEFT: *PMS IV* program cover; the first executive committee—(sitting, from left) thespians Miller, Prefett, Aronson, Swartz, Titchworth, Stuart, (from left, standing) Dodds, Wilson, Harrington, Lommen, Yelle, Eisler, Wintell, Jones, DeCenzo; rehearsal for *Spring Tonic* (1956).

*Let's do it*, said his cohorts. Exit stage right. They conducted an impromptu casting call at a local farm and by show time the next evening had a cadre of hens waiting in the wings. Oliver's lament some 36 years later comes from the success of the coop coup: "We always wished we had had it at the end." The retired Oliver, who last served as an associate dean for Duke University, has a good point. After all, how do you follow a chicken?

The feathering of the Saturday night performance of *Scope and Scalpel*—the musical extravaganza written, produced, and performed each year by soon-to-graduate fourth-year medical students—was not the only last-minute addition to the 1965 production. Four nights before the opening, Oliver and her coproducer, Alan Tapper (MD '65, a Baltimore-based ob/gyn) came to a sinking realization. They didn't have an opening, at least not in the grand *Scope and Scalpel* tradition of big production numbers with the entire cast on stage. Oh, the wringing of hands and the gnashing of teeth! But from desperation was born brilliance.

Not for the first time, and certainly not for the last time in *Scope and Scalpel* history, the previous year's production, *Beyond the Syringe*, contained a line that proved deeply offensive to a faculty member. His complaint to the dean sparked the following caveat: The tradition could continue, but the dean would read the script beforehand. *Hmmm*. This was fuel for the fodder for the *Coldfinger* gang. On Friday night, when the curtains should have parted, the musical director strode somberly out onto the stage. He was very sorry, he told the audience, but the dean had read the script and found it unacceptable. In place of this year's play, Jim Allison (MD '65), a fine pianist, would perform a concert. A baby grand was wheeled out. Allison, elegant in white tie and tails, sat down to play the opening notes of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto no. 2.

Suddenly, the orchestra leader shot up in the third row and fired a blank at Allison, who collapsed across the keys with a dissonant clatter. As he and the piano were wheeled off stage, six men, looking ominous in stocking masks and all-black costumes, marched down the aisle and up onto the stage singing the show's opener to the tune of "Goldfinger." (The dean, by the way, had approved the script, although that protocol was soon abandoned.)

The *Coldfinger* crew had pulled it off. Their show started with a big "bang."

## The names still get a chuckle: "A Scar Is Born," "Days of Line and Hoses," and, of course, "From Here to Maternity."

Speaking of the big bang, the *Scope and Scalpel* creation myth goes something like this. In 1955, back in the days when the school was a little smaller, a fourth-year medical student, one Sam Aronson (MD '55, now an ophthalmologist in San Francisco), was shooting the breeze with Frank Dixon, then the young chair of the pathology department (see profile, p. 26). Medical school was set up so that the students spent their first two years in lectures together, then dispersed for the last two years as they wound their way through clinical rotations. *Wouldn't it be great*, Dixon wondered aloud, *if we could think of some way to bring the class together?* The ensuing discussion is lost to posterity—not so its result: *Hey, kids! Let's put on a show!*

Aronson tested the idea out on a few friends, including Felix Miller (MD '55, today a retired ob/gyn), whom everyone calls by his enduring childhood nickname, Bebe. Miller would become the first show's musical director. That irony still makes him laugh. Seems he wasn't much of a singer, and since there was no score, he could only convey the music to the rehearsal pianist by arduously

playing single notes with his pointer finger. Still the idea of a class play became a snowball rolling downhill. A committee was formed. By show time, 99 percent of the class had enlisted. They built sets and made costumes. They wrote skits that poked fun at the quirks of the professors and lampooned the vicissitudes of their four years of med school. They produced, directed, acted, sang, and danced. "It was the blind leading the blind," Miller remembers. But soon what started out as a few skits in the imaginations of Aronson, Miller, and company had turned into a two-hour musical review. *PMS IV*—taken from

the designation for a fourth-year Pitt medical student—looked superstition straight in the face. It debuted in May 1955, on Friday the 13th. The date did not prove unlucky. This year, when the Class of 2002 stages their musical, it will be the 48th consecutive *Scope and Scalpel* production.

But it is Ross Musgrave (MD '43 and executive director of Pitt's Medical Alumni Association) who should be credited with keeping the momentum going. He served as faculty adviser that first year. *PMS IV's* program notes include this cheerful "postscriptum": *To our successors, to all future PMS IV's; we offer simple advice. Give it a try!* So that fall, Musgrave laid down the gauntlet at the feet of the Class of '56.

"You've been given this challenge by your predecessors," he told them at an assembly in the Mercy Hospital amphitheater. "I hope you'll take them up on it, and I would be happy to work with you on it." Almost immediately a group came forward who would meet at Musgrave's Highland Park home in the evenings.

"They'd sit on the floor and thrash out ideas on how they were going to do the show," Musgrave, who would also advise the next six



FROM LEFT: *Nary a Golden Apple* producer Bert O'Malley, MD '63; angels from 2001's *Sixth Stenck*, including lead, Alia Matthews, MD '01 (front row, second from left); *Anal Powers* lead John Whiteford, MD '00

classes, recalls. "That show became *Spring Tonic*. The program was a far cry from the previous one. It had advertising, thick paper, and included the words to the songs. Instead of original music, they used show tunes, pop tunes, and changed the words." Another legacy of the 1956 production was the name—Scope and Scalpel—coined by the show's director/producer Cyril Wecht (MD '56), the now-legendary Allegheny County coroner.

The best skits were the ones that found the exact confluence of the times, the medical profession, and the idiosyncrasies of beloved—and not-so-beloved—faculty. There was, for instance, a between-scenes video, produced for *Jerry MaGuaiaic* (1998) in the tradition of *Saturday Night Live*, featuring the soon-to-retire biochem professor Carol Coffee. The video shows Coffee matter-of-factly helping students above and beyond the call of duty—carrying books for one struggling with a stack higher than her head, changing a flat tire on the street for another. . . . And the skit that spoofed *The Exorcist*, showcasing pediatrics attending Basil Zitelli (MD '71)—well known for coediting the *Atlas in Pediatrics Physical Diagnosis*—who has seen more than his share of unusual cases. In the skit, Zitelli teaches a medical student the art of conducting a physical exam on a child who can levitate, turn green, and swivel his head 360 degrees.

One year, the two young sons of Bebe Miller were shot out of a cannon. Miller, by the way, stepped up to the plate as faculty adviser when Musgrave stepped down. (Miller's son Andy, MD '91, survived being shot out of a cannon and, years later, codirected the Class of '91's production, *Phantom of the OR*. Today he's in Boston, at Brigham and Women's Hospital.)

"Bebe is the producer type, a razz-matazzer." says Richard Moriarty (MD '66, the pediatrician of "Mr. Yuk" fame), whose own Scope and Scalpel was *The Sordid Life of Wally Pimpstein*. Moriarty, to whom Miller handed the faculty-adviser baton in the early '70s, describes himself

as a nuts-and-bolts guy:

"I like to *do* the show—the scenery and the lighting and that kind of stuff. Everyone kids me that the finales were spectacular when I did the shows because I used every ounce of Mylar that was ever made."

Truth is, what jazzed Moriarty even more than Mylar was the opportunity for pyrotechnics. Every year he tried to convince the writers to work a volcano into one of the scenes. One year, to his delight, they finally did. "And it worked!" he reports with glee.

The year of the volcano was 1985; the show, *Lost in Scaife*. Director Sue Dunmire (MD '85) and music director Sam Tisherman (MD '85) were married the Thursday after the show. Their production also started with a big bang. The plan was that a big black obelisk would rise up from the stage in a cloud of smoke. Once it was straight up, fireworks were to be set off and the band would play *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, a.k.a. the *2001: A Space Odyssey* theme. The thing is, the producer was concerned about having enough

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smoke, so he rented extra-heavy-duty smoke machines. "The lights were down, and the band started playing," says Tisherman. So far, so good. But then the curtains went up, and all the smoke came down right onto the band. "I'm trying to direct the band," says Tisherman, "but we couldn't see each other."

Could it get worse? Yes. After infiltrating the band pit, the smoke floated into the auditorium and buried the entire audience. Dunmire and Tisherman (who are now associate professors of emergency medicine and critical care medicine, respectively) jointly took on the job of faculty adviser in 1991. They report that productions have taken a turn for the "less elaborate."

The content of some skits may be long forgotten, but the names still get a chuckle:

"A Scar Is Born," "Days of Line and Hoses," and, of course, "From Here to Maternity." And the songs: "This Gland Is Your Gland," "Like a Surgeon," "Are You Going to Student Affairs," "Fifty Ways to Leave Your Liver," and the perennial favorite, "Thanks for the Mammary."

Why has Scope and Scalpel persisted after all

these years, through all of the changes in the world? "It's a big release for a lot of people," says Aaron Bornstein (MD '99), a pediatrician at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago, who cowrote and produced 1999's *Saving Ryan's Privates*.

"Students see it as a way of getting things off their chest—good, bad, and indifferent," observes Moriarty. "The students say pretty truthful things. What they wind up saying is important to say. That's why the Golden Apple is a part of the show, and the Anus Equinus. It's the yin and the yang." [The Golden Apple recognizes the profs likely to save students' tushes; Anus Equinus recognizes those who are themselves horses' asses.]

Through the Mylar and smoke machines, students recognize each other in new ways as well. "Every year you see quiet students who have not bonded yet with the class," says Dunmire. "And then they come up on stage, and the class begins to see what they can do. They gain a whole new respect in the eyes of their classmates."

"Medical students have talent coming out of the ears," says Moriarty. "But those other talents aren't recognized at all."

"No one is going to say, 'Oh, by the way, can you also play piano as well as do this presentation?' 'Can you tap dance as well as describe some disease entity?'"

"In medicine you work hard together. You have to trust your colleagues; you become lifelong friends. The show does the same thing. It throws them into this thing that they suddenly realize they have committed themselves to do, and they will do the best that they possibly can. There's this magic about it."

And so the show goes on. What better way to wrap up four years of medical school than by leaving an audience in stitches? ■