



ALL TOGETHER NOW!

LAST IMPRESSIONS ARE EVERYTHING

BY MEGHAN HOLOHAN

Blue paint covers one side of Neil Badlani's face. Looking up, his dark eyes fierce, he raises a plastic battle axe in his hand and shouts, "They can make us disimpact until our fingers bleed!"

The crowd surrounding him roars in agreement. Guitar and keyboard riffs from the '80s rock anthem "Eye of the Tiger" reverberate in the background.

"They can make us learn textbooks full of useless information!"

Another shout from the crowd. Badlani, a third-year medical student at the University of Pittsburgh, wears a T-shirt, shorts, and plastic armor as he stands on the Cathedral of Learning lawn, inspiring a crowd of fellow medical students.

"They can leave us \$300,000 in debt! But they WILL NEVER . . . TAKE . . . OUR . . . SCOPE AND SCALPEL!"

Cheers rise. The students start running away from the camera on the Cathedral lawn.

The TV screen fades to black.

The last test for the Class of 2004 is to create a truly golden Scope and Scalpel.

A December storm has just dumped a half-foot of snow on the ground. North Oakland is eerily still. There are no cars on the roads; few are willing to brave the icy hills. Inside Josh Englert's apartment, about a dozen med students are sitting on couches, futons, and camping chairs, eating Chinese food and watching Badlani on the television. Badlani's performance as "Braveheart" was part of the video shown at the medical school's talent show a few weeks earlier. By showing this rerun, the writers set the mood for the first full script reading of *Scope and Scalpel*—the graduating class' annual show, during which the students parody Pitt med school. This will be the 50th anniversary of *Scope and Scalpel*. And this may be the first

subtle and witty; it makes you think for a moment. He says he's obsessively organized. While writing, he taped little pieces of paper with ideas all over his folder—his way of organizing the flow of the story.

Badlani is gregarious; he has the timing that makes good comedy and comedic writing. His athletic frame looks comfortable as he lounges in editing sessions or when he dances around. He has stage presence. "We start with mental exercises, which is what we are doing now," he said during one writing workshop, closing his eyes a little, looking meditative, as Madonna's "Material Girl" played on a portable CD player and his collaborators watched him with puzzled expressions. When the leadership was trying to think of titles,

career, among other reasons. Even though he's a third-year student, he wanted to lend his comedic talent to this year's class, the class he started med school with. Hence he found himself among the creators of the 50th anniversary show.

Sobolewski speaks in metaphors and bizarre juxtapositions—ideas for the show came to him like "nervous butterflies on drugs." He is generous, often referring to Englert's and Badlani's strengths. The Pittsburgh native, who uses "yinz" and says he has Allegheny River water running through his veins, jokes that he minored in interpretive dance while also studying biology at Washington & Jefferson College in Washington, Pa. A few years ago, Sobolewski performed in the medical school talent show in what was the only act of its kind. He picked "volunteer" and fellow student Dale King out of the audience and as music from *The Barber of Seville* played, danced around King, pretending to cut his hair. Then the music switched to the *A-Team* theme song, and Sobolewski shaved King's hair into a Mohawk. Next came the Mr. Clean jingle, when Sobolewski's dance approximated that of, as he describes it, a "caffeinated hummingbird." That's when he shaved King's head bald.

Sobolewski has been writing and editing in between interviewing for pediatric residencies—11 interviews in all.

Producers Jonathan Bickel and Rachel Norris sit in the corner of Englert's living room. Bickel has been involved, in some way, with *Scope and Scalpel* for the past four years. He is excited about the progress this class has made for the 50th anniversary production. Yet, he is nervous. Well maybe not nervous, apprehensive, and cautious. First there are the live monkeys. From the first day the leadership of *Scope and Scalpel* met, Badlani, Englert, and Sobolewski have been talking about using live monkeys in the show.

"We love monkeys," Badlani says on another winter day. "I can't promise monkeys, but I'm doing my best. We'll find room for the monkeys—they're an integral part of the show."

"There is no way we're getting live monkeys on the stage," Bickel confides later. "I'm the producer, and they're not getting monkeys on the stage. And no ponies either." (There must have been talk of ponies as well.)

When Bickel was in junior high school, a friend of his was attending a Pittsburgh acting school. Bickel asked his parents if he could participate, too. Since then, he has played



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(Standing, from left) Josh Englert, Brad Sobolewski, and Neil Badlani present the first full script reading for the 50th anniversary show.

production ever to have a draft completed before winter break.

Badlani, Englert, and Brad Sobolewski stand in front of their peers. They are the three head writers for this year's show. The three seem very different from one another, yet their differences helped to make the script one that works on many levels, without relying too much on sophomoric jokes. As Sobolewski notes, "Two songs about poop is two songs too many."

Englert is tall and lanky. He often rakes his hand through his brown hair. His humor is

Badlani named three in rapid succession: "*No Sex in this City*, *Bend over Like Beckham*, *Harry Clotter and the Chamber of Secretions*. It's *No Sex in this City*, and we'll tell people Sarah Jessica Parker is in it." (His collaborators groaned, and the show went for several more months without a title.) Badlani's quick wit was sharpened during his few stints as a stand-up comic in Washington, D.C.; that was while he was an undergraduate at George Washington University. "I don't really want to be a doctor; I really, actually, want to be an actor," he says. The enterprising Badlani spent last year earning an MBA at Pitt's Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business—to help him with administrative duties later in his

everything from Jesus in *Godspell* to a flamboyant King Charlemagne in *Pippin*. When he attended Earlham College in Richmond, Ind., he was the technical director of a radio variety show that was similar to Garrison Keillor's *A Prairie Home Companion*.

Bickel has been interviewing for pediatric residencies and, as part of a research rotation, researching PDA applications that will help doctors record medical information. He's devoting his time to this show because he has seen, as he puts it, some "pitfalls and mistakes" of the past years; he wanted to create a bigger and better show.

Animals aside, Bickel is focused on what needs to happen before March. There are a lot of ifs to consider. As he sees it, everything will work out *if*, by mid-March, the cast members are selected, and the set designers are drawing the sets, and everyone is gathering props, and the fundraising has gathered steam. Then the show will be stellar.

At this point, though, Bickel doesn't even know what the script will be like. He hasn't participated in the writers' meetings; he left the creative work up to Badlani, Englert, and Sobolewski. So he, like the other senior students in Englert's apartment, sits, waiting to hear if this script will be the funniest.

Upbeat music fills Englert's apartment—it's from *Annie*—and Badlani, Englert, and Sobolewski start belting out lyrics. Not the familiar lines from the lovable musical. Like Scope and Scalpel writers from the past, the trio has twisted the lyrics to reflect the med school life.

*Sunny skies we never see
Sunny skies . . . no way . . . no sir-ree
No one cares for you a bit
Med student you ain't shhhhh*

Badlani turns and shakes his rear end (a sight they'll see several times during the three-hour reading). He hops around facing the crowd, gyrating his hips (another soon-to-be familiar sight). When the music suddenly switches to rap, Sobolewski's blond head bobs as he pushes the air with his hand, like many rap stars do. People chuckle; Bickel's loud belly laugh often rises above the rest.

Englert, who isn't just obsessively organized, but is also a natural storyteller, recalls a scene from *Crouching Patient, Hidden Finger*, the Class of 2002's Scope and Scalpel. He describes a grandly choreo-

graphed dance of wheelchairs and walkers set in a Veterans Affairs unit; the cast sings its own corrupted version of Kenny Rogers' pop country hit "The Gambler." The number ends as a miniature American flag is hoisted from an IV pole.

That May night two years ago, as he wiped tears of laughter from his eyes, Englert knew that he had to write for his Scope and Scalpel.

Englert calls himself a rising fourth-year; others might just say he is on a leave of absence. Because he took this year off to do research on treatments for sepsis and shock in the lab of Mitchell Fink, who is chair of the Department of Critical Care Medicine, he's not technically in his fourth year of medical school. Englert is considering going into critical care medicine; he's drawn to both basic research and the clinical side. He thinks this research year has helped him to become more detail oriented and helped organize his thoughts for the show.

Early in the writing process, Englert dreamed that Badlani made him go to Scope and Scalpel. One problem: The script hadn't been written. In his dream, Englert was horrified to watch the show flounder. After that, it was a while before he stopped asking himself: *What did you get yourself into? Do you want this responsibility?*

Scope and Scalpel has become each graduating class' legacy. In 1955, student Sam Aronson (MD '55) was talking to pathology chair Frank Dixon about how to bring the class together in their final year after clinical rotations. Then the idea was born—the fourth-year students should put on a show. The first production was named *PMS IV*. (As the ritual matured, so did the titles of the shows, including *Lost in Scaife*, *Cramalot*, *Tuition Impossible*, *Forrest's Lump*, and *Saving Ryan's Privates*, to name a few.) Ross Musgrave, alumnus (MD '43) and director emeritus of the Medical Alumni Association, was the faculty director of the first production. He challenged the Class of 1956 to carry on the tradition. That class staged another production, and Cyril Wecht (MD '56 and Allegheny County coroner) dubbed the theater society Scope and Scalpel.

Fifty years of students roasting their school, professors, deans, and medical center is a lot for these writers, directors, and producers to live up to. There have been years when people were shot out of cannons. There have been

pyrotechnics. This year's Scope and Scalpel members are all acutely aware of the pressure that a golden anniversary brings. When the organizers first met, they agreed on some guidelines for the script and the production.

The first goal—make the production the best ever. Not a small task.

Each year, Scope and Scalpel is likely to have this debate: Should the script have an overarching storyline that connects all the skits? Or should the production be more of a variety show with the skits standing on their own? For this year's production, the leadership wanted a strong story to connect all the skits.

"We want to entertain and have a story. We want the audience to bond with the characters," says Badlani. "It's much more interesting this way, and there's more direct audience engagement."

Another goal—make sure the production wasn't full of inside jokes that only the class shares.

"It's nice to have the whole room laughing," coproducer Norris says. "Our goal was to make sure that everyone has a great time,

"I do it for the glory; Neil is doing it for the girls—it's not working."

which includes the audience and our parents. We want people who haven't been here for the past four years, but can appreciate the four years we've spent here, to laugh."

With all these considerations in mind, the writing was slow at times, Englert admits. Some scenes just fell together. One classmate wrote a song based on a tune from the musical *Chicago*, and the head writers easily constructed a scene around that song. Other scenes took a lot more work. The writers knew that they were going to have to make some traditional jabs, like making fun of the unyielding ob/gyn residents at Magee-Womens Hospital of UPMC, but Badlani, Englert, and Sobolewski had trouble finding the right songs. They scoured online databases of pop songs, trying to substitute the words with medical terms and jokes, but they couldn't find a melody that seemed to work. Every time they started to write, they recalled how funny "The Gambler" skit was. It had all the elements: a witty song, amazing choreography, and great costumes (orange camouflage and United States Marine Corps hats and T-shirts). *It's got to be like "The Gambler,"* some-



Clockwise from top: writers Sobolewski, Englert, and Badlani; producers Jonathan Bickel and Rachel Norris.

one would say.

"I want people to look back and have them say, 'This is the funniest stuff!' and then try to outdo us next year," says Englert when asked why a medical student would become so passionate about participating in a musical.

"It's a good way to leave your mark. And it's a good opportunity to spend time with your classmates before you graduate," Englert says. "I do it for the glory; Neil is doing it for the girls—it's not working."

Aaron Bornstein, the producer and cowriter of *Saving Ryan's Privates*, in 1999, notes that every time he talks to one of his classmates about an upcoming reunion, they start by talking about their Scope and Scalpel. "It is the one thing at the end of medical school that everyone remembers and helps you to get reacquainted with your class. You leave your stamp on the school," he says.

But Englert's would-be legacy needed some inspiration. The Magee songs, or lack thereof, plagued him. Then at about 2 one morning, as he was sitting at his computer checking e-mail, he thought of "La Isla Bonita" by Madonna. It seemed the perfect solution for the ob/gyn scene. Soon, he was swapping the real lyrics for words reflecting the life of a med student working at Magee. "La Isla Bonita" became "Flagella Bonita."

And like many before them, this year's creators struggled when writing the opening act. They toyed with changing "Old Time Rock and Roll" to "Old Time Pitt Med School." Sobolewski pictured a spoof of the Tom Cruise movie *Risky Business*—a med student slides on stage, then dances around in his underwear, a short white coat, and sunglasses. The song was discarded because it was more of a solo than a number that could include the whole cast. Bornstein also recalls how much good material he and his cowriters had to throw out because there just wasn't enough room.

Even with late-night inspiration, organizing the script wasn't easy. (In December it was 72 pages long; by February, during the "cutting" process, the script had grown to 80 pages.) The

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three writers had flow charts and pages of notes; they would shuffle the order, see how the scenes made sense, or if the scenes made sense. The first time the three met, they all dumped pieces of paper on the table with their ideas. (Englert wasn't the only one who kept scraps of paper with notes.) Badlani and Sobolewski had been collecting ideas since they appeared as part of their boy band, Out of Synch, in the school's 2001 talent show. The overarching theme for this year's Scope and Scalpel—which involves traveling through time—has been the same since Badlani and Sobolewski's Out of Synch performance. This year, the two, with Englert, creative director Zachary Miller, and others, made the "Braveheart" lead video for the December talent show.

"We're very attached to this show. It's our baby. It's our vision," Englert says.

"I'm concerned with the finale song," says Jessica Lin, the musical arranger. "I don't think it's a showstopper."

It is mid-January. The writers have been meeting all evening in a lecture hall in Scaife, editing each scene line by line, making the scenes punchier, funnier. Badlani, Englert, and Sobolewski are reclining in the seats in the front of the room.

"Are you talking about [the song about USMLE]?" Englert asks. "We put our strongest songs at the beginning, before the intermission, and at the end."

"It's been used every year," Lin says, referring to the tune that the writers borrowed to sing about the boards.

"The familiar is good," Englert adds.

"We always have something about the boards. It was one of the songs that stuck in our heads," he continues. This is one of Badlani's and Englert's favorite songs. Englert believes that every year there is one song that stays with everyone. Last year it was "Little Short White Coat," based on the Prince song "Little Red Corvette." The year before it was "Dahntahn," to the tune of "Downtown" by Petula Clark.

"What's a song that's a showstopper?" Bickel asks after some back and forth between Lin and the writers.

"I don't know *Rent*, but the song 'Rent' is a big singing song with a lot of voices," Lin says.

"That's what USMLE is," Badlani says.

"I wouldn't change the idea," Lin says.

"It's the '70s, and it's a '70s song," Sobolewski says.

"We had this same discussion in the script reading, and there was overwhelming acceptance," Badlani says.

"It sounds the same as the other song in this scene," Lin says.

"Everything written from '77 to '81 sounds the same," Sobolewski says. Everyone in the room giggles a little.

"We're open to suggestions," Englert says.

"This is when the musical input is important," Bickel says.

A few days later Lin expands on her comments. "What I was hoping for was something that really created tension and was exciting—not just building tension with the plot, but with the song."

"This show is unique because it takes the themes to a different level," Lin says; she wants to challenge the writers to raise their expectations of the music, too.

After the meeting, the writers and Lin talked again. The writers explained how the song might be weak from a musical stand-

Badlani and Sobolewski had been collecting ideas since they appeared as part of their boy band, Out of Synch.

point, but it has strong production value because it is interactive.

Lin has been playing the violin for almost 26 years. She trained at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. She, like the other 50th-anniversary show leaders, wants this production to stand out. Ideally, she would like to create a complete score for the production, as a movie would have.

After witnessing the discussion between Lin and the writers, Bickel notes that it's common for writers to strongly defend parts of the script during early production meetings. Lin seems to be able to sum up the writers' feelings: "There is a core group of people who have really been living this idea for a long period of time, and I think it's difficult to bring in new people."

Meanwhile, coproducer and future emergency room physician Norris has been trying to raise enough money to heighten the professionalism of Scope and Scalpel. Make it a real theater event. (And why shouldn't she dream? As alum Bornstein notes, Scope and Scalpel is the biggest medical school production. His colleagues at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago can't believe that each class raises at least \$20,000.) Norris knows

something about stage presence. After attending UCLA, she and a friend would write songs that Norris performed in coffee shops. But now, her cabaret days seem far away: There are 7,000 envelopes that need to be stuffed, sorted, and sent to alumni to secure ticket reservations. And there's the issue of increasing ticket prices: Is \$10 too much to ask? Norris really wants to make this an event that includes more of Pittsburgh. The leaders of Scope and Scalpel had hoped to have the 50th-anniversary show at the Byham Theater, downtown. Yet, just to secure the Byham, the group would have had to pay nearly \$10,000 for stage labor—not including the additional cost for rent. In all, the Byham would have cost close to \$20,000 and restricted rehearsal times. It just didn't seem feasible.

In Englert's apartment for the first full script reading, Sobolewski speeds through the lyrics to the last song. Englert and Badlani can't keep up.

Six o'clock rounding hour. Getting pimped makes us cower. Crash and burn, relearn, third year makes your stomach churn. Wear your scrubs and ID, attending knows who you be...

Some of the viewers clap. Someone suggests showing pictures of med students and favorite professors during the last number.

"I love the song. It's a fabulous ending," says Elizabeth Legnard, one of the show's directors.

"The verses need to be prerecorded," Norris says (because the song is so fast).

"Where do we go from here?" Bickel asks.

The writers will put the scenes on the Web site for the other classmates to read and help with the editing.

"Final script?" Bickel asks.

"You tell me," Englert replies.

"February 15." ■



Scope and Scalpel turns 50 on May 21 and 22.