

Taking risks in college theater

By RICK WARNER

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If Harry Callahan were a gambler, he'd be known as a high roller.

But because he prefers old wooden stages to green felt tables, Callahan has earned a different kind of reputation. As chairman of the St. Mary's College drama department, Callahan is known as a director who is willing to play for high artistic stakes.

"I feel we almost have an obligation to do the types of things that regular theaters can't afford to try," he explained in a recent interview.

"When you think about it, college theaters are in a very fortunate situation. We're lucky because people don't really expect us to be self-supporting."

While some theaters content themselves with endless reruns of "Mame" and "South Pacific," St. Mary's has flexed its creative muscles with the likes of "Follies," "The Caretaker" and "The Trojan Women."

Callahan doesn't count them all as successes, but he figures nothing ventured, nothing gained.

"You put just as much work into a tired businessman's comedy as you do one of the classics," he said. "It's just as hard to do 'The Boyfriend' as it is 'Follies.' What's important is to pick a show that's worth doing and do it as well as you can."

Further proof

St. Mary's latest production, "Candide," is further proof of Callahan's philosophy. The show, which opens the season Wednesday night at Pittman Auditorium, is a musical adaptation of the famous Voltaire novel with music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by, among others, Stephen Sondheim.

"It's almost like a circus," Callahan said of the production, which tells the story of a naive young adventurer who travels around the world discovering some truths about the nature of good and evil.

"I first heard the sound track (of the original production) when I was in college. The music was beautiful, but the play was practically unproducible. Then a few years ago Harold Prince got Bernstein, Sondheim and some other people to rework the show. There's some new music and a new story line, and it's a lot of fun now."

Theater has always been a joy for Callahan, who came to St. Mary's in 1971 after seven years as technical director at the Raleigh Little Theater. He fell in love with the stage as a child in New Jersey and at age 39, the affair is still going strong.

One-man show

At St. Mary's, Callahan is practically a one-man theater department, directing, teaching, and sweeping the auditorium floor if necessary.

"I find it all meshes together," he said, scrambling for a pack of cigarettes during a rehearsal break. "You really can't separate directing from teaching. A good director is a good teacher, anyway."

Though he works primarily with students and moonlighting amateurs, Callahan's standards are strictly professional. He wants his actors on time for rehearsals and ready to work.

"It's mainly a matter of respect," he said. "I respect anybody who attempts anything in the theater and I expect the people I work with to act the same way."

"Acting professional has nothing to do with being paid. There are some professionals who act very unprofessional and vice versa. Being professional is really a matter of selflessness. It's like religion in that you have to be committed to something bigger than yourself."

Callahan started out as an actor working summer stock in the North Carolina mountains, and appeared in several productions at Raleigh Little Theater after graduating from the dra-

ing school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. But he says the urge to perform is no longer a controlling factor in his life.

"It's a little like love. It just fades away," he said wistfully. "You have to need to act very badly to continue with it, and I just don't need it that badly anymore."

Director Callahan loves his work. Which is not to say it's easy. Trying to produce first-class theater at an all-girls school with only 500 students can be a challenge, especially when it comes to casting.

Callahan uses as many students in his productions as possible, but sometimes he draws the line.

"I'll use a student as long as she fits the part," he said. "I have an aversion to seeing a 16-year-old girl with powder in her hair hobbling across a stage saying, 'It's hell to be 80.'"

To cast male parts and older female roles, Callahan draws on the local talent pool. "We get the whole gamut — housewives, librarians, guys who pump gas," he said. "There are a lot of part-time actors out there."

Callahan must be resourceful in more ways than one. While some directors are blessed with stages the size of ship decks, Callahan must make the most of a hand-box auditorium with a backstage area the size of a closet.

"It has its limitations, but not as many as you would think," he said. "Remember, we did 'Follies' here. It would be awfully hard to do a show like 'West Side Story' or 'South Pacific,' but you'd be surprised what you can do when you use your imagination."

As a spectator, Callahan remains awed by the power of great theater. After seeing "Follies" in New York several years ago, he was so stunned he walked about 20 blocks in the wrong direction before realizing where he was.

Theater in the Triangle area may not be up to New York standards, but Callahan says it's moving in the right direction.

"When I first came to Raleigh, you had the Little Theater and an occasional college production. That was it. Now we've got the Little Theater, Stewart (Theater), all types of college productions, even dinner theater. It's possible to see a different show every night of the week."

One show that sticks in Callahan's mind was his directing debut at St. Mary's.

"We did the Greek tragedy, 'The Trojan Women,'" he remembered. "It was a very beautiful production. There was just one flaw. Nobody understood a word that was being said."

And, he said, "It was in English, too."