New Preston Jones comedy has area premiere at OSU

By GENE GERRARD
Citizen-Journal Staff Critic

American Playwrights Theatre has called the Ohio State University home for over 11 years, having been organized with the admirable idea of providing "an alternate route" for the production of worthwhile plays for community, resident, and university theaters — particularly for those works which might find it rough going in more highly competitive, commercial companies (Broadway, etc.).

The past 11 years have been productive ones for APT, nationwide as well as local premieres of such plays as "The Days Between" by Robert Anderson, "The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail" and "Jabberwock" by Lawrence and Lee, and "Summertree" by Preston Jones. For here is a straight-through production with shrewdness and wisdom, using a group of actors who again demonstrate that the difference between a professional and a non-professional is a matter of dollars, not stage sense.

The company that plays together stays together — until the final fadeout. It is the splendid ensemble work in this production that helps make it one of distinction. Veterans like David Ayers, Al Converse and John Crawford always may be relied upon to deliver. And the higher the stakes, the better the delivery. They are consummate craftsmen.

But they couldn't have carried this load by themselves. That might have resulted in a double hernia. The performances are all excellent, including those by Burton Russell, Ron Colby, Guillame de Boulanger, Albert A. Tavares, and Charles LaBorde. I purposely left out David Morgan's name, for his richly detailed performance is very special. Very special, indeed. He has the touch.

With the apparent success of his first plays, called "The Bradleyville Trilogy," Preston Jones isn't exactly a newcomer. But he has raised his compelling voice in the American theatre to the extent that his peers are beginning to listen more attentively. They know a winner when they hear one.

"The Last Meeting of the Knights of the White Magnolia" is set in a fictional Texas town and has to do with a fading fraternal lodge whose last seven members hilariously and a little sadly strive to keep a supremist tradition alive. But it's "bye, bye Brotherhood" — as an entire era appears to be dying with their ridiculously outdated habitual ritual.

Old habits die hard, and so do those who live by them. Oldest member of the group is Elm J.C. Kincaid (David Ayers is superbly feisty and senile in the role), the prisoner of a wheelchair and memories of bygone days of war glory.

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There is great dignity in Guillame de Boulanger's portrayal of Ramsey-Eyes, a black man who has the last laugh. Charles LaBorde has been ideally cast as Milo Crawford. Always a tremendous favorite with Columbus audiences, John Crawford pulls a few more tricks out of an apparently bottomless bag of magic to further enhance his reputation as one of the city's most dedicated and versatile performers.

Bowen's production is thoroughly professional. His staging makes the most of a solid cast and equally solid material. Russell T. Hastings, set, is extraordinarily detailed and faithful.
Roy Bowen Retires

"I've enjoyed it. It's been fun. And I'll stay on a couple of committees, helping graduate students I've been working with."

Dr. ROY BOWEN, who is "Mr. Theatre" at Ohio State for hundreds of alumni of the drama department, wound up a 21-year career on the faculty August 30.

No pun was intended, but his finale for that career was the production of Stadium Theatre II's "The Oldest Living Graduate," which, like most Bowen productions, pleased critics and audiences alike.

This month, he will be conducting his ninth theatre trip to Europe and Russia, stopping in Devonshire, England for a week, then spending a week in London, seeing various productions.

"Half of the group will go on to Russia, but I've always enjoyed English theatre and my half of the tour will concentrate on that."

Next spring, he is scheduled to teach a course at Michigan State University and before then, he will be directing some productions in Columbus. Some retirement!

But no one is really surprised. Over the years, Dr. Bowen has set a schedule for work that made others watch in envy: while he has been a faculty member for 21 years, he has directed the OSU Summer Theatre for 28 years (and 36 different shows).

He joined the Players Club in Columbus in 1948 and served for a decade as its managing director.

He was a founder and is a past president of the Ohio Community Theatre Association; and he helped in the organization of the American Playwrights Theatre which is headquartered at Ohio State.

For 19 years, he directed in Stadium Theatre I, the arena theatre inside Gate 10 of the Stadium. "There's no other place I'd rather be than in Ohio in the summertime," he comments.

"We started out doing eight shows in a row (compared to this season's four), The musicals were fun. We did a lot of those. I enjoyed working with operas and musicals with Evan Whallon and others in the School of Music."

Part of the time was devoted to University Musical Productions, which brought dance, drama and music together. Among the shows that won raves were UMP's versions of "Oklahoma," "Carousel," "West Side Story," "The Marriage of Figaro," and "Falstaff."

"I suppose the reason we stopped is that the heyday of the big musical like 'Oklahoma' is sort of over. Not as many good things are available. Personally, I regret the fact that we have not been doing other big musical programs. On the other hand, Aida was a triumphant big production."

He won't single out a favorite play — but included in his top five or six is "The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail," by Lawrence and Lee.

His biggest disappointments have been those few shows that didn't do as well as he thought they would, and unfavorable reviews.

"You're constantly putting your work up for public inspection and, even though it's just one person's opinion, it's disappointing when someone takes a negative viewpoint of the production."

He thinks Columbus could support a professional theatre "if they did quality work." One problem he thinks the community faces: a lack of adequate physical facilities. "As much as I love the Ohio Theatre, it is not good for small dramas — particularly the musicals."

It's his view that "theatre in Columbus has lagged behind the other arts."

"With expanded policies toward the Columbus Symphony and the Gallery of Fine Arts, there ought to be something for the theatre. The community has supported our summer theatre well..."

The new facilities for the theatre in the Drake River Union certainly provided one of the high spots in his career.

"I'm happy that we are in this building, and that the program has expanded, and that we've done pretty well with student productions. We now offer the bachelor of fine arts and master of fine arts degrees. We have more specialists on the staff — in lighting, movement, voice — and a good new woman in acting coming in the fall."

Dr. Bowen, a native of Canal Winchester, Ohio, received his bachelor's degree from Otterbein in 1933; his master's from Northwestern University in 1940, and his doctorate from Ohio State in 1951. He was a graduate assistant and assistant instructor at Ohio State from 1946 to 1949, and during the ten years he directed at the Columbus Players Club, served as visiting assistant professor at Ohio State during the summers.

In 1960, he was named director of theatre, a post he relinquished several years ago so that he could spend more time with students. Since 1963 he has served as treasurer of the American Playwrights Theatre.

He likes plays that are realistic and believable: "I look for warm, human quality — Chekhov, Steinbeck's 'Of Mice and Men,' for example."

One of the new playwrights whose work he admires is Preston Jones, a Texas writer who has had close connections with the American Playwrights Theatre. Jones has written a Texas trilogy..."Low on High" five years ago, "The Last Meeting of the Knights of the White Magnolia" and the third play of that trilogy is the one with which Dr. Roy Bowen made his official academic exit: "The Oldest Living Graduate."

David Ayers, executive director of the American Playwrights Theatre, who has appeared in many Bowen productions, offered Dispatch writer, Shirley McNeely, some reasons for the Bowen success in theatre:

"He is a really gentle man. He handles people very well. He (creates) a spirit of affection among a cast... a kind of family atmosphere in bringing a play to fruition. Some of that goes over the footlights, the audiences catch that."
The Recipients of Honors

Alan K. Campbell
Doctor of Humane Letters

Eminent teacher, scholar, academic administrator, and public servant, Alan K. Campbell embodies the best in the tradition of public administration. With initiative and skill he strengthened and enriched the opportunities for graduate professional education in public service. With concern for his fellow citizens, he directed the most sweeping reform brought to the U.S. Civil Service since its creation. For a career of high distinction and honor, he has earned the esteem and recognition of his profession.

Hal Holbrook
Doctor of Humanities

Artist, humanist, and scholar, Hal Holbrook is at once a distinguished son of Ohio and of the world at large. His unique contributions to the theatre and other media demonstrate vividly the scholarly impact that can result from a nonacademic role. As researcher, creator, and performer in the presentation of Mark Twain, he acquainted a growing public with the wit, wisdom, and humanity of a great American literary figure. His many other works and numerous awards stand in further testimony of a career dedicated to opening the minds of a nation to the rich history and literature of its heritage.

Robert E. Lee
Doctor of Humanities

Distinguished playwright and educator, Robert E. Lee is widely recognized for his creative contributions to American theatre. His success as co-author of 11 Broadway plays and numerous other works is reflected in the devotion of audiences nationwide. His efforts to help establish the American Playwrights Theatre at this University have been instrumental in developing the talents of many young and unrecognized authors. In his work with this and other universities, he has contributed significantly to a deeper grasp of the critical role of the dramatic arts in society.

Martha Nelson Lewis
Doctor of Science

Researcher and educator in dietetic education and practice, Martha Nelson Lewis is recognized as a pioneer in her field. Through innovation made possible only by great conviction and great persistence, she developed a curriculum in Medical Dietetics which has served as a prototype training program throughout the nation. For her ability to stimulate intellectual curiosity, she has the admiration of her students, friends, and colleagues. Standing in affirmation of her professorial talents are the numerous honors and awards she has received, including the highest honor bestowed by the American Dietetic Association.