

equal parts

Playhouse taps multicultural pool of talent

BY LIZA HOLTMEIER
Senior staff writer

Forget white men in tights performing "Hamlet."

At the Lincoln Community Playhouse, you're more likely to see a Caribbean musical like "Once On This Island" with a multiracial cast.

In an art form where the meatiest roles have traditionally called for white men, the Playhouse is smashing racial barriers and presenting theater diverse in its approach and its content.

Through nontraditional casting and the selection of more contemporary plays, the Playhouse has tried to get artists from more diverse backgrounds on its stage.

"We wanted to let people know that this wasn't a closed shop for upper-middle-class white people," said Robin McKercher, LCP's artistic director.

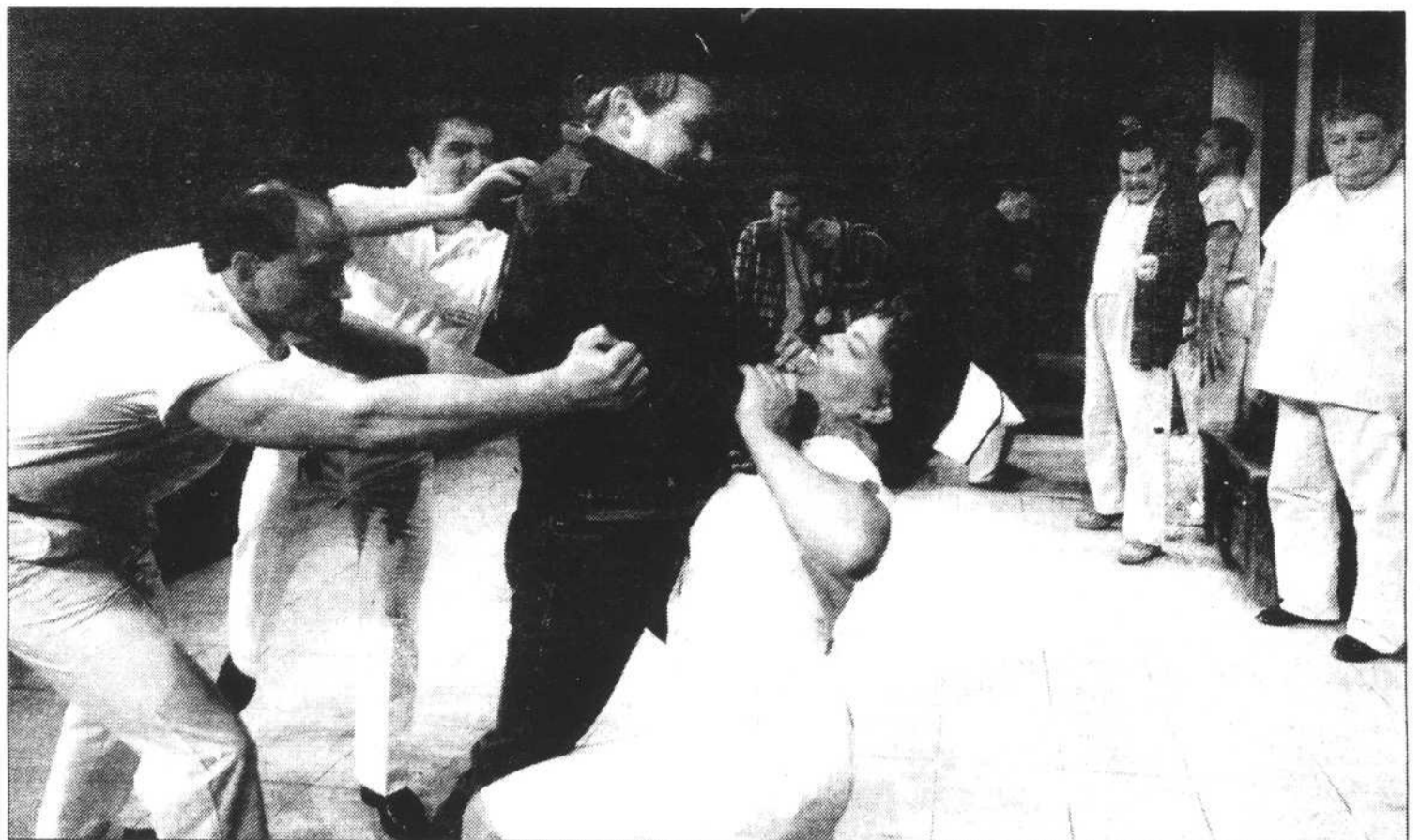
Realizing the acting pool in Lincoln consists of blacks, Asians, Hispanics and a variety of other ethnic backgrounds, McKercher has reached out into the community to tap into this pool of talent.

He used nontraditional casting as his first tool of exploration. Nontraditional casting involves ignoring the playwright's descriptions of the characters and breaking away from conventional casting decisions.

Not only does nontraditional casting get ethnic actors on stage, it also can revitalize a production, and Marthaelen Florence, a longtime performer at the Playhouse, said it gives the viewing audience a different perspective.

"You can only have so many cute little blondes or redheads. Other people have different experiences and different cultures, and they bring that to the stage," Florence said.

However, the world of Broadway theater is currently enveloped in a debate concerning the



IN LAST FALL'S production of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," the Lincoln Community Playhouse cast black actress Marthaelen Florence in the typically white role of Nurse Ratched. To complete the ethnic reversal, white actors played the orderlies, here trying to restrain the violent McMurphy from strangling Ratched.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LINCOLN COMMUNITY PLAYHOUSE

efficacy of nontraditional casting, McKercher said. One school of thought wants to remain true to the ethnicity of the playwright's characters. Followers of this school believe keeping with the original intent avoids assimilating the work into a mainstream culture.

The other school of thought promotes colorblindness in casting. This school says a director has every right to cast an all-black "Macbeth."

McKercher said bending the rules is legitimate, as long as the play achieves its primary themes.

"From my perspective, I just want to have my arms open out here," McKercher said. "I'm of the 'Who cares?' school. As directors, we're allowed the prerogative to experiment with the text on the page. That is merely the catalyst towards achieving great art."

However, nontraditional casting can present challenges for both the actors and the audience.

Florence has first-hand experience with nontraditional casting at the LCP. In "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," Florence played Nurse Ratched, a character described by the playwright as blond and blue-eyed.

Florence said she enjoyed the chance to play this challenging and multidimensional part, but she worried about people attaching the wickedness of her character to her race.

Artistic Differences

An ongoing look at ethnic contributions to Nebraska state culture.

"People would come up to me and say, 'We really hated you on stage.' One of my concerns was that people wouldn't be able to separate the character from the person. It became an issue with some of the older patrons and with some of the cast members," Florence said.

In response, Florence said she was very direct with people who were politically incorrect when discussing her character.

But the end results, Florence said, were worth the struggle. Audiences saw a play refreshing in its new direction and exploration.

"My hope and my dream is that people are going to be colorblind when they come out here," McKercher said.

But while nontraditional casting succeeds in getting ethnic actors on the stage, McKercher also wants to present the stories of other cultures as well.

For the past few years, the Playhouse season has included plays such as the black drama "A Raisin in the Sun" and the multiracial musical "Once On This Island."

The Playhouse has not disclosed the titles for next year's season, but McKercher said they include a multiracial musical and a play about blacks settling a town in Kansas in the 1880s.

The Playhouse also has formed a Diversity Committee. This committee collaborates with

different community centers, such as the F Street Recreation Center and the Asian Center, in an effort to find more ethnic talent.

This summer, the committee will offer scholarships to ethnic youths to attend the Theater Arts Academy. The Academy is a two-week-long camp at the Playhouse that teaches kids about theater.

The Playhouse's efforts, though extensive, are a relatively new phenomenon. The movement's beginnings can be traced to McKercher's arrival at LCP 2½ years ago.

"There didn't used to be this effort," said Brian Taylor, another regular performer at LCP. "As soon as Rob came on the scene, he had this whole idea of incorporating everyone."

However, changing the theater's image took time. "When he first came here, he had a sort of pie-in-the-sky attitude," Florence said. "He found out that not all kinds of people wanted to come to the Playhouse because it had an elitist sort of environment. He's worked really hard to circumvent that attitude."

And with the avant-garde theater The Futz closed since last spring, McKercher is the only director in Lincoln making an effort to do things like nontraditional casting, Florence said.

McKercher said he's just helping the Playhouse fulfill its purpose.

"We are a community playhouse," McKercher said. "And community means everybody."

Waters' 'Pecker' pokes fun at fame, snobby NY art world

BY JEFF RANDALL
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For 30 or so years, John Waters has made a career for himself as a sleaze ethnographer of sorts.

He has put a camera up to the extreme, the profane and the outrageous. And he's never really blinked, either.

But in "Pecker," Waters' latest film, the equally acclaimed and reviled director turns the camera on himself—sort of.

Edward Furlong stars as the title character, a born-and-bred Baltimore youth who spends most of his time taking pictures of everyone he sees around his hometown—including his kleptomaniac best friend, his sugar-addled little sister and his grandmother's talking statue of the Virgin Mary.

When a New York art dealer (Lili Taylor) sees his work, she brings him to the big city and turns him into an overnight art-world sensation.

But when Pecker's family, friends

Film Review

The Facts

Title: "Pecker"
Stars: Edward Furlong, Christina Ricci, Lili Taylor
Director: John Waters
Rating: R (language, nudity)
Grade: B
Five Words: Art imitating life imitating art

and photography subjects start feeling the brunt of his fame, they turn on him, and he is forced to decide between art-world notoriety and small-time simplicity.

It's difficult to tell where fact and fiction meet in this quasi-autobiographical tale, but Waters seems to revel in that mixture. He and Pecker are both from Baltimore, and they both hit the big time by chronicling the admittedly offbeat people around them.

Beyond that, Waters' screenplay takes a serious—if slightly skewed—



ROREY (LILI TAYLOR) takes Pecker (Edward Furlong) out of his hometown of Baltimore and brings him to New York where his photographs earn him instant fame.

COURTESY PHOTO

look at the content and motivation behind true art. He takes a few digs at the New York art scene while he's at it, and he manages to wrap it all up with a feel-good ending that only John Waters

could muster.

"Pecker" is still filled with occasionally over-the-top imagery, including a pair of rats fornicating in a trash can and a strip club rite known as

"teabagging" (don't ask, just see the movie), but this film works best when Waters simply lets the story ride along.

Furlong is ultimately likable in the starring role. He plays the innocent artist with little effort, and he bounces off Waters' oddball cast of characters without ever missing a beat.

Christina Ricci plays Pecker's working-class girlfriend with an equal mix of charm and wit. And Martha Maimon makes excellent use of her limited screen time as Pecker's sister, who works at the gay strip club where many of his more innovative photographs are taken.

The only moments in which "Pecker" truly suffers take place when Waters resorts to the typical come-isn't-all-it's-cracked-up-to-be commentary and half-hearted love scenes. But those moments are thankfully scarce, and "Pecker" emerges as an enjoyable film.

"Pecker" opens at the Mary Riepma Ross Film Theater tonight. Its run continues through Sunday and Jan. 28-30. For screening times, call the Ross Theater box office at (402) 472-5353.