

THE BIRTH OF A NOTION

Charles R. Wilson, Jr. '55

They assemble for the first time in 1951, and reflect the times - some veterans, the usual youngsters, a Pitt varsity letterman and a few women. Truman replaces MacArthur with Ridgway in Korea, and direct distance dialing is introduced as they attend classes at Pennsylvania Hall. A year later Jonas Salk successfully tests his polio vaccine and in the summers that follow one class member, Sam Aronson, does research in the lab of Frank Dixon, the young chairman of Pitt's Pathology Department. "At one of the TGIF sessions in a local pub the discussion turned to problems at Pitt. I believe the question was how to better bring together the students in the School. Dixon brought up the notion of a class play..."

It is now 1955, the Korean War is history, Dwight Eisenhower is President, Albert Sabin is developing an oral polio vaccine, and R.N.A. is synthesized.

Nuclear generated electricity is used for the first time in the U.S., the first images of individual atoms are produced, and strategic air command bombers with nuclear war heads are in the air just in case Russia attacks.

The airways are filled with Sincerely, Mr. Sandman, Rock Around the Clock, Yellow Rose of Texas, and Sixteen Tons, and the first electronic music synthesizer is built.

Davey Crockett's coon skin caps are the fad and we are introduced to Cheyenne, Gunsmoke, The Life and Legends of Wyatt Earp, Captain Kangaroo, The Honeymooners, Alfred Hitchcock Presents, and the Lawrence Welk Show.

Pizza is now a favorite food, Kentucky Fried Chicken appears, and Rocky Marciano, Oklahoma, and Brooklyn are Champions.

Playboy is launched, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof takes the Pulitzer, and Ernest Borgnine and East of Eden are winners.

The Velcro fastener is marketed.

And, perhaps appropriately, Norman Vincent Peale publishes The Power of Positive Thinking, as Aronson discusses Dixon's notion with Felix (Bebe) Miller and Alfred Perfett and they meet with Vincent Albo, Robert Eisler, Joseph DeCenzo and others. "Why not a few skits to pan the faculty, kid around, Ma Humphrey's and her two handed chalk, Mabon and the Schmutzdecke, Hooker's loud voice, Priman's mispronunciations, Brosin's stage antics."

Small groups become larger, and finally a presentation is made to the class "at one of our few entire class assemblies."

Perfett as President of the class interfaces with the School's administration and Aronson and Perfett are told by Miss Edith O. Glenn, Secretary to the Dean, that a faculty advisor is needed.

The Dean is William S. McEllroy, and "he was ecstatic when the idea was presented, and subsequently assisted us in every way possible. It was he who found Ross Musgrave to be our faculty advisor". (Dr. Musgrave had an extensive theater background, and had offered his help.)

Samuel B. Aronson, II becomes the producer; Felix Miller and Roy Titchworth are directors; Robert Eisler is the art director and responsible for all sets and graphic materials; Marwin Lommen stage manager; Alfred Perfett business manager; Sam Tisherman photographer, and representing the social committee, supplies free bagels and spontaneous renditions of "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean"; Joseph DeCenzo organizes and supplies the Band; and forty-nine members of the class write scripts and lyrics, and coordinate activities involving art, photography, casting and properties, business, staging and

ushering.

Miller and Aronson had gone to summer camp as kids. “The camp had a drama coach, John Roach, who had written the musical score for a camp play. Bebe kept in contact with John and obtained permission for us to use the score. The music was all original except one song - Gallagher & Sheen.”

Quickly a format emerges: two acts, fourteen scenes, emphasis on 700 hours of anatomy (Dr. Hooker), Henry Brosin’s School of Drama (Western Psych.), The Bright Young Men Who Came to Town (Drs. Dixon, Cheever, Danowski, Moses, Olson, Stevenson); Clinical Conferences at Magee; Drs. Stock and Lacy and assorted other personalities; and - Memories and I Remember.

“Sam Aronson asked Lew (Seaton) why I (Doris) didn’t come to be in the chorus line...so I did...along with five other wives and a nurse anesthetist from Shadyside Hospital who was the “Streetwalker”. We all went to a costume place and picked out the outfits we wore. We had a great time doing rehearsals.”

Rehearsals at scattered sites follow with coordinated activities at Shadyside Hospital’s Nurses Home Auditorium. (The latter is free, the Hospital is kind enough to offer it, at least one wife is an R.N. there, and several class members are junior interns).

It is by now evident the class is serious; questions arise, and the faculty become restless.

“It was also he (Dean McEllroy) who came to the rescue when the Vice Chancellor demanded he see the script for editing.” It was never edited, and the Dean never read it.

The night arrives - May 13, 1955:

“S’funny! Our class – tradition makers. Why should we be the revolutionaries? PMS IV, us – the seniors! How can medical

students take time to produce a play?

As we write this note, we slowly reflect about our play. The first day, the first idea. Why not a class play? Other schools do it. Organization, the type of show, division of acts, then at last the frame work. The composers moved in, the lyrics were written. Next, the script-writers, vomiting forth hostility, started – their motivating theme: “We’ll get even with them now.” At last, production: we began casting, rehearsals, the selling job. All were fun. We made new friends, close friends. Some of these guys were all right. They could produce, they had wit – yes, we think they’ll make pretty good docs.

Tonight is production night, the big push. Yet, we don’t feel scared. No, there’s no reason to be scared. Pretty good chaps! Good company! Sure we had to sell them. Healthy position for medical students: watchful skepticism. But, they bought! They worked hard. Sacrificed what free time they had to this simple idea. Bright guys! Hard workers! You’d be surprised how fast they learn. Better still, they laugh – hard at their mistakes: bounce back: try harder.

Yes, we’ve had fun. Tonight is truly post-climatic. Sure it’s the finished product. A well coordinated show. But...”

Requests for tickets exceed all expectations, and the show plays to a full - Stephen Foster - house.

“Professors and students, have you heard what’s new? The Class of ‘55 will give you a clue. So fasten your seat belts; prepare for the ride. Watch closely our stage; we’re after your hide. The curtain is rising and we’re raring to go. And here’s the show...”

And there is a postscriptum:

“To our successors, to all future PMS IV’s: we offer simple advice, give it a try!!!”

Dr. McEllroy’s Dean’s Fund provides the after show party at the P.A.A., and “it was about 2:00 a.m. and Dean McEllroy was...extolling the show in a grandiose manner. All of us were there entirely too long that night.”

Successors have indeed “given it a try”.

The program for the 1979 Production noted:

“The yearly Scope and Scalpel production began inauspiciously enough as the Class Play. The brainchild of a few visionary members of that year’s medical school graduation class, the first play was an entirely student-run production - written, composed, funded, produced, and performed. The spirit of the first play, a musical satire review performed on May 13, 1955, was summed up in the ‘55 yearbook: “We’ll get even with them now!” Over the succeeding 25 years, the show has grown far beyond anyone’s expectations. This year’s show is the largest nonprofessional theatrical production in the Pittsburgh area. But it remains true to the original ideals of total student independence in production, exclusive reliance on alumni and advertising monies solicited for the show alone, and steadfast adherence to the irreverent spirit of the first show. Pitt’s “Class Play” has become a unique entity worldwide, and we owe it to the support of the Pittsburgh medical community.”

In 1985 it was “Lost in Scaife” and sixteen of the original cast were in the audience.

“It is heartwarming and nostalgic to welcome the Class of 1955. Thirty years ago, a group of dedicated thespians, also known as PMS IV, launched the first senior class play. This musical production led to the establishment of the Scope & Scalpel Society. It is fitting and appropriate that the Class of 1955 had chosen this memorable weekend to hold their 30th class reunion.”

“The 1985 Scope & Scalpel Society is proud to have completed its production, LOST IN SCAIFE, the 31st annual class show. As the last and largest cooperative effort of our class, it has proven to be a truly memorable experience for all involved. This show has served as a focus for reflecting upon our collective experiences during our four years of medical school. In bringing these thoughts to you, we have laughed, cried, argued, negotiated, and learned a great deal about ourselves in the process. We certainly hope you have been entertained and maybe a little enlightened by your time with us tonight. We, as producers, now pass the hopes of all of us to the Scope & Scalpel Society of 1986, as they strive to continue this fine tradition.”

In 1991 it was the Phantom’s turn:

“The budget has increased from a few hundred dollars in 1955 to an estimated \$15,000 for this year’s production. The scripts and lyrics

have mimicked Broadway shows; and the staging borders on professional. Many tales could be told about each and every show. The titles themselves, when put together, almost tell a story. Do you remember the title of your class play?"

"One day I was sipping a Spring Tonic (1956) with the Girl with the Pearl (1957) At Satan Place (1958) when the Sound of Mucus (1974) made me Run like Sixty (1960) to my Bedside Manor (1981). I swallowed the Big Pill (1988), turned on MD, TV (1987) and was Lost in Scaife (1985). I was dreaming of a vacation in either Miami Slice (1986) or the south sea island of Borborygmi (1962) when I suddenly felt Dr. Adipose Wrecks (1959) shaking me and shouting, "What's Opera, Doc?" (1984). We can't go Back to the Suture (1990), the Tuition: Impossible (1983), and That's Incurable (1982) at the Smegma House (1979). I told him that A Stitch in Time (1961) and Nary a Golden Apple (1963) will stop the Nightmare on DeSoto Street (1989). He said, "Did you know that Midas Welby, M.D. (1976) needs Cash (1971)? Some of his patients think he's a Quack (1970) because of the way he treats people with Slipped Discos (1978) and Scar Trek (1975). And one day he even took his Coldfinger (1965) and Maimed (1967) a PMS Superstar (1972) who was trying to Cramalot (1968) so he could qualify for Medic-Hair (1969). The Wizard of Ours (1973) came to his rescue and Welcomed Back, Cutter (1977), who was Beyond the Syringe (1964) because of the Sordid Life of Wally PMSten (1966)." By then, it was Saturday Night in Vivo (1980), and PMS IV (1955) was already challenging the Phantom of the O.R. (1991).

The producer of 1991's original musical comedy was Andy Miller, son of Bebe, and the faculty advisor Sam Tisherman, son of Samuel.

Ross Musgrave remained faculty advisor through 1963, and was followed by Felix Miller (1964-1980).

Operation Thyroid Storm (1992) and Quantum Beep (1993) followed.

The Class of 1955 would spawn a general and some admirals, a Navy Surgeon General, professors of sundry rank, a few Department Chairmen, and a Hench awardee, but mostly individuals who practiced medicine. It was uniquely different in only one way, one idea which became reality - PMS IV.

As the fortieth production evolves, PMS IV updates Memories and I Remember:

Sam Tisherman still has movies he probably hasn't shown yet.

It couldn't have been forty years - no way!

Robert Eisler
Psych
Slippery Rock, PA

Jim Dodds enjoying the punch at dress rehearsal. McVicker's belly button in the Stock-Lacy number.

Jack Harrington
Psych
Phoenix, AZ

Sang duet with Jake Shuttleworth. I was Dr. Stock, he was Tex Lacy.

Foster McVicker
Semi retired Med. Director
Birmingham, AL

I played the part of Willie, an average medical student, maybe even a naive one.

Bob Stewart
Family Practice
Erie, PA

Moscovitz - "Fasten your seat belt, prepare for the ride."

Joseph DeCenzo
Gyne
Miami, FL

Joe DeCenzo organized the band and what a great job. In the fall of 1956 Tom McCarthy and I went to a Pitt-California football game in San Francisco at Kezar Stadium, and who sat behind us but Henry Brosin. He was on a sabbatical at Cal. He remembered the play and how he was portrayed in it. Zap Em was my most memorable line.

Lew Seaton
Vice Admiral USN
Surgeon General Retired
Orange Park, FL

Sam Tisherman continually singing "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean" seemed to permeate the air.

Jack McGinnis
Retired
Savannah, GA

I was very pleased to be asked to play Paul McLain.

Matt Yelle
Retired, Family Practice
Anoka, MN

Not participating in any summer theaters etc. once is enough.

Vince Albo
Ped. Hem.-Onc.
Pittsburgh, PA

The entire class for its 100% participation in the original class play.

Al Perfett
Gyne
Permanent Class President
Past President M.A.A.

Who is represented by the sketch on the front page of the program?

Wally Bruce
Ret. Int. Med.
Brielle, NJ

(Dr. Robert A. Moore, Vice Chancellor, Schools of the Health Professions)

Played role of Frank Dixon.

Walt Bianconi
Ret. Family Practice

I'm sure you will hear from others who...will never forget it!!

Al Kinsel
Cardiology
Pittsburgh, PA

It's a great idea.

Don Mrvos
Ob-Gyne
Pittsburgh, PA

Musical Director

Bebe Miller
Ob-Gyne, Pittsburgh, PA
President M.A.A.

Ross Musgrave...innate talent

Robert Potter
Retired Family Practice

Pittsburgh, PA

The only other anecdote which I remember well was quoted to me by Dixon and occurred at a faculty meeting. Sam Harbison, Chief of Surgery, stated to the assembled group that had I spent as much time on my academic record as I had on the class play, I would have compiled a hell of a record.

Sam Aronson
Retired Ophthalm.
Independent Real Estate Investor
San Francisco, CA

I think it was Sam Aronson who called and asked that I come to Shadyside Nurses Home for rehearsal. I later was go between with Dean McEllroy vis "a vis" script.

Ross Musgrave
Retired, Plastic Surgery
Executive Director M.A.A.

I feel fortunate to be in such a talented class. I still feel awed that someone or some people in our class could write, produce, and supply all the orchestra and voices to put on PMS IV.

Matt Yelle

It just grew a life of its own because it was such a great idea whose time had come.

Lew Seaton

We achieved our goal by introducing a unifying theme to a class where students came to learn.

Sam Aronson

Identity of PMS IV Continued

The fortieth production, "Thoracic Park" (1994) was followed by "Forrest's Lump" (1995), "Apolyp 13" (1996), "Bed Pan Walking (1997), "Jerry Maguiac" (1998), "Saving Ryan's Privates" (1999), "Anal Powers & the Gunner Who Shagged Me" (2000), "the Sixth Stench" (2001), "Grouching Patient, Hidden Finger" (2002), "The Sopranolols" (2003) and "Lasix: Unloaded" in 2004.

The Class of 1955 had reserved seats at Carlow College for the 2005 production, "Bedside Story" to celebrate the class's 50th anniversary. It was followed by "Harry Prodder & the Chancre of Secrets" (2006), "Desperate Housestaff" (2007) and "the Full

Montefiore” (2008). Eleven members of the Class of 1955 and original faculty advisor, Ross Musgrave, were again in front row seats for the 55th production, “Scutdoc Millioners.”

Early in the final year of medical school certain members of the Class of 1955 felt the need to bring our diverse groups together by attempting to produce a graduation class play. The obstacles were really too many to individually list - no template, no money, no music, no script, and no rehearsal area. Nevertheless, PMS IV was successful and spawned what is now, according to the letter from the cast and crew of 2009's “Scutdoc Millioners,” “the longest running non-professional theatrical production in the city of Pittsburgh, and has become a rite of passage for Pittsburgh Medical Students...it gives our class the opportunity to be together again after being scattered for two years on clinical rotations. The opportunity for collaboration and bonding more than anything might be the foremost attribute of Scope and Scalpel.”

The original production was instrumental in making the Class of 1955 one of the strongest in Pitt history with regular reunions, sponsorships of its Class of 1955 Scholarship Fund, and participation in a myriad of school leadership roles.

Our successors have indeed “given it a try,” and PMS IV continues to say “Thanks for continuing the tradition.”

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