Like Movies? This Local Group Makes Its Own

by SUE SHAUGHNESSY

Remember the classic story about Robin Hood and his battles with the nasty authorities in Sherwood Forest?

A group of high school and college students also remember the tale and have come up with a new twist.

The result is an off-beat film entitled "In His Honor's Bloody Kingdom." The 22-minute production is the work of a group calling themselves Cinima-Vista.

There are about 20 active members in the group who attend Schoolcraft College, Oakland Community College, the University of Michigan and Eastern Michigan University.

"IN HIS Honor's" is the first 16 mm film produced by the group, while the sound track is merely a narration of the story. In past productions, the group has synchronized the sound with the action.

The latest production took almost a year to film and three or four months to edit, according to Bob Schrader of Livonia, spokesman for the group.

"The film took so long to make because just about everyone involved is a student, and this is a hobby," Schrader explained.

Cost for the production was paid by the group's president, Dennis Skotak of Westland, but the group would like to raise some money to pay for additional prints of the finished product.

At the present time, the club has the original print -- which is all the scenes spliced together in the proper sequence which can't be used for regular showings -- and another copy for showing purposes.

The film has been shown to other film clubs in the metropolitan area and to a group of film students at Henry Ford Community College. There has been no charge made for showing the film up to the present time.

Schrader says that the group is happy to arrange for any group to see the movie and would welcome the opportunity to tell more people about Cinima Vista.

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LOCATION for the Robin Hood satire was in the Edward Hines Park near Northville, and interior scenes were filmed in members' basements.

In 1967, the group filmed a science fiction story, "Attack from Outer Space," using Plymouth's Kellogg Park as the locale for some scenes.

"In His Honor's" includes elements of social satire, slapstick, pathos and pure honest laugh type of humor. The storyline has been re-written so that nobody really wins in the battle between the champion of the poor and the authorities.

Musical score for the work is varied and includes such widely varied selections as works of Jelly Roll Morton, the "1812 Overture" and German operatic music.

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CINIMA-VISTA was organized in 1963 by Schrader and Skotak, who are friends and film buffs. "When we started, we were a pretty unusual group, but that doesn't seem to be true today," Schrader says.

(Amateur film clubs are springing up in the area. Last year, students at Farmington High School produced a film, and have formed a Cinema Guild this year with plans for future productions. Students at Plymouth High School have just embarked on a film making project).

Members of Cinima-Vista all either write scripts, actor help film the productions. Often they do all three.

Schrader appears as Robin Hood in "In His Honor's" and has written scripts for past productions of the group.

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IN ALL, the group has made 20 different films since it was organized. A past production was used as the background during the performance of a rock band in Detroit's Grande Ballroom. In 1967, the students won two honorable mentions in the nation-wide Kodak Teenage Movie Contest.

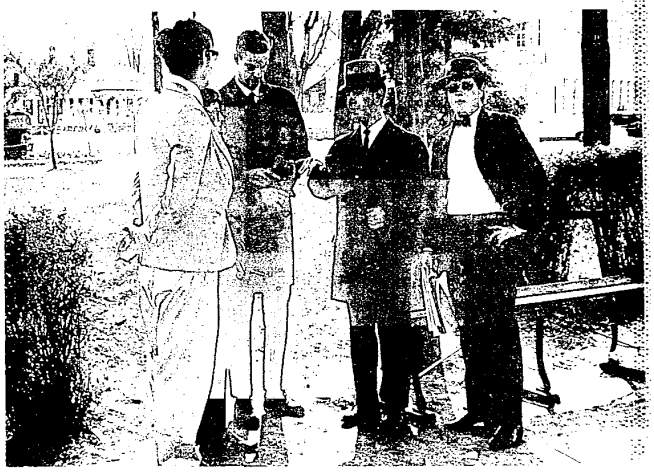
Members of the group meet "about once a month" to view and discuss films and to discuss ideas and possible scripts for their own production.

In fact, the members are scheduled to consider a new script written by two members, who attend Schoolcraft College, during its next meeting.

Maybe this script will be the basis of the next production of Cinima-Vista.

LOVERS MEET -- Robin Hood (Bob Schrader of Livonia) runs to meet his Maid Marion (Carol Stewart of Farmington) in this scene from the Cinima-Vista production "In His Honor's Bloody Kingdom."

SLAPSTICK -- The influence of Laurel and Hardy and other slapstick artists upon members of Cinima-Vista is evident in the club's newest film. This scene from "In His Honor's" follows an old-time free-for-all pie fight in the local tavern.



ON LOCATION -- The 1967 science fiction film produced by Cinima-Vista used Plymouth's Kellogg Park as the locale for some scenes.

The Greek Theater:

The One Season Was A Miracle

by SUE SHAUGHNESSY

"We Too Shall Win."

That might sound like an apt slogan to resound off the walls of an athletic stadium, but when that cry echoed in the Eastern Michigan University baseball field, the setting was artistic rather than athletic.

The quotation ends a long speech of the chorus in the Greek comedy "The Birds."

That play was one of two classical Greek dramas produced by the now defunct Ypsilanti Greek Theater during its one and only season in the summer of 1966. The other was the trilogy "Oresteia."

Today Briggs Field houses the EMU Hurons rather than Dame Judith Anderson and Bert Lahr and their supporting casts.

* * *

WHAT HAPPENED?

The theater was something of an artistic hit, but a financial flop. Most of the critics (more than 100 from throughout the country attended performances) loved it, but the house was never "sold out."

When the curtain rang down on the final performance of the theater, the backers were faced with a stack of bills which totaled $400,000.

Despite serious fund-raising efforts throughout the winter following the premiere season, the curtain of the Greek Theater never rose again.

Looking back, it seems a miracle that the one season was ever staged.

Even the backers agree with that.

A capsule history of the theater, written by Zeke Jabbour, an active backer from Ann Arbor, asserts that "Ypsilantians believe that the festival was there because of a miracle. Indeed, it was more than a miracle; it required a whole series of 'miracles' to allow this auspicious birth of what promises to be a great institution."

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WHAT WERE these miracles?

In 1963, a group of Ypsilanti residents led by Clara Owens, a junior high teacher, conceived the idea of a local summer theater festival.

The economic benefits of a nationally known festival in Ypsilanti were obvious.

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WHY GREEK theater?

First of all, Ypsilanti prides itself on its Greek atmosphere. The town is named after Greek Gen. Demetrius Ypsilanti, and promotional materials from the local boosters never fail to comment on the "Greek architecture" of the residential areas.

In addition, the tradition of Greek classical theater is the foundation of the dramatic literature of the western world even to the present day. The classical Greek play blends drama, narrative, movement and music into one dramatic concept, and the backers believed that a knowledge of classical Greek Theater would lead to a better understanding and appreciation of contemporary culture and society.

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THE FIRST big coup scored by the backers was convincing Greek Director Alexis Solomos to leave the National Theater in Athens, Greece to come to Ypsilanti as the artistic director.

When the season opened, the backers had brought choreographer Helen McGehee, from the Martha Graham troupe; controversial Greek composer Iannis Xenakis from Tokoyo; and Yugoslav-born Parisian Konstantin Simonovich as musical director to Ypsilanti.

The actors were lead by Dame Anderson and Lahr, but included many other famous names from throughout North America.

By the middle of Febuary 1966, the backers were $294,000 short of the $300,000 needed to open for the summer.

Everybody pitched in and helped on the project. The Ypsilanti Press launched a fund raising drive. Local Girl Scouts troops sold cookies, and women's clubs staged fashion shows. The board of directors went after the foundations and industries to raise the capital. Residents of Flint and Ann Arbor helped raise funds.

Somehow -- with the help of a large anonymous donation on the final day of the drive -- the $300,000 was in the till on March 21, 1966.

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BRIGGS FIELD on the EMU campus was secured for the theater site. Just a week after the end of the baseball season, the actors started to rehearse on the newly constructed stage.

That was a miracle in construction because during the entire week, it rained in surrounding areas but not in Ypsilanti.

Before the stadium was approved as the theater site, separate fields had to be found for the Ypsilanti Recreation Department baseball league to play their schedules.

After all these miracles, it seemed almost inevitable that luck was running out on the project. That final miracle -- necessary for the continuance of the project -- never came because the audience failed to materialize.

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IN AUGUST 1966 a Detroit-based critic wrote a story about the financial troubles of the theater. The story said that the performers had drawn audiences from New York and Wisconsin, but that the Detroit residents were not making the trip to Ypsilanti. The average house up to that time was 40 per cent of capacity.

The 12-week season cost $800,000 to stage and the total revenue of the theater was $400,000.

Probably the most perceptive and sympathetic analysis of the theater's troubles appeared when the Chicago Daily News critic Jack Christiansen wrote: "On the face of it, that special chemistry that produced previous 'miracles' in Stratford and Minneapolis does not seem to be working in Ypsilanti, and any support the theater draws now must be based on faith in the future, rather than in endorsement of what is currently on stage."

Christiansen was one of the few critics who panned the acting. He said that "the 'Oresteia' Trilogy with Judith Anderson. . .is a long and earnest bore, and 'The Birds' without the marvelous Bert Lahr to stand it on its ear would have been a dreadfully sophomoric exercise."

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TODAY JABBOUR has a philosophic attitude about the project.

"Classical theater just doesn't pay, and we have to accept this," he said in an interview. "It's an unfortunate fact that this type of project can't exist without public subsidy.

"There was no single great tragedy, and I don't think of it as a flawless performance," he continued. "But nothing could have made the theater economically viable in that short period of time or probably even over a long period of time.

"I don't know of any classical theater that makes money," he concluded.

That's true, but maybe an additional factor is that the Greek Theater's "Pocketful of Miracles" ran out too soon.

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