

# Youngest director takes hold

By ETHEL SIMMONS

Although "Lion in Winter" is the first full-length play she has directed and Barbara Underwood at age 25 is the youngest director Birmingham Village Players has ever had, she appears firmly in command of her responsibility.

A Birmingham resident, Ms. Underwood has been rehearsing with her cast for the last two months. "I auditioned early," she said, "because there are many two-person scenes in the show and I wanted to have plenty of time to work with the actors."

The red-headed director previously directed performances of one acts for the city's "In the Park" programs two years in a row, for Players. She also directed a one-act Pinter play for a

potluck supper at the Birmingham Village Players playhouse at Chestnut and Hunter.

Believing her compadre, she said, "I'm kind of a frantic director. I have to do things physically for the actors." She explained she gets up on the stage and demonstrates what she wants done.

ANY TIME A CAST member is having a problem with a line, Ms. Underwood may "give them a modern line and comparisons." Translating from Old English concepts to contemporary slang can be hilarious.

As a third-generation member of players, Ms. Underwood comes by some of her theatrical instincts naturally. Her grandfather was a member, and her father, Art Underwood, is currently president.

She said she was concerned that people might think she got the job directing "Lion in Winter" because her father happened to be president this year. But, Ms. Underwood said, "I was assured he stayed out of it, and it was a board of directors' decision."

She was especially eager to direct "Lion in Winter" because she is a self-taught student of English history. Of English-Scottish descent, Ms. Underwood has traced the family tree back to England, and the name Underwood is listed as a Scottish surname. Her mother (also Barbara Underwood) was a Dennison, and young Barbara belongs to the Clan Stewart Society of America, which represents the Dennisons.

"Lion in Winter" deals with Henry's struggles with his sons, as a fight over succession to the throne after young Henry's death. King Henry favors John, while his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine is for Richard.

ACTION IS SET in the year 1183, combining a couple of historical events into a fictional drama. The plot is melodramatic, with "something to offend everyone," Ms. Underwood said. It contains humor, and physical violence "with a 20-pound broadsword."

Ms. Underwood graduated in 1974 from the Academy of Dramatic Art, now defunct, at Oakland University in Rochester. She then went on to two professional jobs, with the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival and the Alley Theater in Houston.

She decided to come home and Not entirely happy with the realities of the professional theater world, she decided to come home to Birmingham. She works as a graphics artist with Multi-Craft in Troy, which does automotive graphics.

"The Birmingham Village Players approaches professionalism more than any community theater group I've ever seen," she said.



Barbara Underwood, 25, who has a professional theater background, is directing "Lion in Winter." (Photos by Randy Bors)



Steve Pew, enjoying a laugh at rehearsal, portrays King Henry II, who must choose a successor.



Debi Diehl is Alais.



Sheila Girardot is Eleanor of Aquitaine.

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