

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/953-2105



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Walt Whitman is his newest role

By Cathie Breidenbach
special writer

AFTER A six-and-a-half month tour in "The Sound of Music," Thomas Fiscella of Birmingham will be coming home to take the role of Walt Whitman in "Leaves of Grass," a one-man show debuting in Ann Arbor during Art Fair week.

On tour with "The Sound of Music," he played Captain von Trapp in 90 American and Canadian cities, including Kalamazoo and the Macomb Center for the Performing Arts when the company toured Michigan. Now Fiscella is preparing to switch from the stern, Austrian military man to Whitman, the dynamic American poet/philosopher known as a champion of the common man.

In a phone interview from Atlantic City, N.J., where he is winding up his current tour, Fiscella called "The Sound of Music" "a well-written, powerful play" and spoke with respect for his character, Captain von Trapp. "You'd think I would easily get tired of the captain, but I continue to discover things about the man, about the depth of his compassion for his family and about his strength."

After 175 performances, the 23-year-old actor is nevertheless ready to move on. "As we speak, I'm growing a beard to play Whitman," he said of the transformation in progress.

"THE SOUND of Music" adds to Fiscella's list of professional credits that is impressively long for such a young performer. At Seaholm High School, he was active in forensics and in musical and drama productions. Fiscella praises the four levels of drama courses at the school, the award-winning debate team and the "exceptional opportunity" offered to students. Encouraged by Seaholm's



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program, he went on to major in theater and English at the College of William and Mary in Virginia, and graduated last year.

Throughout his college years, he worked professionally in plays and musicals including a tour in "Much Ado About Nothing," and he studied theater at Cambridge University in England as part of his college program.

"My training was largely in classical plays," he said, mentioning Chekhov and Shakespeare. Like all unknown actors, he started in professional theater playing small parts. "Everybody starts out in Shakespeare carrying spears or dead bodies," he said, recalling one such role in "Julius Caesar" where he had to speak his few lines in praise of Marc Anthony while hefting a "big guy and carrying him offstage."

"Leaves of Grass," which Fiscella calls "an exploration of Whitman's philosophy through poetry," blends live performance with literature, a combination well-suited to Fiscella's double major in theater and English.

He said, "Whitman's a unique and colorful American personality, and his poetry was daring for his time."

Kenn Pierson of the Serpent's Tooth Theatre Company, which is producing "Leaves of Grass," adapted Whitman's poetry into a play and set some of the poems to music. Whitman thought of his verse as more than literary, as language meant to be heard.

"HE WAS FOND of borrowing slang from the gritty working people," Fiscella said, and Whitman incorporated the language of ordinary speech into his verse. Fiscella believes if Whitman were alive he would heartily approve of his poems being adapted to a dramatic, theatrical experience and his poetry being put to music.

In fact the title of one of Whitman's most famous poems, "Song of Myself," suggests the rhythmic, musical nature of poetry. Pierson has taken the next step and literally made songs of some poems.

The lineup of successful one-man/



Birmingham resident Tom Fiscella as Captain von Trapp and Catherine Morin as Maria Rainer appear in scene from "The Sound of

Music," which is ending its 90-city tour in Atlantic City.

one-woman shows on and off-Broadway in recent years attests to their popularity. Fiscella said that in the typical show a historical or literary figure retells humorous anecdotes and reads from his works. "Leaves of Grass" is unique, the actor explains, because the play "merges actor and the audience in a process of discovering Whitman's poetry and his ideas."

Fiscella worked with the script

last fall as it was being developed. "Whitman is a passionate poet of both body and soul. He finds bodies just as sacred as souls and sees us as part of the evolution of the universe," he said.

Nature imagery and a profound reverence for nature pervade Whitman's poetry, and it is this respect for nature that Fiscella believes gives Whitman particular relevance to our era of new-found ecological

awareness. "Whitman calls us to get back to basics of seeing ourselves physically and spiritually and seeing how we fit in to the universe."

Performances will be Thursday-Sunday, July 25-28 and Aug. 1-4, at the Performance Network in Ann Arbor. Curtain time is 8 p.m. Thursday; 7 and 9:30 p.m. Friday-Saturday, and 7 p.m. Sunday. For ticket information call 437-3264 or 663-0681.

upcoming things to do

THEATER SCHOOL

Registration is open for Cranbrook Theatre School in Bloomfield Hills. The newly renovated outdoor Greek Theatre at Cranbrook Educational Community is the summer classroom for aspiring actors and actresses ages 8 through 19. Cranbrook Theatre School will offer classes in all areas of theater production during its 50th season. Staff members are professionally accredited teachers and theater specialists. All classes begin June 24. Contact Cranbrook

Schools Office of Special and Summer programs at 645-3678 for more information.

MEADOW BROOK

Smokey Robinson, Grammy-winning singer/songwriter from Detroit, performs at 8 p.m. Friday, June 21, at the Baldwin Pavilion at Meadow Brook Music Festival at Oakland University in Rochester Hills. In other additions and changes for the summer season, Phranc will open for Morrissey at 8 p.m.

Wednesday, June 26; Trixter and Firehouse open for Warrant at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, July 9; Alexander Zovjic opens for Bob James at 8 p.m. Friday, July 12, and Shelly Thunder and Bop Harvey replace Dread Zeppelin at 6 p.m. July 22. For ticket information call 377-2010.

SUMMER NIGHTS

The Summer Nights concert series continues every Friday at the Troy Hilton Inn. Celebrity DJ host is Linda Lee. Attractions are Touched,

June 14; 1964 as the Beatles, June 21; Intrigue, June 28; Romance, July 5; Trinidad Tripoli Steel Band, July 12; Bop Harvey, July 19; Intrigue, July 26; Phil Dirt and the Dozers, Aug. 2; Mellow Fellows (blues), Aug. 9; Trinidad Tripoli Steel Band, Aug. 16; Intrigue, Aug. 23, and Rumpelstiltskin, Aug. 30. Continuous entertainment runs from 5 p.m. to 1 a.m. Cover charge is \$2 from 5-8 p.m., \$7 after 8 p.m. Tickets are available at the Troy Hilton, phone 583-9000, or at the door.

FILM SERIES

This summer Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum in Bloomfield Hills presents a Modern Artists Film Series featuring portraits of 13 20th century artists in a 10-week program. Each program is approximately one hour long and can be viewed at 2 p.m. Friday and Sunday, June 14 through Sept. 1, in the

deSalle Auditorium. Films are free with museum admission. Programs begin June 14 and 16 with "Picasso: War, Peace, Love" followed on June 28 and 30 with "The Age of Steel: Diego Rivera." Films are free with museum admission. For further information call 645-3312 or 645-3323.

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