

# Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100

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## Actor's specialty:

## Donald Symington plays 'quintessential WASP'

By Ethel Simmons  
staff writer

**B**ALTIMORE-BORN ACTOR Donald Symington has played parts ranging from villains to heroes, but some of the roles that stand out are those where he has portrayed the all-American WASP.

He was chosen for the current production at Meadow Brook Theatre for that very reason. He plays a similar "role" in a pantyhose commercial on television. And even Woody Allen picked him out because he looked like a typical WASP to play the part of Diane Keaton's father in "Annie Hall."

Symington has those elegant, nicely mature looks that you see on male models plugging a prestige product like a fine cognac in magazines. A TV commercial for pantyhose may not sound like his kind of thing, but in the sequence, he and another gentleman are playing chess in their club when a woman enters the premises and he gives a kind of sneer.

Very much in the WASP tradition.

SYMINGTON, six feet three and carefully lean, was scooping a melon slice at 10 minutes to 2 when the interview team (reporter and photographer, plus Meadow Brook public relations man Frank Bollinger) arrived. "You're early," he said, and one had the idea that here is a man who does everything promptly on schedule.

Symington had just returned to the actor's "trailer" on the Oakland University campus, where he is living during his stay at Meadow Brook Theatre, appearing in "The Dining Room" and the next production "The Heiress." His gray hair was smoothed back after a dip in the university's gymnasium swimming pool.

He offered the visitors tea, and when the melon was finished and the herbal tea served, he relaxed in a big, comfortable armchair and politely answered questions.

Telling how he got the role in "Annie Hall," Symington said he had first worked with Woody Allen in the movie, "The Front," playing one of four men on an investigatory committee Allen faced.

Allen had appeared as an actor in

"The Front" but was not otherwise involved in the film's production. When Allen was casting for "Annie Hall," however, he remembered Symington.

"HE CASTS GREATLY in his smaller parts for look and type," Symington said. "I looked like the quintessential WASP, which is what he wanted for Annie's father."

Asked what he thought of Woody Allen, Symington replied, "He's brilliant." Recalling the scene in "The Front," he said they were all called back to reshoot it and, "We didn't use a script. They let Allen do what he wanted to do. It was very hard to keep a straight face."

Allen would recite the line in the script and expand on it. "He made up all this incredible dialogue. When it was over, all the crew burst into applause."

Symington likes to do commercials because they pay so well. Talking about the pantyhose commercial, he demonstrated the kind of faces he and the other man make. "We do this," he said, mugging, "and for that we're paid \$10,000."

He doesn't have any lines in the commercial. "It's the visage," he explained.

THE NEW YORK actor also has another commercial running on television now. "It's for some kind of computer," he said, airily confessing he couldn't recall the name.

In "The Dining Room," which is having its Michigan premiere at Meadow Brook, Symington plays nine parts. All the actors have multiple roles, portraying characters from kids to oldsters.

Donning mini-specs during the interview, to look at the script, he was surprised to find that one character he played, "as an 8-year-old," was actually supposed to be older. He said he stuck by his portrayal, believing the older boy wouldn't react the way the part called for, in a scene about a child who is attached to the Irish maid leaving the household.

The play makes fun of the classic WASP, a dying breed, but Symington points out that "The Dining Room" is not a satire. "It's a comedy. It's a warm, charming, very delightful evening of these various vignettes."



GARY CASKEY/staff photographer

Donald Symington chats while looking at script of "The Dining Room," in which he appears at Meadow Brook Theatre.

Running the age gamut, he also plays an 80-year-old grandfather, a self-made millionaire who has a scene with his grandson, and in another sequence portrays a 5-year-old at a birthday party.

LISTING some more of his characterizations in "The Dining Room," he said, "I play a man who is supposedly dying and discussing his funeral with his son. It's a lovely scene. Probably the best scene for me."

In another scene he plays a stuffy 40-

year-old father whose children won't behave. In still another, "I play the lover of a woman married to my best friend. That scene is not a nice scene at all. It gets more difficult for her when her son interrupts us while having tea in the dining room."

"Isn't that all?" he questioned, then recalled one more, where he plays "sort of a 16-year-old in a funny scene about a mother who is senile. The mother's role is played seriously. It's all so funny. The audience doesn't know what to do about this scene."

Although Symington says he has never had a big break ("I've been in three George Abbott flops"), he has been on stage and in movies and television with such luminaries as Lunt and Fontanne, and Tallulah Bankhead, whom he considers America's greatest actress of the last 50 years.

He played with Bankhead and Estelle Winwood in a comedy called "Here Today." For serious drama, however, "She was such a caricature of herself, no one would take her seriously," he said.

IN THE BROADWAY musical "The King and I," starring Yul Brynner and Gertrude Lawrence, he played Sir Edward Ramsey, the British ambassador. "It's a small but lovely part if it's played right."

Although he didn't create the part, he believes he was the best one in that role. Other actors played it as sort of a Colonel Blimp, he said, while he played it as a romantic part. "I dance with Anna and ask her to marry me," he said.

Symington played the part for a year. He was in and out of the role for a period of time, because Brynner, who is rather short, objected to him, apparent-

ly because he is rather tall.

"I'm very tall. It didn't make any difference, but it seemed to make a difference to Mr. Brynner," he said. Later, things were patched up, and Brynner said Symington was the best actor ever to play the part.

Six months ago, Brynner, who is still touring in "The King and I," called from Seattle and asked him to join the cast. Symington declined. "You can't play a part forever. You bury your head in the sand," he said.

LIKE MANY other actors, Symington has had his turn at TV's daytime soaps. In "Love of Life," he played a despicable, charming heel named Jack Andrews. The part lasted three years. "I was very well known. You couldn't cross the street without someone throwing something at me," he declared.

Donald Symington is first cousin to a famous name in politics - Stuart Symington. "He's from Baltimore, too. That's why I love my line to the grandson (in "The Dining Room"). He'll join a fraternity. In New York and Baltimore, he'll get mixed up with liquor and women. I understand that very well."

## Witty vignettes detail subculture

The Michigan premiere of "The Dining Room" by A.R. Gurney Jr. continues through Sunday, Feb. 19, at Meadow Brook Theatre on the Oakland University campus near Rochester. For ticket information, call the box office at 377-3300.

By Cathie Breidenbach  
special writer

In an overlapping series of vignettes, "The Dining Room" at Meadow Brook Theatre depicts with wit and good humor the demise of a subculture. The rich, Eastern-seaboard WASP is the endangered American species up for

### review

whimsical, yet pointed observation.

Six actors portray 60 characters in this play, directed with admirably fine pacing by Terence Kilburn. "The Dining Room" is a vehicle for fine actors; and Meadow Brook has six of them in Jeanne Arnold, Bethany Carpenter, Joey L. Golden, Jane Lowry, Donald

(Continued on next page)

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