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# STAR

By Brian Kelley '97

## RIDER'S THEATER PROGRAM STAGES ITS GREATEST REVIVAL

**In** theatrical terms, a revival is defined as the return of a play or musical to the stage, usually with some changes to make the work fresh or bring it up to date. By that definition, Rider's theater program is clearly in the midst of a revival that looks to enjoy a long, successful run.

The most recent achievement for the Rider theater program is the much-needed renovation of the studio—or “black box”—theater that took place this summer in the Fine Arts Center on the University's Lawrenceville campus, thanks in large part to a gift from **John Spitznagel '63 (journ.)**.

To celebrate the completion of the studio theater project, Rider is hosting a reunion of theater alumni and Alpha Psi Omega—the national honorary theater society—on November 19. The evening will include an exciting revival of Rider's 1991 production of the rock musical “Hair” (please see side bar on page 3).

The studio theater also represents the latest milestone for a Rider theater program that began in the late 1950s. “There was a group of students here

known as Theater '59 that set the standard for the future,” said **Patrick Chmel**, chairman of Rider's fine arts department. “They staged productions that were absolutely fantastic.”

The early days of Theater '59 are recounted in the book, “Rider College: The First One Hundred Years,” by **Dr. Walt Brower '48 (bus. ed.)**. Rider began its formal theater program in 1959—hence, the name—under the direction of English professor **Lee R. Yopp**.

“It was a Rider program, but it was also community theater,” said **Joe Teti '65 (bus. admin.)**, who is now president and chief executive officer of Triangle, the printing company based in Lawrenceville. “We staged the musicals in Alumni Gym because that was the only place to do them at the time. When I got to Rider in the fall of 1961, we did a landmark production of ‘West Side Story.’ We used the stage and about half of the gym for that one. It was quite a production.”

In 1963, Theater '59 was chosen by the U.S. Department of Defense to make an eight-week overseas tour to perform for the armed forces personnel in Europe. Two years later, Theater '59 was one of eight collegiate theater

groups selected by the National Theater Association and the American National Theater and Academy to perform at the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Center for Performing Arts in Washington, DC, according to Brower's book. The group made another overseas trip in 1966 to entertain the troops in the Far East and the Pacific Islands.

Also in 1966, Theater '59 christened Rider's Fine Arts Center with a production of “Carousel” starring **Gordon MacRae** as Billy Bigelow, a role he played on Broadway and in the show's film adaptation. The production's choreographer was an up-and-coming Broadway dancer by the name of **Tommy Tune**, who would go on to win nine Tony Awards as a director, choreographer and actor (see “Other Thoughts” by Dr. Brower on page 36 of this issue for more about the opening of the Fine Arts Center).

“With Professor Yopp, it had to be Broadway quality,” said Teti, who added that Yopp is still directing shows near his home in North Carolina. “If he needed a 50-year-old guy for a part, he would get a 50-year-old guy rather than have a student play that age. It was a great learning



