DIRECTING *THE FANTASTICKS*

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From its inception, the direction of *The Fantasticks* has been a fascinating and wonderful educational experience. When I first submitted my proposal to do the show, I had not intended for it to be my problem in lieu of a thesis, but rather a beginning directing project. I had no idea that the submission would meet with such opposition. I figured this was a lesson in “real life,” for it is a widely recognized fact that getting a show produced requires much salesmanship and determination. When informed that I would be able to use this production for my master’s thesis project, I was both delighted and frightened. After all, I had never directed a show before; and I wasn’t really sure what I was getting myself into. In addition, I would be going about this project backwards. Usually, when such a project is contemplated, the thesis research is done first; and the direction of the show done after the completion of the written work. Although I did do my homework before directing *The Fantasticks*; because of time constraints, I was unable to delve as deeply into the subject as I would have liked. I have often stated that this, in some ways, was probably a blessing in disguise. If I had really known what I was about to embark upon, I might have been too intimidated to tackle it. I learned how important it is to surround yourself with a staff of good, trustworthy people. I learned how important organizational skills are; and, most importantly, I learned to respect the hard work and dedication it takes to be a director – as well as all of the other creative and administrative positions involved in the theatre. Heretofore, I had only looked at the process through the eyes of a performer.
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TERMS AND CONCEPTS USED IN PROCESS OF ANALYSIS

In preparing an analysis for the script of *The Fantasticks*, it is important to set forth, with certain clarity, the definitions of specific terminology used in the process. Such words as style, theme, spine, and super-objective must be fully understood as they relate to the theatre in general and as they apply to the production of *The Fantasticks* in particular.

*Style* can be a difficult term to define, for it is a much-misunderstood word. It has nothing to do with being stylish; nor should it be confused with the term stylization, which has to do with any style which markedly departs from the realistic. Style refers to the particular tone, mood, atmosphere, emphasis, and “dimension” in which the idea of the play is conveyed (Clurman 30 & 33).

It is the director’s job to determine a script’s style, along with the most appropriate method of production, to convey its quality and meaning.

The style of a play can be determined from the accumulation of answers to acting, directing, and production problems.

The director must have knowledge of the world from which the play came as well as the theatrical practices of the day. Then comparisons must be made as to the ways in which other plays from the period resemble each other, as well as how a particular play is different from the others (Callow 6).

It is imperative for the director to recognize the author’s uniqueness in deciding on a style for his specific production. Theatrical aspects, such as costumes and décor, are important factors in considering the style of a play, as well as that of the acting--the way the actor speaks, sits, walks, and delivers other such basic actions. Another facet to consider would be cultural and historical context.

A compelling reason for a director to choose a certain play for production could be its *theme*. Perhaps the theme strikes an emotional or intellectual “chord” in the heart and mind of the director. Hopefully, the same response would be elicited from the audience. The shared
response would, thus, serve as a bond between the artists involved and the spectators. “Any play analysis should contain a clear statement of the play’s theme, which may consist of a mood, an attitude or overall feeling, the essence of a play’s inspiration” (Clurman 30).

The director must formulate answers to questions concerning the script’s content in ‘dramatic’ terms. What is the audience supposed to feel? What general action motivates the play? What is the basic conflict involving the plot and the characters? What behavioral struggle or effort is being represented?

The answers to these questions can be expressed as an active verb: for drama (and acting) are based on doing, on action. These answers are referred to as the play’s spine. The term inevitably can be compared to the spine in one’s body, which serves as the base to hold the vertebrae in place, just as all the smaller actions and dramatic divisions hold a play together. Stanislavsky, the renowned Russian director and author, refers to the spine of a play as its “main or through action, leading to what he calls the ‘super-problem’ or ‘superobjective’ — the playwright’s basic motivation in writing the play” (Clurman 28). Understanding what the spine of a play is helps the director formulate a guideline for the production. The play takes on a more definite form and culminates into an ultimate dramatic statement. The director only needs to figure out the way in which the spine is to be articulated.

The first step a director must take when undertaking the huge task of directing and analyzing a play is to read and reread the piece several times. It is helpful to prepare a written analysis of the play, which can compel the director to a clear and exhaustive knowledge of the play. The director should keep a list of first impressions, any random thoughts or ideas that occur while reading or pondering the play and any questions and answers that arise. Only then can a general production scheme begin to take form in the mind of the director. These notes may be recorded randomly at first and more formally as rehearsal time gets nearer (Clurman 24-26).
After the director lays down such groundwork, the task of directing becomes focused. This should prove helpful to the actors in developing their characterizations, which, in turn, should assist the audience in a deeper understanding of the play.

**METHODOLOGY**

One of the many methods for directing taught in colleges and universities and employed by professional directors throughout the U.S. is that contained in *On Directing* by Harold Clurman. Clurman’s method utilizes script analysis, including a clear understanding of the play’s theme, a thorough production plan, audition and casting procedures and theories, methods of determining characterization, as well as the organization of a director’s prompt book.

As Clurman suggests, I began by determining the theme or spine of the play as the “springboard” of my interpretation. This led to a quest to find the manner in which this spine would be articulated and the play stylized. According to Clurman,

> after the director discerns a script’s style, he must then decide which production method would be most appropriate to ensure that the authors’ and the director’s intent is taken into consideration in regards to plot line and dialogue. The director is then obliged to translate his insights and understanding of the play into stage language (Clurman 33).

This is not to assert that the director is disallowed to interpret the work in his own way or to bring a new “slant” to his production. Every theatre piece represents the thought and feeling of the company which produces it; it is their work as much as it is the playwright’s, in this respect. As long as the results of the director’s chosen interpretation of the text elicit some kind of emotional and/or intellectual response from the audience and has creative value, he should not be discouraged from flexing his creative or artistic muscles.

After decisions have been made in regards to the nature of the play – it’s spine and style – the director proceeds with a more detailed study including the drafting of a scene-by-scene
production plan. He must then hold advisory consultations or production meetings with the
designer or various designers of the production. The director should be capable of
communicating to the designer his vision of the play in terms of themes, metaphors, style,
atmosphere, mood, and desired impact. He should give insight into the sort of movement which
will be called for, indicate important acting areas and the position of entrances and exits, and
inform the designers of elements of timing between scenes, all as they relate to the spine.

Clurman states emphatically though, that the “director should not dictate to the designer but
rather stimulate his powers of invention” (Clurman 58).

In matters of choosing the cast through auditions, Clurman concludes that

any choice in casting becomes pointless unless one has determined how each
of the characters is connected with the play’s spine and style. The audition
process and decision-making should concentrate on the whole company,
rather than solely on the individuals (Clurman 72).

After careful consideration of the play’s main action or spine, the director should then
find the spine or the chief motivating action for each character and be able to state such from the
character’s own viewpoint. Two aspects of the role must be jointly considered: the basic nature
of the character and its physical manifestation, the motivation of which should precede the
drawing up of the director’s score. “The director’s work should not be a solo performance but a
graph for, and, at best, an inspiration to his collaborators, the acting company and all the other
members of the production staff” (Clurman 79).

The director’s prompt book or working script is his score, following the play scene by
scene and line by line. The method Clurman espouses is a variation of the method I utilized for
this production of The Fantasticks. The director’s prompt book is arranged and divided into a
three-column configuration on a blank sheet of paper facing each of the pages of the text of the
play. Clurman advocates the use of the terms actions, adjustments, and activities as his first,
second, and third column respectively. However, I chose to use different terminology as taught by my college instructor, Marjorie Hayes, at the University of North Texas. These include in order: (1) analysis, (2) action units, and (3) spectacle. The first column notes the particular dramatic action of the moment and addresses objectives, motivation, and subtext. I made this choice, because this was the method I had become accustomed to using in class, and found it worked well for me.

The second column gives a title to each unit, or beat, of the script, as it is divided, using an active verb for each specific action. Clurman refers to these units or beats as basic actions and every unit of a scene has its own climax. The Fantasticks contains no clear-cut scene delineations so this method works very well in helping to organize or break down the script into French scenes. French scenes are similar to beats in that they allow the director to visualize the total action as one major unit broken into dozens of subunits, all interrelated and all pointing in one concerted direction. Beats refer more to the tempo in content and purpose. The third column contains all the “business” or what is happening physically on the stage as well as any and all diagrams needed for clearer understanding. Although some directors choose to dictate or devise all or most of this business ahead of time, Clurman feels that most of the blocking, notations on lighting, tempo, offstage sound and music, should be done during rehearsals, allowing for the spontaneity of the actors and the director.

In my direction of The Fantasticks, I decided to incorporate some pre-planning, because, as a first-time director, I did not wish to be perceived as indecisive or unprepared. However, I tried to remain open to instinctive responses and a certain amount of organic blocking transpired.
AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE FANTASTICKS,

THE PLAYWRIGHTS AND THEIR TIMES

Much has been written about Tom Jones, Harvey Schmidt, and Word Baker, the trio from Texas who created and brought The Fantasticks from its inception to its significant place in the history of American musical theatre. Two excellent sources include The Amazing Story of The Fantasticks: America’s Longest Play, written by Donald C. Forbes and Robert Viagas and The Fantasticks: The Complete Illustrated Text, by Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt. Both books include extensive background information on the authors and the times in which they lived, contributing influences on the writing and creation of the show, the processes involved in producing the show, show reviews, and facts and figures relating to the rise and ultimate success of The Fantasticks. Contained in this section is an historical summary of information gleaned from these accounts.

An Historical Overview

The authors of The Fantasticks, Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt, met while students at the University of Texas. Jones was a directing major working on his M.F.A. in Drama, and Schmidt was an Art student. Although the drama department at the University of Texas produced hundreds of plays, they had never done a single musical. It was actually through an extracurricular organization, called the Curtain Club, that Jones, Schmidt, and Word Baker, who was to become the original director of The Fantasticks, became intrigued with the genre of musical theatre.

The three classmates began their partnership in 1950 with a musical revue they called Hipsy-Boo! Baker was the director of this first successful collaboration. Hipsy-Boo! was followed with their second effort, which became an annual production, called Time Staggers On.
directed by Tom Jones. These first two forays into the exhilarating world of musical theatre were enormously popular hits, unlike anything the two had encountered in their experiences with their more classically oriented dramatic productions at the university.

Jones and Schmidt continued to write songs together. After graduation, they both served in the Army during the Korean War. They kept up their songwriting collaboration by long distance mail. Jones, who was released from the military first, went to New York to try and become a director of plays. His career as a classical director did not immediately “take off,” and Jones found himself writing comedy material for stand-up comics to make a living.

As Schmidt was still in the service, Jones began working with another composer named Dr. John Donald Robb. Dr. Robb was a successful attorney who really wanted to be a composer. Having been educated at Yale, where he “tinkered” around with music with fellow classmate, Cole Porter, Robb also studied composition with the renowned Nadia Boulanger in Paris. Upon retirement from his law practice, Dr. Robb became head of the Music School and Dean of the College of Fine Arts at the University of New Mexico and, in 1955, took a year’s sabbatical to write a musical comedy. Jones and Robb were introduced at this time, and the two shortly began looking for something to musicalize.

Conception to Inception

One of the ideas mentioned was an obscure piece called Les Romanesques, first introduced to Jones by his drama professor at the University of Texas, B. Iden Payne, in his Period Play Production class. This charming little play was written by Edmond Rostand who was probably best known for his acclaimed Cyrano de Bergerac.

Little did Jones know, at the time, that this scene study would have a profound impact on his life. For Jones and Robb decided to use this piece as the model for their musical adaptation
they were to call Joy Comes to Deadhorse, which premiered in the spring of 1956 at the University of New Mexico. Although the show generally elicited respectful responses from critics and audiences alike, Jones was unhappy with the final product. Dr. Robb disagreed, viewing the piece as successful. Jones felt Deadhorse was basically wrong, and Robb felt it was basically right. Something in the way the show was stylized did not ring true with Jones. He was not quite sure why he felt it to be misguided, but he could not reconcile himself to it. So the two decided to part ways. Jones agreed to give Robb the rights to anything he had written for it; and Robb, in turn, gave Jones the right to pursue it in another version with another composer.

The new composer turned out to be Harvey Schmidt. After Schmidt was released from the Army, he also moved to New York where he worked as a graphic artist for NBC Television and as a freelance illustrator for such magazines as Life, Harper’s Bazaar, Sports Illustrated, and Fortune.

The pair worked on the new version of Deadhorse for about three years, during which time they also contributed material to such important cabaret venues as Julius Monk’s Upstairs-Downstairs shows and Ben Bagley’s Shoestring Revues. However, their original premise of Deadhorse as a big Broadway show, patterned after the Rodgers and Hammerstein mold so popular at the time, simply was not working.

The time had come for Jones and Schmidt to either abandon the project or to finally make it work. Jones had become desperate for money to help his recently widowed mother. Schmidt unselfishly took a year off from his art projects to devote himself to working full-time with Jones on their musical. Without this selfless act, The Fantasticks might never have become a reality.

At the same time, Jones’ and Schmidt’s former classmate, Word Baker, got a job at the Minor Latham Auditorium at Barnard College in New York. He was to be the director of three
original one-act plays to be produced in a season of summer stock. Baker wanted one of these one acts to be a musical. Remembering his friends from the old University of Texas days, he went to Jones and Schmidt with a proposal to take a reduced version of Deadhorse to show in one month to producer and actress Mildred Dunnock and guaranteed them a production date one month after that.

That is when Jones and Schmidt literally threw out all of their old ideas and started over on their new version of Deadhorse, which was to be retitled The Fantasticks. In his 30th Anniversary Edition of The Fantasticks, Jones recounted and cited sources from which the pair borrowed ideas for this new version of their musical.

They discovered a 1900 adaptation, written by an English woman, named Julia Constance Fletcher, under the pseudonym of “George Fleming,” also called The Fantasticks. Jones read and reread this charming little adaptation, which was written in the French manner of rhymed couplets, with five characters, a few extras for the abduction, and only one set. It appeared to be the perfect model for their newly assigned one-act musical. Although there were numerous changes from the original, the plot was basically the same, and The Fantasticks quickly began to take shape in its new form.

Jones used as his inspiration, not only the aforementioned adaptation, but also ideas borrowed from a book by Harley Granville-Barker called On Dramatic Method. The somewhat outdated book describes how Shakespeare achieved all his dramatic effects. In creating The Fantasticks, the love story and feuding families of Romeo and Juliet were borrowed from, as well as the basic unifying imagery of darkness used in Macbeth and moonlight used in Midsummer Night’s Dream. A variety of other Shakespearean techniques were studied, such as
the use of rhymed verse and prose and couplets, to close scenes. Jones decided to write the
dialogue for The Fantasticks in various forms of verse.

Other influences used in the creation of The Fantasticks were Thornton Wilder’s Our
Town, with its use of the narrator, just as El Gallo serves as the liaison to the audience in The
Fantasticks. According to Jones, it was Goldoni’s The Servant of Two Masters, which gave the
authors the idea to do their show in Commedia style.

Further influences included John Houseman’s production of A Winter’s Tale, which
contained a cold, moon-like first act and a sun-drenched second, and Leonard Bernstein’s
original version of Candide, which opened its second act with heat and musical discord.

The inspiration for the character of Mortimer came from an old movie called A Double
Life with Ronald Coleman, whose character describes an old actor in England who specializes in
death scenes.

Casting: Original Version

Jones and Schmidt gave an almost-finished copy of the script of The Fantasticks to
Barnard College Executive Director, Mildred Dunnock, in the summer of 1959. They also
played six or seven songs for her, hoping that she would consider premiering the piece at the
Barnard Summer Theatre. She loved it; and, after giving her approval for The Fantasticks to be a
part of the trilogy presented August 4-8, 1959, Jones and Schmidt set about finishing the script
and score. They held auditions and cast the show, mostly from the resident company at Barnard
College. The only person selected from outside the resident company was the actress who
played Luisa, Susan Watson. The production premiered as scheduled that summer with a five-
performance run. This original version of The Fantasticks was modest, but effective. They had
opened after only one week of rehearsals, which were not without major difficulties. At their
first run-through, Susan Watson lost her voice and fell from a ladder, severely injuring her ribs. She was, in essence, unable to sing or dance. The decision was made to let Harvey Schmidt sing her songs, while Watson mouthed the words, and to get their choreographer to dance for her. It was at that very run-through that Lore Noto walked into their lives. He had come to see the show. He obstinately refused to leave when warned of the problems the run-through was encountering. He had come with the intention of producing the show, and he said he would make allowances. It was this same obstinacy that would later help keep The Fantasticks alive.

The 1959 original cast of The Fantasticks consisted of Jonathan Farwell as The Balladeer (later changed back to El Gallo), Susan Watson as The Girl (later Luisa), Crayton Rowe as The Boy (later Matt), Ron Leibman and Lee Groghan as The Fathers, George Morgan as The Property Man (later The Mute), Dick Burnham as The Actor, Bill Tost as The Man Who Dies and Harvey Schmidt as The Pianist.

Lore Noto: A Producer with Vision

Lore Noto loved what he saw that night. He thought the show was a work of genius and never stopped believing in it. He wanted to produce the show commercially and offered Jones and Schmidt the deal for which they had been waiting. He wanted them to turn The Fantasticks into a full-length musical and would pay them each 250 dollars on any future royalties. Noto was able to “clinch” the deal when he agreed to give the creators and the director, Word Baker, complete artistic freedom. They signed the contract with Noto and began working on the expanded version of The Fantasticks.

Next came a series of backers’ auditions to raise the sum of $16,500 needed to capitalize the show for Off- Broadway. It was believed at the time that Noto was a wealthy man, capable of just writing a check for the needed sum. Jones and Schmidt never knew, until much later, that
Noto had quit his job and sacrificed his entire life savings to get the show launched. After months of these backers’ auditions, the money had finally been raised and was booked for the spring schedule at the Sullivan Street Playhouse. They cast the show, rehearsed, and opened on May 3rd, 1960. *The Fantasticks* got off to a “rocky” start but eventually caught on with audiences and critics alike.

The original Sullivan Street Theatre cast of *The Fantasticks* consisted of Jerry Orbach (El Gallo), Rita Gardner (Luisa), Kenneth Nelson (Matt), Hugh Thomas (Bellomy), William Larsen (Hucklebee), George Curley (Mortimer), and Thomas Bruce (actually author Tom Jones as Henry).

There have been thousands of actors since the 1960 opening who have appeared in *The Fantasticks*. Some of the more notable celebrities who fall into this category include Lisa Minelli, Glenn Close, F. Murray Abraham, Elliott Gould, Richard Chamberlain, Bert Lahr, Edward Everett Horton, Anna Maria Alberghetti, Stanley Holloway, Ricardo Montalban, John Davidson, and Robert Goulet.

**Opening Night and Early Reviews**

It is difficult to believe, in view of the enormous success that *The Fantasticks* has enjoyed, that the opening night of the show did not go that well. The critics all came out that night, and the ensuing revues were mixed. They were not bad notices but did not really forecast the show’s incredible future.

Brooks Atkinson of *The New York Times* wrote that the music was “captivating” and the style “entrancing.” He added that the first act was “fresh and sweet in a civilized way.” However, he went on to say that “two acts are one too many to sustain the delightful tone of the
first,” and that “perhaps The Fantasticks is, by its nature, the sort of thing that loses magic the longer it endures.” That statement seems humorous, in light of the longevity of the show.

Walter Kerr of the Tribune wrote raves for Jerry Orbach, who played El Gallo, and for Thomas Bruce, who was in actuality the author, Tom Jones, and for the rest of the cast. But he concluded by stating that “The Fantasticks does not hold its mannered head aloft for the full run of the book or the somewhat better score. It attracts you, settles back a bit limply, wakes you up again, and averages out a little less than satisfactory.”

Some of the more favorable reviews came from some of the daily papers. John McClain, of the Journal American, called The Fantasticks a “delight” and said it was “wonderfully well-suited to the small environs of the Sullivan Street Playhouse and should enjoy a long and lively occupancy.” Richard Watts, Jr., of the New York Post, described the show as having a “freshness, youthful charm, and a touch of imagination,” even though he complained that the show had “its lack of consistent effectiveness.”

The afternoon papers were generally praiseworthy, but it was widely held that the Times and the Tribune reviews were the ones that mattered the most. Noto was advised to close the show, to save his money; but that old obstinate “streak” flared, and he steadfastly refused to give up. He wanted to wait for the other papers and the magazines and weeklies. As it turned out, these reviews were good. The Associated Press called The Fantasticks “a sheer delight.” Cue magazine said “Bravo! The most inventive music in town! The brightest young talent now on display.” The critic for the Saturday Review called the show “A Magickal Musickal,” and said that “Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt have worked with a professional expertness equaling the best Broadway has to offer and with a degree of artistic taste that Broadway seldom attains any more.”
One of the more astute reviews came from Michael Smith of the *Village Voice*:

I am sadly out of practice at writing raves. As any critic knows, it is far easier to pick out a production’s faults than its virtues, and I am hard pressed to explain *The Fantasticks*. With this in mind I did something for the first time last week. Having seen the show free on Tuesday, its opening night, I bought tickets and went back on Thursday.

He went on to say that “the most elaborate and sophisticated art is employed to catch the audience in its simplicity. There is a breath-taking balance between worldly wit and commitment to naivete.” He further stated that “*The Fantasticks* is not the dregs of an uptown backer’s audition, nor an under-produced Broadway Musical. What are usually limitations Off-Broadway, become advantages. I just might go to see it again.”

**The Long Run**

After these noteworthy evaluations, Lore Noto made the decision to gamble and keep the show open. Gradually, the small houses and empty seats started to disappear as word of mouth spread. That same year the Broadway actors went on strike, which also helped business and also allowed those actors who were usually working to come see it. *The Fantasticks* began to develop a loyal following of eminent personalities. The rest is history. *The Fantasticks* began its unsurpassed long run.

**Historical Backdrop**

Since its auspicious beginning, *The Fantasticks* has played all over the world. It has been seen in well over 11,000 productions in the United States in over 3,000 cities and towns in all 50 states, as well as in over 700 productions in 68 foreign countries. The show has broken many records, since its opening on May 3, 1960. That same day, a nationwide civil defense drill took place. That year the Pulitzer Prize for Drama was awarded to a musical, *Fiorello!* By George Abbott, Jerome Weidman, Jerry Bock, and Sheldon Harnick. Dwight D. Eisenhower was
President of the United States at the time. Although it was 1960, technically, the country was still in the midst of the mood of the “happy days” of the 1950’s. The turbulence that would personify the latter part of the decade had not yet begun. When The Fantasticks first began its incredible run, a young man by the name of John F. Kennedy had just reached his political stride with the nomination for President of the United States, along with then Vice President, Richard M. Nixon in opposition. The “Days of Camelot” followed, when Kennedy won the election; and he and his fashionable wife, Jacqueline, and their two beautiful children inhabited the White House. After the assassination of Kennedy, the “bubble had burst” in the psyches of the American people. What followed was a period of enormous social upheaval, including racial discord, the women’s liberation movement, the emergence of hippies and the drug scene, the energy crisis, and the controversial Vietnam War. Americans had lost their innocence forever.

It is, indeed, a wonder that a seemingly simple and sweet little musical like The Fantasticks could survive such a decade. But survive it did. Perhaps it is because the show offered a little respite from all the chaos and served as a reminder or reflection of those less-conflicted, bygone days. Not only has The Fantasticks survived all these years, but it has thrived, not only in New York, but also in numerous productions throughout the world for nearly four decades.

Records and Statistics

The Fantasticks is not only the longest running musical in the world but is also the most frequently produced. The show’s standing in the Guinness Book of World Records is surpassed only by Agatha Christie’s The Mousetrap, which opened in London in 1952. However, in 1974, The Mousetrap moved from the Ambassador Theatre to the St. Martins, and so The Fantasticks is the world’s longest running show of any category still running in its original theatre, The
Sullivan Street Playhouse. It is still running there today after 40 years. As of 1990, there had been nearly 9,000 productions of the show in the United States in over 2,000 cities and towns. It had played in all 50 states, plus Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and the District of Columbia. There had been 15 national touring companies in the U.S., and extended tour of U.S. Military bases in the Pacific and in Europe, plus 32 additional productions at bases throughout the world. In addition to the original and continual run at the Sullivan Street Playhouse, The Fantasticks has established records in Houston for eight months, San Francisco for six years, Los Angeles for four years, and Denver for five years. The Fantasticks had at least 453 productions in 68 foreign countries and had been produced 191 times in Canada, 48 in Germany and 38 in Australia. In Scandinavia 43 productions including one each year since 1962, when it won an award as that year’s Outstanding New Theatrical Piece. Japan had seen nine productions, New Zealand seven, Saudi Arabia five, Czechoslovakia four, and Israel three.

The purpose of this section is to offer insights and a glimpse into the challenges and processes involved in creating any work of art, but especially this musical production of The Fantasticks. The spirit and dedication required by those involved in this endeavor were truly astounding. The seemingly insurmountable obstacles were overcome and exceeded beyond all expectations in the final analysis. As previously stated, The Fantasticks has set and broken even its own remarkable records of achievement, time and time again.

In conclusion and on a personal note, the story of the inception to conception of The Fantasticks was quite inspirational to me while pursuing my dreams of a higher education and theatrical career. It was especially meaningful in overcoming my own arduous journey with this project.
PERSONAL HISTORY

The personal story of the mounting of my production of *The Fantasticks* at the University of North Texas would not be complete without a little background information and some raised questions. Why did I choose this particular show? What obstacles did I have to face to bring this project to fruition? Was I able to overcome these obstacles and triumph over certain adverse circumstances? Perhaps this is a story similar to *The Little Engine That Could*, for I truly believed in the eventual success of the undertaking, much in the same steadfast way those involved in the creation of *The Fantasticks* must have believed.

The first experience I ever had with *The Fantasticks* came, when I was a young girl in the 1960s. My father, who was a professional actor, had been cast as Bellomy in a local production at a now-defunct professional playhouse known as the Knox Street Theatre in Dallas, Texas. I always helped my father with his lines, when he was in a show, and was quite familiar with the style of prose usually employed by playwrights and librettists of the day. Although I was still very young, I noticed something very different about the dialogue in this script and became immediately fascinated with the show. It was written in verse, and the poetic verbiage used by Jones and Schmidt was enchanting to me. It was also the first time I had ever heard of a kumquat! (There is much mention of the fruit in this script.)

When the show finally opened, I saw a performance so moving that it has profoundly impacted my life. The cast was incredibly gifted in their abilities to effectively communicate the show to the audience with their insightful interpretations of the characters and with their acting and musical prowess. I was probably too young to appreciate the contributions of the director, but I remember being fascinated with the small, almost non-existent set and the intimacy of it all. I was also particularly enamored with the unusual orchestration. I loved the show’s use of the
powerful piano and the wistful harp. I couldn’t quite grasp how only two instruments could carry a musical. (I had, literally, grown up around musical theatre and had always seen productions with full orchestras.) Nonetheless, the music was touching and invigorating. I went back to see it night after night. I just couldn’t get enough of it. I played the album over and over again. I adored the music to this charming musical, not to mention the fact that I always relished being able to see my talented father perform. I have seen the show many different times in all sorts of venues since then, but I have never been quite as enthralled as with that initial production. Much of the specific memories of that first production have faded from my mind with the passage of time. But what has remained is the feeling I had — an almost magical, ethereal one unsurpassed by anything I have experienced since. That is one of the reasons I chose to direct The Fantasticks for my Master’s Thesis project. It was my fondest desire to be able to recapture some of the magic experienced so long ago.

The theme of the play in many ways carried me through an often-difficult adolescence. “Without a hurt, the heart is hollow,” is one of the more poignant lines in the show. It was a lesson of which I reminded myself any and every time I experienced “growing pains.” I identified strongly with the character of Luisa, as I was close to the onset of adolescence myself. I had all the normal pre-pubescent, romantic notions about life, just as Luisa did. I hoped I would one day be able to play the role. I never even dreamed that I might one day get to direct the show.

When I was the right age to play Luisa, the opportunity somehow eluded me. By the time I was 14 years old, I had already begun to sing professionally and was developing a strong “belting” voice, which was definitely not the kind of voice required for the role of Luisa. It is no coincidence that, in my freshman year in college, I chose to do Luisa’s monologue from The
Fantasticks for an acting class at North Texas State University (now the University of North Texas).

A couple of years later, I was working at a professional dinner theatre in Dallas as an entertainer. I had just finished playing the role of Aldonza in a very successful production of Man of LaMancha when the announcement was made about the next musical to be produced there. It was to be The Fantasticks. I debated with myself as to whether or not to try out for the role. I was 21 years old at the time. I decided I was not really suited for it (age-wise or vocally) and opted not to audition—a decision I have often regretted.

Some twenty years later; and, after a lengthy career in the music business, I returned to college to pursue a Master’s Degree in Theatre (my Bachelor’s Degree is in Music Education). I was enrolled in a directing class, when I was asked by my instructor if I wanted to direct an unsupported project—a one-act play for the upcoming season. I asked if I could, instead, make a proposal to direct a full-length musical. I knew exactly what I wanted to direct…The Fantasticks! Ms. Hayes, my teacher, advised me to submit my idea to the Production Committee and was most encouraging about the prospect.

I entered the meeting with high hopes. What I encountered was some pretty stiff opposition to my idea from some of the committee members. It was argued by one of the Dance instructors, that the Theatre Department at North Texas did not have the talent to undertake such a project, especially with a first-time director. I countered with the idea that we could combine our efforts with the renowned North Texas College of Music; and made it clear that, although I was an inexperienced director, I was not without credentials. After all, I had many years of professional experience as an entertainer and as a businesswoman in the entertainment industry. It was further stated that it would be next to impossible to find a musical director, a
choreographer, and musicians to work on such an enormous project with no budget available. I assured the committee that I would be responsible for locating the personnel. I don’t know exactly why I was so confident that I could “pull this thing off.” Maybe it was because I felt so challenged. But I did know that this might be my one and only opportunity to be involved, at long last, in a production of one of my most cherished shows. I had to “go for it.” As I recall, a few of the committee members stood up for me…most notably, Barbara Cox, head of the Costume Department and Student Advisor of the Theatre program. She came to my defense and said that it was “about time that the Department took some chances.” It was an interesting afternoon. The debate over my proposal became extremely heated and somewhat nasty. I was even cursed at by the same person from the Dance faculty. Finally, but reluctantly, I was given the go-ahead. Now that I had opened up this “can of worms,” all I had to do was prove myself. What had I gotten myself into?

Upon exiting that meeting, I immediately traipsed over to the Music building in search of a Musical Director. My son, Tony, who at the time was a freshman voice major at the University of North Texas, told me about a very talented student he knew who might be interested in doing something like this. His name was David Das. I was able to quickly locate Das and asked him if he would be willing to work on the project. He said, “Yes!” And I told him I would get back to him with the details. Within less than twenty minutes, I had been able to secure a Music Director for my upcoming musical! Unfortunately, Das left town for the summer and did not leave a number where he could be reached. So no communication was made with David Das until school started again in the fall.

The first week of school, the Theatre Department held auditions for all of the shows for the upcoming fall season. I located Das, who apologized for not staying in touch with me. He
regretfully informed me that he would be unable to do my show after all because of scheduling conflicts. I was slightly panicked!

Auditions proceeded anyway. There were several qualified actors/singers who showed up at the auditions from the Theatre Department. I was unaware at the time (and had not been told) that I would only be allowed to choose my cast after the Mainstage productions, which were directed by the faculty members, were cast. This was, and still is, the policy set by the faculty. I had not been assigned a faculty advisor at this point. It was later decided that Joe Deer, a brand new faculty member, would be my major professor; because musical theatre was his field of expertise.

I was, literally, sent out of the room, when time came for decisions to be made regarding casting. When I was allowed to return, I discovered that most of the singing actors available were cast in other productions—a couple of which were in direct conflict with my rehearsal and performance dates. I accepted these decisions and rules as gracefully as I felt I could and resolved to find another way to handle the problem of casting. I was told by one faculty member not to worry—that this project was just something for me to “muck” around with…and that a student-directed production was not that important. I took great offense to that statement; because it is not within my personality to lend my name, time, and efforts to anything that is less than what it could be. It was important to me, and I wanted the experience to be important for the university and to my cast and crew. I needed to know if I was capable or talented enough to stay in educational Theatre, or whether I had any business ever trying to direct again.

At first I was told that I needed to use only actors from the Theatre Department. I was able to cast all but three parts from the Drama Department. David Crutcher was cast as Hucklebee, CJ Liotta as Bellomy, Scott Lentz as Mortimer, Chad Dansby as Henry, and John
Adams as The Mime. When it was realized that there were absolutely no real choices left to me for those certain uncast roles, I was given permission to go to the Music Department and, later, to the outside.

A couple of girls from the Dance Department expressed an interest in choreographing the show, but scheduling conflicts prohibited them from doing so. Fortunately, I had spoken to a dear friend of mine over the summer, Paula Morelan, who is a tremendous choreographer. She told me she was interested in developing some contacts at the university. I contacted her again, and she agreed to choreograph my show.

I first met Paula when she was the choreographer for *Gypsy* at the Garland Civic Theatre where I portrayed Mama Rose. I also worked with her in *Cotton-Patch Gospel* at Garland and in *Ducks and Lovers*, a world-premiere musical put on by the Plano Repertory Theatre for “Plano-Fest!” Paula had a reputation for being tough but was extremely talented and always produced excellent results. I was ecstatic with the prospect of working closely with such a professional. I knew it would be an invaluable learning experience for me, as well as the cast and crew. Coincidentally, during the course of our rehearsals Ms. Morelan was nominated for (and won) the Leon Rabin award for “Best Choreographer of the Year” for *Guys and Dolls* at the Garland Civic Theatre.

In the meantime, I went in search of a girl to play Luisa, a boy to play Matt, and a Musical Director after my “call-back” auditions produced no clear candidates. I went to the Music Department to find Lara Tillotson, a girl I had seen in a production of *Guys and Dolls*, who had a beautiful soprano voice. I located her just as she was coming out of a choir rehearsal and asked her if she would be interested in auditioning for the role of Luisa. I also told her I needed a Musical Director. She turned her head and yelled out “Hey, Bob!” A classmate,
named Bob Austin, responded by walking over to us. He was a middle-aged graduate doctoral student and was the director of the Men’s Chorus at the University of North Texas. I told him I was looking for a Musical Director for *The Fantasticks*. Unbelievably, he said, “Sure, I’ll do it for you.” Austin had done the show many times before and had even played it at the Sullivan Street Playhouse in New York. He had also played El Gallo and Matt when he was younger. I could not believe how incredibly lucky I was to have found him in such an unusual way. I explained to him that this was a graduate student project, and I had no funds available with which to pay him. He said it didn’t matter, he would do it anyway. Fate was sure smiling on me that day. I auditioned Lara right then and there, with Bob accompanying her. I made the decision to cast her. The three of us discussed the fact that we would need a harpist. Bob said he would contact the head of the harp department, Ellen Ritscher, and ask her if she could recommend someone. As we walked out the door, we literally walked right into Ellen Ritscher. This was beginning to get “spooky.” We explained that we were looking for a harpist to play *The Fantasticks*. She told us she was currently playing it at the Casa Manana Theatre in Fort Worth and would be happy to do the show for us. She told us how much she loved the show; and, besides that, she already knew the score. Bob said he would find any other musicians we needed to do the show. What an incredible day I had!

My next object was to find someone to play El Gallo and Matt. I got names of possible candidates from the music department, from some actor friends of mine, from Paula, and from Bob. I spent hours a day on the telephone calling prospects. I auditioned several men for the roles, meeting them in the Theatre Department, the Music Department, in dormitories, or wherever I could. I was unhappy with all of the choices available to me. I had gone to see a production at Theatre Three in Dallas of *Into The Woods* where I witnessed two of the most
attractive and exciting talents I had seen in a long time playing the handsome princes. I noticed that one of them, an Equity actor, had played El Gallo before. I spoke with him after the show, and he expressed a desire to play El Gallo in my production, if he was available. He gave me his phone number. The other actor left, before I had a chance to speak with him. I called the first one. He checked his schedule and found that he had conflicts that would prohibit him from doing my show. I asked about the actor who had been in the show with him. He said, “Gene Yaws? He might just be interested.” The two of them had just seen The Fantasticks together at Casa Manana, and Gene had told him that he would “kill to play El Gallo!” I was given his phone number. I called him and told him I would like to offer him the role. I had already seen him perform and knew he would be right for it. He checked his schedule and agreed to do the role, even though it meant he would have to drive in from Grand Prairie every day. Once again, I had lucked out in finding such a perfect person to play El Gallo—and he was a professional actor. He had a gorgeous singing voice and had a certain arrogant, sexy, dangerous quality about him, which was exactly what I had envisioned for the role.

Finding a person to play Matt would prove to be even more difficult. After what seemed like endless searching, I was going to hear one last auditionee at Bruce Hall, one of the dormitories at U.N.T. I had taken my car, because I was not real sure how to get to Bruce Hall. I stopped at the information booth to ask where to park and was startled by a knock on my car window. I turned to see my son’s roommate, Philip Bentham. I had previously asked him to audition for the role of Matt, but he did not feel he could fit it into his schedule. I told him what I was about to do, and I told him that if his schedule opened up I would still like for him to try out. As luck would have it, he had dropped a class and his schedule was open. I said that I would meet him at his apartment in ten minutes, and he could audition for the role. After I saw
the first person that auditioned for this role at Bruce Hall, I was not impressed – either vocally or physically. Philip auditioned, and the rest is history. My search was over. I cast Philip in the role.

In conclusion, everything seemed to be falling into place for me, somewhat serendipitously. This project would be the first musical ever directed by a student at the University of North Texas. A more detailed chronicle of the audition, rehearsal, and performance schedules and securing of other staff personnel follows in the next chapter.
AUDITIONS, CASTING, REHEARSALS, AND PERFORMANCES

Processes, Procedures and Schedules

My production of The Fantasticks was scheduled for the 1996 fall season at the University of North Texas with performance dates of November 14 through 16. The department of Dance and Theatre Arts at the university hosts a regular season each semester with faculty-directed productions as well as a Lab Series (a program that focuses on student development and direction). The Fantasticks was the only full-length production and the only musical slated to be a part of the Lab Series that season. The regular line-up included Baby, a musical by Sybille Pearson, David Shire and Richard Maltby, Jr., under the direction of the newest addition to the faculty, Joe Deer, who became my faculty supervisor. Tales of the Lost Formicans, a play by Constance Congdon, directed by Marjorie Hayes, and David Mamet’s The Frog Prince and tales from Paul Sills’ Story Theatre, directed by guest director and former faculty member, Ed DeLatte, were also scheduled. In addition to The Fantasticks, the Lab Series included two one-act plays by Edward Albee, Zoo Story and The American Dream, under the direction of two undergraduate students. There was also a Junior Choreography Concert scheduled.

Auditions for all of the productions, except the Choreography Concert, were scheduled during the first week of classes on Wednesday, August 28. The auditionees were asked to prepare a monologue and bring sheet music for one song, if they wished to be considered for one of the musicals. An accompanist was provided. Each auditionee was given a form to fill out, and a time scheduled in fifteen-minute increments. There were the inevitable delays; auditions did not run on time. These try-outs were open to students from the department of Dance and Theatre Arts as well as the College of Music, although very few music students showed up. Approximately eighty students tried out. As was to be expected, there were more actors than
singers who auditioned. There was much more dramatic or acting ability than musical or singing
talent. All of the directors, as well as some other staff members from the Theatre Department,
were present for consultation. The auditions lasted for several hours.

Audition callbacks were posted for the next night. The faculty directors held these
callbacks in three different spaces. I attended Joe Deer’s callbacks where he focused on
choreography, music, and readings from the script. The student directors were not allowed to
post their callbacks yet. This was departmental policy. After all candidates were seen, these
directors met to consider their options. As previously mentioned, that is when I was sent out of
the room. With so many shows scheduled for the semester, there were many conflicts in
scheduling for rehearsals and performances. No conflicts existed for me to use actors cast in
Baby, so I could and did use some of them. But the other productions were in direct conflict
with The Fantasticks. What was particularly disturbing was that many of the actors who had
singing ability were cast in the non-musicals. I was left with less than ideal choices for my
production. I literally could not cast my show without more auditions. I posted a notice for my
own callbacks a couple of days later and resolved to solve the problem somehow, even if I had to
go to the Music Department or to the outside.

During the original audition process, I did luck into one fortunate situation. A student
named Daniel Tripp asked if I had secured a Stage Manager yet. I told him that I had not. He
said he was interested in the position, although he had no experience in stage-managing. I told
him that I had no experience as a director either, so we could learn together. I knew Daniel only
slightly, having worked with him when I was the makeup designer for God, by Woody Allen the
previous semester. He played one of the major roles in the show, and I had applied his makeup.
I was impressed with his professionalism and serious, organized nature, and thought he would be
ideal as my Stage Manager. As it turned out, my instincts were right. I could not have hoped for
a better person to be my Stage Manager. I will always be grateful to him for his tremendous
efforts on behalf of the show.

David Das, the Musical Director I thought I had secured for the show backed out; but he
told me he could play the piano for my callbacks. I would have to find another musical director
for the rehearsals and performances. The day of those callbacks, I called Das; and he, once
again, backed out on me. I was frantic. I tried to secure a replacement from the College of
Music but was unable to find anyone for that night. I did, however, find Bob Austin that day,
who graciously consented to do the show as well as nearly all of the rehearsals for me.

Knowing that the musical aspect was of vital importance to these callback auditions, I
decided that I would have to play the piano myself. My undergraduate degree was in Music
Education with a voice concentration, but I am a less-than-adept piano player. I figured that a
bad player was better than no player. I was able to teach the auditionees some of the songs and
listen to their voices. Having no budget available to hire someone else to come in and help, I
just did what I had to do.

Christina Williams, one of the Dance and Theatre Arts students, offered to help with
choreography. She tried the auditionees out on a couple of combinations and did a very nice job.
However, she was cast in Tales of the Lost Formicans and was not available to do the
choreography for the show. Another student who showed an interest in choreographing, Yna
Espina, was also unable to work out conflicts with the Junior Choreography Concert. I contacted
my friend, Paula Morelan, and she agreed to choreograph the show.

In the spring of 1996, I attended a History of Costume and Decor class and a Set Design
class with a student named JoAnn Raynis. Raynis was an Art major with a minor in Drama. We
became friends. I had great admiration for her as a person and as an artist. In the fall, we were in a Costume Design class together. I asked her if she would consider being my Set Designer for *The Fantasticks*. Even though she had a grueling work and school schedule, she agreed to help; and I named her as my Set Designer.

Another student from the same Costume Design class, Sarah Baccus, showed me some examples of her designs. She had actually previously designed costumes for *The Fantasticks* as a project for one of her classes. I liked her ideas and asked her to design my costumes for the show. She said she would.

One of the students I was seriously considering to play the role of Luisa was a young lady, Ernie Ernst. However, Ernst had just played one of the leads in *Baby*, and I felt that I should give the opportunity to someone else. I located a lovely soprano by the name of Lara Tillotson in the College of Music and decided to cast her in the role of Luisa. However, I liked Ernst and her helpful attitude. She had played Luisa before and loved the show. So, I asked if she would be willing to work on props; and, luckily, she said she would love to have the opportunity.

I had originally offered the position of Makeup Designer to Tiffany Vollmer, who is the student assistant in Makeup. Although she was willing to design my show, another student, Stacy Thorn, who had been the Director for *God* (in which I was Makeup Designer), begged for the opportunity. With my consent, Vollmer relinquished the position to Thorn.

I had a wonderful staff in place and was able to cast most of the show.

I still had no serious contenders for the role of El Gallo. My first choice from the department of Dance and Theatre Arts, Cody Head, would have done a wonderful job, but was cast in *Baby* and *Frog Prince*. Brian Gonzales, another strong contender, had the same problem.
I was hoping to be able to use a talented student, Chris Huber, to play Matt. Huber wanted to do the role but was directing another play and was also working as Sound Designer for *Tales of the Lost Formicans*. He simply was unable to make his schedule work.

I posted the names of those definitely cast. The first person I cast was John Adams in the role of The Mute. John was a professional mime and had been with a mime troupe from the Arts Magnet High School in Dallas for three years. He had come to me in the Green Room and told me of his experience. I asked him to do some of his routines for me. He was terrific and there was no doubt in my mind that he was the right person for the role.

Some of the other roles were a little more difficult to cast. I had envisioned the fathers to be opposites in size and type—sort of a Laurel-and-Hardy-type visual sight gag! However, all of the candidates were approximately of the same stature. I decided to use David Crutcher, who had given a very funny audition, and C. J. Liotta for Hucklebee and Bellomy, respectively. Chad Dansby, who could have also played one of the fathers, gave a very humorous reading of Henry, the old actor, and thus I decided to cast him as the aging thespian. Another student, Alex Ozburn, had almost begged me for the part of Mortimer. He said he had played the role before and loved the part and the show. However, he was cast in *The Frog Prince* and *Story Theatre* and was unable to be in *The Fantasticks*. The day I posted my callbacks in the Green Room, I ran into Scott Lentz, who was lamenting the fact that he had not been cast or had not made any of the callbacks for any of the shows. I told him I wanted him to come to mine, and I am so glad I did. He *was* my Mortimer! I asked each of the guys at the callbacks to “die” for me as the character of Mortimer does in the show. Lentz was totally hysterical at the audition, as he was in the show. His expressions and Cockney accent, as well as his physical comedic style, were most effective.
I was able to talk Gene Yaws, a professional non-Equity actor into playing El Gallo. He was also perfect for the role with his gorgeous singing voice, handsome, sexy appearance, and smooth-talking stage presence. I was very fortunate to have found him in a production of *Into the Woods* at Theatre Three in Dallas.

As it turned out, the most difficult character to cast was Matt, the boy. I auditioned many different males from the Theatre and the Music departments but was not really satisfied with any of my choices, until a young man whom I had already asked to audition suddenly and coincidentally became available. I already knew Philip Bentham; he was my son’s roommate, and they had sung together in a very fine quartet called “Innovations” in high school. He was a good-looking, wholesome, young man with a fine singing voice. He had previously told me he didn’t have the time to do a show because of his school schedule. When I ran into him again, quite by coincidence on campus, he told me he had dropped a course and would audition. My only concern was that the range of the music would not fit his voice (he sang bass in high school) and the fact that he had no acting experience. I went to his and my son’s apartment and had him sing with the tape of *The Fantasticks*. He was able to hit all of the notes. I had him read from the script. Although he was inexperienced, I felt he could be trained to act the part. He was so right for it because of his age, his appearance, and vocal ability. There was only one conflict. He had a choir program on the night of one of our performances. I was sure we could work out something with his professor, so I cast him. My casting was now complete, and what a wonderful cast and staff it was!

The next step was to try to figure out a rehearsal schedule, working around all of the various conflicts. I admit that I found this task to be nearly impossible. My husband, Ed, helped me draw up a chart (a copy of that chart is included in the appendices). Nearly everyone
involved had conflicts, including me. I was just ending a run as Mama Rose in Gypsy for Richland College and was singing at the Enclave Restaurant and Supper Club on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. Even though this was how I was making my living, I was able to drop my performances on Thursday nights during the run of my rehearsals. Unfortunately, I was unable to retrieve those Thursday night engagements afterwards, so there was a permanent loss of income for me because of the show. In addition, I had a class on Wednesday nights until 8:00 p.m. My staff and I adjusted to each other’s conflicts accordingly.

Rehearsals began on Monday, October 7th and were, for the most part, held five days a week, Mondays through Fridays, from 7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. in Stovall Hall, room 172, where the production also took place. Production meetings were scheduled for Mondays at 6:00 p.m. in the Design Lab in the Speech and Drama building.

We called one additional rehearsal on a Saturday afternoon and scheduled one on Sunday, November 10, from 2:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. for dry tech. During this rehearsal, work was still being done to set up a lighting system. On Monday, November 11, we had a “cue-to-cue” rehearsal while still working on the lighting. And on Tuesday and Wednesday, the 12th and 13th, we had our dress rehearsals.

Opening night, November 14th we had to work out the aforementioned problem with Phillip Bentham's choir concert. His teacher refused to let him out of his commitment to the choir so I came up with the idea of having an opening night reception before the show to stall for time, until Phillip arrived. Our leading lady’s mother, Ellen Tillotson, offered to cater and brought in food and drinks. John Adams, our Mute, entertained the people in the lobby with his mime routines, while we waited. No one seemed to be upset or annoyed by the delay; rather they seemed to enjoy it. And Bentham arrived more quickly than anticipated. The show went on
about 15 or 20 minutes later than it normally would have. The audience was very receptive that night, as well as for the next two evenings. Directing was an exhilarating experience—unlike any I had known in all my years as a performer.

A Scenery and Properties Design Concept

Any discussion of scenery and properties design must first begin with a discussion and explanation of the performance space and the positive and negative qualities associated with the facility. Budgetary considerations must be addressed, as well as decisions made on theatrical style desired for the production. Overall, the concept is intimate, minimalist sets, with highly symbolic set pieces and props.

The Speech and Drama Building at the University of North Texas contains two facilities for performances. The larger proscenium theatre is called the University Theatre and seats approximately 500 people. The smaller one is a black-box, theatre-in-the-round, or arena stage, called the Studio Theatre, which seats up to 200 people. I assumed that my production of *The Fantasticks* would be held in the Studio Theatre, which would have been an ideal place to house this intimate little musical. I was unaware of the decision made over the summer to attempt to make a third facility, Stovall Hall, room 172, into a performance space. This space was essentially a large dance studio with no permanent seating. I was informed by Joe Deer, my faculty advisor, and other staff members, that this was where my production would be held. There were a variety of problems associated with the space, and I was not pleased with the prospect.

I was also told that a brand new $50,000 lighting system had been ordered and would be installed in time for my production and that I was going to love being in that space. It was not installed, and neither I nor anyone else associated with the production loved being in that space.
First of all, anyone entering the space had to take off his or her shoes. This was not only difficult to enforce, but also proved to be dangerous, destructive, and hindered the choreography. Cast and crew members were constantly slipping, falling, and ruining hosiery and socks.

With the exception of a few odd items, there were not many set pieces required for use in our show. Everything necessary had to be built and moved or carried over from the Speech and Drama building and constructed or borrowed from existing materials, since we had such a small budget.

There was no raked seating for the audience members, and the space was divided into two rooms. We were given the option of using one or both rooms. One room was too small; and two rooms were too large, in our opinion. The Fantasticks is a very intimate show and works best when audience members are close enough to become directly or indirectly involved. This is the concept I wanted to convey in my production. The cast, crew, and I all felt we would rather use the smaller area to create that intimacy. JoAnn Raynis, the set designer, designed the set for both configurations; but we made a joint decision to use the corner of the one room for our performance area. Joe Deer, my faculty advisor, thought differently but told us we could make our own decision. In retrospect, I am not so sure we made the right decision. We sold out every performance; and the audience members had an extremely difficult time seeing all the action, due to the fact that we had to set up so many rows of non-raked seating. However, there was also no good place for dressing rooms or for a make-up room. Thus, we used the adjoining room for that purpose, setting up tables and mirrors and racks for clothing. It was less than ideal, but we made it work. The only positive aspect of the space was that the acoustics were good.

JoAnn and I made many trips over to the space to try to determine our design process, develop design ideas, and to decide what set pieces were there that we could use and what other
pieces would be needed. I found a ladder in a storage room and hit upon the idea to use this for El Gallo. I saw him as a kind of “God-like” figure controlling the action from “on high.” This turned out to be a very effective visual aid. The Fantasticks traditionally has a kind of simple, homemade Little Rascals “Let’s do a show!” quality about it, which worked perfectly for the almost non-existent budget we had to work with. (We were given a $175.00 total budget.) (It also fit in with the original concept of Commedia del Arte style of theatre.)

Jones and Schmidt originally intended The Fantasticks to be presented on an open stage, a simple space surrounded on three sides by audience, which is basically the concept we used. As is usual in the presentational style of theatre, we wanted to play the action as closely to the audience as possible to enable the players to speak directly to the audience from time to time or to involve them more in the action and the dialogue. For the most part, as in the Commedia style of theatre, I did not want the actors to leave the stage, but to wait outside the center of action for their turn to “come back on.” Some of the time, mostly at the beginning of the play, I wanted the actors to watch the other actors in the light. Later, they might sit on the back or sides of the platform or on benches or cubes with their backs turned towards the audience to indicate that they were not directly involved in the action of the play. The audience who would soon view them as invisible would quickly forget them.

I decided to work with the three cubes we found in the space and also to utilize a ballet barre we found there, which doubled as part of the set and to separate the band from the action of the play. I really wanted to use a platform stage with a curtain and four poles—-one on each corner. I felt this was also consistent with the Commedia concept and would also add levels to the playing area, which were sorely needed because of the non-raked seating. I also viewed this platform as a means to provide a symbolically safe-haven or nucleus for the characters to come
together. The beginnings and endings of each act take place on this platform—a sort of “home base” where they strike their final and beginning poses or tableaus. It also served as the place, in my production, where Matt and Luisa sought refuge from the storm in “Soon It’s Gonna’ Rain.” JoAnn designed, and we built, a 4’X8’ platform with two ramps—one coming off the stage left side and the other coming down from the front right side of the platform. As it turned out, we were forced to change from ramps to steps when it was realized that the ramps would have caused a space problem and a safety hazard. We also had portable steps already available to us.

Most of the action, however, would take place on the floor. I brought a barstool from home to use and JoAnn designed a moon/sun stand with a hook to use for our cardboard moon/sun, which she also cut out and painted. Ray Fike, the faculty technical advisor, had a black curtain with The Fantasticks written in purplish lettering already in his possession; and he said we could use it. JoAnn designed it to go behind the platform stage, and we found some fabric we dyed to match The Fantasticks lettering, to go across the front of the platform at the end of each act. We also used the same fabric for a skirt to go around the bottom of the platform stage. There was a bench in the space we used during rehearsals, but it was wobbly. Daniel Tripp, my stage manager, and a couple of the cast members took it to the shop one day and put extra pieces of wood underneath it to make it more secure.

During rehearsals, we used a trunk (which was more like a cabinet with doors that opened from the front) that we found in the space, but it was not exactly what we wanted for the performance. After talking to Ray Fike, we discovered that the department already possessed the perfect trunk for our purposes. It was large enough to hold two actors, opened from the top and
had a large hole in the back, enabling the actors to enter and exit the trunk without being seen by the audience.

All of the set pieces, the platform, the ladder, the stool, the bench, and the cubes were painted black. The trunk, which was already black and blue, was repainted black and the purplish color to go with the lettering, the curtain, and the skirt. The staff and cast did all the work ourselves.

The setting was designed to go in the back right corner of the room because there was a lighting grid already installed on the ceiling alongside a folding gym wall (refer to Appendix). There were three sections of rowed seating with aisles on each side of those sections. During one of the production meetings, we were informed that we had to rent folding chairs for the performances, since there was no permanent seating installed in the space. This was later recanted. The department agreed to pay for them, since this had not been a budget consideration. We had to try and guess how many chairs we would need. JoAnn’s design called for 102 seats; so we made the decision to order 125, just in case we needed them. We also had some bleachers in the front right corner of the room that were bolted to the floor. We never dreamed we would use all of the chairs and the bleachers, but that is essentially what happened. Our show sold out all three performances!

As mentioned before, Jones and Schmidt intended for The Fantasticks to be about illusions.

Traditionally, The Fantasticks makes use of numerous simple properties, some of which are used in symbolic ways such as the wood doweling sticks used to represent the wall and the rapier swords, the cardboard sun/moon, the snow confetti, the flame whip, the branches symbolizing the trees, etc.
Ernie Ernst, our Properties Manager and I decided to follow the authors’ original concept, with minor alterations, in designing the props for our show. A list of props used, with their description, is located in the appendices.

A Lighting Design Concept

_The Fantasticks_ is about illusions. It is not “real.” Rather, the show deals in suggestive realism. It is not written in prose but in poetry. Since there is little or no scenery, much of this illusion and “theatrical magic” should come from the lights.

As previously discussed, I was promised that a brand new lighting system worth $50,000 would be installed for our use in the Stovall Hall facility by show time. I put up notices for someone to be the lighting designer for _The Fantasticks_ and asked several qualified people if they would be willing to design and/or run lights for the show. No one offered to help. I went to the faculty and my advisor for help and was told they were all too busy. Nothing had been done to install the new lighting system, which was sitting in the closet. Ray Fike, the faculty technical advisor, had promised me faithfully that he would find someone to take care of the lighting situation. It never happened. It was less than a week before the opening and still nothing had been done. Our leading lady, Lara Tillotson told us that her brother, Josh, would do it for us; and I told her to ask him to come on in to help. Scott Lentz, who played Mortimer, also offered to help design the lights. I told him to proceed. He and Josh Tillotson spent hours working on the design. We were later informed that we did not have the proper cables available to install the system…we would only be allowed to use very basic lighting. We used lights on trees and no footlights. I desperately wanted to use a spotlight for certain parts of the show but was told I could not. Finally, after much negative input from Ray Fike, he finally stepped in and rigged a basic system up for us to use and eventually we were
able to bring in a spotlight. This did not happen until our dress rehearsal. Our lighting was nothing fancy but worked out all right, except for one time during our final dress rehearsal when everything went black as fuses were blown. The problem was found, and repaired and we had no further problems.

When asked what I wanted for the lighting in the show, conceptually, I pointed out such things as the fact that there should be a romantic moonlit effect for the ending of the first act versus the sun-drenched, harsh lighting at the beginning of the second act. I liked the idea of the use of a spotlight for several reasons. There is much mention of the light in a theatrical sense by Henry, the old actor, who is forever attempting to be seen in “his” light. I also wanted the lovers to be pinpointed in a spotlight during the scenes in which they were truly together as in “Soon It’s Gonna Rain” and “They Were You.” The spotlight had a unifying effect. I wanted the lighting to evoke the mood of theatricality as well as illusion or suggestive realism.

A Costume Design Concept

Having only a small budget to work with, our costume designer, Sarah Baccus, under the advisement and supervision of Barbara Cox, decided to pull most of the costumes from the available inventory of the North Texas Costume department. Conceptually, I wanted the costumes for The Fantasticks to be theatrical, colorful, and have flair. I wanted them to be suggestive of Commedia del Arte but with a more contemporary look about them. I believe Sarah, Barbara, and I were successfully able to accomplish this.

Sarah did not always make it to production meetings, but we saw each other at least two or three times a week, during our Costume class. Ideally, designers should never miss these meetings. She showed me sketches and renderings of her designs in progress. Barbara Cox advised and assisted in every aspect, from designing to constructing to pulling costumes. Sarah
took measurements of the actors during the first week of rehearsals and immediately began pulling several items for the actors to try on.

I brought in several dresses from my own costume closet for Lara Tillotson (Luisa) to try on. Although those items fit Lara, the colors did not work well with her olive complexion. One sleeveless, full-skirted, white dress Sarah found worked, but needed some color. So Sarah constructed a dusty pink satin sash with a big bow in the back and matching bow for her hair, which was exactly the touch the dress needed. Lara wore tan tights and character shoes, which were died white to match the dress. Conceptually, the white dress fit the image I had for Luisa’s character. Luisa is a woman/child, still innocent and virginal, yet embarking upon womanhood. The white dress symbolized her purity, her naivete’. The pink sash and bow were representative of her “little girl side.” However, the dress was slightly low-cut and form fitting in the bodice, displaying the actress’ ample bosom and small waist, thus revealing the body of a sensual woman. Towards the end of the musical, when Luisa is hurt by El Gallo and reconciles with Matt, I staged her to remove the bow from her hair as a gesture of her newfound maturity and her loss of innocence.

Sarah appropriately dressed Phillip Bentham (Matt) in a conservative outfit with khaki chino pants, blue oxford shirt and tan cardigan sweater. He wore white socks and brown loafers on his feet. Matt is a college boy who dresses in a traditionally “preppy” looking outfit so as to reinforce his identity as a student, a status of which he is most proud. Matt believes himself to be wise and learned and is not ashamed to be considered an “egg-head.” He dresses casually, yet sensibly, as befits his role as Luisa’s protector.

For Gene Yaws, who played El Gallo, Sarah found a gorgeous black cape lined with red, a white calypso-type shirt, and constructed some tight black flared pants with red insets in the
bell portion. There was also a red sash around his waist with gold fringe. He wore black boots. We decided not to use a hat, because Gene’s hair was so nice. This costume was absolutely stunning on Gene and caused quite a bit of conversation among his adoring fans.

The black and red colors of El Gallo’s costume aptly represent his dark, dangerous, yet exciting side. He is the most dashing and vibrantly clad character in the show. In Spanish, El Gallo means “the rooster.” El Gallo is the center of attention, just as the rooster is the central character in a barnyard. Yet El Gallo’s mission is to teach, to enlighten the other characters in the play, as well as the audience. The white shirt and gold fringe of the sash could indicate the existence of a “heart” and a pure motive underneath all the bravado and the spectacle.

I had wanted David Crutcher (Hucklebee) to enter the play in his boxer shorts, so Sarah found an obnoxious-looking pair for him. I thought this would be a humorous way to introduce his character while also revealing something of his personality. (He was not ready for the opening scene and was forced to enter without his pants.) Sarah sewed the front opening on the boxer shorts closed to prevent any unforeseen accidents. He was put in plaid pants and suspenders. His shirt was a white button-down with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, and he wore no tie. He wore a crumply straw fedora hat with tan hatband. He wore brown shoes and socks.

I had told Sara that I saw the fathers as being like “The Odd Couple” by Neil Simon; and I wanted Hucklebee to be like Oscar, the slovenly one. This was accomplished with his costume and by his late entrance.

C J Liotta (Bellomy) was dressed in a colorful, striped vest with very unusual buttons and matching tie, which Sarah constructed. He wore tan pants, white long-sleeved shirt and a white vaudevillian-type straw hat with red hatband. The reason for the unusual buttons was because there is a reference made to the fact that Bellomy is a button-maker by profession. We chose to
have C J Liotta wear his wire-rimmed glasses and a handlebar moustache. The moustache was
used to give him an old-fashioned, “nerdy,” out-of-date quality, as befits the character’s miserly,
stingy ways. He looked very prim and neat, just as Felix’s character in *The Odd Couple*.

Chad Dansby, who played Henry, the old actor, was clothed in a tattered, patched, brown
knee-length costume with multi-colored tights over which he placed an aged, torn, colorful
doublet of brown and orange. He wore a soft clown ruff around his neck and soft, pointy shoes
on his feet. During the abduction scene he wore a black cape over his shoulders. Later, he was
dressed in a long, bright, crayon-red wig, a red turban, and a pirate outfit with huge gold
earrings. A period rag coat was placed over the original costume and long underwear.

Henry’s costume spoke volumes about the character’s status as an aging actor. He was
poor, down on his luck, and somewhat senile. He was still wearing the same costumes he had
been wearing for decades; he could not afford new ones. Plus he was delusional about the way
they looked now, as he had a sentimental attachment to them. He was truly a man living on his
past glories.

Sarah and I had a difference of opinion on the costume for Mortimer, played by Scott
Lentz. She did not want him to be dressed in long johns (or body stocking), as his character is
often portrayed; but I did. She wanted to do something more original. I wanted to stick with the
more traditional outfit, because I have always thought it to be hysterically funny. I also wanted
him to have a potbelly. Sarah gave in to my desires and dressed him in a pair of dyed pink long
johns and loincloth. He wore yellow and white striped socks and black and white high-topped
tennis shoes. His stomach was padded; and we found a very funny Indian headpiece that had
long, black “dred-lock” braids hanging down with a feather sticking out of the top. Later, when
he was dressed like a pirate, he wore a huge, Captain Hook-like pirate hat and jacket over the
pink long johns. It was a very funny costume. Although all of the characters were somewhat humorous, Henry and Mortimer provided most of the comic relief in the play.

I felt that the pink long johns simulated the nakedness of the body of an Indian with only a loincloth, but wrinkled, lumpy, and potbellied as an older, more out-of-shape, comic, figure. Mortimer was also poor and extremely dumb or mentally challenged. He blindly followed Henry and his instructions for years. Yet, when he changed over to the pirate outfit, he represented the adventurous lifestyle Matt was searching for and was easily able to seduce Matt into leaving home.

Another thought Sarah had, which we were unable to bring to fruition because of budget, was to sew a stuffed parrot onto the shoulder of Mortimer’s pirate costume. The prop was to be an inept one, falling off every time he moved a certain way. This would not only have been funny, but would have given insight into Mortimer’s own inept character, giving the costume control over him just as Henry had control over him.

Sarah placed John (the Mute) in a black turtleneck sweater and black tights, which were nixed in favor of looser black pants. This decision was made, because the tights revealed too much of John’s gender, and I perceived his character to be genderless. A black top hat was rented, and a daisy was placed in the hatband. Around his waist John wore a tan tool belt in which he placed needed items, such as the rain and snow confetti, the ribbon, the necklace, and the plums. This set him up to be the utilitarian character with no greater purpose than to serve. It set him out of the action, setting him apart from the other characters in the play. He wore traditional white-faced mime make-up (designed by make-up designer, Stacy Thorn), making him faceless, and white gloves, black socks and shoes.
I received many compliments on the costumes for the show; and I don’t believe we could have done better, if we had had a huge budget with which to work.

Included in the appendices are original costume designs found in The Director’s Stage Guide, furnished by Music Theatre International. They served as a guideline or a basis for ideas actually used in my production of The Fantastics. The renderings were credited to Harvey Schmidt. Color photographs of our costumes are included in the photo section of this document, also located in the appendices.

Makeup Design Concept

Originally, the makeup for The Fantasticks was to be designed by undergraduate student, Tiffany Vollmer, who, under the guidance of faculty member, Barbara Cox, ran the makeup shop. I knew Vollmer to be a knowledgeable and talented makeup artist. She and I worked together when I was the makeup designer for God, by Woody Allen, in the spring of 1996 at the University of North Texas. God was a Lab Series production directed by student, Stacy Thorn. Unbeknownst to me, Thorn approached Vollmer with the idea of taking over as the designer of makeup for my production. Vollmer, who was overloaded with several other projects, agreed to relinquish the position, if I were agreeable.

I had seen renderings and photographs of makeup designs Thorn had done for class and thought she was quite good. I was confident she would do a fine job for me. Therefore, somewhat ironically, Thorn was named makeup designer for my directing project, just as I was named makeup designer for her project.

The biggest problem that Thorn and I had to face was where, in the Stovall space, to set up a makeup and dressing room. We discussed our options. We could create a place in the next room, which was the other half of the performing space we had decided not to use. We could do
the makeup in the bathrooms. We could use an empty room quite a distance away. Or, we could
do the actors’ makeup in the regular space in the Speech and Drama building and have to walk or
 drive to Stovall after the makeup was applied. None of the choices were ideal or very practical,
but we finally made the decision to use the space next door. We had to bring in tables and chairs
and set up mirrors. The stage makeup had to be carried over from the Drama building. Our
biggest complaint was that there was no water available in that space; and, because of the
sensitive dance floor situation, we were not allowed to bring in water. Thorn and I both wanted
to soapout Chad Dansby’s (Henry’s) hair, but could not, because of the lack of water.
Otherwise, everything went smoothly. I helped Thorn with the makeup application on the
actors, as did assistant, Charis Boyd.

Thorn and I met a few times during the rehearsal period to discuss our concepts for the
makeup. She showed me renderings she had made and asked my opinion.

For John Adams (The Mute) we were faced with the question of whether or not to use
traditional white-faced mime makeup. I really wanted Adams to be set apart from the other
characters in the play. His character was not really a part of the action or the plot, but rather a
utilitarian, almost invisible prop man. I felt that the use of the mime makeup was appropriate,
and Thorn and Adams agreed. Thorn designed and Adams applied his own makeup. He
preferred, and was used to doing it himself; so we gratefully obliged. We had also made the
decision for him to shave his beard off for this show. As mentioned before, I felt he should be
somewhat genderless; and the clean-shaven look helped accomplish this.

For Lara Tillotson (Luisa), Thorn designed a soft, natural looking makeup but decided
she wanted her to wear false lashes to give her a more wide-eyed, innocent, yet flirtatious look.
Tillotson was not too fond of the notion of wearing false lashes but agreed to try them and did
use them throughout the run of the show. She wore a dusty pink, natural shade of lipstick to blend with her bow and sash, and her lips were lined with a plum lip liner pencil for definition. She wore a little pinkish blush on her cheeks and soft brown eye shadow highlighted under the brow with a light beige shadow. She was conceptually, once again, a little girl/woman.

Phillip Bentham (Matt) wore very basic makeup—foundation, a touch of blush and lip color, and a little dark brown liner around the eyes. It was just enough to keep him from “washing out” on stage and to help him maintain a rosy, youthful appearance. The only special makeup effect used on Bentham was a black eye, quickly applied by Thorn off stage. This would represent an outward symbol of the hurt he had experienced “beyond that road” when he ventured into the world.

Gene Yaws’ (El Gallo) makeup was also basic but skillfully applied to accentuate his handsome features. I perceived El Gallo to be a man of mystery. Yaws naturally had light, almost mysterious looking eyes, which were played up by the eye makeup—black liner, smoke grey and brown eye shadows. He, being a colorful character, wore some color on his cheeks and a natural lip color. His hair was long in back and perfectly coiffed, which suited the arrogant personality of El Gallo well. We chose not to make him wear a hat (the more traditional look for El Gallo) because of his beautiful hair.

Thorn and I perceived the two fathers to be middle-aged and, thus, applied a little standard age makeup—highlights and shadows in creases for wrinkles. For Bellamy, played by C J Liotta, Thorn decided to give him a handlebar moustache. It seemed to suit my concept of Bellamy as being like the more priggish Felix in the Odd Couple. However, when Liotta first wore the moustache at dress rehearsal, I thought it looked too fake; and it kept falling off of him. Thorn was firm in her decision to have him wear it, and so she thinned out the hair on the
moustache a lot and added some grey to what I considered to be the “too-black” piece. It looked much more natural then; and, I must admit, added much to the look of his character. As mentioned before, Hucklebee, played by David Crutcher, was, in my mind, like Oscar the counterpart to Felix in the Odd Couple. Crutcher had a very intriguing square face with which to apply the middle-age makeup and already had his own moustache, which we decided to keep. It was a scruffy moustache and well suited to his slovenly character.

Thorn and I made the assumption that Mortimer, portrayed by Scott Lentz, was at least sixty years of age, by the fact that it stated in the script that he and Henry had been together for forty years. We used old-age makeup on him but tried not to make him look as old as Henry. I helped Lentz at first; but, after he got used to applying it, he was able to do his own makeup. Lentz mugged it up beautifully for his character in the show, making vacant, dumb looking faces, which didn’t require a lot of makeup tricks. We decided not to apply Indian war paint because of the transition to the pirate outfit in the later scene.

Chad Dansby had, by far, the most intricate makeup for his portrayal of the ancient actor, Henry. Thorn and I both wanted him to appear as if he were almost 100 years old. Thorn spent most of her time on Dansby, in order to accomplish this. It was unfortunate that we could not “soap out” his hair, because we wanted him to be balding due to his line “imagine hair!” We also had no bald cap available for use. Not being able to make him bald was a problem of the space and limited budget. His hair was greyed, though, and made to stick out all over his head for comic effect.

Choreographic Process
As mentioned earlier, Paula Morelan, a wonderfully talented professional choreographer agreed to choreograph The Fantasticks for me. She had choreographed the show a couple of years before at the Garland Civic Theatre, but chose not to use the exact same choreography she
had used before. This was due to the differences in the set and the abilities of the cast as well as a consideration of my input and interpretation of the choreography. In my youth, I had danced and choreographed and am not without some understanding of the process.

Morelan and I met a couple of times, before rehearsals began, to plan and discuss our ideas for the show. We held one meeting at a Denny’s Restaurant in Dallas and once in my apartment in Denton to gain a clearer understanding of our interpretations.

Morelan is a perfectionist and a no-nonsense woman. She drove the cast hard and long at rehearsals. I attribute much of the success of the show to her ability to get a precise, disciplined performance out of the cast. She and I compliment each other well. Whereas, I tend to have a more relaxed, informal style of directing, Morelan kept the cast in line by not putting up with any foolishness. One can question her methods but not her results. The show was tight, and all the hard work paid off.

The style Paula used for the fathers, Hucklebee and Bellomy, in their two big numbers, “Never Say No” and “Plant a Radish” was vaudevillian in nature, utilizing hats and canes and comedic moves. This choice supported both our ideas of the overtly theatrical style we wished to impart to the audience. The lovers, Matt and Luisa, were choreographed in a more romantic ballroom type of dance. I staged their numbers “Soon It’s Gonna Rain,” “Metaphor,” and “They Were You” for the most part; but small sections were polished by Morelan. I also staged Luisa’s solo “Much More” and the “Rape Ballet” with the assistance of Joe Deer, my advisor. Morelan did a terrific job with the choreography on “Round and Round” in which she emulated a maypole-effect with the use of ribbons and frantic whirling around by El Gallo (Yaws) and Luisa (Tillotson). More time was spent on this number than any other but the results were well worth the effort. It was visually stimulating, exciting, and disturbing, all at the same time, which is an
apt interpretation of the piece. This was a time of confusion for Luisa—her transition from little girl to womanhood. Also quite notable was the musical number between El Gallo and Matt (Yaws and Bentham), “I Can See It.” Morelan effectively created a mood of restlessness in Matt and showed the dominance of El Gallo over the youth. This piece set the stage for Matt’s exit into the unknown outside world of which he so longed to be a part.

A Music Direction Process

Bob Austin, our Musical Director, is a doctoral student at the University of North Texas. He is also the Director of the Men’s Chorus in the School’s College of Music. He has played piano and sung professionally for many years. Most interestingly, he had played the piano for *The Fantasticks* at the Sullivan Street Theatre in New York in the sixties. He had also played El Gallo and Matt in other productions of *The Fantasticks*. Needless to say, Austin was certainly qualified and extremely familiar with the music of *The Fantasticks*.

I was also very familiar with the score. I knew the music and all of the lyrics very well. As a professional singer, I had sung some of the songs in my nightclub act and had listened to the album and seen the show many, many times.

Austin and I had three or four preliminary discussions over the phone outlining our strategy for rehearsals and the show. Bob and I decided it would be a good idea to rehearse the cast on music only, after the first night’s “read-through.” Each actor/singer was assigned a time to work individually with Austin, as well as various groupings and ensemble work. I attended all of these rehearsals and talked to each of the actors about their characters, when they were waiting their turn to sing.

I had given each of the actors a cassette tape of the 1990 Japanese tour of *The Fantasticks* for them to listen to and practice with at the initial rehearsal. They told me they found this to be
extremely helpful. Although most of them did not wish to copy the voices on the tape, they were able to use it to help learn the music.

I was quite impressed with the abilities of my cast members. Those who were supposed to, in my opinion, had beautiful voices, like Luisa, El Gallo, and Matt. Those who had “character” voices, like the two fathers, were appropriately funny. I believe the songs were composed to showcase the vocal talents of the leading characters, based upon the range and difficulty of the pieces. While the songs for the fathers could be performed by actors with considerable vocal ability, they are simple and not overly challenging.

After that first week, we started on choreography and blocking, constantly reinforcing and refining the things Austin had taught them in those musical rehearsals. He had focussed on the notes, the technique, the interpretation, and good vocal habits.

Austin and I decided to cut several measures from the Overture, because it ran so long and did not really seem to be necessary. We kept the rest of the score mostly intact, although I asked that he add an instrumental section in “They Were You,” so that I could block Matt and Luisa to return to the platform during that section.

My experience as a professional musician was helpful, when dealing with Austin and the cast, as well as the musicians in the orchestra. Bob and I agreed that we had to have a harpist for our production of The Fantasticks. I have always considered the harp to be an important and integral factor in the “sound” and look of the show. The harp adds a wistful, delicate sound that cannot be achieved, in my opinion, with the piano alone. I feel this was an appropriate choice of instrumentation conceived by the authors for their premise of loss of innocence. After having gotten a commitment from Ellen Ritscher, the head of the harp department at U.N.T., to do the show, I just happened to run into her one day very near to the show date. She very
unconcernedly said she didn’t think she could make one of the performances. She said it didn’t really matter; and that Austin could just play it by himself, as he had done for rehearsals. I was not very happy but could not really say much, since I was not paying her. Bob was also extremely agitated by her decision. I told him I knew several professional harpists that I could call upon. I spent several hours on the phone trying to locate a replacement for the one night Ritscher said she could not make it. I was actually able to come up with two harpists who said they would like to do it for me. One was a friend of mine, Laurel McConkey, and the other, Patricia Diers, who was recommended to me by another harpist friend of mine. In the meantime, I called Ritscher to confirm that she would do the other two nights -- she decided she didn’t really have the time to do it at all. I made an agreement with McConkey and Diers to do all three nights. Both had played the show before and were looking forward to doing it.

Austin found a drummer and a bass player from the College of Music to play the show. Austin played the piano expertly, and the orchestra was excellent. It has traditionally been part of the style of *The Fantasticks* to have the musicians on stage with the actors (usually behind them, if possible), and in full view of the audience. Ours were separated only by a dancer’s portable barre on the stage right side and were also in full view.

I had made the decision to use the “It Depends On What You Pay” number, rather than play it safe with the recently written, more politically correct “Abductions.” The original song uses the word “rape” in a literary sense, meaning “to seize and carry off by force” -- A “literary” rape, as in *The Rape of the Lock*. Not wishing to offend anyone, I wrote and rewrote the explanation preceding the song and was able to keep, in my opinion, the more humorous, original version. This was done with the stated permission of the authors in the MTI Director’s Stage Guide. I felt that some of the humor was obtained by the surprise effect, the “naughtiness”
of the short, unexpected word. It had not offended me, when I was a child; and I hoped that others would feel the same way. As it turned out, the number was one of the biggest hits in the show, expertly sung and choreographed. I did not receive one negative comment in regards to the song.

A Program Design Concept and Discussion of Program

I had already designed a program for my production of *The Fantasticks*, when the box-office staff informed me that this was the responsibility of the Stage Manager. I have since learned that I was misinformed. Not wishing to usurp Daniel Tripp’s authority to design his own program, I turned the responsibility over to him. I did, however, request that a caricature picture of *The Fantasticks*, in their tableau pose on the platform stage, be used. I gave him a copy of that picture, as well as the “Happy Ending” picture for the back. He assembled the information for the program and transferred it onto a form provided to him by the box office workers. They supposedly gave Tripp a sample to proofread.

I was extremely unhappy and dissatisfied with the final product. There were no pictures – only the title written in black on the cover of a pink-colored Xerox paper that was folded in half. In addition, there were typographical errors and misprints. Bob Austin was listed as Dialect Coach, instead of Musical Director. Paula Morelan was listed as choreographer; but her impressive biography was totally omitted, as was Austin’s. Generally speaking, the program was the biggest disappointment of the entire project. In my opinion, it was ugly and cheap looking. I am sorry I was not given the opportunity of previewing it. I would never have allowed it to stand as it was.

I have included a copy of the actual program used and the one I designed in the appendix.

A Reflection on the Production Process
From its inception, the direction of *The Fantasticks* has been a fascinating and wonderful educational experience. When I first submitted my proposal to do the show, I had not intended for it to be my Problem in Lieu of a Thesis, but rather a beginning directing project. I had no idea that the submission would meet with such opposition. I figured this was a lesson in “real life,” for it is a widely recognized fact that getting a show produced requires much salesmanship and determination.

When informed that I would be able to use this production for my Master’s Thesis project, I was both delighted and frightened. After all, I had never directed a show before; and I wasn’t really sure what I was getting myself into. In addition, I would be going about this project backwards. Usually, when such a project is contemplated, the thesis research is done first; and the direction of the show done after the completion of the written work. Although I did do my homework before directing *The Fantasticks*; because of time constraints, I was unable to delve as deeply into the subject as I would have liked. I have often stated that this, in some ways, was probably a blessing in disguise. If I had really known what I was about to embark upon, I might have been too intimidated to tackle it.

I learned how important it is to surround yourself with a staff of good, trustworthy people. I learned how important organizational skills are; and, most importantly, I learned to respect the hard work and dedication it takes to be a director – as well as all of the other creative and administrative positions involved in the theatre. Heretofore, I had only looked at the process through the eyes of a performer.

In retrospect, I can think of some aspects of the process I would change, if I could repeat the experience. I would have liked to have had more preparation time—more time to study and analyze the script, specifically, and the style of Commedia del Arte, in general. In a perfect
scenario, I would have had fewer outside conflicts. Although it was beyond my control, I would have preferred doing the show in a different space. If I had no other option than to use Stovall Hall as my performance space, I would probably use both rooms, utilizing the entire area. I would not have relied on the fact that we were promised an intricate lighting system, nor would I have left the job of lighting designer “up in the air” for so long.

However, I would not have changed my staff or my cast, nor could I have dreamed of a more well received reaction from the audience. I consider myself to have been extremely lucky and fortunate to have had a mostly successful experience as a first-time director.
REFERENCES


Filmography


Discography
