What, besides Mylar, has made Scope and Scalpel sparkle for so long? (Shown here, the 1969 Medic Hair production program cover.)

BY SALLY ANN FLECKER

WHY THE SHOW MUST GO ON

GIVE MY GRAND ROUNDS TO BROADWAY

Lois Pounds Oliver (MD ’65) still regrets the floating chickens. Not the floating chickens per se. The chickens were great at the Saturday night performance of Coldfinger, fluttering down so softly from the great catwalk above the stage in the Stephen Foster Memorial Theatre. In fact, those live chickens were practically a showstopper—not only for the surprised audience but also for the startled cast. The chickens descended at the close of the first act, during the “Womb at the Top” number (sung to the tune of “Milk and Honey”), a satirical homage to Magee-Womens Hospital. Those 17 men singing their hearts out, and done up as heavily pregnant women in blond wigs, had no clue that the show was about to take a fowl turn.

The idea to use poultry to ratchet up the silliness of the skit had come late in the game—after the show’s Friday-night performance. One of the stagehands, who grew up on a farm, remembered that if you dropped a chicken from on high it would flap its ineffectual wings and ease itself to the ground like a dandelion wisp caught in the breeze.
Let’s do it, said his cohorts. Exit stage right. They conducted an impromptu casting call at a local farm and by show time the next evening had a cadre of hens waiting in the wings. Oliver’s lament some 36 years later comes from the success of the coop coup: “We always wished we had had it at the end.” The retired Oliver, who last served as associate dean for Duke University, has a good point. After all, how do you follow a chicken?

The feathering of the Saturday night performance of Scope and Scalpel—the musical extravaganza written, produced, and performed each year by soon-to-graduate fourth-year medical students—was not the only last-minute addition to the 1965 production. Four nights before the opening, Oliver and her coproducer, Alan Tapper (MD ’65, a Baltimore-based ob/gyn) came to a sinking realization. They didn’t have an opening number. Oliver’s lament some 36 years later comes from the success of the coop coup: “We always wished we had had it at the end.” The retired Oliver, who last served as associate dean for Duke University, has a good point. After all, how do you follow a chicken? The feathering of the Saturday night performance of Scope and Scalpel—the musical extravaganza written, produced, and performed each year by soon-to-graduate fourth-year medical students—was not the only last-minute addition to the 1965 production. Four nights before the opening, Oliver and her coproducer, Alan Tapper (MD ’65, a Baltimore-based ob/gyn) came to a sinking realization. They didn’t have an opening number. Oliver’s lament some 36 years later comes from the success of the coop coup: “We always wished we had had it at the end.” The retired Oliver, who last served as associate dean for Duke University, has a good point. After all, how do you follow a chicken?

The names still get a chuckle: “A Scar Is Born,” “Days of Line and Hoses,” and, of course, “From Here to Maternity.”

Speaking of the big bang, the Scope-and-Scalpel creation myth goes something like this. In 1955, back in the days when the school was a little smaller, a fourth-year medical student, one Sam Aronson (MD ’55, now an ophthalmologist in San Francisco), was shooting the breeze with Frank Dixon, then the young chair of the pathology department (see profile, p. 26). Medical school was set up so that the students spent their first two years in lectures together, then dispersed for the last two years as they wound their way through clinical rotations. Wouldn’t it be great, Dixon wondered aloud, if we could think of some way to bring the class together? The ensuing discussion is lost to posterity—not so its result: Hey, kids! Let’s put on a show!

Aronson tested the idea out on a few friends, including Felix Miller (MD ’55, today a retired ob/gyn), whom everyone calls by his enduring childhood nickname, Bebe. Miller would become the first show’s musical director. That irony still makes him laugh. Seems he wasn’t much of a singer, and since there was no score, he could only convey the music to the rehearsal pianist by arduously playing single notes with his pointer finger. Still the idea of a class play became a snowball rolling downhill. A committee was formed. By show time, 99 percent of the class had enlisted. They built sets and made costumes. They wrote skits that poked fun at the quirks of the professors and lampooned the vicissitudes of their four years of med school. They produced, directed, acted, sang, and danced. “It was the blind leading the blind,” Miller remembers. But soon what started out as a few skits in the imaginations of Aronson, Miller, and company had turned into a two-hour musical review. PMS IV—taken from the designation for a fourth-year Pitt medical student—looked superstition straight in the face. It debuted in May 1955, on Friday the 13th. The date did not prove unlucky. This year, when the Class of 2002 stages their musical, it will be the 48th consecutive Scope and Scalpel production.

But it is Ross Musgrave (MD ’43 and executive director of Pitt’s Medical Alumni Association) who should be credited with keeping the momentum going. He served as faculty adviser that first year. PMS IV’s program notes include this cheerful “postscriptum”: To our successors, to all future PMS IV’s: we offer simple advice. Give it a try! So that fall, Musgrave laid down the gauntlet at the feet of the Class of ’56. “You’ve been given this challenge by your predecessors,” he told them at an assembly in the Mercy Hospital amphitheater. “I hope you’ll take them up on it, and I would be happy to work with you on it.” Almost immediately a group came forward who would meet at Musgrave’s Highland Park home in the evenings.

“They’d sit on the floor and thrash out ideas on how they were going to do the show,” Musgrave, who would also advise the next six
And the songs: “This Gland Is Your Gland,” “Like a Surgeon,” . . .

“Medical students have talent coming out of the ears,” says Moriarty. “But those other talents aren’t recognized at all.

“No one is going to say, ‘Oh, by the way, can you also play piano as well as do this presentation? Can you tap dance as well as describe some disease entity?’

“In medicine you work hard together. You have to trust your colleagues; you become lifelong friends. The show does the same thing. It throws them into this thing that they suddenly realize they have committed themselves to do, and they will do the best that they possibly can. There’s this magic about it.”

And so the show goes on. What better way to wrap up four years of medical school than by leaving an audience in stitches?”

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