

DONOVAN RHYSBURGER

Father of the Theatre





If the Wabash had been leaving town the evening of Oct. 28, 1925, Donovan Rhynsburger insists he would have been on it. "We had just done the dress rehearsal for my first play here, 'Captain Applejack,' and it was terrible."

So terrible, Rhynsburger says, he was ready to board the first out-of-town train and end his two-month stint as director of the Missouri Workshop, a student theater organization.

But opening night must have gone better than the rehearsal: Rhynsburger stayed at Mizzou until his retirement 48 years later.

Rhynsburger came to Columbia fresh out of the University of Iowa, where he earned a bachelor's degree in commerce.

"I had planned to go into my father's poultry business, but by 1925, the bottom had fallen out, and I didn't think there was room for two of us."

So Rhynsburger headed to Mizzou, wearing horn-rimmed glasses and his most conservative suit to appear older than his 22 years. Theater had dominated his extracurricular activities and elective courses in college, with his drama background and a recommendation from his Iowa mentor, director E.C. Mabie, Rhynsburger landed the \$1,200-a-year job, as instructor of English to teach speech and drama.

Since his advent at Mizzou, drama and theater have progressed as society and social mores have progressed, Rhynsburger says. "But it's no worse now than then," he adds.

Rhynsburger recalls casting the daughter of a prominent minister in the role of a prostitute in 1928. Despite protests — "How can you allow a charming, innocent college girl to play the part of a prostitute?" — "Anna Christie" was so popular it was held over for two nights.

The former director inherited the Missouri Workshop in its fourth season. According to legend, students Cy Coggins and Darrel Starnes concocted the idea of a student theater in 1922 over a five-buck, 5-gallon jug of bootleg beer. The two placed ads in the *Columbia Missourian* and made stump speeches from the steps of Jesse Hall, attracting 100 members in one week-end.

"Don was able to give it professional

direction," says Loren Reid, emeritus professor of speech. "He was Mr. Theater here. He created it."

Under Rhynsburger, the workshop presented more than 250 plays. Besides directing four major plays each academic year, Rhynsburger worked out the details of costuming, lighting and production. "Then he'd do one or two plays in the summers," Reid remembers. "Today, no one would think of doing that."

Yet Rhynsburger accomplished that and more. He initiated the "Rinsewater Rag," a newsletter for 150 former workshop members in the service during World War II. The issues brimmed with hometown news, photos and the names and

addresses of the servicemen so they could correspond with each other.

But the name list aroused the suspicions of the U.S. government, who sent a representative to visit the professor. "He thought I was some kind of subversive agent," says Rhynsburger, who persuaded him otherwise.

The director also founded Purple Mask (a theater honorary society), the Intramural Play Tournament, the Original One-Act Playwriting Contest and the Missouri High School Drama Festival, which this year coincides with his 80th birthday April 15.

Still Rhynsburger found time to help the physical education department produce dance dramas. For one show, he labored over elaborate sets, only to face a poor attendance. He and dance teacher Peggy Minton were crushed.

Rhynsburger says his best acting ever was his 1935 portrayal of the title role in "Abraham Lincoln," which featured his wife, Peggy, as Mary Todd Lincoln. Rhynsburger's stage makeup and posture were so convincing that no one recognized him in publicity photos.



By the time they had cleared the stage and lugged the sets to Rhynsburger's dim office, Minton was in tears.

To console her, Rhynsburger gave her a hug. "Just then, in walked the lovable old watchman, Mr. Thompson, with his flashlight shining," Rhynsburger chuckles. "He became our 'midnight father' and would join us at Gaebler's for coffee." Minton and Rhynsburger were married three years later in 1931.

The same decade, Rhynsburger earned a master of fine arts degree at Yale University, where he studied drama under Alexander Dean, an eminent director.

"Don Rhynsburger was as well trained as anyone could be," Reid says. "His actors and actresses were convincing, not artificial. He was a teacher and a helper, not a demanding critic."

As well as directing, Rhynsburger starred in the workshop productions of "Abraham Lincoln" and "Rip Van Winkle." Ruth Mutert, an academic adviser at UMC and former Rhynsburger student, says, "I enjoyed him because he was quite an actor himself. When he stepped in to play someone else's part opposite you, he gave you a lot to work with."

Rhynsburger philosophizes, "You cannot be a director unless you have experience in acting."

The director's most known protégé is George C. Scott. When Broadway actress Pat McClarney agreed to appear in the workshop's production of "The Winslow Boy" in 1950, Rhynsburger, for the first time, advertised for auditions. A journalism student who had never played a lead, much less been on stage, sought the starring role of Sir Robert Morton.

After a 45-minute eye-to-eye conversation with the aspiring Scott, Rhynsburger mused, "I believe he's worth it."

At tryouts, there was no doubt.

By fall, the director sensed Scott's potential. "But I didn't know it would be anything like this," he says. To hone Scott's talent, Rhynsburger — for the first time — chose four plays specifically for his student.

Scott starred in two of them, "Shadow and Substance" and "Two Blind Mice."

All the while, Rhynsburger says, the Stephens College Playhouse was shadowing his student. Before performing in his

next two workshop plays, Scott had been lured away for \$15 a week.

His mentor was hurt: "We were not very good friends for awhile," Rhynsburger says. Later the relationship became more amiable, and Scott on occasion credited his start to Rhynsburger.

There were other disappointments for the director. Jesse Auditorium was declared a firetrap; workshop plays were ousted from its stage. But the eviction inspired the director to move summer productions to the roof of the Education Building, creating "Roof Top Theatre Under the Stars."

Still, the workshop needed a permanent home. Even after Jesse Auditorium's renovation, facilities were cramped and acoustically poor.

Rhynsburger began collecting and drawing plans for a theater, but met funding obstacles. Finally, in 1969, construction began on the Fine Arts Building, which would house theater, art and music.

"When we got a theater, we knew exactly what we wanted — mirrors, outlets, lighting, everything. And we got it except for an expensive elevated orchestra platform," he says, adding, "It was worth waiting for."

And wait he did. "I was determined not to leave this Campus until we got a theater of our own. When we did, I wanted to stay and enjoy it."

The department of speech and dramatic art moved into the building in 1960, and the workshop faded. "It's my fault," Rhynsburger concedes. "We now had a University Theatre of our own, and we didn't try to build another student organization."

Rhynsburger retired as University Theatre director and director of dramatics in 1968, five years before retiring from the University.

Since then, the emeritus professor has confined his drama activities to portraying St. Nicholas at the Calvary Episcopal Church's Christmas bazaar.

But Rhynsburger stays active all year round. He and his wife live in one of Columbia's finest apartment complexes dedicated to working professionals. And Rhynsburger has logged more than 3,000 hours as a volunteer at the Harry S. Truman Memorial Veteran's Hospital, where some patients are decades younger than he.

"I like people," he says, "and I like to feel as if I'm being of service." □