

"Of Thee I Sing" opens UCSD Theatre season

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"OF THEE I SING" OPENS UCSD THEATRE SEASON NOV. 14

"Of Thee I Sing," the 1930s Pulitzer Prize winning musical that offered its original audiences a colorful, boisterous escape from their depression era blues, will come to life at the University of California, San Diego on Nov. 14.

The musical comedy, playing at UCSD's Mandell Weiss Center for the Performing Arts Nov. 14-16 and Nov. 19-22, will inaugurate the Department of Theatre's 1986-1987 season. Curtain time is 8 p.m., except on Sunday, Nov. 16, when it is 7 p.m.

The red, white and blue stage production was crafted by writers George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind, composer George Gershwin, and lyricist Ira Gershwin. Kaufman was one of the primary writers for the Marx Brothers. "Of Thee I Sing," is considered George and Ira Gershwin's most successful show and, in some ways, their most daring because of its explicit satire of American politics.

Directing the ambitious musical play is Michael Kantor, a third year student in UCSD's Professional Theatre Training Program. Thomas Nee, a UCSD professor of music and conductor of the La Jolla Civic/University Symphony Orchestra, is conductor; Patrick Nollet, a dancer and choreographer with the local dance troupe Three's Company, is choreographer; and Nelson Huber, a graduate of Westminster College of Princeton with vocal directing credits from New York's Equity Library Theatre, is music director.

The story follows the presidential campaign of a debonair, charismatic young man named John P. Wintergreen. He is swept into the White House by a big, brassy campaign that plays down the issues of the day and focuses on "love," a theme that "everybody is interested in and doesn't matter a damn," as the candidate's crafty campaign chief puts it.

Kantor said he selected the piece, which opened on Broadway in 1931, because he believes it has relevancy today. "Given the fact that Ronald Reagan is an actor, there is the same show business quality in his administration that we see in the play," he said.

The farcical comedy and wry political humor that permeate the piece have endured for the half century as well.

The plot gets its impetus from the candidate's campaign slogan: "Put love in the White House." It is decided that Wintergreen will marry the winner of a beauty pageant after proposing to her in every state of the union.

The winner is a Southern belle named Diana Devereaux, but Wintergreen falls in love with Mary Turner, the organizer of the beauty contest, instead. He proposes to her in front of his cheering supporters at a campaign rally and she accepts.

The spurned Diana takes her outrage to the people and before Wintergreen knows what hit him, he is facing impeachment hearings before an indignant Senate.

Kantor's staging is meticulously true to the period. Costumes, sets and text all remain firmly rooted in the political climate of the early 1930s.

"The point is the text deals with institutions that don't change and issues that don't change. Tax legislation, disarmament--it's all relevant to the here and now," Kantor remarked.

The show is full of old favorites, such as "Wintergreen for President," "Love is Sweeping the Country," and the title song. Nee is using the original Gershwin orchestration.

"People are used to hearing the orchestration redone for a Boston Pops-type orchestra. What they'll be hearing in our production is a small orchestra sound, as Gershwin intended it," Nee said. He assembled a 13-piece pit orchestra for the musical from the Civic Symphony and UCSD's Department of Music.

The cast of 27 includes theatre students Matthew Wright, Julie Briskman, Deryl Caitlyn, Brad Cottrill, Ross S. Wassermann, Tom Santos and Theresa McCarthy. Production designers, also graduate students in theatre, are John Murphy for sets, Cathy H. McFarland for costumes, and Rob Murphy for lights. Production dramaturge is student Zeid Jensen.

Kantor, who is directing "Of Thee I Sing" as his thesis project for his M.F.A., assisted director Robert Woodruff with "A Man's A Man" at the La Jolla Playhouse and director Peter Sellars with "Ajax," which came to the Playhouse after opening at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. last summer.

Tickets for "Of Thee I Sing" are \$5 (student) and \$10 (general public), available at the Mandell Weiss Center Ticket Office, the University Events Box Office in the Student Center, the downtown Arts Tix booths and all Ticketmaster outlets. For information, call 534-4574.

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