

The Boar's Head & Yule Log Festival

The congregation of the University Christian Church recreates annually a medieval Epiphany season spectacular of music, song, and dance that salutes the victory of logic over evil and crystallizes the essence of the Christmas story.

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The presents have been opened . . . the turkey devoured . . . the wassail is gone . . . and the multi-colored lights of Christmas have been carefully packed away for yet another season.

In retrospect it seems that once again the pre-Christmas rush has precluded the true meaning of Christmas, its spirit somehow lost in the whirlwind of pastries, parties and presents. The post Christmas blues seem imminent.

Members of the University Christian Church located on the northern boundary of the TCU campus have developed a formula to aid Fort Worth residents in rekindling the yuletide spirit.

For the past six years over 200 members of the congregation have come together during the season of Epiphany to present a spectacularly-moving and professionally-dramatic production known as the *Boar's Head and Yule Log Festival*, this year scheduled for 3 and 5 p.m. January 1 and 2 at University Christian Church.

According to Ron Shirey, choir master of the church and musical director of the festival, "It's really a family tradition. There can be entire families involved at times, although it is also a joint effort of church members to do something on a scale that they might not have an opportunity to do otherwise. It costs them nothing, the time involved is minimal and it's a lovely gift to the community."

The atmosphere surrounding the event reflects this philosophy — it is expectant, joyous, organized, close-knit, warm and moving — very much like a family gathering.

Last year the cast included wise loving grandmothers, clean-cut athletes, enthusiastic housewives, cooing babies, several teenagers with French braids, a bearded college student with glasses and an ample supply of overworked businessmen. All are members of the church gathered together in a spirit of unity and harmony.

Unseasoned actors all, their parts cast by the luck of the draw,

a sign-up sheet and the unwitting eye of Mary Ruth Jones, volunteer casting coordinator, they enact their parts with gusto.

Although there is no dialogue in the production, the mood is set through music, costuming and the emotional attitude of the actors. Each member of the cast studies his role from a 21-page script which outlines details drawn to scale for staging, positioning, entrances and exits.

"The first year we ever did *Boar's Head*," explained Susan Layne, a member of the original *Boar's Head* committee and a shepherd in the pageant from its inception, "no one knew what it was going to be like. People were somewhat reluctant to do the parts . . . This year I noticed that all the parts were taken and that there was a waiting list . . . The congregation has really supported it 100 percent."

The festival is the brainchild of Dr. A. M. Pennybacker. It was at his urging that a special committee was formed to study the feasibility of such an undertaking.

After careful deliberations, months of research and a trip to Christ Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, to observe the *Boar's Head* production there, the committee, returned to Fort Worth bursting with energy and enthusiasm. They resolved to adapt their own production in as authentic a manner as possible.

The festival itself is basically divided into two parts: the secular legend and the religious tradition.

"The first part is theoretically the secular legend," explained Shirey recounting the history behind the legend. "It concerns a young Oxford student in 14th century England who retreats to the woods with a volume of Aristotle to read, to study and to think. While thusly engaged he is attacked by a wild boar who had previously been ravaging the village."

"Using the book to kill the boar by thrusting it down his throat, the student triumphantly returns to the village bearing the boar's head on a log. The townspeople celebrate this victory of good

over evil of sound logic and reason over brute force — with a feast.”

The first half of the pageant depicts the village gathering. Bedecked in radiant colors of turquoise, plum, amber, burgundy, jade, wine and aquamarine, the ladies of the manor, the beefeaters, the waits, and the sprites congregate in a joyous celebration of life.

The entire segment is one of rejoicing and thanksgiving as the townspeople celebrate the triumph of good over evil.

The pageant then moves from the secular legend to the sacred tradition of the Christmas story. The same theme is dominant, enacted through idyllic pageantry — the adoration of the shepherds, the pilgrimage of the magi and the birth of the Christ child.

A setting of garland-draped balconies, festooned with fresh greenery, rich ruby carpets and a red-draped platform built especially for this presentation, affords each visitor a special view of the proceedings.

The audience experiences the festival along with the cast through the singing of familiar

carols. The deep voice of a surgeon can be heard mingling with the soprano tones of a grandmother, her eyes filling with tears as she feels the emotion of the moment.

At the climax of the pageant, as the traditionally clad shepherds carry crooked wooden staffs slowly down the aisle in a solemn procession of reverence, the familiar notes of *Angels We Have Heard On High* emphasizes the presence and importance of the Christ child. It is indeed a moving experience.

Costuming and music are the heart and soul of the production, while the special effects of lighting binds the performance into a unified whole.

Special efforts were made to duplicate the authenticity of the medieval dress. LaLonnie Lehman, costume designer for TCU, and Dr. Henry Hammack director of the festival, researched the project. They drafted the patterns and spent many hours haunting garage sales, second hand stores and retail fabric shops to find comparable fabrics.

“A loan was secured by the *Boar's Head* committee in the



Each year a family with a newborn child portrays the Holy Family.

beginning.” elaborated Shirey, “to finance the costumes because they were the biggest expense. Now that investment has been almost totally paid back through donations and the sale of a sound track record, which is available at each performance.”

The costumes were made by volunteer members of the church who donated their special sewing skills. Untold hours were spent fabricating this elegant and elaborate wardrobe.

Puffed sleeves, wainscoted and sequined vests, turbans, plumed hats, peasant blouses, burlap tunics and eyelet pantaloons hint of the attention to detail that these volunteers have spent in pursuit of authenticity.

“The costumes are flexible and are carefully stored from year to year,” said Shirey. “They are pinned and basted and adapted to whoever has the part. A special storage closet has been built to house these treasures.”

The fabrics have weathered the test of time. Six years of wear and tear and untold numbers of cleanings have threatened their existence, but they have come through virtually unscathed, as impressive today as they were the first year they were used.

A scrapbook of photographs is kept on file depicting each costume to the smallest detail. This has been no small task as Shirey estimates there are over 85 combinations from which to choose.

Adoration by candlelight.



Susan Layne, a twinkle in her eye, elaborated on the necessity for this compulsion. "The shepherds' costumes consist of long robes, head coverings and sashes. The colors are subtle and it's hard to tell which tunic goes with which sash."

"When the performance first began, we had erroneously tied our sashes around our heads and had completely overlooked the headpieces. We marched down the aisle looking like a tribe of Indians rather than shepherds." "The committee was mortified. The minute the first performance was over we were whisked away and redressed correctly. It was decided that from that time forward, there would be pictures for posterity, so that each person would know how they were supposed to look."

Musically the pageant is a symphonic masterpiece. "We have over 3,000 people in our congregation," Layne continued, "We do really well putting on special events because of our fabulous musical facilities. It is a natural thing to do as a group and a gift we can give to the community."

The music was specifically commissioned for the *Boar's Head*. Randy Bass, a composition student at TCU at the time, arranged the musical score. Mike Bedford, later to become University Christian Church associate choirmaster, was commissioned to do the handbells for the wisemen's procession.

A 27-piece orchestra and a 72-voice choir, are in the upper left balcony of the sanctuary. The paneled walls reverberate with the harmonious sounds supported by an organ, a harp, trumpets, violins and wood winds. Church members and music lovers from the community who wish to donate their time comprise this volunteer orchestra. They study their parts at home, rehearsing at only two gatherings before the actual performance. Their syncopation is superb. The effect rivals a professional symphony in dedication to perfection.

Despite the beauty of the music, it is the people who

breathe life into the festival. The cast of varying ages, shapes and sizes gives a certain vitality to the performance.

- Young children, their eyes sparkling, the giggles suppressed, skip down the aisles. They come in pairs holding lanterns that bob in unison with their pigtails.
- College men dressed as waits swing from balconies, dancing and somersaulting down the rows. They pinch and kiss grandmothers and pretty maidens alike while spreading laughter and joy throughout the audience with their merriment.

- Young dancers, their long hair shining, dance a celebration of youth and grace. Their innocent smiles show a promise of the leaders of tomorrow; their humble bows a silent reminder that God is in our midst.
- Hooded men in pointed caps and shoes carry brightly colored banners and old-fashioned bows and arrows. They transport large platters of food.
- The Star of the East, majestically leads a procession of magi and giftbearers from all walks of life to the altar. Their eyes twinkle in the softness of candlelight,

Ladies-in-waiting and Beefeaters ceremoniously herald the Boar's Head.



reminding us of our own individual importance and the unique gifts that are ours to give.

- The solemn bell choir — teenagers all — their hair restrained by barettes, their eyes aglow with expectation, bespeak the innocence of goodness of youth.
- The regal bearing of the magi blend grace and elegance into a mixture of joy and harmony. They solemnly present their gifts of bells, books, crowns, and frankincenses to the babe in the manger, affirming God's promise of peace on earth. It is indeed a magnificent moment.

There is hardly a dry eye in the house as the pageant comes to its final conclusion. The triptych, which is a specially built platform made of wood and cloth, opens to reveal the Holy Family.

"It is one of the most dramatic things you will ever see," explained Shirey. "Each year a family with a newborn from the church is chosen to represent the Holy Family."

Rumor has it that no matter how fussy the child has been prior to the moment the doors are opened, he (or she) immediately stops crying and rises to the occasion playing the part to perfection.

"It's beyond description," said Cathy Ryan groping for the right words. "There is no way to explain the emotion you feel when they open the triptych doors. You have to experience it."

Many interesting anecdotes surround the planning and preparation of the festival, but by far the most mysterious involves the scene at the opening of these doors.

When the triptych doors are opened, Mary holds up the child and the people salute and kneel. One year, according to tradition as the child was held up, he raised his hand and gave a papal blessing.

Another tale involves the TCU fire. In the spring of 1981, the church buildings were extensively damaged from the youth activities room downstairs to the doors of the sanctuary by a fire set by the TCU arsonist.

Although the walls, carpets and ceilings were seriously damaged, the costumes and sanctuary itself remained miraculously untouched.

Ryan and Lehman did the inventory following the fire explained, "It's a miracle that damage to the costumes was slight. What is missing is so infinitesimal that it's not worth mentioning some bolts of fabric, a few bells."

Thanks to a fire-proof closet, strategic placement of blowers by quick-witted firemen and opened windows, these elaborate works of art were saved.

Costumed waits swing down from the balcony on garland bedecked ropes.

But all aspects of the festival are not serious. The pandemonium backstage contrasts sharply with the polished production. Young, old, teachers, students, mothers, fathers, doctors, lawyers, bookkeepers, dentists, housewives and business leaders all congregate for a 1:30 p.m. make-up call each day.

Organized lines form as Lucille Davis, the volunteer in charge of make-up proceeds to conduct her version of miracles. She explained her secret as she marked a dark eyebrow on a blond befeater. "Four shades of make-up are used. One is for ladies who don't want greasy faces such as the ladies-in-waiting, and a darker base for the outdoor people such as the shepherds. When we first started doing the production, we built beards from scratch. That was a job. It took up to three and a half hours each day just for the beards."

Although a few of the men really get into the spirit of things by growing their own beards, the majority rely on more modern hand-tied stockings. The effect is much the same.

An off-balanced sense of timing

pervades as one patrols the halls. Bearded knights and platooned soldiers seem out of place surrounded by the signs of modern technology. Adolescents in leggings and black-tights stand arm in arm laughing over hand-held electronic games. Aproned teenagers flirt and swap stories with modern day stable boys.

While thespians lounge in costumes of satin and lace, they munch on apples and slices of cheese. "No one is allowed to drink anything once the costumes are on," laughed Layne. "We can have water, cheese and apples, but no soft drinks or coffee. The vending and soft drink machines are even unplugged."

Following the last performance on Sunday, a magnificent banquet is held in the parish hall. Surprisingly many of the foods seen in the pageant are eaten by the merry-makers.

"All of the food is real except for the whipped cream and eggs," pointed out Layne. "Even the bread loaves and turkey are baked ahead, then securely nailed to their respective boards."

Elsie Williams, a church member and renowned cook, has baked the fruitcakes every year. They are wrapped in cellophane and carried through every performance, only to be devoured afterwards at the banquet.

The large mince meat pie which is carried on a trencher is also a favorite. It is baked by church member Lorene Fowler in a special pan purchased some years ago by the committee.

"It used to be a problem to get the mince meat pie raised high enough so that the audience could see it," said Cathy Ryan. "Just this year we have developed a workable system. We baked a fake crust on the lid that covers the real pie. It is well protected and we can eat it later."

The *Boar's Head*, which is the symbol and nomenclature from which the pageant derives its name, is also real. A Texas wild game trophy the Boar's Head is ceremoniously carried, apple in tow, in the procession by four members of the Trencher Company in plumed garb.

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"I nearly ruined the boar," Dr. Charles Kendal, a dentist and a member of the Trencher Company whispered after the 1981 performance. "We forgot to duck at rehearsal and the boar's nose was jammed into the door as we exited. "We had to glue the nose back together," he confessed.

The boar has certainly not suffered from this discretion as the damage is minimal, invisible even to the best trained eye. Claiming its rightful place at center stage during the banquet, its presence concludes the festival symbolizing the many blessings with which we are endowed in our freedom loving land-of-plenty.

The pageant is indeed an experience not to be missed during the holiday season. "The timing is the best part of it," said Layne, "for the hurry-up of Christmas is over and there is a lull. The audience really gets to think of the Baby Jesus. It is so moving and no one in the cast is distracted."

The *Boar's Head* performance this year will be held at 3 p.m. and 5 p.m. on Saturday, January 1 and Sunday, January 2 and the public is welcome. There is no admission fee and no need for reservations. But one needs to come early as the sanctuary at the University Christian Church, 2720 University Drive, fills up rapidly.

In the words of Dr. Pennybacker. "Welcome, It is a festival of God with us . . . to cast out darkness every where."

The Boar's Head and Yule Log Festival is a fitting conclusion to the hustle and bustle of the Christmas rush. The Christmas blues, having now been tempered into softer shades of peacock and sapphire, are able to push the Christmas woes of disappointing gifts and unpaid bills back into their proper perspective.

And isn't that the best way to end the holidays? 