

#### Part IV: HPC in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The new millennium began with the once mighty HPC floundering. Much headway had been made since some of the dark days of the mid-1990's when the organization's death or at the very least marginalization in Hinman appeared to take place. Even at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, HPC was an organization on the fringes of Hinman culture, not front and center as it had been in earlier times. That was all about to change.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, the Fall of 2001 saw many changes in the lives of Hinmanites and of Americans in general. This event left indelible imprints on every American man, woman and child, and Hinmanites were not immune. In fact, they may have been affected even more. Since the beginnings of Binghamton University, many of its students have come from the New York metropolitan area, and the attacks and the vast destruction and loss of life that they caused hit particularly close to home. With all the grief, fear, and anxiety following the attacks, Hinmanites were looking for a diversion, something to take their minds off the turmoil encompassing their lives and the lives of every American citizen. They would come to find that diversion in one of Hinman's most enduring institutions—HPC and its new brand of leadership.

The Fall of 2001 was also the first semester for a young freshman named Sharon Kowlasky. Sharon came from New Jersey and decided to go out of state to attend Binghamton University for a variety of reasons. The first reason was that she received a small scholarship to Binghamton which actually made it even cheaper to attend than Rutgers. Also, she was drawn to Hinman College in particular because it offered suite-style living, one of the amenities that she was looking for in a residential college. Most important of all, when she read up on each of the residential colleges, she noticed that Hinman was famous for having its own theater organization

called the Hinman Production Company. Sharon loved theater and knew that she still wanted to participate in it while she went to college.<sup>1</sup>

Sharon did not get involved in HPC her first semester. That was soon to change. At the time she was a resident of Roosevelt Hall and on her floor was another freshman names Liza Adelman. In the Spring of 2002, Liza encouraged Sharon to come to an HPC audition with her. At the time Sharon was recovering from a bad case of pneumonia and the absolute last thing she wanted to do was audition for a play. Still, she relented and went to the audition anyway. There she met James Fox, who would soon become the President of HPC. James had transferred the second semester of his freshman year to Binghamton and lived in Champlain Hall in Dickinson and then the Hayes Apartment Community. In fact he never officially lived in Hinman at all during his time with HPC, but nonetheless spent almost all of his time in Hinman, either in the Commons or in Roosevelt hanging out with Sharon and Liza. At first, not being a Hinmanite was difficult for him because he had friends in both HPC and the Dickinson Community Players and at the time there was a rivalry between the two groups. James had done theater in high school and wanted to continue to do that in college, but knew that he would be unable to be involved in Binghamton University Main Stage productions. James and Sharon (even though she was ill) auditioned for two HPC shows: a new production of *Hair*, and a play called *The Shape of Things*. Because of her illness she did not get any parts, but she, James, and Liza became fast friends and would eventually form a triumvirate of HPC leadership for the coming years.<sup>2</sup>

James, on the other hand, was cast in *The Shape of Things*. The play was directed by Megan Wilen who was the President of HPC at the time. James quickly learned that everything in HPC was a labor of love and that to be successful in the organization they would have to

devote a large amount of time to the organization. James also was involved in the production of *Hair* where once again controversy arose out of this play. Ten years earlier, HPC had received a lot of flak over burning an American flag. The producers decided that they would not burn a flag in this production, but they did decide to go ahead with something which many found even more controversial than the burning of a flag, something the producers of the 1992 version had purposely left out of their production. The original play calls for there to be a nude scene and the producers of HPC's *Hair* decided to keep that scene. For a while, everyone was worried that the university would try to stop the play for public nudity. Bracing for the worst, they decided to go ahead with the scene anyway. Word made its way around the community that there would be a nude scene in *Hair* and as the show's debut approached, the cast and crew worried what the consequences for their radical step would be. Some even half expected University Police to burst into the Commons and arrest everyone for public nudity. Luckily, the show ran its course without incident. At the end of that academic year James attended his very first E-Board meeting and during that time was elected President of HPC. Realizing the awesome responsibility he now had, James prepared to lead HPC and begin the Herculean effort of turning the organization around.<sup>3</sup>

In the Fall of 2002, two shows went into production for HPC. One was a tried and true classic for HPC—Steven Sondheim's *Company*. Unfortunately, no review of this play exists. Another play went into production that semester as well. This would be a new play for HPC called *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*. James Fox would direct this play and Sharon Kowalksy became the props mistress. The play is set in the Lapin Agile (French for "Nimble Rabbit"), a bar in Paris at the turn of the century. In this setting many oddball characters come into play, but the true comedic moments shine when Pablo Picasso meets Albert Einstein and the world's

greatest artist and the world's greatest scientist duke it out in a battle of wits covering every conceivable topic under the sun. The comedy written by Steve Martin was full of wit and intelligent banter and that was perhaps the greatest criticism—not that any part of the play's production was bad, but rather that the subject matter probably was over the heads of ordinary college students. Still the performance of the actors was praised, especially that of Will Green and Matt Levy who played Picasso and Einstein respectively. The biggest praise for the play went to the production team and those working diligently behind-the-scenes.

...kudos to production team-members Director James Fox, Stage Manager Rachel Marcus, and Costume/Prop Girl Sharon Kowlasky. Fox successfully translated Martin's winning script onto the Hinman stage. If an audience doesn't notice the minutiae of a stage direction, then the production has wildly succeeded as it has here.<sup>4</sup>

The success of Steve Martin's *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* was a somewhat surprising hit for HPC. It also showed the rest of the Hinman community just what HPC and its leadership could do. So, James decided that it was time to take HPC in a new direction. He and many others in the group knew that HPC, though still putting on quality shows, was a fractured organization and not living up to its full potential. After examining the way they produced shows, James realized that all too often all of the responsibility would fall to the individual director of the show. HPC would try to produce two shows a semester and there rarely was any crossover between the casts of each show. In essence there were two HPCs each semester and when one was done with the Commons, the other would move in and there would be little interaction between the two. James and many others wanted HPC to be a more open organization and wanted as many people as possible to be involved. They decided the best way to reform HPC was through revising its constitution. Though the constitution had gone through many changes over the years and would continually be revised, it had essentially remained the same since Adam Brown and his E-Board had worked on it back in the mid-1980's. To reflect

the changing times, James knew they had to amend the constitution. One of the big changes to come out of this reformation was the assistant director position. Although the assistant director position was not new, its role changed. In previous years directors with little or no experience in directing (or sometimes even with HPC) would be given the challenging job of directing a show. Now it was written into the constitution that before anyone could direct an HPC show, they had to have served as an assistant director. In essence, the less experienced assistant director would become an apprentice to the director. This stopped the all too common practice of those with little or no stake or commitment in HPC to direct its shows. It also helped bring more people into the organization and gave up-and-coming leaders a chance to hone their skills.<sup>5</sup>

In the Spring of 2003, there was an unexpected opening in the HPC E-Board. Jumping at the chance to gain more leadership positions in HPC, Sharon volunteered and was elected as Secretary of HPC. Also during that time an unprecedented three plays went into production for HPC: a new play called *Line* and *Brighton Beach Memoirs*. *Line* would be directed by Aaron Ricco. Ricco was very much into experimenting and doing unusual work. Although many had their doubts, *Line* was a success and a great show. Unfortunately, this version of *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, which had been so successful in the past, fell short of its expectations. Very often in the play lines were missed, though the actors did a great job of ad libbing and rolling with the punches thrown at them. One example of this involved the actor Matt Levy, one of the stars of *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*. During one of the performances of *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, Levy was accidentally left completely alone on the stage when he wasn't supposed to be alone. The set for the play was designed using tables that were available in the Hinman Commons. The crew had built a second story of the house that most of the play takes place in. The construction was rather unstable and the actors were schooled on exactly where they could and could not step

when they went to the second story of the set. Throwing caution to the wind, Levy scaled to the second story, pulled out his diary, and began writing, giving a long monologue that kept the audience in attention until the next character entered. This quick thinking on Levy's part saved the show.<sup>6</sup> The third play would see HPC return its very first play ever, and the one which forever put it on the map—that play which had Patrick Misciagna break nearly all the rules back in 1980, *Pippin*.

Sharon would once again be in charge of all the props for *Brighton Beach Memoirs* and *Line*. She, Liza, and James were also all cast to star in *Brighton Beach Memoirs*. Most importantly, she and James would co-direct *Pippin*. Though no review of any of these plays exists in the written record, a *Pipe Dream* reporter did attend one of the rehearsals for *Pippin*. This behind-the-scenes account captured all the magic and fun that this community-based theater organization brought to its members. Along with serious rehearsing, there was much joking around and playful banter amongst the cast and crew, all of whom were friends. For those who don't know, *Pippin* is a play that at times can be somewhat racy. There is even a choreographed orgy scene which calls for some of the male cast members to fondle their female counterparts. Most if not all of the cast members were a little shy and naturally inhibited regarding this scene, which prompted Director James Fox to quip to the reporter, "I feel like we have a problem with this cast. They don't know how to flirt or dance or have sex. I feel like they must have the most boring weekends ever."<sup>7</sup> This led not only to an impromptu seminar on the proper way to grope a breast but also a friendly bashing of cast member Scott Eckers, who played the title character. Eckers was unable to attend that rehearsal and a good natured ribbing of Eckers at his expense occurred. It was not meant maliciously. It was all in good fun and helped the cast to bond. Fox and Kowlasky were also noted for their effective leadership of that motley crew of student actors

during the rehearsal of a battle scene. “Battle practice was a mixed bag. Fox managed the stage fighting while Kowlasky choreographed a dance number. The two split responsibility and made a dynamic team, accomplishing a lot without arguing or stepping on each other.”<sup>8</sup> Even with all the raucous roughhousing and friendly insults thrown at one another, the cast and crew of HPC was a tight-knit group of individuals dedicated to its mantra of fun, friendship and the love of theater. Unfortunately, no review of the play is available, but the oral history states that the plays were all successful. It appeared that HPC was coming out its funk, and beginning to climb the ladder of success and the ascent to the top of community-based theater in Binghamton. As the *Pipe Dream* reporter stated, “With a group as crazy as H.P.C. you can tell there’s a lot of fun in store.”<sup>9</sup>

James Fox remembers this production of *Pippin* fondly. The cast was large and nearly everyone who auditioned got called back. Also the cast for this group was close-knit and worked very well together, making it an overall enjoyable experience. One of his favorite memories of his time in HPC involves the now infamous orgy scenes of the play. In most productions of *Pippin* the orgy scenes involve rather strange movements, set to Caribbean music. James never liked this interpretation of the orgy scenes and instead decided to go all out on them. He encouraged the cast to dress up in whatever crazy outfits they wanted to go onstage and act sexy. It was during this time that he invented the now infamous Ketchup-Mustard rule. Because the play had an odd male to female ratio there would have to be some male-on-male and female-on-female orgy action in the scene. To decide who would play the homosexual roles James would line all the male cast members up and have them reach into a bag filled with individual ketchup or mustard packets; the kind offered at most fast food restaurants. Whoever picked a mustard packet would have to take on a homosexual role in the orgy scene for that show. This humorous

way of picking who would play the heterosexual and homosexual roles in the scene occurred throughout the running of the show. Once during the orgy scene Scott Eckers (who played the title character Pippin) was kissing a number of the female cast members, when one of the men who had picked a mustard packet earlier went right up to Eckers and planted a big sloppy kiss on him, much to Eckers's bewildered surprise. As a shocked Eckers pulled away, the male cast member simply said to him, "I got the mustard."<sup>10</sup> Another funny moment to happen during the production of *Pippin* happened on the opening night of the show. Right before the show was about to begin a fuse blew, plunging them into darkness. James scrambled about desperately searching for anyone who had a set of keys to the fuse box to trip the switch so that they could bring up their lighting board. Luckily, he was able to track down a custodian and they flipped the switch mere moments before the play was about to begin.<sup>11</sup>

The long days and nights spent working on *Pippin* are forever seared into the mind of Sharon Kowlasky. Years later she would reminisce,

I think my favorite memory is actually sitting in the Hinman Night Owl (where the mailboxes are now located) with the cast of *Pippin*. We were all very good friends and at the end of the night, just as we'd be finishing up rehearsal, John, the Night Owl manager, would give us all the extra food they made that no one bought and they'd just be throwing out anyway. Usually, we all ended up hanging out and laughing and talking with the Night Owl staff.<sup>12</sup>

*Pippin* was a great success for HPC and especially for James Fox. James had devoted almost all of his time to HPC. Although he never once lived in Hinman, he spent more time there than he ever did in either Dickinson or his off campus apartment. He had been president only for a year, but in that time he made the organization his baby and was devoted to it completely. At this time he stepped down and allowed a new E-Board to take control. He did this in part because he was graduating a semester early and could not be with the organization for the full year but also because he knew that in order for HPC to be successful he would have to



pass it off to effective new leadership. During his time, James had taken the organization which was still suffering from a number of lingering troubles and had revitalized it.

One of his major accomplishments was ending of the rivalry between HPC and the Dickinson Community Players. For a number of years HPC and the DC Players had been feuding over who was the better community-based theater organization. James put an end to all that, making the cast and crew of HPC go to watch DC Player productions. As soon as they did this, the DC Players and came and watched their productions. Shortly thereafter, the two groups began exchanging props and set pieces and even actors and crew members when they needed to. With the feud now over, both HPC and the DC Players could concentrate on making quality productions.<sup>13</sup> In some respects this almost seemed like fate. To the some it would seem that having a HPC president from Dickinson of all places would be blasphemous. Even though back in the early 1980's HPC had been opened to anyone on campus, there still was a lingering mistrust of anyone who wasn't a Hinmanite. Not only did James break down this wall once and for all, but he also helped bridge the gap between his own community (Dickinson) and his adopted community (Hinman), uniting the two like never before. In that sense it was a blessing that James had been placed in Dickinson and not in Hinman as a freshman, because only then could he perform this type of service. Not only that, but he was also responsible for taking the last bit of exclusivity out of HPC and really opening up to everyone who wanted to be involved. James would continue to help out and advise for the next semester, but he knew that he, like the great leaders of HPC before, would be passing the torch to a new generation.

At the end of her sophomore year, Sharon left Roosevelt Hall to move off campus, but she would not leave HPC. With James leaving office, she was elected President of HPC and given the awesome task of leading the little theater that could into the next stage of its

development. As proud as Sharon and the rest of HPC were feeling about its accomplishments so far, a problem arose that nearly killed HPC off for good. HPC had had many enemies over the years. The continuing rivalry with the theater department was currently dormant but it had never gone away. HPC had fought residential life administration, student apathy, and even its very own community for funding and its right to exist. However, there remained one thing that threatened to shut down the theater for good—the lighting in the Hinman Commons. Although the lighting and its wiring were continually being modified and upgraded as needed for each play, overall most of the lighting system was antiquated and in ill repair. The lighting system and its wiring were a fire hazard almost from the very beginning of HLT/HPC's existence, but through a series of jerry-rigged modifications, deliberate obfuscation, and a little help from friends in high places, HPC had been able to ward off anyone threatening to shut them down over their wiring. That all changed in the summer of 2003 when Sharon received word from the Binghamton University fire marshal that the lights in the Hinman Commons were out of date and a fire hazard and that they would have to be replaced. Knowing that there was no way that they could afford such an expensive upgrade of their lighting system, Sharon agonized that summer over what they were going to do about the lighting system.<sup>14</sup>

The Fall of 2003 saw HPC face a number of challenges besides the lighting system. In an effort to help save on the cost of purchasing the rights to plays, Sharon and the rest of HPC decided to go for a cheaper play. The play that they wanted to produce for that semester was another Steve Martin play titled *The Underpants*. Sharon went before the SA to ask for additional funding to help offset the costs for buying the rights to play and for money to update their lighting system. The SA initially did not give them any funding because HPC's charter was

only through Hinman and not the SA. Eventually, after a hard-fought battle, the SA did give HPC some money to put towards updating their lighting system.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, trouble struck on another front. With cash in hand to pay for the lights and for the rights to produce the play, HPC received word that Steve Martin was attempting to get the rights back to his play. Martin, in an attempt to revive his floundering career, wanted to bring his play to Broadway. When the play was in production on Broadway it could not be produced legally anywhere else. Also, an internal snafu by the HPC treasurer basically prevented them from acquiring the rights earlier. They learned that they would have to wait until February to see if Martin would go ahead with the production of his play. It soon became apparent that even if Steve Martin decided not to produce his own play, there would not be enough time for HPC to stage a show that semester. Anger and resentment over what became known as “the show that never was” brewed within the normally placid HPC surroundings and animosities between members grew thick. In a move reminiscent of the early experimental days of HLT, Sharon decided that HPC should take the semester off and concentrate on staging a show in the Spring. In the meantime they could update their constitution and inventory, and take stock of what HPC currently had. A number of members did not like this. They had signed on with HPC to act or produce, not to do inventories or to rewrite the constitutions. The fallout of “the show that never was” was devastating for HPC. Many members quit in anger and with all the other problems swirling around the organization, its future looked dark and stormy.<sup>16</sup>

Two cast members who did not quit were freshmen Melanie Feltmate and Florencia “Flo” Varela. Both Melanie and Flo lived in Cleveland Hall and became fast friends. Like so many HPCers that had come before them, they had been involved in theater in high school and wanted to continue that in college. Also, they were caught by the interesting advertising scheme

that HPC presented. At that time and in previous years, the Binghamton University fire marshals had been especially strict with the fire codes of each building. Recently, they had mandated that no paper could be posted anywhere in the building with the exception of bulletin boards. Staying true to their character, HPC flaunted the rules and taped posters advertising the organization on walls, windows and doors, going completely against the fire codes. This highly illegal practice caught the eyes of these two eager young freshmen which compelled them to join HPC at the most opportunistic moment. With HPC desperate for members and constantly on the lookout for new leaders, Melanie and Flo, whether they knew it or not, were about to join the long line of leaders in HLT/HPC history that included such notables as Stan Golderg, Steve Young, Patrick Misciagna, Adam Brown and so many, many others. For E-Board elections that semester, the only people who showed up were the ones to be elected. Melanie was elected Treasurer and liaison between HPC and HCC and Flo was elected Technical director.<sup>17</sup>

In the Spring of 2004, the remaining members of HPC soon realized that there was absolutely no chance that they could produce *The Underpants*. In a near Herculean effort, the cast and crew of HPC threw together the play *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)* in nearly two weeks. The group was able to scrape enough people together to put on the show, though Sharon went back to her old forte of being in charge of the props and costumes. Following this show, greater efforts were made to enlist people for behind-the-scenes work, as they were desperately in need to people for that show. Although the play was utterly thrown together at the last minute, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)* was a hit for HPC.

That semester also saw two student written plays come to the Hinman Commons. The first was a play called *Collaboration*. The second was a play written by Binghamton student

William Duffy called *Acceptable Sacrifices*. This dark play centered around a number of characters living in a small town and how they manipulate one another for their own purposes. Sharon would play Constance, a successful doctor in the small town while Joe Petrolawicz played her husband Harvey, a macho, tough-guy police officer. Rounding out the cast was Brandon Ashinoff and Rachel Kornhauser, who played their next door neighbors Bob and Sara. Unfortunately, the play was criticized for having characters who did not leave a lasting impression with the audience. One reviewer stated, "If this play had been anything other than a student production, it might have disappointed, for once the audience walks away from the game board, there is nothing left to think about."<sup>18</sup> Not everything was critical about the play. The reviewer praised the actors for fitting their roles well and for the technical aspects of the play. *Acceptable Sacrifices* was not a complete loss for HPC. Given the fiasco surrounding *The Underpants* and the ever looming issue of the lighting system, the fact that HPC could stage three shows that semester was truly a miraculous event. HPC had hit a snag on its climb back to the top, but it would not be held down for long.

The Summer of 2004 offered no relief to HPC. The fire marshal once again got on HPC's case, this time about where it stored its equipment. Besides the HPC office located in the Hinman Commons, HPC had been storing most of their stage equipment in a room in the basement of Roosevelt Hall called Paradise. The rest of their props, costumes, etc. were strewn either in the central HPC office or in Paradise. The fire marshal claimed that it was a fire hazard to house all their property in these two relatively small spaces and forced HPC to find a new place to house their equipment. Luck appeared to be on the side of HPC at this stage. There is another large room in the basement of Roosevelt Hall that had up until that point been used as a luggage storage room for Hinman residents. That year it was decided that there was no longer a

need for a luggage storage space in Hinman and so that room was given over to HPC for their use. HPC quickly made use of their new space and filled this new room with their props and costumes. Keeping with the Dante theme, they dubbed this new room Inferno. To this day, Paradise contains all of HPC's flats, wood, furniture, and set-building items. Inferno has their props, costumes and various other knick-knacks. The main HPC office holds the lights, paint, extra building supplies, and other expensive equipment along with extra scripts and other general information including the HPC archives. With space issue now settled, HPC could concentrate on bringing two more plays to the Hinman Commons in the fall.

By the Fall of 2004, HPC was ready to stage two more plays. The first play to be produced would be Edward Albee's provocative *The Goat or Who is Sylvia?* *The Goat* was a controversial play because it dealt with the taboo topic of bestiality. In the play Aaron Riccio played Martin, a seemingly normal, average, middle-class man with a seemingly normal all-American family. However, everything comes crumbling down when Martin reveals to his family that he has been having an affair and not just any affair. He has been cheating on his wife with a goat named Sylvia. Opposite Riccio would be a newcomer to HPC, Maria Racioppo. Maria was a freshman and completely new to Hinman who got involved with HPC because Melanie Feltmate, who had become a DA in Hughes Hall that year, encouraged her to try out. Maria would play Stevie, Martin's emotionally distraught wife. Racioppo's character was supposed to fly into a rage during one scene and destroy a large portion of the set. Maria got so into character that they had to construct a small partition between the stage and the audience to keep the audience from being hurt from flying debris. One particularly humorous moment came during a Saturday matinee of the show. There was a scene where Maria was supposed to take a bowl full of M&M's and drop the bowl. The bowl was supposed to shatter and spill the candy.

However, during this presentation of the show, whenever Maria dropped the bowl it would not break, it would just fall to the floor and roll around. Staying in character, Maria tried to break the bowl twice before she finally gave up and continued on with the scene as though it was all supposed to happen.<sup>19</sup>

The reviews for *The Goat* were mixed. Aaron Riccio was praised for his performance of Martin and his psychological torment of coming to grips with the undeniable truth that he loves his family and Sylvia the goat. However, many of the other cast members were criticized for their flat performances and overacting. One reviewer ended by saying,

Intriguing in structure, but lacking a strong overall cast, the play ends up being a thought-provoking commentary on the aspects of the culture that we follow blindly. Perhaps, if the subject material were less taboo, it would have been easier for the actors to bond over it.<sup>20</sup>

While *The Goat* may not have been a hit, it was a success for HPC. It gave the mostly novice cast and crew a chance to hone their skill at producing quality and thought-provoking theater. HPC should also be lauded for experimenting with such taboo subject material as was presented in the play. Whatever shortcomings in *The Goat* were all about to be cleared away with the next HPC play, a play that had entertained hundreds of Hinmanites in the past, had made HPC history for two successive generations of HPCers and was about to do it again.

The second play for the Fall of 2003, set to debut on December 9 in the Hinman Commons, was none other than what has been described as the perfect musical—*Guys and Dolls*. Liza Adelman took on the awesome responsibility of directing this, perhaps the most holy of all plays performed in Hinman. She didn't do it alone. She had a lot of help from her good friend, Sharon Kowlasky, who was the show's choreographer and also did a bit of acting, performing as the supporting character Mimi. Joseph R. Petrolawicz would play Nathan Detroit, Kara Scott

would play Miss Adelaide, Tim Ryan played Sky Masterson, Melanie Kwiatkowski played Miss Sarah Brown, Ira Kantor played Nicely Nicely Johnson, and Steve Major played Benny Southstreet. Arvida Abernathy was performed by Kim McCombs, Harry the Horse by Rachel Schwalbe, with Melanie Feltmate acting as the M.C. at the Hot Box. Lt. Brannigan was played by Dan Lyons, General Cartwright was played by Christine Lyons, Agatha by Nicole Murphey, and Joey Baltimore by Dan Lyons. Taking on the show-stealing role of Big Julie which both Paul Reiser and Adam Brown made famous, was Charles Berman.<sup>21</sup> Berman, who was also deeply involved in the theater department, would later go on to write his own play for HPC.

As in every previous production, the preparation and buildup to *Guys and Dolls* was enormous. Flo Varela remembers the flats in particular were difficult to do. This was the first time that this generation of HPCers attempted to use moving sets. The flats had wheels on them so that they could be moved around easier. The multiple scene changes in the play necessitated this type of flat. However, the breaks on the flats were not reliable and often the flats would not stay where they were placed forcing the crew to try and jerry-rig them as best they could. Another problem posed by the flats was a scene where the gangsters were supposed to run out of the mission and jump through a doorway and over a flat. They were supposed to look graceful. The reality was they were anything but graceful. Another scene that was of particular difficulty for Melanie Feltmate was a scene involving the hot-box girls. In the scene there was a sign that Melanie had to flip over with a broom. Melanie, who was the shortest person in the cast, had great difficulty flipping the sign over. When she finally did get it to flip over the audience applauded in recognition of her efforts. Another problem faced during the show centered around the number "Sit Down You're Rocking the Boat." The scene takes place in a church amid



church pews where the singing and dancing are supposed to take place. However, the pews were not weighted correctly and they constantly were falling down.<sup>22</sup>

Even with all of the obstacles that had to be overcome, this most recent presentation of *Guys and Dolls* was a smash hit. Every single show was sold out. Reflecting back on this experience, both Melanie and Flo considered this to be one of the high points of their careers in HPC. Even though many things in the play were thrown together at the last minute, HPC was still able to put on a quality, professional show that entertained quite literally hundreds of people. More importantly, and probably unbeknownst to the participants of HPC, the success of this show was important for two reasons. The first reason was that it was a needed victory for the organization that was still trying to redefine itself in the new millennium and gave a much needed boost to morale. The second, more important reason is that the success of this generation's production of *Guys and Dolls* proved to themselves that they too could rise to the level of their forbearers and put on a classy and professional production with limited resources and under the greatest of stress. Throughout it all, they persevered and came out winners and showed the entire community just what HPC had to offer. More than that, it seems altogether fitting that this of all plays was the one that was to be successful for the group. In the opinion of this author, it seems as though there's something special about that play whenever HPC performs it, as though a higher power, in some unknown but grand scheme, constructs a labyrinth of obstacles that need to be overcome, but then, almost miraculously, makes it all come together in one beautiful shining package. At the risk of jinxing all future productions of the play, it seems as though whenever HPC decides to stage *Guys and Dolls*, magic happens.

After the success of *Guys and Dolls*, work was not over for the dedicated men and women of HPC. While Sharon had acquired *Inferno* in the summer of 2004, the first opportunity

they had to move all of their stuff into new room was at the very end of the Fall of 2004 after *Guys and Dolls*. HPC moved all the flats, wood and other large bulky items to Paradise from the central HPC office and from a few smaller storage areas in the Hinman Dining Hall. They also relocated all the props and costumes to the newly acquired Inferno. During what became known as the Great Office Cleanout of 2004, Mel'n Flo (as they became known because they were nearly always together) quickly began to show themselves as the future leaders of HPC. They also acquired new nicknames. Flo became known as Chaos, and Melanie became known as Ruckus. The reason they got these new nicknames was because during the office cleanup they used to horse around with each other and the rest of HPC causing both a ruckus and chaos. After the office clean-up, the cast and crew of HPC settled down for a much deserved winter break and prepared for another semester of fun, friendship and the love of theater.<sup>23</sup>

The Spring of 2005 started off on a high note for HPC. They started off the 2004-2005 academic year with a \$700 budget. Melanie and Flo were friendly with Frankie Seeman and Ryan Schoeffield, the President and Financial Vice President of HCC, respectively. They were able to bump up the money they allotted to HPC to \$1000 for the remainder of the semester and were able to have \$1000 budget allotted to HPC for the next academic year. This was a much needed financial boost for HPC.<sup>24</sup>

With the extra cash in hand, HPC set about producing its next show, *Murder at Rutherford House*. *Murder at Rutherford House* is a murder-mystery in the dinner theater style. Dinner would actually be served to the audience during the play. During the course of the dinner, the audience members would be given cards and at the end of the play they had to write down who they thought was the murderer and why. Prizes were awarded to the most accurate answer and the one with most creative answer. This novel concept had never been tackled by

HPC and presented some interesting logistical problems. Instead of risers and rows of chairs, tables needed to be set up so the audience could eat during the show. Anyone who has been in the Hinman Commons can tell you that it is a small space to begin with and even smaller when half of it is cordoned off for audience space during a regular performance, sans tables. With the extra space needed for the tables, it made the stage area incredibly small and difficult to work in. To complicate matters, it was written into the script what food was to be served to the audience and when. Melanie and others would arrive two hours before every show to chop fruit and help to prepare meals. Before one of the shows, Sharon had left a large portion of it in her apartment in Hillside. She wound up missing half the show ferrying it from her apartment down to the Hinman Commons. Some members of the tech crew were assigned to distribute the food. They had to be convinced to dress up as waiters or waitresses so they could be better able to play their part. The technical crew was not the only ones enlisted to help with the play. Adam Bonet, who was the RD of Hughes Hall at the time, helped by loaning HPC his refrigerator so that they could fill it with food for the show. For cast and crew of HPC, and especially for Sharon, Melanie, and Flo, the play was a logistical nightmare of the highest proportions. Still, in the end, the cast was great and the play went off without a hitch and the audience loved it. *Murder at Rutherford House* was complete hit for the group.<sup>25</sup>

Where *Murder at Rutherford House* was a fun and entertaining play, the next play that HPC would perform that semester would be one its darkest and most tragic plays ever, and because of the subject matter it would push almost everyone in the cast to the emotional breaking point. That play would be *The Laramie Project*, which is the story about the death of Matthew Shepherd, a student at the University of Wyoming who in October of 1998 was savagely beaten to death near Laramie, Wyoming, because he was gay. This savage hate-crime sparked a media

frenzy at the time and opened up a national dialogue on hate crimes, homosexuality, and homophobia. The play, which is told in a series of monologues, deals with Shepherd's death and the controversy surrounding preconceived ideas about homosexuals. The play, which was co-sponsored by the Binghamton University Rainbow Pride Union, was full of sensitive and controversial subject matter and the announcement of its production created a stir.<sup>26</sup>

Rehearsals for the play were very hard emotionally. Flo remembers this draining experience. "I cried at every rehearsal and the actual play...it's a very emotional play."<sup>27</sup> Almost every cast member played six different parts apiece. Lines were difficult to learn as the play was mostly long monologues by each of the characters. The sets were very minimal. They had simple flats painted green with chairs of all different colors placed around the stage and even in the area where the audience normally sits. At first glance it appeared as though the chairs were placed randomly in the room, but there was a reason to it. The few props and costumes that they had were placed on the chairs and as each cast member sat in the chair, they would pick up the costumes and props that they needed to become their next character.<sup>28</sup>

The play is by its very nature supposed to be somber and depressing, though there were a few lighthearted moments. During one of the shows, one of cast members, Kyle Owen, was sitting in one of the chairs when one of his contact lenses fell out. At that point he began tearing up and jerking around in an attempt to find his missing contact. Everyone who was present thought that it was the emotion of the play that was getting to him and they too began to grow emotional. After the fact, everyone had a good laugh at this snafu.<sup>29</sup>

During the rehearsals for the play, Ary Benmayor, who was cast to play the Reverend Phelps, had a difficult time getting into the part. Benmayor was an excellent actor, but for whatever reason he was struggling to truly understand this particular character and perform him

realistically. In an attempt to help Benmayor better understand the psychology of his character and to better betray him, Sharon moved the rehearsal outside onto the Hinman Patio and told Benmayor to rehearse his lines there. Benmayor was reluctant to do so because the Reverend Phelps dialogue contains a lot of hate speech directed mostly towards homosexuals and he was uncomfortable rehearsing these derogatory lines in public. Sharon encouraged Benmayor to try and he did, standing just above the stairs leading up to the Hinman Patio and preaching one of Reverend Phelps's anti-gay sermons. To the casual passerby (and there were many) they must have thought that Benmayor was a violent homophobe. Although this incident was slightly embarrassing to Benmayor, this innovative rehearsal allowed him to better understand his character and he nailed the part every time thereafter.<sup>30</sup>

Difficult lines and saddening material were not the only problems associated with the play. Reverend Fred Phelps, who is one of the characters in the play, is also a real-life person. Reverend Phelps is an evangelical Christian who at the time of Matthew Shepherd's death commented that Shepherd got exactly what he deserved and that all gays deserve to die because their sexuality is an affront to God. After Shepherd's death and the trial of his killers, Phelps began touring the country protesting at every place where the play was performed and advocating his violent hatred towards homosexuals and preaching anti-gay sermons. At the time that HPC was producing *The Laramie Project*, Phelps was in Nyack, New York, and there was a very real possibility that he would come to Binghamton to protest the play. No one in HPC knew exactly what would happen if Phelps and his supporters came and picketed the play. Not only was Phelps's brand of hatred and bigotry not wanted, the cast and crew of HPC was concerned that a riot between Phelps supporters and those who were against him would spark. Luckily, Phelps never came and the play went on without incident.<sup>31</sup>

The reviews for *The Laramie Project* were mostly positive; however, it was not without its criticisms. One of the major criticisms of the play was that it moved too slow. All too often it seemed as though the monologues were forced, and were dragged out longer than they needed to be. Also, the fact that each actor played at least six different characters added to the confusion. Also the performances were not consistent. For instance, Ary Benmayor was praised for his excellent portrayal of the Reverend Phelps but not for some of his other characters. This seemed to be a problem with many of the male actors. The actresses seemed to fare somewhat better, though they too suffered from many of the same inconsistencies. The play's major strengths seemed to occur during scenes that were quicker and more animated. One reviewer cited Kowlasky's experience with comedies and musicals (which are usually quicker paced) as the reason why this was so. However, Sharon was also praised for the scenes that did work well, especially in Acts II and III. One reviewer stated:

...the moments when everything comes together are striking, and with a little more time (and in some cases, talent) HPC could have yielded a far more substantial product. It comes so close. The "Amazing Grace" scene is flawlessly directed...When so many individual pieces work together to make a unified whole, we understand the power (and necessity) of a community theater.<sup>32</sup>

Although these were not glowing reviews, *The Laramie Project* was a surprise hit for HPC, and even if it wasn't, it would still be ranked as one their greatest accomplishments. *The Laramie Project* was by far the most controversial and thought-provoking play HPC had ever done up until that point, and even with the threat of violent protest, they still performed the play. It is also definitely the most professional play ever produced by HPC in that regard. HPC had a lot to be proud of. The play was also a success for more humble reasons. *The Laramie Project* would be the last HPC play that Sharon Kowlasky would participate in. That semester she would graduate and leave Hinman and HPC behind, though, not before making sure that her

successors were adequately trained and prepared for the awesome challenges and responsibilities that lay before them. By graduation time, Sharon Kowlaksy had much to be proud of. Not only had her involvement in the company led her to grow and become a prominent figure in Hinman College, but it also allowed her to pursue her passionate love of theater. Moreover, Sharon had built upon the great foundation that James Fox had left her and moved HPC into the beginnings of what can only be described as a new golden age of community-based theater for the company and for Hinman. Under her presidency, HPC grew to ten times the size that it was when she was a freshman. In 2007, Sharon would describe her feelings for HPC. “It was a lot of hard work, a lot of patience and organization, and a lot of perseverance over all the little things that popped up. It was more than a full-time job; it was my life and became the most important thing to me at college.”<sup>33</sup> Sharon may have been leaving HPC behind, but the memories and friendships that she had made would last a lifetime. As emotional as the final goodbyes were, she took solace in the knowledge that her mentees would continue on the traditions and legacies of the little theater that could.

In the Fall of 2005, the leadership of HPC fell upon the shoulders of Sharon’s disciples, Melanie Feltmate and Flo Varela, the new co-Presidents of HPC. This dynamic duo of HPC quickly realized that they’d have to expend all their efforts to continue to make HPC a successful community-based theater organization. They quickly set about to perform two plays for that semester. The first play to be performed was a comedy called *Office Hours*. The play is a series of vignettes told from the perspectives of different characters. Technically speaking, it was a fairly easy play to put together and there were no real problems with it. *Office Hours* was not a particularly memorable play for many, but it was very successful and professionally done and a hit for HPC.<sup>34</sup>

The next play to be performed that semester would be a musical called *The Boys From Syracuse*, which was a play based off of William Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*. As fate would have it, *The Boys From Syracuse* turned into a real life comedy of errors. The cast for this play was huge, but thankfully they all bonded quickly and became very close-knit. In some theater troupes, rivalries and spats can occur among the cast members. While this had certainly happened to HPC in the past (and will undoubtedly happen again in the future) the cast for *The Boys From Syracuse* were all helpful towards each other worked exquisitely well with directors Kimberly McCombs and Dorian Dodd. This was a good thing because it seemed that everything that could possibly go wrong with the play did. During rehearsals, many cast members fell and injured themselves (none seriously). The play, which takes place in Ancient Greece, calls for the actors to wear traditional Greek garb. However, the costumes looked nothing like traditional Greek attire and it initially appeared as though the actors were wearing bed sheets for costumes. With a little bit of work, the costumes turned out ok. Also, there was a problem with one of the main cast members. Sam Nathanson, who would become an HPC mainstay, had difficulty singing. Try as hard as he might, Sam just was not able to sing up to the caliber that the directors were looking for, which was bad because in one scene he was supposed to sing a duet with another cast member. During the actual show he did the best that he could and his efforts were greatly appreciated by all. The show did very well and was sold out every single night. *The Boys From Syracuse*, despite all of its comedic errors during rehearsals, was an outstanding hit for HPC, which had returned to its bread and butter staple, the musical comedy after experimenting with different genres. The success of the play showed all involved that HPC was back on track as a hit-producing machine and more importantly the cast, which had bonded so well during play, all came back time and time again. Not since the late 1980's had HPC seen



such a close-knit and dedicated troupe as it had at this time. This facet would become vitally important in the semesters to come.<sup>35</sup>

In the Spring of 2006, both Melanie and Flo were going to study abroad, Melanie to Perth, Australia and Flo to London. Although they trusted those who they had left in power in their stead, they still worried about the future of their company to which they had dedicated so much of their lives. Before they left for their respective destinations, they left the remaining members of the E-Board with a calendar of everything they had to do for the semester. Mel'n Flo were leaving nothing to chance. That semester saw only one play go into production. The play was called *Jackson! A Musical Thriller* and was written by a student named Charles Berman. One of the biggest problems facing this play was that no one could decide on a set. They wound up using simple black curtains as the background with a US flag hanging up. That was the only place produced that semester. When Mel'n Flo returned from study abroad they settled down for a nice, relaxing summer off, but with big plans for what they would do for the fall semester.

When Mel'n Flo returned to Hinman in the Fall of 2006 they came with the realization that this would be their penultimate semester at Binghamton and their last semester as presidents of HPC. Therefore their mission was twofold. The first and most important thing was that they had to make sure that the leadership for the company was left in good hands and that the next generation of HPCers were adequately trained and could rise to the challenge. The second thing on their minds was that this was their last opportunity to do a show which they all wanted to do. For a long time Melanie had had a show kicking around in her head that she had wanted to bring to the Hinman Commons. When Melanie was in eighth grade, at the tender age of thirteen, she first saw the cult classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. A year later she saw the live stage

version and fell in love with the story ever since. When Melanie met Flo in 2003, she introduced her to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and they would be frequent attendees at the Vestal Violators, which periodically had midnight showings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. As time went by in their HPC careers, Mel'n Flo continually discussed producing *The Rocky Horror Show* (the title of the stage version). The play, famous for its audience participation, would be an interesting and challenging play to put on, especially in the small confines of the Hinman Commons. Still, the dynamic duo of HPC were up to the challenge and pitched the idea to the rest of HPC, who eagerly accepted. Everyone involved knew that *The Rocky Horror Show* would be a difficult show to produce, requiring long hours, extensive sets, and lots of money. Luckily for HPC, they were able to have the wiring in the Hinman Commons redone which had brought them up to fire code, so the fire marshal was off their backs for the time being. HCC also increased their budget for the year which helped with the efforts. Still, they knew that the other show would have to be simple and as inexpensive as possible. They then came across a series of one-act Woody Allen plays collectively called *Writer's Block*. The plays are typical Woody Allen, but most importantly they had rather minimal sets which would allow them to devote more time and resources to *The Rocky Horror Show*.<sup>36</sup>

Although the show was supposed to be relatively easy to do it came together rather late in the process. Most distressing of all, though, was that the first show had to be cancelled because of massive flooding in the Binghamton area. Although the campus itself did not flood, many of the cast and crew members (who lived off campus) were flooded in. The anticipation for the show was high and the forced cancellation was a big hit for the morale of the group. Flooding was not the end of their problems. Due to a miscommunication, the programs for the play were not printed in time for the first showing, and had to be printed during the intermission so the

audience could get one of the playbills. However, all the fears and trepidations were cast away as soon as the show debuted the following day on November 16, 2006.

HPC decided to stage two one-act plays from Woody Allen's *Writer's Block*. The first was a play called "Central Park West." This story is full of the stuff that made Woody Allen famous: adultery, envious spouses, and neurotic characters all around. Maria Racioppo played Phyllis, a conceited psychoanalyst in whose apartment the play is entirely set. Freshman Ipsita Ghose made her HPC debut as Carol, Phyllis's friend. The conflict of the play comes in when Phyllis discovers that Carol has been having an affair with her husband Sam (played by Johnny Bradigan). Cassidy Hark makes an appearance as Juliet, Sam's most recent mistress and one of Phyllis's former patients. She plays the delightfully ditsy Juliet excellently. Completely stealing the show is Eric West who plays Howard, Carol's cuckolded husband. West in this role was a walking, talking mirror image of Woody Allen himself and played the hysterical part fabulously, completely upstaging everyone else on the set and winning the hearts of the audience with his interpretations of signature Woody Allen neurotic antics. This particular one-act play is laced with marital infidelity and numerous laugh-out-loud moments, such as when Phyllis rips apart reams of her philandering husband's papers and when Howard, completely distraught over learning of his wife's infidelities, tries to kill himself with a World War I era German Luger. The excellent and very comedic play reaches a climax when each of the characters gets what they deserve. The theme of the problems and repercussions of marital infidelity are made clear in numerous laugh-out-loud moments and the audience was reminded that the center of the universe was most definitely not Central Park West.

The next one-act play to be successfully performed was entitled "Old Saybrook." The story takes place entirely within a country home in rural New Jersey (if there is such a thing). At

first all seems well as the audience is introduced to two happy couples, Sheila and Norman, played by Anna Masliakova and Travis Howard respectively, and their friends David and Jenny, performed by Johnny Bradigan and Beth DuBon. The couples' quiet evening is interrupted by two strangers, another married couple, Hal and Sandy played by Joseph Coppola and Navah Fuchs. We soon learn that Hal and Sandy used to own the house and were driving by and decided to stop in and say hello and see if the man who they sold it too still lived there. At first the three couples get along well, until Hal tells them about a secret compartment hidden in the fireplace. Upon opening the secret compartment, the characters find a diary that details all the extra-martial sexual encounters between Jenny and Norman. Upon learning of this, Jenny's husband, David, takes out a shotgun and threatens to kill everyone. Much of the humor in the play centers around the character's efforts to calm the emotionally distraught and homicidal David down. During these heated conversations we soon learn that both Hal and Sandy have been cheating on each other. With this knowledge the entire house goes into an uproar as all the philanders prepare to meet their fates at the end of a double-barrel shotgun. Making his appearance at this time is the quirky Max (played by Michael Serpe), the man who bought the house from Hal and Sandy. Max enters the room bound and gagged to a chair. Upon releasing him, we find out that Sheila, Norman, David and Jenny are all characters in an unfinished play that Max was writing and that those four characters came to life in an attempt to get Max to finish his play. Everyone argues and bickers on how the play should end, but eventually agree that the best way to end it is with forgiveness. The touching final scene, when Max and his two artificial couples race off to finish the play leaving the two real people, Hal and Sandy, to confront their demons and to ultimately forgive each other is a tender moment showing that love conquers all, even the most heart-wrenching of infidelities.

In both one-act plays, HPC made excellent use of the simple décor used in for both settings. Even though the stage was fairly minimalist, the crew managed to make use of the same furniture and still give the impression that the action took place in two different settings. Kudos go to both Tom Sutch, who made his directorial debut with *Writer's Block*, and to Sam Yaggy, a co-director and a veteran of HPC, playing Sergeant in *The Boys From Syracuse*. Freshman Laura Thelander helped assistant direct the show. Laura was inspired to join HPC by an acquaintance from her hometown in Orange County, New York. That acquaintance was none other than former HPC President James Fox. *Writer's Block* was a success for HPC. Although the show may not have sold out every night like other plays, there still was a sizeable audience, and the quality of the acting and the production was absolutely first rate. With *Writer's Block* firmly squared away, HPC could now throw all its resources behind its most ambitious project in years—*The Rocky Horror Show*.

For those unfamiliar with *The Rocky Horror Show* or the film version, it is the story of two naïve young people, Brad Majors and his fiancée Janet Weiss, and their misadventures in the castle of the evil transvestite mad scientist Dr. Frank-n-furter, an alien from the planet Transsexual, in the galaxy Transylvania. Both the film and the play were filled with sexual references and most of the subject matter touched many taboo subjects and bizarre sexuality. Not for the faint of heart, *The Rocky Horror Show* broke all the rules regarding common ideals about sex and sexuality and set it all to music. Bringing everything together to make this ambitious musical work was perhaps the most challenging thing that Mel'n Flo ever did and is perhaps one of the most complex shows that HPC has ever produced.

One of the first problems that HPC had to overcome was casting the show. Luckily, many HPC veterans jumped at the chance to participate in the show, including many people who

had been involved in *The Boys From Syracuse*. In the end, Jillian Maxwell would play Janet Weiss, John Svitek would play Brad Majors, and HPC veteran Kyle Owens would play Frank-n-furter. Nicholas Roach would play Frank-n-furter's Igor-like henchman Riff Raff, Ava Rosenblatt would play Columbia, and Andrea Shapiro would play Magenta. Vance Valerio would play Frank-n-furter's version of Frankenstein's monster, Rocky, Sam Nathanson would voice the Narrator, and Hanniel Choi would play the dual roles of the rival scientist Dr. Everett Scott and Scott's nephew, Eddie. Alexandra Gordon, Max Eisenstat, Whitney-Mae Faison, Brittany Jennings, and Tracey Gordon rounded out the cast as Phantoms, more minions of Frank-n-furter who also doubled as crew devoted to changing the sets as needed. Auditions for the show were very interesting to say the least. Usually when a producer and/or director casts a show they have actors read lines or do a brief scene. Along with this, Mel'n Flo also asked each of the cast members if they were comfortable wearing nothing but their underwear in front of people. While this may have seemed like a strange and unusual question to the outside observer it was a very legitimate question. Most of the cast would be performing in costumes that were little more than their undergarments, leaving very little to the imagination. The play also calls for many of the cast to perform very risqué scenes. To get the cast used to this, Melanie would put on proactive music and give out lap dances. Rehearsals occurred at a near breakneck pace. They were seven days a week every single week and went on for hours each night, leaving the cast and crew precious little time for any other pursuits including academics. Unfortunately, for a long while the Hinman Commons was not available because the Physical Facilities decided to remove the asbestos from the Commons at that most inconvenient of moments. To compensate for a lack of rehearsal space, the cast rehearsed in dorm rooms, floor and main lounges and just about any space that was available to them. Oftentimes they would rehearse in full costume

(which regularly wasn't much of a costume at all). Both Melanie and Flo remembered humorous moments when innocent residents of the building would walk by and see all these strange people wearing next to nothing and parading around in strange choreographed movements, humored and scared to death at the same time. Humorous moments occurred on a regular basis during rehearsals for the show. The cast would often hurl good-natured barbs and insults at one another. One rehearsal in particular stands out in everyone's mind. In the middle of rehearsing one scene, someone broke wind rather loudly which caused everyone to break down in hysterical laughter. Rehearsal had to recess for twenty minutes because the cast could not stop laughing. None of it could have worked if the cast had not been tight. Many of the same relationships that they had forged during previous HPC shows helped with the bonding of the cast, so they were comfortable dealing with each other in rather delicate positions (pun intended). For example, John Svitek, a first-semester freshman, was a little anxious about playing his role. Melanie and the rest of the cast created games that were meant as team building exercises, but fixed them so that he would have to do some of the more outrageous and raunchy exercises. Kyle Owens, who played Frank-n-furter, began wearing an "I love [heart symbol in place of word love] Brad" pin to encourage Svitek. A play as outrageous as this would oftentimes make actors squeamish and unwilling to do certain parts. However, there was none of this in this particular cast. Each and everyone of them embraced their role whole heartedly. Not only did they get into their characters completely but they also immersed themselves completely in the underground culture that is *The Rocky Horror Show*.<sup>37</sup>

The cast members were not the only ones to be challenged. Set design and construction was also a problem that had to be solved. The sets were huge, the largest sets in recent memory and perhaps some of the largest sets in all of HPC history. The slab that was used for Rocky to

lay on when he was “born” was absolutely gigantic. The crew built the slab in the Commons and when everything was all over they could not get it out. During one of the scenes, a television monitor is supposed to show Dr. Scott wheeling down a hallway in his wheelchair. Not only did they have to pre-tape this segment so that it could be used during the actual performance but during one of the shows, one of the cast members hit the wrong button and instead of Dr. Scott in his wheelchair all they say was static. Melanie had to stealthily sneak onto the stage to fix this and save the scene. Another technical detail that had to overcome was what to do about the scene where Eddie tries to escape. The script has Eddie bursting out of a soda machine before he is killed. HPC was unable to either get a soda machine or to build one themselves that looked real enough. To solve this problem ice was substituted for the soda machine and they surrounded Eddie in foam to have him burst out of the “ice.”<sup>38</sup>

One of the most integral parts of this play was its music. The music is important for any musical but this is especially true for *The Rocky Horror Show*. It was agreed early on that they needed as full a band as possible to make the music sound good. Luckily for HPC, there was a lot of support from musicians who wanted to play for the show. They did have trouble finding a person who could play saxophone in the band. For weeks on end both Mel’n Flo searched for anyone who could play saxophone, even appealing to HCC in hopes that there might be a musically inclined member who knew how to play the sax. Just when all hope was lost on finding a saxophone player, they happened to stumble across an acquaintance of theirs at a party. This person happened to know how to play the sax and agreed to play for the band. At almost the very last minute the band was complete and ready to rock out for *Rocky Horror*.<sup>39</sup>

Most versions of the play encourage audience participation. Veteran *Rocky Horror* fans know exactly when to shout out insults at the cast and make fun of their lines. Goodie bags are



also distributed with various items that can be thrown at the cast members. Seeing a production of *The Rocky Horror Show* is an experience, to say the least, what with all the scantily clad people milling about, audience members hurling insults at the actors, and flying objects during the production. It is also an extra special night for *Rocky Horror* virgins, or those who have never been to a live show before, because they get a large “V” painted on their forehead so that everyone knows that they are “virgins”. The show was scheduled for November 30 at 8 p.m., December 1 at midnight, and December 2 at 2PM and 8 p.m. The midnight showing of *Rocky Horror* is usually the time when all the diehard fans come out to witness and partake in the spectacle. Everyone knew that the show was going to be popular so they added extra seating which brought them well above the number allowed by fire code. Almost all of the shows were sold out and the midnight show was incredibly popular. For that show so many people kept coming that there was standing room only. The Hinman Commons was packed as it never was before. At the door they sold tickets and goodie bags one by one.<sup>40</sup> The stage was set, the cast was pumped, but would *The Rocky Horror Show* live up to all the hype that it had generated?

The answer to that question was a resounding yes! HPC rocked the house with its performance and brought the audience to its feet on numerous occasions. Each and every cast member performed well above all expectations. There were a few snafus. During one show a flat that was being used as a background for Frank-n-furter’s lab fell down. Luckily, no one was hurt. In another scene Kyle Owens is supposed to come onto stage with a chainsaw. During one of the shows it took Kyle a very long time to come out. Finally he came out not with a chainsaw, but with a cucumber. After the show it was learned that the prop chainsaw had been misplaced and the only thing he could find was a cucumber. Still the scene went on, albeit to a somewhat confused audience. Sam Nathanson, who played the Narrator, also had the unfortunate tendency

to forget some of his lines. Luckily for everyone, he was great at improvising and no one in the audience was the wiser. The band was amazing and the musical numbers were superb, especially the show's signature number "Let's Do The Time Warp Again." At the end of every show audience members were invited up to dance with the cast and "do the time warp again." Every show was special, but the most special of them all was the midnight showing. There it seemed as though all the diehard *Rocky Horror* fans from miles around converged on the Hinman Commons, many of them dressed (or is it undressed) for the occasion. Even the Vestal Violators came and afterwards the manager approached Mel'n Flo and said that it was the best production of the show that he had ever seen. No official reviews exist for HPC's version of *The Rocky Horror Show*, but that comment was the greatest praise that anyone in the cast and crew of HPC could have received.<sup>41</sup>

Sunday December 3, the day after the last show, everyone in HPC took a much needed rest. Mel'n Flo slept over twenty-four hours to compensate for the sleep deprivation they had been accumulating since rehearsal for the play started. Still, the next week the cast, crew and even the band begged Mel'n Flo to schedule rehearsals because they missed seeing each other so much. All told, the play was a monumental success for HPC. Through sales of tickets and goodie bags HPC raised over \$2,000. More than that, though, *The Rocky Horror Show* was exactly what HPC needed.

The play was the lifetime achievement moment for both Mel'n Flo during their time in college. These two dynamic personalities and faithful leaders had, whether they knew it or not, taken a Hinman organization that had been beleaguered by many issues over the previous decade and turned it around to the winning organization that it had once been. Under their leadership they had seen the budget grow from \$500 to double that amount. They were able to have new

wiring installed in the Hinman Commons, bringing the lighting system up to code and even had many brand new lights installed. They saw membership skyrocket as more people than ever before got involved, and with the exception of the Spring of 2006, every semester had at least two productions. They hadn't done it alone. Foundations had been laid by earlier HPC greats like James Fox and Sharon Kowlasky and countless other devoted HPCers. Still the efforts they had made would set the example for what the leaders of HPC should be. HPC had had its ups and downs, and even on its most recent upward climb there had been setbacks, just as undoubtedly there will be setbacks well into the future. The success of *The Rocky Horror Show* would be for this generation of HPC the equivalent of the success of HLT's *Guys and Dolls* or an earlier generation of HPC's production of *Greases*. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, for HPC success was not final, and failure was not fatal. Every member of this theater organization had the courage to continue, and that's what counted. The Spring of 2007 will see HPC stage an old timeless classic. *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown* will make another appearance in the Hinman Commons, the fourth time it will have done so. The end of this year will also see Melanie Feltmate and Flo Varela graduate and leave Hinman and HPC behind, but the legacy that they and the rest of HPC leave behind will last for years to come. James Fox, Sharon Kowlasky, Melanie Feltmate, and Flo Varela had joined the ranks of the great leaders of HPC: Stan Goldberg, Steve Young, Patrick Misciagna, and Adam Brown. Their blood, sweat and tears were all pooled into that little community-based organization dedicated to the singular purpose of fun, friendship and the love of theatre.

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Kowlasky, e-mail message to author, February 15, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> James Fox, telephone conversation with author, April 12, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Matt Chayes, "Martin's Picasso is a comic work of art," *Pipe Dream* Vol. LXIII, No. 20 November 15, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> James Fox, telephone conversation with author, April 12, 2007.

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- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Daniel Schwartz “A day in the life of...The Hinman Production Company,” *Pipe Dream* Vol. LXIV, No. 22, May 2, 2003.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> James Fox, telephone conversation with author, April 12, 2007.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Sharon Kowlasky, e-mail message to author, February 15, 2007.
- <sup>13</sup> James Fox, telephone conversation with author, April 12, 2007.
- <sup>14</sup> Sharon Kowlasky, e-mail message to author, February 15, 2007.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Sharon Kowlasky, e-mail message to author, February 15, 2007 and Melanie Feltmate, Flo Varela and Maria Racioppo, interview with author, January 30, 2007.
- <sup>17</sup> Melanie Feltmate, Flo Varela and Maria Racioppo, interview with author, January 30, 2007.
- <sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Ellis, “Student-written play is an acceptable work,” *Pipe Dream* LXVI, No. 23, April 30, 2004.
- <sup>19</sup> Melanie Feltmate, Flo Varela and Maria Racioppo, interview with author, January 30, 2007.
- <sup>20</sup> Heather Chin, “‘Goat’ presents interesting problems,” *Pipe Dream* Vol. LXVII, No. 22, November 23, 2004.
- <sup>21</sup> Guys and Dolls playbill, located in the HPC Archives.
- <sup>22</sup> Melanie Feltmate, Flo Varela and Maria Racioppo, interview with author, January 30, 2007.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Sharon Kowlasky, e-mail message to author, February 15, 2007 and Melanie Feltmate, Flo Varela and Maria Racioppo, interview with author, January 30, 2007.
- <sup>32</sup> Aaron Riccio, “‘Laramie Project’ takes on turmoil,” *Pipe Dream-Release Entertainment* April 28-May 5, 2005.
- <sup>33</sup> Sharon Kowlasky, e-mail message to author, February 15, 2007.
- <sup>34</sup> Melanie Feltmate, Flo Varela and Maria Racioppo, interview with author, January 30, 2007.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.