

Part V: The Traditions and Legacy of HLT and HPC

Every long running organization has traditions. HPC is no exception. One of the longest standing traditions that HPC has had has been the procedure that they have used to pick each of the plays. This procedure is truly a community effort involving everyone in this community-based theater organization. At the end of each semester the general body of HPC sits down and decides what play to perform for the following semester. This meeting is called a Pitch Meeting because each of the members can pitch an idea to the rest of the group concerning what play they should perform. An individual will pitch the show, give a brief description of what the show is all about. It helps if either that individual or someone else in HPC is willing to direct the show. After that the HPC treasurer looks up the costs associated with the rights and the royalties of the show. At the beginning of the next semester the group returns and has a voting meeting. In this meeting another discussion occurs, this time focusing on the pros and cons of the plays that were suggested in the Pitch Meeting. After the discussion is over the group votes on which play they would like to see produced. The one with the majority of the votes wins. In the past few years, HPC has offered a student playwriting contest in which a current student will write a play and submit it to HPC for the chance to have it performed by the group. Usually held in the spring semester, the E-Board members read over the submitted plays and pick the best one of the bunch to be performed. Though they are completely unknown shows, there are no royalties or rights to be purchased. Also, some very good and original performances have come out of the student writing competition.¹

Other traditions include some of the interesting behind-the-scenes traditions that HPC uses. One of the more interesting ones involves Schlomo. Schlomo is a stick made out of broomsticks, duck tape and a hook. This makeshift device has been used to help the crew hang

the curtains for years and has become an original HPC staple for the production.² Another tradition includes the team-building song “Gerry.” “Gerry” is a song that is played before every performance to warm the actors up. They dance around like fools and expend nervous energy. “Gerry” is very popular and everyone gets involved. One year, one of the directors was dead set against performing “Gerry,” which led to a huge outcry from the rest of the group. Now it has been officially mandated that everyone rocks out to “Gerry” (cast, crew, directors and even the E-Board) before every performance. Other memories include the customary trip to Denny’s after the first performance of the show to go over what went well, what went wrong, and to consume inferior quality food late at night. Perhaps the best and most time-honored tradition is one that dates back to the first time that HLT began using the Hinman Commons as their stage area.

Melanie Feltmate captures this rite of passage for everyone involved in the group:

I love every year when we bring the freshmen in for our first GIM [General Interest Meeting] of the year and show them the Commons and say “Okay, here’s your stage.” They all look like they’re about to say, “You’ve got to be kidding,” but then comes the end of the semester and they see the transformation the Commons can have and it’s really nice to see that.³

It’s these traditions that add to the legacy of an organization now in its 36th year of existence. Of all the great Hinman institutions, HPC is definitely the one filled with the most drama, comedy, farce, and romance. Very little of that actually comes from the plays performed. It comes not from the fictional realm that Hinman community-based theater operates in, but from the personal interactions among the members of this tight-knit yet inclusive organization. It is the institution that has the most passionate members. This author can personally attest that even close to forty years after the organization began, people who were involved in it still talk time and time again about being members of either HLT or HPC at some point in their lives.

Stan Goldberg, the founding father most responsible for the creation of HLT, would marvel at the fact that the organization is still around (albeit with a new name and a slightly different set of rules) all these years after he tended the helm. “The whole thing was great,” Stan would say, “There was no budget and no charge. It was just for fun. It was all just for fun. Amazing that people took as much time out of their schedules as they did to participate.”⁴ Over thirty years after he graduated from Binghamton, Steve Young, one of the original members of HLT, would proclaim that HLT (and by extension HPC) fulfilled the creative needs of the people of Hinman.⁵ Twenty-five years after reinventing HLT and creating the new organization, HPC, Patrick Misciagna had this to say, “It was the nights of standing ovations. That was the best pay you could get. I don’t know how we did it but we pulled off miracles. The applause was what kept us going.”⁶ Likewise, Jody Sandler, Patrick’s right hand man during their years in HPC, stated, “[HPC was the] entryway for people who think ‘wouldn’t it be nice to be a movie star.’ It gave people an opportunity to be in the arts and theater.”⁷ Adam Brown, perhaps HPC’s most stalwart and influential leader who led the organization through what can only be called its golden age, had this to say upon reflecting about the meaning of HPC: “During *Fiddler on the Roof* there was a moment on the stage that dealt with ‘leaving home.’ HPC represented home. I talked to [Faculty Master] Al Haber a lot about what home is. That play allowed me to reflect over the past seven years of my time in Hinman. It was a very special moment...really wonderful.”⁸ Four years after the end of his involvement in HPC, James Fox would say, “[HPC] helped me realize a lot about myself. Helped me to figure out how to handle people and to help actors emerge and entertain an audience. It teaches you how to be passionate.”⁹ In 2006, in the penultimate semester of her senior year and the last time she would be involved as HPC co-President, Melanie Feltmate wrote this about what the meaning of HPC was all about.

We are a true low-budget community theater—it doesn't sound glamorous, but that's our legacy. We find the most innovative costumes and sets you can imagine, because we HAVE to. And in the end it always looks great, and we always pull through. I kind of like the name Hinman Little Theater more because it makes us sound like the little engine that could. Based on our space and restrictions to the Commons and budget you'd think we'd never be able to produce a show, but we always pull it off.¹⁰

In a way none of these words truly sum up what the Hinman Little Theater or the Hinman Production Company experience is all about. How can you put into words an organization that has meant so much to so many people over a nearly forty-year existence? The answer to that question is that it is almost impossible. This “little theater that could” has done the impossible and pulled off miracles on countless occasions in its storied past. It has also created bonds of fellowship and family among the members regardless of when they served. Anyone who has been involved in either HLT or HPC can meet someone from any era of that organization's history and they will be in complete understanding of what it means to be in a Hinman community-based theater organization. Adam Brown once said that HPC was all about fun, friendship and the love of theater, but it's more than that. It's about the bonds of community, of overcoming insurmountable odds and looking back on the finished product and realizing that the many hours of hard-work, tribulations and stress were more than worth it. It does not matter if the young men and women involved in the group go on to have successful acting careers like HLT alum Paul Reiser. What matters is that they had the chance to contribute to the ongoing story of an organization that has entertained thousands of people over the course nearly four decades and built the personal characters of everyone involved in the group. In this sense the legacy of HLT and HPC is centered not in the plays performed but in the people who were in them, all of whom are radiating beacons of the Hinman Spirit.

The author would like to extend his gratitude to Stan Goldberg, Steve Young, Pete Lorenzi, Steve Fialkoff, Gary Levine, Tony Toluba, Patrick Misciagna, Jody Sandler, Rene Coderre, Adam

Brown, Mark Solkoff, William Kahn, Scott-Robert Shenkman, Alice Brod, James Fox, Sharon Kowlasky, Melanie Feltmate, Flo Varela, Maria Racioppo and the members of HPC for their contributions to this chapter and for their efforts in one of the finest Hinman institutions and for creating, by far, the VERY BEST theater organization on campus.

¹ Melanie Feltmate, e-mail message to the author, October 30, 2006 and Flo Varela, e-mail message to the author, October 30, 2006.

² Flo Varela, e-mail message to the author, October 30, 2006.

³ Melanie Feltmate, e-mail message to the author, October 30, 2006.

⁴ Stan Goldberg, telephone conversation with author, September 28, 2006.

⁵ Steve Young, telephone conversation with author, September 29, 2006.

⁶ Patrick Misciagna, telephone conversation with author, October 20, 2006.

⁷ Jody Sandler, telephone conversation with author, November 1, 2006.

⁸ Adam Brown, telephone conversation with author, November 21, 2006.

⁹ James Fox, telephone conversation with author, April 12, 2007.

¹⁰ Melanie Feltmate, e-mail message to the author, October 30, 2006.