

Theatre Offers 30's Woolcott Farce

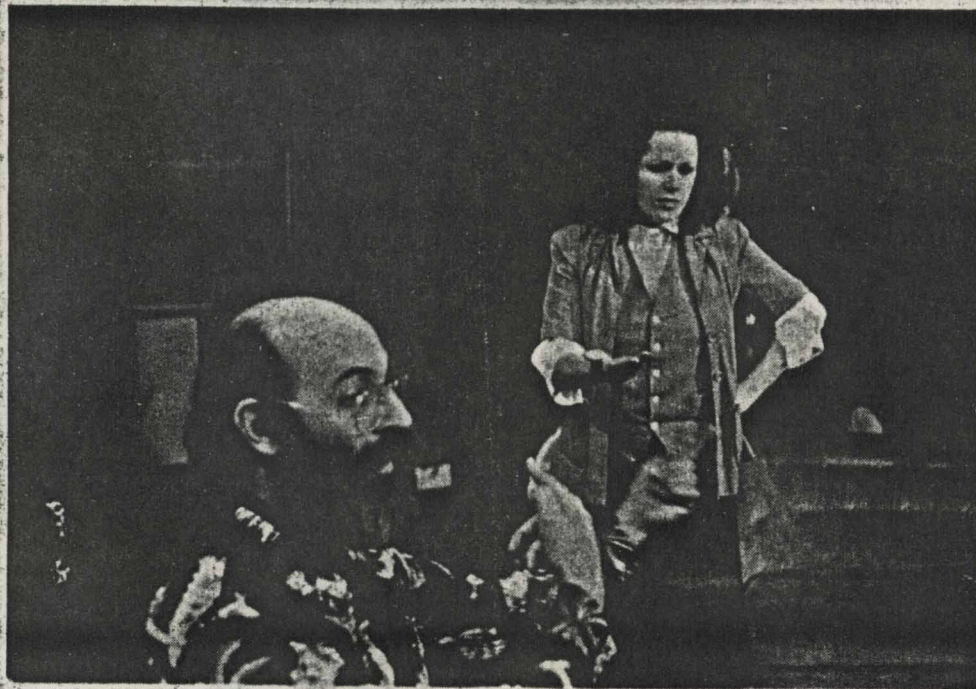
By Breakey and Goldstein

He's Sheridan Whiteside. World-famous wit and raconteur. His newspaper column is read in over 500 papers. Millions of ears tune in his weekly radio program. Famous people hang on his every word. And his small circle of "intimates" includes such diverse luminaries as Walt Disney, Admiral Richard E. Byrd, Mahatma Ghandi, Jascha Heifitz, Ethel Barrymore, Arturo Toscanini, Katharine Cornell, and Haile Selassie.

Sheridan Whiteside is the theatrical equivalent of world-famous wit and raconteur Alexander Woolcott. Woolcott had such a newspaper column (in the New York World) and his radio program ("The Town Crier") was heard by millions. Woolcott numbered among his friends the same group of greats as Whiteside's and many more, at the innermost core of which were such sharply-honed wits as Harpo Marx, Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, James Thurber, Ogden Nash, playwrights George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, and "New Yorker" Magazine publisher Harold Ross. They met every afternoon at New York's Algonquin Hotel with other members of the nefarious Round Table which Dorothy Parker dubbed "Wit's End." Pointed remarks and witticisms flew about the table like balls at some World Champion 19-handed ping pong match.

Woolcott was considered volatile, on the one hand an open-hearted rascal, on the other a petty egomaniac—with class—given

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Rehearsing for the Provincetown Theater Company's production of "The Man Who Came to Dinner" are Edmond DiStasi as Sheridan Whiteside and Peyton playing his secretary, Maggie Cutler.

to invective and abuse. A typical sampling of Woolcottian behavior was experienced by Moss Hart when The Great Man visited his new place in the country (as described by Bennett Cerf in his book "Try and Stop Me"): "(Woolcott) bullied the servants, condemned the food, invited friends of his own from Philadelphia to Sunday dinner, and wrote in Hart's guest book: 'This is to certify that on my first visit to Moss Hart's house, I had one of the most unpleasant times I ever spent...' The next day, Hart was describing Woolcott's behavior to George Kaufman. 'Wouldn't it have been horrible,' he ruminated, 'if he had broken a leg or something and had been on my hands for the rest of the summer!' The collaborators looked at each other with a dawning delight in their faces and took the cover off the

typewriter."

Some time later, in October, 1939, Kaufman and Hart's play, "The Man Who Came to Dinner," opened in Boston with the bearded Monty Woolley as Sheridan Whiteside, the show's thinly-disguised Woolcott. Chafed that Woolley's performance of Whiteside was more in demand than his own, Woolcott remarked, "He needs a shave." Woolley became identified with the role, repeating it in the 1941 film version co-starring Bette Davis, while Woolcott had to satisfy himself with playing it in summer stock.

Perhaps to the late Woolcott's consternation, most of the subsequent Whitesides have had beards. True to the tradition, the director and designer of the Provincetown Theatre Company's (PTC)

current production of "The Man Who Came to Dinner," George R. Tamsitt, chose Edmond DiStasi for the part. DiStasi is a veteran actor and director whose least talent is in his beard.

"The Man" is a definite departure from previous PTC efforts, such as "The Bald Soprano," "Marat / Sade," "The Balcony," "Peter Pan," and the forthcoming "Alice in Wonderland," all of which may be considered in the line of experimental theatre. "The Man" is a traditionally structured play, summoning forth the technical and stylistic talents of the actors and director. Its success is chiefly dependent on the timing and delivery of the playwright's lines. The quintessence of 1930's sophisticated comedy, "The Man Who Came to Dinner" is as different from previous PTC productions as coffee is from marijuana. It is a piece of theatre with a narrow dramatic focus operating at torrid temperatures with a hilarious assortment of characters passing through and sharing its spotlight with the madcap, scheming Whiteside. Included are cartoon broadsides of the likes of Harpo Marx, Albert Einstein, Tallulah Bankhead, and Noel Coward. Tamsitt, whose activities include being a collector and dealer in antiques, has a marked affinity for the art deco period.

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"The Man Who Came to Dinner," the Provincetown Theater Company's second production of this winter's season (the amateur Town group performed "Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" before Christmas) will premiere February 28 at the Provincetown Art Association.

There will be 10 subsequent performances of the comedy—March 1 through 4, March 8 through 10, and March 15 through 17. All shows begin at 8:30 in the evening. For reservations, call 487-1414.