

Rollins: Legend keeps his mission

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ed jazz studies at William Paterson University for 20 years.

"His approach never faltered, and at his age, he shows no signs of slowing down," Reid said. "He never holds back. What he really has done is raise the performance bar for everyone else."

Although Reid only played with Rollins once, in 1987 during the 70th anniversary concert for Dizzy Gillespie at Wofltrap, he has appreciation for his jazz influence. Early in Reid's career he had the opportunity to play with Rollins but refused because he did not want to play electric bass.

"He called me up and wanted me to play," Reid recalled, "but I did not want to play electric bass, and he would not let me play acoustic."

Rollins was quite close with J.J. Johnson, and when the legendary trombonist died in February 2001, Reid said he called Rollins with the news.

"It was a difficult moment because Sonny was very close to J.J., and we talked a long time about their friendship," he said. "So many of his peers are leaving him."

For more than a half century, Rollins has carved out a creative pathway that is as fresh today as it was when he recorded in 1949 with the legendary Babs Gonzales. The New York City native is one of a few remaining jazz icons who have given so much spirit and verve to the music.

From that point of departure, Rollins hit his early groove with the likes of Thelonius Monk, Miles Davis, Clifford Brown and Max Roach.

In 1956, Rollins recorded the groundbreaking "Saxophone Colossus," his rendition of "St. Thomas" (a childhood tune his mother sang) has become a ca-

lypsos trademark. A year later, Rollins recorded the seminal "Way Out West" and "A Night at the Village Vanguard" using just bass and drums. The musical technique became known as trolling.

In talking about his latest work "Sonny, Please," Rollins said the band did not enter the studio with a set musical approach.

"I did not have a concept," he said of the recording session. "It was a collection of compositions that the band had played on our tour in Japan."

What came about was a CD that was solid, straight-ahead and cutting-edge with a dash of funk – and sounded the clarion call that Sonny Rollins was still the man with a distinct musical mission.

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RUFUS REID,

bassist and former director of jazz studies at WPU, on Sonny Rollins

"It is gratifying that we did not have any so-called throwaway cuts on the recording," Rollins said. "We wanted all of them to be strong musically, and I think we accomplished that."

Returning to the metropolitan area always presents a homecoming

for Rollins, who grew up in the Sugar Hill section of Harlem in the 1930s, surrounded by a creative renaissance. Among his childhood friends were Jackie McLean, Arthur Taylor and Kenny Drew, who would go on to establish themselves in the jazz crucible that was Harlem.

"Although I no longer live in New York, I always look forward to coming back because I do have a lot of fans there," Rollins said. "It is a special occasion for me because I do not play there on a regular basis. So this is a homecoming for me."

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Pioneer: Raising the curtain on 'Seussical'

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"It took away the most important thing in college for all of us," said Andrea Corbo, a 21-year-old communications major. Campus theater has provided one of the few places where a community can flourish on this primarily commuter campus, members of the Pioneer Players said.

The reorganization was used to consolidate theater production under the university's communications department. But at the behest of the university's new provost, Edward Weil, these plays are now meant to serve primarily an academic purpose, not extracurricular one. Some affiliates of the Pioneer Players, whose ranks include science and nursing majors, worry that students might be prevented from taking part in theater if casting directors have a mandate to serve communication students' academic needs first.

Stephen Marcone, the new dean of William Paterson's College of Arts and Communications, dismissed this concern as speculation. "If we evolve (theater) into a full-fledged major then maybe there will be a pecking order," he said, adding that the college has no immediate plans to develop such a major.

The Pioneer Players learned of the budget changes two days before fall semester last year. But rather than wilt like a chopped Truffula Tree from the Seuss tale "The Lorax," the students decided to sally forth.

"We decided as students to take everything in our hands," Corbo said.

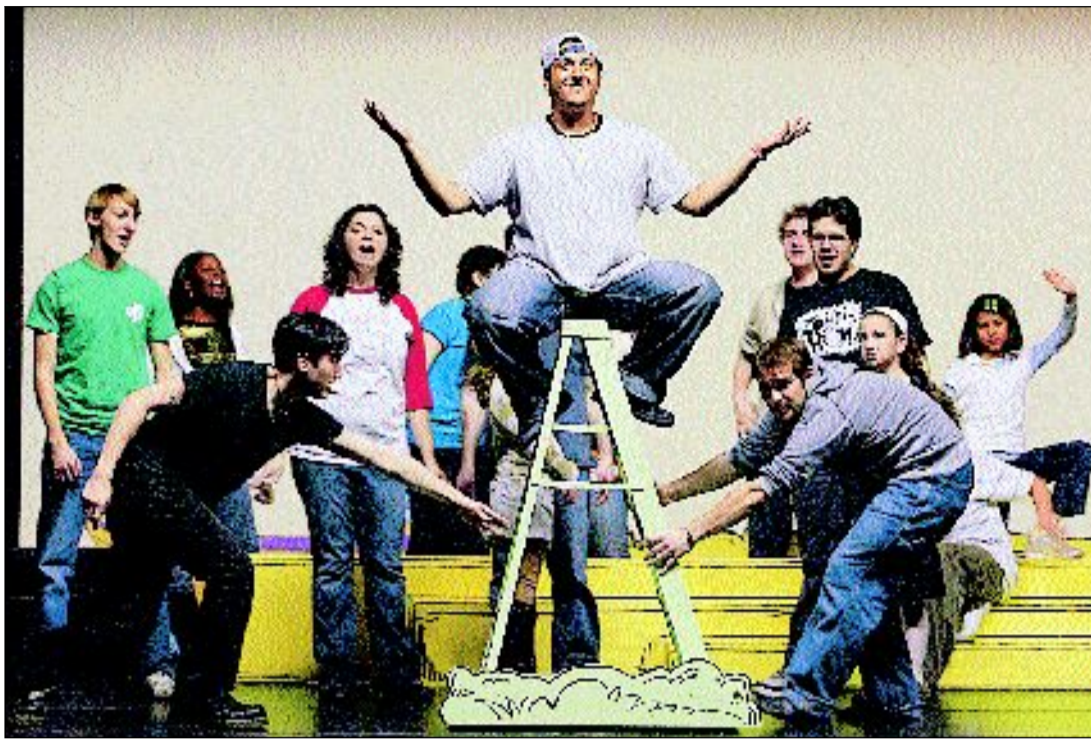
They formed a five-person committee, approached the university's administration, and asked for a restitution of funding.

Part of what guided them certainly was sentiment.

"I think they were sad that Ed and I are not doing as many productions as we were," said Shari Selke, one of the two performing arts staff members who had helped usher the Pioneer Players into existence in the early 1990s. Prior to the reorganization, she and her colleague Ed Matthews produced each Theatre Series show, doing everything from securing rights to holding casting calls to arranging production dates.

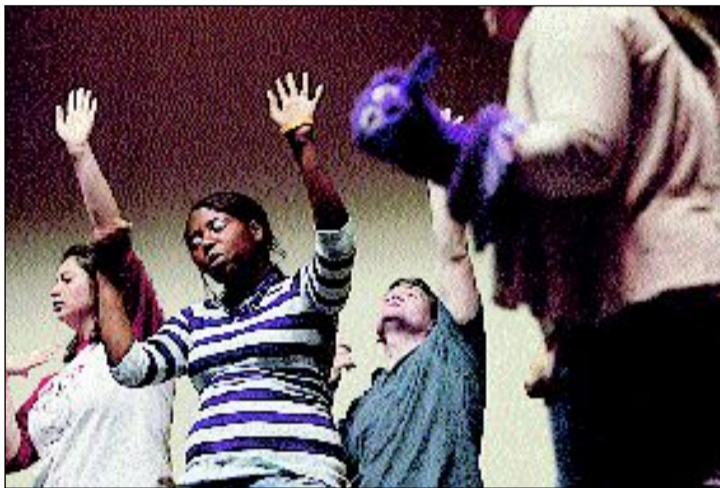
Now the Pioneer Players had to shoulder those responsibilities. Though they retained Matthews and Selke as advisors (and hired them to direct and co-stage manage the musical), the production was entirely in their hands. One of their biggest challenges was securing the thousands of dollars needed to stage the musical. They petitioned the university, collected some 800 signatures and met with school administrators, including University President Albert Speert.

When that didn't succeed, the Pioneer Players lobbied the Student Government Association with a business plan that called for a \$30,000 budget. (Had the student group not been able to hire a



Photos by MICHAEL KARAS/Herald News

Pedro Jimenez, who stars as Horton, rehearses with the rest of the Pioneer Players for their upcoming staging of the musical "Seussical."



Christina Hoffman, left, Nicole Hunningham and Daniel Polard practice for "Seussical," which opens April 12 in Wayne.

professional choreographer and set designer at a reduced rate, their budget would have soared upward of \$100,000, Ed Matthews said.) The student government approved the funding on Jan. 25. The theater group was told it was the biggest payout in SGA history.

Meanwhile, logistical nightmares kept cropping up. Everything ran late, from casting to booking the performance space. They had to schedule weeks of rehearsals for the production's 22 actors, who range from elementary schoolchildren to university seniors. The Shea Center for the Performing Arts, the campus's 900-seat theater, was booked by the time they set production dates, forcing them to scramble to find a local stage that could accommodate them at a reduced rate. Then there was suddenly no space to build their set. And here and there, promising cast members dropped out for unforeseen reasons.

Not to mention the classes the students had to attend, the tests they had to take and the papers they had to write.

Stress pushed the Pioneer Play-

ers to chafe with the university's administration. "They made themselves be very vocal," said Christine Reed, the director of the performing arts department.

And some students still smart over their encounters with school officials. "How could you be so emotionally attached to this?" Caitlyn Grogard, the president of Pioneer Players, said a high-ranking university official told her during one meeting.

"It goes to show that they don't care about students who come here," Grogard, a 21-year-old history and education major, said.

But perhaps the cruel hand of economics was the real Grinch. "I think everyone is sensitive to how they felt," Reed of the performing arts department said, "but the budget constraints that we're living under" permitted no wiggle room. According to the state Commission on Higher Education, the state budget passed last year cut \$101 million in operating aid to New Jersey's 12 major public universities. William Paterson alone lost nearly \$4 million in funding, or nearly 10 percent of its state op-

erational aid.

To make up for shortfalls, the university siphoned money from all departments, including the College of Arts and Communications, which oversees the performing arts department.

If there is a silver lining, it may be in the nearly \$2 million that Gov. Jon Corzine's proposed 2007 budget pledges to restore to William Paterson University.

And learning playmaking through trial-and-error has proven invaluable to the senior members of the Pioneer Players. They say that producing has been more rewarding than simply memorizing lines and rehearsing choreography. In some ways, they grew to appreciate the predicament itself because it fulfilled the promise that a college education provides not just classroom training, but life experience as well. "We're coming out a lot less sheltered because of it," Grogard said.

"You wish things were different," said Hilary Goldman, a 21-year-old English writing major, "but at the same time we've learned so much from this."

"That may not be much to some, but it's a lot to us," Grogard said.

Perhaps audiences will appreciate that when they get to see the show for themselves. Watched in a rehearsal last week, the production captures the whimsy of Dr. Seuss with its faithful renditions of the Broadway show's tongue-twisting tunes. It also features some spirited, even genuinely moving performances by Drew Cyburt and Pedro Jimenez, who respectively play the Cat in the Hat and Horton the Elephant.

"I know the show is going to be wonderful," Selke said. "I'm hoping that they know that too in their extremely tired haze."

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Grindhouse: Anything but a grind

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ling," ends up replacing a leg with an automatic weapon, which puts her dance skills to good use. But being newly legless doesn't keep her character from adventures in the sack, another staple of the grindhouse.

There must've been a worldwide fake-blood and brain fluid shortage when Rodriguez filmed this thing. Messy.

Tarantino's film is a sadistic ode to muscle cars and "organic" movie stuntwork that shows just how much is missing every time Nic Cage ducks a digitally created Chrysler. This is real rending steel and burning rubber, as an aged, scarred stuntman (Kurt Russell, hilarious and iconic) takes out his

Tarantino's film is a sadistic ode to muscle cars and "organic" movie stuntwork that shows just how much is missing every time Nic Cage ducks a digitally created Chrysler.

frustrations on women by wrecking them in his vintage muscle car.

As in "Kill Bill," Tarantino matches lethal, grizzled male action stars with empowered tough grrrrrls (Rosario Dawson, Tracie Thoms and stunt-woman Zoe Bell) who sputter lots of Tarantino tough-talk – none of which is printable here.

Tarantino still can't act a lick. The music (Tarantino's soul and classic-rock picks) and cars are dated. The directors ogle and ob-

jectify the women, even the empowered ones, in the worst grindhouse tradition. Both features are far too long, with Tarantino's set-up for "Death Proof" – tarnting-up women talking dirty and drinking in an Austin bar – right on the edge of interminable.

But the gag "prevues" are a hoot – with Rob Zombie's "Werewolf Women of the S.S." and Rodriguez's "Machete" (starring his battle-scarred muse, Danny Trejo) promising enough to become real grindhouse sequels.

You go to "Grindhouse" for the same reasons people went to the original grindhouses – primal, visceral action and primal, visceral sex (wait'll you see how that's handled). Nobody ever went for the acting or "the art."

You may not buy into Tarantino's ex-video store clerk thesis, scripted into the lines of a couple of characters, that movies from "Piranha" to "Vanishing Point," "Black Caesar" to "White Line Fever" were "classics," the "greatest American movies ever." But you'll certainly connect with their appeal. The critical favorites of the '70s may endure, but the high-energy junk playing at the drive-ins was anything but a grind.

BEST BETS

PRE-RELEASE PARTY: John Taglieri, a rocker from East Rutherford, performs an acoustic set tomorrow night at The Tilted Kilt in Little Falls. He is performing in advance of his upcoming fourth album, "Wide Awake & Dreaming," which is filled with clean-sounding, alt-pop tunes and inspirationally minded lyrics. The album has its official release party April 13 at Kenny's Castaways in New York's Greenwich Village.

The Tilted Kilt is located at 131 Newark Pompton Turnpike in Little Falls. Taglieri and bandmate Tom Darby go onstage at 9 p.m. For more info, call 973-837-1120.

– Ed Beeson