

October 2003

Players: For Paul L. Coffey and Joshua Scharback, theater means good company

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Recommended Citation

Gillespie, Robert (2003) "Players: For Paul L. Coffey and Joshua Scharback, theater means good company," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 92 : Iss. 4 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol92/iss4/7>

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By Robert Gillespie Photo By Fred Field

PLAYERS

For Paul L. Coffey and Joshua Scharback, theater means good company

Brutus and Cassius, the two Romans on the balcony plotting the assassination of Caesar, an hour ago were the amiable fellows Paul L. Coffey '98 and Joshua Scharback '98. On the Theater at Monmouth stage, Brutus resembles the young Dustin Hoffman. Brutus and Cassius both project well-versed, sure-footed mettle.

Even though it's the next to last performance of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in Monmouth's repertory season and everybody is well past opening-night jitters, both actors took the stage an hour early to rehearse the assassination with their fellow conspirators, making sure they'd got it in hand. Scharback, the company's fight choreographer, spent 2000-2001 learning the craft in a workshop at The London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art and knows someone can easily get poked in the eye. Twice in slow motion the conspirators polished off the tyrant.

When the bloody, dark play ends two hours later on a sunny, 80-degree August afternoon in Maine, you'd think the actors, like divers coming up from the depths, might need readjustment to real life, but—their real life being the theater—Coffey and Scharback are on stage changing the set for the evening performance, *The Philadelphia Story*. They act major roles in that play, too.

Coffey, back in shorts and T-shirt, seems remarkably cool for a guy who just murdered Julius Caesar. He's checked his e-mail and wonders where to take his visiting parents to dinner. Next up may be "a little power nap or more errands. Get something to eat." The call for the 8 o'clock performance of *The Philadelphia Story* is 7:30, and when the actors come back it's similar to the afternoon routine: running through lines, stretching like athletes before their event.

"They're extremely long days here," says Scharback.

"Day and night," Coffey says. A three-day break is the longest time he's had off this summer.

"You're always on a bit of a high," Scharback says, explaining how he stays juiced up over the two-month season, though he admits it's sometimes tough mustering energy in crowd scenes for AARP audiences on summer afternoons.

"That's why a repertory theater is good," says Coffey. "You never get old at one show. You switch genres. In college you have a few weeks to rehearse one show, but we rehearse them all at the same time. There's a theater saying: 'You don't know what play you're in until you see what costume you're in.'"

"We get to play so many different roles," says Scharback, who's also performed in other theaters in Maine, in Virginia, New Hampshire and Seattle and on Off-Off Broadway. After six summers at Monmouth he feels comfortable with the space, the style, the actors.

Last year he directed Monmouth's *The Adventures of Robin Hood*.

"I like variety," Scharback says. "Sally [Wood, the theater's artistic director] is conscious of that in the casting. We switch to keep things interesting for the actors. You learn by playing opposite different people. You trust each other. That keeps you going."

All but a couple of Monmouth's actors perform roles in two or more plays, and several people rotate through jobs in the scene shop or costume shop. Coffey, completing his second season at Monmouth, is the theater's music director—and "an incredible musician," says Sally Wood.

Coffey planned to major in English and minor in music at Colby but pretty much fell into theater, dropping orchestra when it conflicted with *Mother Courage* rehearsals. "It's where I was putting in my energy," he says. Coffey's credits include regional performances with the Peterborough Players, the BoarsHead Theater, Plowshares Theatre, Lost Nation Theater and several roles in New York.

Their junior year on Colby's theater program in London, the two actors lived together while taking voice and movement classes. They had a contest to see how many nights in a row they could see plays: 16, they agree, "before we crashed." They took in 60 plays in all.

Scharback, though a performer in high school, jokes that he was a government, then philosophy, then Spanish major at Colby before finding his way to performing arts. He was on the soccer team but passed it up "to do some time with theater."

"I loved it. You get lighting instruction, all kinds of things," he says, including scene design and directing. "It's really helpful to know what goes into it."

Says Monmouth's producing director David Greenham: "They've done lots of technical stuff, as opposed to only acting. They know theater."

Honed by their summer work, both actors are headed off to M.F.A. programs, Scharback recruited by the internationally based Clarence Brown Theater at the University of Tennessee and Coffey to the Brown University/Trinity Rep Consortium, where Coffey expects to broaden his acting with playwriting and directing. Scharback, while studying with working professional actors, anticipates meeting directors and designers of visiting shows and acting in the program's plays when they tour abroad.

Film, TV, commercials, voiceovers for animations—none of it appeals when actors live and breathe the live stage.

"No matter what vocation you choose, you *must* have passion," Greenham says. "They have it."

Joshua Scharback, left, and Paul L. Coffey in the Theater at Monmouth production of Julius Ceasar.