

Tuesday, November 17, 2009

Frances Dodge's vintage gown takes center stage in fall production

By **Katie Land**, news editor

A Dodge family heirloom takes center stage in Oakland University's production of "The Learned Ladies of Park Avenue" this November. With the help of Meadow Brook Hall, costume designers Donna Buckley and Leslie Littell recreated Frances Dodge's classic 1933 "coming out" evening dress.

The gray-beige silk velvet evening gown is accented on the small of the back with pleated, fan-shaped velvet. A photo of Dodge leaning against a piano was featured in the Detroit Free Press at the time.

Littell gently examined the original dress to create a pattern for the new one. The dress worn in the play by student Danielle DeWulf uses the same fabrics and materials, but appears in a soft lilac color.

Set in 1936 New York, "The Learned Ladies of Park Avenue" is a screwball comedy featuring love triangles, a delusional aunt, a dithering father and a mad Hungarian cook. The dress was made for the character Betty, who wears it through the entire second act to the resolution of the story.

"As a designer, I wanted to recreate something from the Wilsons for this production," Buckley said. "They were the highest society in Michigan at that day. I think sometimes the Hall and its treasures are forgotten, so I wanted to do something to restore the connection between the family and the university."

The Hall allowed the designers and actress to view the dress and hosted a photo shoot of the finished product afterwards. A display surrounding the dress is currently in Varner Hall outside the theatre.

"When working on a period piece, I like to go back to the originals from that time period," Buckley said. "I can learn more when working with a three dimensional piece of material that was really worn on a body, to see how it was constructed. I like a challenge as a designer and as someone who creates clothes."

Oakland theatre professor Karen Sheridan directs the show, which completes its run this weekend. The final show times are at 8 p.m. on Thursday, Nov. 19, at 10 a.m. and 8 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 20, at 8 p.m. on Saturday, Nov. 21, and the final show takes place at 2 p.m. on Sunday, Nov. 22.

General Admission tickets may now be purchased by phone from the **Varner Box Office** at (248) 370-3013 and one hour before performances. For more information about Oakland's Department of Music, Theatre and Dance, visit oakland.edu/mtd and to learn more about The Hall, visit oakland.edu/mbh.



Frances Dodge in her 1933 gown.



Danielle DeWulf in the new gown.

SUMMARY

With the help of Meadow Brook Hall, costume designers recreated Francis Dodge's classic 1933 evening dress for OU's fall production of "The Learned Ladies of Park Avenue."

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