



West Virginia Tech student Trina Darby, a.k.a. Amy Jo, and her real-life boyfriend.



Waitress Wanda Daniels, sometimes Livvie, at Monty's.

TO WORK AND

Chekhov in a West Virginia idiom persuades local residents, at first apathetic or hostile,

For three sisters life has not been beautiful yet. It has choked us like weed . . . Work is necessary. Work. —Chekhov's *Three Sisters*

[Life has] choked us like coal dust . . . To work and be proud of it, that's what's needed.

—Cornerstone's *Three Sisters From West Virginia*

It is early evening at Cornerstone Theater Company's communal house a few yards from the railroad tracks in Montgomery, West Virginia. Newspapers are strewn around, and a note about recycling is taped to the refrigerator. It ends, "P.S. How about boxes upstairs and on the third floor for scrap paper? OK . . . getting anal." The walls shake as a train chugs by. Cornerstone's pixieish 29-year-old co-founder, Alison Carey '82, and Rubenesque actress Ashby Semple '88 are hunched over a phone book, copying every entry with a first name of Donald, Don, or D.

Alison has forgotten to get the last name and phone number of a handsome car salesman whom she met while handing out audition flyers at the laundromat. "He seemed genuinely interested, but he never came by the office," she explains. Embarrassed about calling random Dons, she has enlisted Ashby for support. "Do I say my name is Alison and I'm trying to

track down a guy named Don who I met in front of the laundromat?" asks Ashby. "You don't mind being portrayed as that kind of woman?"

Ashby picks a name from the list and dials.

Ashby: Hi, I'm sorry to bother you. I may have the wrong Don. I'm from the Cornerstone Theater Company, and we're trying to track down a Don that we met who's interested in auditioning for our play.

Don: I ain't no actor.

Ashby: You ain't no actor! (Laughs.) Well, you're not the Don I'm looking for, but if you want to come check it out and help out in any other way, you can stop by City Hall anytime, we're on the second floor.

Don: Well, I don't really have time for that.

Ashby: OK, well, come check out the show in November.

Don: Maybe.

On that bleak evening in early September, the thirteen members of the Cornerstone Theater Company, most of them Harvard graduates in their twenties, hit rock bottom. Never in their four years of planting the seeds of community theater throughout the United States had the group encountered such



BENJAMIN COBB



STEVE PAVANE

Grocer William Parks, or old Dr. Childers (Tchebutykin).

BE PROUD OF IT

that theater can be alive and well and living in Montgomery.

by WILLIAM SHEBAR

resistance. "It's hard to get excited about doing a play with people who are at times openly hostile," complained resident composer David Reiffel '79. "It's not so much hostility as apathy," said Ashby.

Conceived by Alison Carey and director William Rauch '84 in response to what they consider an ossified professional theater establishment, Cornerstone spends two to four months in each town it visits, working alongside local residents to create an original piece of theater. Typically, the group takes a classic play and rewrites it to reflect local realities. They've done a Wild West *Hamlet* with eight songs and five dance numbers in Marmarth, North Dakota (pop. 193); a rewrite of Molière's *Le Tartuffe* called *Tartooof (or, an Impostor in Norcatour—and at Christmas!)* in Norcatour, Kansas; and an adaptation of *The Oresteia* on a Paiute Indian reservation in Nevada. At the end of each production, Cornerstone donates \$500 of the box office receipts to help establish a permanent community theater.

Most of the money for Cornerstone's \$350,000 annual operating budget (which includes a \$225 weekly paycheck for each company member) comes from individual contributions (30 percent) and private foundations (30 percent). The remaining 40 percent is split evenly between government grants (mostly at the state level) and box office receipts. Tickets to Corner-

stone productions are free with a suggested \$5 donation. All the group asks of its communities are a performance space and free housing.

Cornerstone was invited to Montgomery—a depressed coal-mining town with a population of 3,000, forty miles from Charleston—by Robert Gillespie, the president of the local college, West Virginia Institute of Technology. Gillespie promptly delegated the project to an unenthusiastic vice president, Anne Cavalier, who described Cornerstone's proposed visit as a "one-shot cultural vaccine." After a month, Cavalier and Kim Johnson-Butler, who heads the Kanawha Valley Economic Development Corporation, had still failed to come up with free housing. Exasperated by their inaction and on the verge of canceling the trip to Montgomery, managing director James Bundy '81 phoned Johnson-Butler. After explaining the group's predicament, James asked, "What would you do if you were me?" to which she replied, "Well, first of all, I wouldn't be you."

In the end, the group had to rent a decrepit house from local attorney Louis Tabit and, already behind schedule, spent the first eight days of its residency fixing it up. "You see that black patch?" actress Amy Brenneman '86 asked me, pointing to a severely worn-out portion of the kitchen floor. "The

whole floor used to look like that." To complicate matters, the townspeople—whom Cornerstone is always most intent on wooing—made a host of false assumptions about the group's reason for being there. Some thought that it would cater exclusively to Tech students. Others mistook its bright-eyed, come-join-us style for evangelism. (It didn't help that Cornerstone is also the name of several fundamentalist groups.) "I thought they were some church group, or part of a cult or something," said retired newspaperman Sammy Fragale, who later joined the cast. Still others saw them as aspiring Broadway Babies, paying their dues in the boondocks. "They breeze into town," began one article in *The Charleston Gazette*, "vagabond show folk bent on bringing Broadway to Main Street, U.S.A."

Those who knew about Cornerstone's previous residency in racially divided Port Gibson, Mississippi, suspected them of being rabble rousers, political propagandists out to touch the community's rawest nerve. In Port Gibson the group had mounted an interracial production of *Romeo and Juliet*, with Romeo played by Edret Brinston, an eighteen-year-old black high school student, and Juliet played by Cornerstone's white, Harvard-educated Amy Brenneman. The West Virginians feared that Cornerstone would put on a "Mother Jones play," as one local politician put it—a troublemaker that would fan the flames of labor-management conflict in the coal mining industry.

But Cornerstone's biggest obstacle in Montgomery was apathy. Stung by coal mine closings and massive layoffs in the last decade, and saddened by the marring of their countryside by

**Stung by coal mine closings
and massive layoffs, Montgomery
residents are suspicious of outsiders
and feel powerless to control
their economic future.**

strip-mining, Montgomery residents are suspicious of outsiders and feel powerless to control their economic future. "Some people here doubt whether the sun will rise the next day," says the town recorder, John Mussetto. There is deep skepticism about collective action of any kind. Many mining families feel that the United Mine Workers let them down in their year-long strike against the Pittston Coal Group. There is a dearth of political or social groups in Montgomery—not even an Alcoholics Anonymous chapter, which is unusual for a town its size. People keep to themselves. In the words of Gene Anders, the owner of Monty's, a popular diner near City Hall: "The only way to get people's attention in this town is to drop a bomb."

Bill Rauch decided to start auditions right away even though he had not yet picked a play. Monty's, which is always crowded at lunchtime, was a logical recruiting ground. Company members started eating lunch there regularly, going from table to table to introduce themselves. The locals were friendly enough, but when asked to audition, everybody at the table



Chekhov's three sisters are Masha, Irina, and Olga. Their West Virginian counterparts are, from left, Mary Beth (Ashby Semple), Amy Jo (Trina Darby), and Livvie (Wanda Daniels).

would simultaneously point a finger at somebody else and then start laughing.

The group decided to change its strategy. Hoping to arouse curiosity, they set up sound equipment one Saturday morning in a vacant lot between Mountain Insurance and Biscuit World and sang "Cornerstone's Greatest Hits"—original theater songs by composer David Reiffel. "People walked by and got in their cars as if they weren't hearing anything," said company manager Patti Payette. "It was like we were in another dimension," added set and costume designer Lynn Jeffries '84.

Unfazed, the company went that same evening to a West Virginia Tech football game and sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" in four-part harmony. The crowd was appreciative, but it turned out that most of them were there to root for the opposing team and lived in Kentucky. Apparently local apathy extended even to football. Still, the group met one friendly native—a 75-year-old grocer named William Parks, who was supervising parking at the game. He promised to come in for an audition.

But then again, so had Don.

Ashby: (Picks up phone.) How about Don Kidd, he sounds promising. (Dials.)

Don: Hello?

Ashby: Hi, um, I might have the wrong Don, and I know this is a curious call, but I'm with the Cornerstone Theater Company, and we're trying to track down a Don who's interested in being in a play. Have you heard anything about us?

Don: No.

Ashby: Oh. Well, if you're interested in coming and meeting us just because I've made this crazy phone call, you can find us any day on the second floor in City Hall. You can track me down.

Don: Well, I'm taking a bath right now.

Ashby: Oh, you are! I'm sorry!

Don: I brought the telephone into the bathroom with me.

Ashby: (Laughs.) I hope it's going well.

Don: Well, yeah, it's going pretty good.

Ashby: Well, come by and visit us sometime, Don.

Don: Hey—thanks for the call.

By their third week in town the company's perseverance started paying off. During their frequent meals at Monty's, they persuaded waitress Wanda Daniels, a coal miner's daughter and single mother of three, to audition. She performed a song she had written for her father's birthday—"He owed his soul to the company store, but his heart belonged to Jesus"—which eventually made it into the production. William Parks, the man who had parked cars at the football game, didn't turn up for his audition, but Cornerstone's technical director, Benajah Cobb '84, tracked him down at a Sunday church service in nearby London and got him to make another appointment—and this time he actually showed up.

One important Cornerstone index of acceptance in the community—the "hello" coefficient—was rising. "In the past three days, everyone I've said hello to has said hello back in a very friendly way, whereas before it was like fifty-fifty whether they'd even respond," explained Texas-born Lynn Jeffries at a company meeting. "Yeah, we're having a really big impact on this place," joked co-founder Carey. "The whole goddamn town's going to be saying hello by the time we leave."

More and more locals started turning up at City Hall for auditions. Bill Rauch gave them improvised scenes based on various permutations of the "I can't pay the rent" . . . "You must pay the rent" . . . "I'll pay the rent" story and had them read from any of a number of plays he was still considering for the final production. Sammy Fragale, the retired newspaperman, displayed an uncanny talent for improvisation in a scene with Cornerstone actor Christopher Moore '86. "We seldom

have a chance—this is ordinary people—we seldom have a chance to even see a play," said Fragale.

Bobby Zickefoose, the mayor of nearby Smithers, and her friend Suzanne Pollastrini, a legal secretary, wowed the group with clogging—an indigenous dance that is a hybrid of tap and the Irish jig. ("I flirted shamelessly with Suzanne to get her to audition," said managing director Bundy, but Pollastrini told me, "You don't have to ask me twice to dance.") Mary Smith, a mother of four whom Ashby met on a bread line, brought her five-year-old daughter, Tesha. "The lord blessed me with this beautiful skinny little girl," said Smith, "and I want her to do all the things I always dreamed of." And 75-year-old Ethel Burgess, a.k.a. Grandma, came bearing banana bread with no intention of auditioning. "I used to love theatrics, but since then I've had two car wrecks and I don't think I'd remember my lines—I can't even remember where I put my keys," she explained to Rauch. He assured her they could work something out—"even if we have to whisper your lines to you."

Finally the group achieved what it considers a critical mass of auditioners—fifty people. Now it was up to Rauch to decide what play they were going to do. Auditioning plays at the same time he was auditioning people, he was looking for a theme that connected with the local community. For a time Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, with its strong parallels to the coal industry's plundering of rural West Virginia, was a leading contender, as were Gogol's *Inspector General*, a scathing satire of small-town corruption, and Gorky's *Enemies*, with its strong implications for West Virginia's labor unrest. But in all three of these plays the parallels seemed heavy-handed. Also under consideration were Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, a group of Irish one-act plays by Lady Gregory, and Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.

Except for a tendency to read Masha as "Marsha" and Irina as "Irma," the West Virginians seemed to have an affinity for Chekhov. There was something about the longing for mean-



Director Bill Rauch gives instruction to Suzanne Pollastrini, a legal secretary with a passion for clog dancing.

STEVE PAVNE



Nick "City Boy" Turpin, played by Cornerstone actor Peter Howard, gives Amy Jo her birthday cake in act 1 of *Three Sisters From West Virginia*. Accountant Robert Nistendirik is Kinison, a computer nerd in a flowered shirt.

ingful work combined with a love of home. Rauch learned that the slump in the coal industry had forced record numbers of West Virginians to pack up their belongings and look for work in other parts of the country. Since 1980 the state has lost a bigger percentage of its population than any other state in the nation, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Rauch had found his interpretation. The sisters would be West Virginia natives whose family had relocated to a northern industrial city. In the original play, the sisters live in rural Russia and long to "sell the house, break with everything here, and to Moscow." In Cornerstone's *Three Sisters From West Virginia*, their dream would be to "sell the trailer, break with everything here, and back to West Virginia." Said Rauch, "There's something mythic about Appalachia and West Virginia as the place you want to come home to. Then again, maybe it's just John Denver."

So, on the morning of September 15, as everyone stood around the kitchen with bowls of cereal and mugs of coffee watching the provident Patti Payette pack herself a tuna sandwich for lunch, a bleary-eyed Rauch announced: "We're doing *Three Sisters*." A few weeks later, as if to affirm the wisdom of his choice, the *Charleston Gazette* came out with a "Holding on to Home" series, which portrayed the dilemma faced by West Virginians: stay at home and scrounge for a living, or move to where the jobs are. Letters poured in to the *Gazette* from all

over the country expressing a longing for the beautiful hills.

The choice of *Three Sisters* had important symbolic meaning for Cornerstone. Having just done their interracial *Romeo and Juliet* in Mississippi, the choice of another "powder-keg play," as Rauch describes it, would have marked them as a group dedicated to what the British call *agitprop*, deliberately provocative political theater. "It would be easy for Cornerstone to become 'Oh, that theater group that does explosive plays about the naughtiest and most appalling issue in town,'" Bundy told me over coffee at Monty's. "We'd be creating a career for ourselves, carving out a niche. We'd probably always be able to get grants to do that because it turns people on. But artistically that's not the most satisfying thing, because it's a monochromatic approach to doing plays. *Three Sisters* is much more subtly tied to this community and much more accessible. And in the end, you can't avoid the tough social issues. They'll always come up."

At a company meeting, actor Peter Howard '84 went one step further in defining Cornerstone's mission. "While we have no specific political agenda," he said, "we're political in the sense that we show people what can be accomplished by working together." Added Reiffel, "We go to lots of places like Montgomery where people don't think of their community as a place worth thinking about, let alone making theater about. The political thing that we do is to say that the place where

you live and the way that you live is a thing worth considering." Listening to them, one can't help but think that they have found what Chekhov's characters—who, like them, are educated, middle-class people—long for: work they can be proud of.

However, it is work with an insidious emotional side effect known as "Cornerstone guilt." "There's so much to do all the time that you start feeling guilty if you sleep too late or take time off," says Bundy, who moves deftly between high-powered fundraising meetings and odd jobs like hanging lights, selling tickets, and running out for teabags. The company meeting I attended turned into a confessional, with each member unbosoming some lapse of devotion. Rauch said he felt guilty about going to Washington, D.C., for the weekend to visit his family. Payette admitted to passing up a golden opportunity to ask a friendly man in the laundromat to audition. "I just wanted to be anonymous and do my wash," she confessed. "Was it Don?" asked Bundy.

The cast list was up within 48 hours of Rauch's decision to do *Three Sisters*. Out of the fifty who auditioned, twenty were chosen. (Many of the others joined the stage crew.) Character names were picked from the Montgomery phone book.

Waitress Wanda Daniels was cast as Livvie (Olga in the original); Tech student Trina Darby would be Amy Jo (Irina), and Cornerstone's Ashby Semple completed the trio as Mary Beth (Masha). Cornerstone's landlord, Louis Tabit, was cast as the evil Stickdorn (Solyony). William Parks, the car parker, became old Dr. Childers (Tchebutykin). New parts were created for cloggers Bobby Zickefoose and Suzanne Pollastrini. And Robert Nistendirik, an accountant whom the group met by interrupting a business lunch at Monty's, would play Kinison (Kuligin), an annoyingly optimistic computer nerd. "Unfortunately, I think they cast me well," he said with a disingenuous smile.

But there was one major gap: no one to play union lawyer Archie Valentine (Vershinin). Cornerstone approached dozens of men, including the mayor of nearby Gauley Bridge, whom they auditioned in his office, and a talented store owner in East Bank who strung everyone along for three days and then said no. Ashby and James headed for the Ritz Club bar, a dive on Fourth Avenue, where a 6'8" man named Keith agreed to audition but then succumbed to negative pressure from his drinking buddies.

Of course Don, whom Alison had termed "the perfect Vershinin," was still very much on everyone's mind.

Ashby: (Dials.) Hello, Don? Don! Where have you been? At the laundromat! Look, here's the deal, we need a Vershinin.
OK? OK! Yes, eight o'clock. God, you've made me happy! (Hangs up.) Only kidding.

Although they never reached the right Don over the phone, Alison did run into him at the 7-11 and set up another audition. He failed to show, and no one ever saw him again. But they finally found a Valentine: Jesse Johnson, an actor who had recently left New York to come home to West Virginia.

Cornerstone puts a huge amount of research into its adaptations, drawing on the local history and idioms while remaining faithful to the intent of the original text. In creating *Three Sisters From West Virginia*, they consulted writer John Taylor, a native West Virginian whose father had moved to Detroit in

the 1950s to get a job in the auto industry. In the original play, the three sisters are the educated, upper-class children of a military officer; in the rewrite, they are members of the industrial working class. Tech economist John David gave them a factual basis for transforming Chekhov's military men into union members.

This framework led them to translate Chekhov's rural imagery systematically into industrial imagery. When Valentine and Nick "City Boy" Turpin (played with disarming intensity by Cornerstone actor Peter Howard) argue in act 2 over whether happiness is possible in our time, Turpin says that "assembly lines run and run, whether or not they're happy," instead of "birds fly on and on . . ." Instead of trees, it is smokestacks Turpin sees "as if for the first time in my life," before being killed in a game of chicken played with forklifts (a duel in the original).

Community members helped Cornerstone sharpen its translation of Chekhov into West Virginia idiom. When Rauch wanted to change "Thanks to Father, I and my sisters know the French, German, and English languages" to "Dad taught us how to fish, hunt, and hike," Tech historian Otis Rice suggested "bark a squirrel, dig out a ground hog, run a trot line" instead. Wanda Daniels suggested "dog drunk" instead of "falling down drunk." Small changes like these were made until opening night. "It's the most complete rewrite we've



Junior (Chris Moore) proposes to Natalie (Amy Brenneman) at the end of act 1. She accepts.



Ethel "Grandma" Burgess, in the role of Aunt Billie, and Lynn Jeffries, as a homeless person, bid farewell to the three sisters in act 4.

ever done," said Rauch. "We've pushed the imagery as far as we could." In one particularly nice translation, Irina's line, "[M]y soul is like an expensive piano, locked, and the key lost," became Amy Jo's "My heart is like a secret mine grown over and the map lost."

Rather than use one of Montgomery's school auditoriums—not at all Cornerstone's style—the group chose the decrepit basement of City Hall, a gymnasium that must have fallen into disuse around the turn of the century. Two rows of bleachers looked through a rusty fence into a dark, frightening space: at one end was an old punching bag that looked as if it would turn to dust if you hit it; at the other were brick walls showing through peeling white paint, a fenced-off area with piles of lumber, five windows covered with more rusty chain link, and a bent basketball hoop. "It's a great space," said set designer Jeffries to a skeptical group of community cast members.

With the help of technical director Ben Cobb—whose calm efficiency made him the emotional ballast for everyone as opening night approached—and two community volunteers, Chip Daniels and Charles Dickens, Jeffries's vision came to life. The sisters' home, a full-size trailer with removable walls, was constructed from the tin siding of an actual burnt-out trailer the group found on Route 60. Outside the trailer hung a tire swing. The basement's brick walls became the walls of surrounding factories, complete with a ten-foot high plant gate. And the *pièce de résistance* was thirty feet of real railroad

track donated by the CSX Railroad, which Cobb and his helpers placed between the two audience sections. "The implication is that the trains that go through Montgomery every day could be ending up in the northern industrial city where the play takes place," said Carey. The tracks weighed six tons—talk about heavy symbolism. "Gravity got them in," said Rauch. "I don't know how we'll get them out."

When Jeffries's set was finished, it evoked both the bleakness of an industrial landscape and the love of home. "It's not just taking what's there and putting it on stage but celebrating what's there," she explained. "It's saying look at this, isn't it beautiful, and I found it right here." The trailer was decorated with some fascinating local knick-knacks, like a lamp made out of a miner's cap and embellished with jackrocks, which are clusters of nails used by striking miners to puncture the tires of vehicles bringing scab workers through the plant gate.

While the set was being built downstairs, rehearsals began in a vacant hall on the second floor. Despite a full schedule, Cornerstone continued to make its presence felt in the community by conducting workshops at the local high school, speaking to Rotary Clubs, and singing on an early morning radio show called "Live from Shoney's Restaurant." They also put in an appearance at a "Cow Chip Jamboree"—a local version of bingo in which a cow roams around a field that has



Alfetty's trailer burns to the ground in act 3. The supine Detroit plant worker, played by Bobby Veazey, takes it philosophically.

Chekhov

IRINA, act 1, scene 4: A man should work, he should labor in the sweat of his brow, whomever he may be.

SOLYONY, act 1, scene 5: Twenty-five years from now you won't be around, thank God. Two or three years from now you'll have an apoplectic fit, or I'll pump a bullet into your forehead first, my angel. (Perfume business.)

ANDREY, act 2, scene 3: Dear grandfather, how strangely it changes, how it deceives, life. Today, from boredom, from nothing to do, I took this book into my hands. Old university lecture notes. And it all became so funny . . . My God, I am the secretary of the local council . . . and the most that I can hope for is to be a member of the local council. I who dream every night that I am a professor at the University of Moscow, a famous scholar of whom all the Russian land is proud!

ANDREY, act 4, scene 11: The present is disgusting, but at least when I think about the future, it's so nice! Everything gets so light, so spacious; and light glimmers in the distance, I see freedom. I see how my children and I become free from idleness, from kvass, from goose and cabbage, from afternoon naps, from base parasitical dependence . . .

Cornerstone

AMY, act 1, scene 4: A woman should be proud of her work, she should feel a part of the product, whoever she may be.

STICKDORN, act 1, scene 5: Twenty-five years from now you won't be around, thank God. Two or three years from now you'll have an apoplectic fit, or I'll run your ass over with a forklift first, sweetheart. (Hair spray business.)

JUNIOR, act 2, scene 3: Oh, Gramps, how strangely it changes, how it tricks you, life. Today, from boredom, from nothing to do, I turned on the TV, and I saw this commercial: "Be all that you can be." And it became so funny . . . My God, I am a management trainee at McDonald's . . . and the most that I can hope for is to become assistant manager. I who dream every night that I'm a student at Tech, an environmentalist that all of West Virginia is grateful to!

JUNIOR, act 4, scene 11: The present is disgusting, but at least when I think about the future, it's so nice! Everything gets so light, so green; and mountains roll away into the distance, I see freedom. I see how my children and I become free from layoffs, from beer, from Hamburger Helper, from late night TV, from menial blood-sucking dependence . . .

been divided into numbered squares and, well, I'll let you guess how the winning number is determined.

At one point, Rauch and Carey slipped out to New York for two days to attend a round table with a group of visiting Soviet directors. With the help of a translator, they described their production of *Three Sisters*. One director sternly reminded them that "Chekhov is our national treasure" and warned them not to mess with him. But most of the directors seemed delighted and kept repeating, "To West Virginia, to West Virginia, to West Virginia"—Cornerstone's rewrite of the play's famous line, "To Moscow, to Moscow, to Moscow"—which really cracked them up. And at the end of the meeting, Cornerstone was invited to do a residency at a theater in Lithuania.

During the rehearsal period, Cornerstone took several setbacks in stride. One of the cloggers, Smithers's mayor Bobby Zickefoose, decided the play was too depressing and quit, telling Carey over the phone: "Your play won't fly." (A few weeks earlier she'd been singing, "They're gonna make a big star out of me.") Louis Tabit had misgivings about his sarcastic character, Strickdorn, and had to be replaced by the Federal Express delivery man whom Cornerstone courted on his many trips to their office. He, too, quit, forcing Rauch to rewrite the role for a woman so that Montgomery resident Dyann Simile could step in. Simile brilliantly transformed Stickdorn into a Loretta Lynn clone who keeps singing "You ain't woman enough to take my man" as she lacquers her garish black wig with unconscionable amounts of hairspray. Finally, a sweet old red-haired woman named Audrey, for whom Rauch created a special nonspeaking role as Natalie's (Natasha's) mother, re-

signed when a friend told her, "If you don't have any lines, then you don't have a part."

One of the three sisters, Trina Darby, was on the verge of quitting because her friends were teasing her about being the only black sister. "My best friend says people just aren't gonna go for it," she told Rauch one day at rehearsal. But Rauch had already worked out a rationale. Old Doctor Childers (Tchebutykin), who says on more than one occasion that he is in love with the girls' mother, was being played by William Parks, who is also black. Before Rauch could open his mouth to give Darby this interpretation, Wanda Daniels piped up, "I always figured that the doc and our mom had a little hanky-panky going on and that he's your father." Darby sighed with relief and rededicated herself to the show. Later, she made a joke about being the black sheep of the family.

The problem of keeping the cast together paled in comparison with the unreliability of volunteer techies. Stage manager Alice Hutchins had signed up 32 stagehands at the local high school, but only five showed up at a meeting called on the day of the opening. "The others didn't even call," lamented Hutchins, who has thick red hair and a voice like Lauren Bacall. "I don't understand how people can do that." The problem persisted through the first week of performances, slowing down complicated set changes in which the trailer's walls are removed or replaced. "Who's going to move the walls tonight?" was a frequent refrain until Hutchins's visiting husband and two bystanders were pressed into service as permanent crew members.

Hutchins also suffered a major prop disappointment at the hands of Anheuser-Busch, which had agreed to donate "movie



The dress rehearsal curtain call.

beer" (cans of soda labeled "Bud Licht" and "Budweisen") pending a look at the script. Cornerstone Fed-Exed a copy to the company's public relations firm in St. Louis. A few days later, they received a phone call from an official who said the play was too depressing. "We only like to associate our product with upbeat projects," he explained. So Hutchins made movie beer the hard way, cutting the ends off empty beer cans and fitting the remaining body over unopened soda cans, cursing Anheuser-Busch under her breath.

It's the day before the first performance, and the group's house reflects the stressful push toward opening night. Newspapers have piled up on the dining room table, and new warnings are posted in the kitchen: "Don't be icky! Please remember to wipe counters, stove top, and table when you're done eating!" and "Wash your dishes carefully. Some are getting really *grosse*." Last month's Halloween pumpkin still sits, its face collapsed, at the top of the porch steps. At Monty's everyone is talking about an article on



STEVE RAYNE

Wanda and Cornerstone in that morning's *Charleston Gazette*. "Well, if it isn't the headliner," says one regular when Wanda appears to pour his coffee. "Business has been booming today. People are coming in just to see me," Wanda replies, casting a sidelong glance at her boss, Gene Anders. He makes no secret of the fact that Wanda's rehearsal schedule has hurt her performance at work. "She's lost her zip," he says. "But everybody pitches in and refills the cups for her when she slows down." Wanda's fellow waitresses sense her opening-night nerves. "I

bet she won't eat a thing for dinner tonight," says one of them. (Actor Peter Howard, who entered the restaurant just as I was leaving, later told me that Anders said, "You see that fellow who was just in here? He's writing an article for Harper Magazine about the Cobblestone Theater Group.")

At City Hall, the crew is rushing to finish the set. Ben supervises from the top of the bunk bed inside the trailer, his head sticking out through the roof. Actors line up to get last-minute notes from an exhausted Bill Rauch. Over the last month he has directed them in such loving detail that all they seem to require today is his silent presence. It's a good thing, because he hardly has a voice left. He's so tired that he comes within an inch of applying Crazy Glue to his lips, mistaking it for Chap Stick.

The lingering symptoms of a flu, nicknamed the Cornerstone Crud, fill the theater with a symphony of coughs. Jesse Johnson, the last cast member to succumb, arrives looking like a ghost. "I feel like poop," he announces. "Don't kiss me tonight," says Ashby, who embraces him in acts 2 and 4. He looks hurt. "Only kidding," she says.

Lynn emerges from her costume and prop room and is immediately set upon by three people. Bill wants her to go through her fourth-act song (the one written by Wanda); Ashby wants to know where to cut the rug inside the trailer; and Amy, taking naturalism to heart in her role as the young mother, asks Lynn for permission to "smush bananas and other food onto my sweater." "Yuk . . . Yeah, I suppose so," says

Rauch has directed them in such loving detail that all they seem to require today is his silent presence. It's a good thing. He's so tired that he comes within an inch of applying Crazy Glue to his lips, mistaking it for Chap Stick.

Lynn. In the midst of all this, David is experimenting with a synthesizer setting that sounds like a human whistle. He has composed four new songs to be sung by Alison—one to open each act.

At 6:45 the crew finishes the audience platforms, and the entire cast forms a kind of bucket brigade, passing chairs down the line and setting them up. Lighting director Mary-Ann Greanier brushes glow paint at the edge of each step. (Later she wakes up in the middle of the night and sees a strange glowing object next to her head; it is her hand.)

At 7:00 the group assembles in the bleachers and quiets down to hear Bill give final notes. "First of all, can you give a hand to all the people who got the set ready today?" Loud whooping and applause. He reels off a dozen caveats and reminders. "Remember, sisters, to tease Junior in that first scene. In act 2, everybody, don't forget to shut the trailer door behind you—it's winter, it's cold outside! Chris, don't forget to

strike the laundry basket. Partygoers, when you're waiting for the nine o'clock clogging, go ahead and chant, 'It's nine o'clock, it's nine o'clock.'

Bill pauses. "In a second we'll move upstairs for individual notes." Another pause. "I just want to say that I'm

Grandma shows me roses and a telegram ("Break a leg; don't break anything else") from her daughter in Massachusetts.

incredibly proud of all of you, and I'm really excited that we're going to invite people in to watch our play tonight. You should all be very proud of yourselves."

Wanda is panicky. Her daughter, who has volunteered to usher, is holding her hand, trying to comfort her. "What if I just freeze up?" she asks Bill on the way upstairs. "What if it's my line and nothing comes out?" Bill: "Don't worry, you're surrounded by friends. You have people on stage with you who are going to support you and ad-lib." Wanda: "Yeah, they'll say, 'Livvie just had a stroke.'"

Upstairs, people are changing into costumes and making themselves up in front of a row of mirrors at one end of the hall. Trina and Peter go over the blocking for their emotional parting in act 4. William Parks sits in a corner, going over his lines one last time. Grandma, sure of her lines, shows me roses and a telegram ("Break a leg; don't break anything else") from her daughter in Massachusetts. At the dress rehearsal, Grandma told Bill, "The best thing about this is that everybody loves each other so much, they can all get undressed together."

At 7:25 company member Chris Moore, who plays the part of Junior (an aspiring environmentalist who ends up as an assistant manager at McDonald's) leads a quick warmup. Everyone stands in a circle and stretches. Then they join hands and pass an imaginary electric current (a squeeze of the hand) around the circle. Someone tells Chris it's showtime and he wraps it up with, "OK, group-hug everybody, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon." Everyone huddles into the center and breaks into a collective war cry followed by applause.

Despite the bad weather, a sell-out crowd awaits them downstairs. The lights go up on the three sisters, with Livvie grilling real hamburgers on stage. The distant sound of a passing train seems like a perfectly cued sound effect, but it's the real thing.

From the very start the audience was thoroughly involved in the performance. People were tickled pink at the first mention of Montgomery. And when Valentine tells the three sisters that he used to work for the local in Boomer (a mining town near Montgomery), one audience member couldn't contain herself: "Boomer! That's where I'm from!" People recognized their friends ("It's Suzanne Pollastrini!"), talked to the charac-

ters ("You're right about that!"), and tried to shake their hands as they exited. During an excruciatingly slow scene change, one woman got up and helped the understaffed stage crew move the bunk beds into the trailer, for which the audience gave her a round of applause.

Not far into the play, Trina's poise was put to the test when she got stuck inside the tire swing. She deftly ad-libbed a few lines while extricating herself. The next night she consolidated her reputation for keeping her cool when she helped William (Doc Childers) recover from a missed cue by asking, "What's up, Doc?" The only thing that threw Trina off course was the arrival of her boyfriend in the fourth act. She was sitting on the railroad tracks after a tense exchange with Peter (Turpin) when her boyfriend bounded down the steps, sat right in front of her, and said, "Hi." "I smiled when I wasn't supposed to," Trina told me the next day, "and I messed up two lines. He really made me angry."

The audience clearly loved the performance but was unprepared for its length—three and a half hours. Some people left at intermission, thinking the show was over. After the curtain calls, one man near me stretched his legs and said, "It was long, but it was good."

After the final performance, the cast and crew got a standing ovation. "I felt we deserved it," said Alison. "It's been a tough residency." When the applause died down, James handed Suzanne Pollastrini a check for \$500 from the box office proceeds to help start a community theater. As Alison described it, "There was a moment of complete silence, as if everyone wanted to soak up the last moment before moving on."

A few weeks later, a number of *Three Sisters From West Virginia* alumni, including Wanda Daniels, Trina Darby, William Parks, and Sammy Fragale, held the first meeting of the Montgomery Community Theater. They elected Suzanne Pollastrini president and planned to do their own adaptation of Lorca's *The Shoemaker's Prodigious Wife* next summer, with Dyann (Loretta Lynn) Simile directing.

Five other community theaters spawned by Cornerstone (in Kansas, Nevada, Oregon, Mississippi, and North Dakota) will also be doing adaptations of the Lorca play this year. The company wanted to see how these diverse communities would adapt the same play. Cornerstone did its own adaptation, called *The Video Store Owner's Significant Other* (title courtesy of West Virginia's Dyann Simile), in February in Washington, D.C.

In March they began a three-month residency in Eastport, Maine, after which they plan a "reunion show," bringing together two or three cast and crew members from each past community show to create one production that Alison hopes will "sum up all we've learned and experienced on the road." If that sounds like a farewell to nomadic life, it will be. Sometime at the end of 1991, Cornerstone plans to put down roots. "We're all afraid of losing something if we settle down," says Alison, "but we can't go on living this way." Adds Bill, "It's invigorating, but it's not healthy for a lifetime." After giving so many Americans a new appreciation of home, Cornerstone deserves one of its own. ▽

William Shebar '79 is a freelance writer and television producer living in New York. He recently wrote and produced a documentary on Malaysia for the Discovery Channel. For this magazine, he has profiled philosophers Willard Quine and Charles Sanders Peirce.