

BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY

Lanford Wilson insists that he's not abandoning playwriting in favor of translation—but he's also quick to extol its virtues, as a break from writing plays. "It takes an entirely different kind of energy to translate," he says. "It's like a busman's holiday."

Wilson recently completed a translation of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, which is currently running at the Hartford Stage Company under the direction of its artistic director, Mark Lamos. "It was Mark's idea that I do it, and under most circumstances I never would have considered it," relates Wilson. "But I was in the process of working on *Angels Fall*, and really getting burned out. I had decided that I couldn't write another play for at least a year, and the idea of translation appealed to me."

When Wilson agreed to take on the project, he didn't speak a word of Russian, but he devised what he thought was a reasonable plan of attack. "I decided to get a tape of the Moscow Art Theatre production in Russian, a copy of the play in Russian, and then commission two literal translations—one by an American who knew Russian and one by a Russian well-versed in English." But after he had assembled all these items, he decided that the task was, in a word,

"impossible." "When I looked at the Russian text, I couldn't even tell where the play began, and so I did what I felt I had to do: I took Russian lessons."

Spending more on the lessons than he was being paid to translate the play, Wilson studied intensively, three hours a day, five days a week for close to three months. ("Well, holidays cost money," he shrugs.) He's the first to admit that he's not yet near fluency, but he learned enough so that he could read the text in the original language, and look up words when he needed to. "I think I looked up every single word in the entire play," he admits. "But the final product is definitely a translation, not an adaptation. My intention was to remain true to Chekhov, to communicate his lyricism and his playability—and also his startlingly simple speech. I simply could not have worked from literal translations. I had to work from the original."

Wilson feels that the particular achievement of his translation—it's already been praised by a Russian scholar with whom he conferred—is that he's "shaken the British sound out of the language. It's not jazzy, but it's quintessentially American." Participating in the rehearsal process also yielded some changes in the script, which continued to evolve right up to the opening.

From his experience, Wilson has decided that the art of translation should naturally fall to playwrights. "It takes a playwright to understand the problems inherent in other playwrights' works," he insists. But after spending a year of his life on *The Three Sisters*, he has no immediate plans to tackle another translation project. Maybe someday, but for now, it's back to playwrighting. —Laura Ross

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PERMISSION GRANTED

It's not unusual for an actor to confer with his agent or lawyer before accepting a role. But recently, David Carradine sought counsel from a somewhat less common source. Before taking on the part of the Oglala Sioux holy man in *Black Elk Speaks*, Carradine visited the Pine Ridge Reservation in Oklahoma to receive permission of the Black Elk family. Permission was indeed forthcoming, and the play, based on the book by John G. Neihardt and



SHHHH!

Craig Smith suffers verbal abuse from A. Mapa in *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman*, currently running at the Cocteau Repertory in New York. Ben Johnson's rarely produced Elizabethan comedy details the torment of a man who hates noise, combining broad farce and ascerbic wit into a play which has perplexed critics for centuries. Set by director Gerald Chapman in modern-day New York, the play runs in repertory with *The Beaux' Stratagem* and *The Oresteia* through April 20.

adapted by Christopher Sergel, can be seen April 18–21 at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center.

A production of the American Indian Theatre Company, *Black Elk Speaks* is also being filmed by Nebraska ETV Network for the PBS *American Playhouse* series, for release throughout America four times over the next three years. The filming is taking place on location in South Dakota and Nebraska.

The play, directed by Tom Brennan, has a 31-member cast, including three great grandchildren of Black Elk himself. Producer JR Matthews, himself a Quapaw-Seneca Indian and artistic director of the American Indian Theatre Company, states that in his 1931 epic, Neihardt "fused into one great visionary voice the spiritual truths and cultural realities of a peo-