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Feature Story

A tall brunette with ruby red lips and long, glamorous eyelashes sits backstage, anxiously awaiting to debut in the play "Romance Language" at Ursinus College. This beauty seems eager to make a grand entrance, but something is obviously wrong. Very wrong. One breast is bigger than the other.

"Uh-oh ... Carol, Carol?! Help!"

Such are the emergencies that Carol Silber, the play's costumer/makeup artist, encountered nightly during the production's four-night run in mid-April.

"Carol was my savior during [the] play. I would never have been able to fix my chest by myself," said Greg Urban, the sophomore who played cross-dresser, Madame Nash.

Indeed, the 45-year-old Silber seemed to be a savior to most of the cast members. Clad in a white T-shirt, jeans shorts and sneakers, this petite woman with short, frosted blonde hair and big brown eyes could be found rummaging through the costume closet most nights before a performance.

"One night I had to find a dress to replace one that had been accidentally torn, and then I had to rush around and do the makeup. I was so stressed during the play. I even had dreams that something would go wrong, and I wouldn't have enough time to finish everyone's makeup," Collegeville resident Silber said.

When not saving the play from disaster, Silber frequently escaped out the back door of the theater and smoked a cigarette to help relieve her stress.

"I don't know why I agreed to do [the makeup and costumes]. I am falling so far behind in my homework," Silber said, shaking her head in disbelief.

Indeed, many people would be shaking their heads at Silber in disbelief after hearing that she currently attends day classes at Ursinus. Having previously attended Bucknell in 1969-70 and later Ursinus in 1973-74, Silber decided to reenter academic life and enrolled as

an English major during the fall of 1994.

Silber's main reason for returning to college was to obtain her teacher's certification in English. In the past, Silber had worked as a bookkeeper, but she said she found this work to be unfulfilling. She said she has always wanted to work with children.

Although there are very few older daytime students at Ursinus, Silber's transition back into college life was a smooth one, and she managed to blend right in.

"I had a class with Carol last semester, and I found her enthusiasm to be absolutely amazing ... she always participated a lot and made a real effort to get to know [her classmates] on a personal level," sophomore Joe Catalano said.

Silber's ability to bond with younger students was evident from her demeanor backstage. During lulls in the chaos, she chatted with the cast members about such things as schoolwork, music, movies and relationships. When the radio was turned on in the dressing room, Silber joined in the spirit of fun and danced right along with her younger counterparts.

Indeed, in most regards, Silber presented herself with the young energy of a twenty-year-old. However, unlike other full-time students at Ursinus, Silber has a husband and a nine-year-old son to attend to when she goes home.

"I got home exhausted one night, and my son told me that he needed to bring a dessert to school the next day for Grandparent's Day. Of course, being the wonderful mother that I am, I had to put my schedule on hold and make a chocolate cake," Silber said, still a bit annoyed that her son had sprung his request on her at the last minute.

Despite the stress of trying to balance her family and schoolwork, Silber said she has never regretted her decision to go back to school. For that matter, Silber claimed she has never regretted anything in her life.

"I wouldn't trade my life for the world. I just want to have as much fun as I can until I die," Silber said.

Indeed, many people would love to switch lives with Silber -- mainly because she has

met hundreds of celebrities. As a makeup artist at the Valley Forge Music Fair from 1974 to 1978, Silber has met just about every entertainer who has performed or spoke at that venue during that time period. Her celebrity acquaintances include the likes of Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman, Gladys Knight, George Carlin, Roberta Flack and Walter Cronkite -- but to name a few.

"I really just fell into doing that job. I was working at a hairstyling salon where the owner was a professional makeup artist, and he did [makeup for] most of the people at the Valley Forge Music Fair during that era," Silber said.

Silber would tag along whenever he did makeup for such things as weddings and Mummer's Parades so that she could observe his technique. Eventually she began helping and got a lot of positive feedback from her makeup mentor. Indeed, he thought she did such a good job that he asked her to assist him at Valley Forge.

In addition to this, Silber also accompanied her boss to do makeup for lyric opera in Philadelphia. Doing makeup for an opera seemed strangely appropriate to Silber, for her own father sang with the Metropolitan Opera before she was born.

"My father also did some semi-professional community theater and my mother was a costumer, so I've always been right at home backstage. [My siblings and I] always had access to makeup and costumes, and we were always playing and dressing up," Silber said. Silber said this early exposure to the theatrical world fostered in her an appreciation for the theater. Thus, she eagerly offered to help with the plays at Ursinus.

"Last semester I called Dr. Henry [the professor who directs the plays] knowing that I was not of the age group she probably wanted to perform, so I told her I'd be glad to help in anyway I could," Silber said.

After hearing of Silber's experience and enthusiasm, Henry asked her to do the costuming and makeup for the production of "The Tempest" which was performed during the fall semester of 1995.

As a costumer, Silber said her studies in English literature are an invaluable resource to her. Indeed, Silber was already familiar with the characters and the story of "The Tempest," and she said this helped her get an idea of what the characters should look like.

Silber made use of her English background once again when it came time to think of costumes for "Romance Language." Most of the main characters in the play are well-known authors and historical figures such as Walt Whitman, Louisa May Alcott and George Armstrong Custer.

"Having studied them in class, I already have a notion of who the people are and what type of personality they have," Silber said.

Despite the abundance of non-fictional characters in the play, Silber said she still used her imagination at times because the play was not intended to be an authentic era piece.

"This is the type of play where you have to use stereotypes so you have to work with the ideas that first come into your mind and then exaggerate them on stage," Silber said.

In this frame of mind, she chose to outfit the character of Ralph Waldo Emerson with her husband's old smoking jacket. The character of George Armstrong Custer wore a calvary suit and huge feathered hat. The transvestite Madame Nash even flaunted a big red boa which he/she seductively waved about.

"I thought the boa was the perfect touch for my character. I still felt strange dressed as a woman, ... but I thought Carol did a great job with the costume and makeup," Urban said, with a smile.

"I gave up a good [grade point] average for this play, but it was worth it. I just hope I can convince my professors to give me extensions on my papers," Silber said, with a laugh.

Although the main type of drama in her life has been theatrical, Silber has been witness to some historical drama as well. While she was living in Londonderry, Ireland, in 1971-72, for example, the Bloody Sunday Massacre occurred within miles of her home.

"I ended up in Ireland because my first husband was in the navy ... it was a good thing

I was young because if I went over there when I was older I would have been paralyzed with fear," Silber said.

Silber and her husband stayed in Ireland for a year and a half and moved a total of six times while there. Silber said the country was in such turmoil at that time, and bombings were continuous.

"My own house even got bombed ... [our house] was two doors down from the library that was the target of the bomb, but our house felt the effects of it," Silber said. By chance, Silber and her husband were not home when the bombing occurred.

While in Ireland, Silber had many friends who were in the radical Irish Republican Army. She said she met most of these people because they worked on the base where her husband was stationed.

"We did go on some rides with them -- not when they did bombings, but they were intent on causing trouble," Silber said.

She broke off her friendships with these people after she began to realize the extent of what they were doing.

Despite her exposure to the Irish political dissention, Silber said she found Ireland to be an extremely beautiful country. She said she was very impressed by the Irish people as well because they were so culturally aware and poetic.

"I would love to go back to Ireland and live there again someday," Silber said.

Silber said she has no plans of going abroad anytime soon. She is firmly rooted in the life she has created for herself in Collegeville.

Her chances of seeing another rebellion in the near future are quite high though. In the fall of 1996, Silber will be student teaching at Owen J. Roberts Middle School. When she begins to assign homework, the students will inevitably protest.