

The Play's the Thing at Park College

By Robert W. Butler
Arts and Entertainment Editor

Charles Gordone seems to have a love affair going with Park College. For the second summer in a row he's back in Parkville to direct an Actor's Prologue Company Original Repertory Theater (APCORT) world premiere.

"These people have spoiled me," the actor/director/playwright (he won a Pulitzer for his "No Place to Be Somebody") said in a recent interview. "They're something else. I can't believe the enthusiasm and cooperation I've seen here. I'm pretty jaded, having been in the professional theater for a while, but what I've seen at Park College is really refreshing."

Gordone is directing "Indian Givers" by Kansas City poet/playwright George Gurley. It opens Friday night on the Park College campus.

Gordone is no stranger to Gurley's work. Last summer he directed Gurley's absurdist comedy "Cures" for APCORT. The play was the winner of last year's Missouri Arts Council playwright competition and Gordone, one of the judges, was so impressed he asked to be the first to stage it.

While "Cures" was a decidedly unrealistic black comedy set in a mortuary, "Indian Givers" is based on a historic event and carries a great deal of social commentary.

"When I was judging the competition I read both 'Cures' and 'Indian Givers,' both of which George had entered, but their styles were so different I didn't know they were by the same man," Gordone recalled. "'Indian Givers' would have won second place but the organizers didn't want to give both first and second prize to the same playwright."

"Indian Givers" is based on the plight of the Modoc Indians of northern California, a tribe that in 1872 made a defiant last stand against the U.S. Army in a volcanic lava bed. The principal characters are two brothers, Modoc chiefs, named Captain Jack (played by Art Suskin) and Hooker Jim (Raymond Smith). Jim wants the tribe to give up Indian ways and join the white man, while Jack would prefer death to debasing his Indian heritage.

"That's the basic human story," Gordone said. "It's not historically accurate in every detail, but it is an excellent vehicle for the universal theme of man's inhumanity to man and to himself. The conflict separates the brothers and, in the end, both are hung by the whites."

"The irony of the situation is that both brothers are right in their own ways. There is no clear-cut villain. Each is concerned with the survival of his race. Hooker Jim wants to perpetuate the race under any circumstances, while Captain Jack believes that by giving in to the white man the Indian race will cease to exist as such and might as well be extinct."

The transition from poet to playwright hasn't been an easy one for Gurley, Gordone noted, particularly because Gurley approached theater from a strictly literary, rather than practical, point of view.

"I think this year George understands more about characterization within a dramatic situation," Gordone said. "With a couple of more drafts this could be a truly fine American play. It needs to go deeper into characterization, which is something George has never worked with that much. And the play is still an embryo. It's been through several changes, some of them pretty painful to the playwright, particularly as a non-theatrical type whose main interest is literature."

The first draft of "Cures" was only 68 pages long and had to be expanded for performance. The first draft of "Indian Givers," on the other hand, was so voluminous that it would have played for three hours.

"George had gone from an underwritten absurdist play to an epic," Gordone chuckled. "It's realistic and disturbing but still humorous—every now and then the comic poet in Gurley comes through again."

Gordone has only the highest praise for the APCORT program, which is dedicated to producing two original plays every summer.

"Operations like this are vital to the theater," he said. "Of course, it requires a certain level of knowledgeability on the part of theatergoers because what we are putting up there on the stage is not a finished product. It's a work in progress. It's as much for the playwright as for the audience—an opportunity for him to see the potential of his work. It's vital that programs like APCORT survive because even in New York there's no such thing as the minor leagues where a day-in, day-out program is available for playwrights to try out their ideas in performance."

Gurley's experience in seeing his plays performed is a textbook exam-



Farewell

Captain Jack (Arthur Suskin, right) parts from his wife (Sally Methner) in this scene from the world premiere of George Gurley's "Indian Givers," which opens Friday night

at Park College. It is the first production of the Actor's Prologue Company Professional Repertory Theater season.

ple of how such a program can help the playwright, Gordone said. "For instance, now we're dealing with ensemble acting, something George never knew about. He's moved from playwriting—which happens just in his

head—to playmaking, which is what happens when you start working with actors on a real stage."

Gordone himself keeps busy with acting and directing assignments. He recently directed his own play, "Ana-

biosis" in St. Louis and is working on a musical version of his "No Place to Be Somebody."

For ticket information on APCORT productions, call 741-2000, Ext. 169, between noon and 5 p.m. weekdays.