

Joan and the chorus



JOAN TRIUMPHANT

BY GILLIAN GILMAN CULFF'88

IN 1950, noted composer and SLC faculty member Norman Dello Joio, disappointed by a 1948 film, *Joan of Arc*, decided to retell the tale as an opera to try to capture the emotion in Joan's personal story.

He decided it would be staged at Sarah Lawrence with student actors, dancers and chorus. The result was an extraordinary moment in the College's history, bringing together creative and performing arts in a single—and memorable—interdisciplinary effort.

Offered as a course for credit in the dance, music and

theatre programs, *The Triumph of Joan* got under way with a \$2,000 grant from the Whitney Foundation. Dello Joio created and directed the lyric drama, while colleague Joseph Machlis of Queens College wrote the libretto. Each of the three departments was given a copy of the piece; working within their separate disciplines throughout the year, the 85 student participants came together for collective rehearsals in March 1950.

Speaking in a contemporary interview with *Sarah Lawrence Alumnae Magazine*

(as this publication was then known), Dello Joio told of giving the chorus of 50 (under the direction of Hugh Ross) a crucial, twofold role. First, they were charged with portraying all of Joan's thoughts and feelings; at the same time, they functioned as a traditional Greek chorus, telling the story to the audience and conveying its emotional content. Because the entire chorus portrayed Joan's inner life, said Dello Joio, "a real identification with the role developed for each one in the chorus." Under the direction of dance program director



Composer Norman Dello Joio



clockwise from above: *The King* (left) with Joan, played by Gisela Fischer '51; Building sets; Dello Joio directs rehearsal; The dancers

Bessie Schönberg, the dancers were also critical players, depicting the story's action and intensity in three original dance compositions.

Adding visual arts to the interdisciplinary mix, Nancy Hamburger Sureck '50, with

the audience on three sides and the chorus on the fourth, the piano hidden on stage. A series of multilevel ramps arranged in a geometric pattern enabled the cast and dancers to move through different levels as a way of creating changing sce-

the performance "first-class stuff of music drama, textually, dramatically."

But the real triumph was reserved for the students. Like many of the production's participants, Sureck cherished the experience. "*The Triumph*

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input from sculptor/faculty member Theodore Roszak, designed the sets as her academic work for John Blankenchip's stage design class. Sureck's task: to create a theatre in tiny Bates Assembly—later known as Bates Gym—with room for a chorus of 50, a piano and an audience of more than 100. Her solution was a modified theatre-in-the-round installation placing

nic spaces, culminating in Joan's cell at the lowest level, center stage. Students in Blankenchip's lighting class made up for the lack of changeable scenery by designing imaginative lighting to signal scene changes.

The Triumph of Joan opened to an audience of 140 in May 1950. Reviews were overwhelmingly positive; *The New York Times* called

of Joan was an incredible confluence of music, theatre, sculpture, dance and unlimited creativity," Sureck recently told *Sarah Lawrence*. Such interdisciplinary work "has been a mode of operation for me ever since. Sarah Lawrence unlocked singular thinking, expanded my imagination and encouraged new and unusual ways to solve life's challenges."



Creating costumes