Harvard in Drag: The Collected Works

In the bowels of the Hasty Pudding building at 12 Holyoke Street, a clubhouse with theater built in 1888, is the so-called Elephant Room, a narrow, bare-bulb, basement cell made glorious by its inhabitants—the costumes of Harvard men in drag from years and years of Hasty Pudding Theatricals. When the run of this year’s show, Snow Place Like Home, is over, the costume of

Photograph by Jim Harrison
Diane Comebacktolife, the tabloid journalist murdered by the end of Act I, and those of all who had means and opportunity at the Catskill ski resort that winter, will join their outrageous predecessors in the Elephant Room, if only briefly.

The Elephant Room got its name, incidentally, because when the wretched space was made barely usable for costume storage sometime in the 1980s, says Daniel Ring ’99 (music director of the current show), masses of sand that had been put there had to be removed. In the sand was found the skull of an elephant. It sits today just outside the prop room.

But the days of this décor are dwindling. Soon, the costumes of yesteryear, this sequined and booted alumni association, will have to go elsewhere, along with the posters, props, and other detritus of the Hasty Pudding decades.

The well-worn building, acquired by Harvard in 2000, will close for a top-to-bottom overhaul just after the 2003 show. Renovations will cost $15 million to $20 million and take about a year and a half, displacing the 2004 show to a theater the Theatricals will rent in Boston. The schedule minimizes disruption of the shows. Had renovations begun this fall, Pudding shows for two years would have been displaced. Harvard was not prepared to begin renovations this spring because of an unexpectedly prolonged planning process. “It’s a very complicated building,” says David P. Illingworth, associate dean of Harvard College, who notes that he has spent so much time on the project that he has come to think of himself as dean for Hasty Pudding.

When it reopens near the start of 2005, the entire building will be reserved for use by student groups. The Hasty Pudding Theatricals will continue to be staged in the refurbished building, although the student parties customarily associated with them may not be. In a building to be used by other student organizations as well, no storage space will be provided for the collected costumes of the men in drag. They will be banished to not-yet-identified precincts more distant from the Yard. And what will become of the elephant’s skull?

This year’s Hasty Pudding woman and man of the year are Sarah Jessica Parker (who stars in the cable-television series Sex and the City) and Bruce Willis (Die Hard, Pulp Fiction, and, currently, Hart’s War). How would Willis look in one of those outfits from the Elephant Room?

Living Wage: Next Stage

On the last day of January, President Lawrence H. Summers announced that the University would adopt the “living wage” recommendations of the Harvard Committee on Employment and Contracting Policies. (The text of the president’s statement is available at www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2002/01.31/01-katz.html). HCECP delivered its final report in mid December; the document (available at www.hcecp.harvard.edu) climaxed months of intensive work on the issue by the committee that former president Neil L. Rudenstine created as part of the agreement ending the lengthy occupation of Massachusetts Hall last spring (see “Airing Out the Living Wage,” January-February, page 66). The recommendations represent a substantial victory for the living-wage campaigners, even though Harvard does not plan to enact any of their demands literally. “All of the individual demands were rejected in their specificity,” says professor of economics Lawrence F. Katz, HCECP’s chairman.

After a month-long “comment period” that subsumed the Christmas vacation, Summers was expected to announce his decision on the report’s recommendations on January 18. Instead, he waited almost two more weeks to “distill what he has heard from a wide variety of people inside and outside the University,” according to Harvard spokesman Joseph Winn. In the meantime, activists kept up their pressure on the University with rallies, including one on Martin Luther King Day that drew several hundred people to Harvard Square.

The living-wage campaigners have sought improved pay scales for lower-paid Harvard workers like security guards, custodians, dining-services employees, and parking attendants—rates that would at least match the floor of $10.68 per hour adopted by the city of Cambridge. As of September 2001, Harvard directly employed 392 workers—all unionized—earning less than this figure; these low-paid workers represented 2.7 percent of the University’s 14,506 employees. An additional 579 on-campus contract workers (mostly nonunion), accounting for 63 percent of 919 such employees, also earned under $10.68.

HCECP unanimously concluded that Harvard’s “wage and contracting practices for lower-paid workers fall short of meeting the University’s goal of being a good employer.” To remedy this, the report proposed a two-pronged attack: first, that Harvard raise pay immediately for low-paid employees by renegotiating wages covered in existing collective bargaining agreements—specifically, lifting hourly wages to a minimum range of $10.83 to $11.30; second, that Harvard enact a wage-and-benefits policy that ensures parity between the University’s in-house pay scales and rates paid to those working in comparable jobs at Harvard under the aegis of outside contractors.

The committee rejected the demand put forward by the Progressive Student Labor Movement (P$LM), the group that spearheaded the Massachusetts Hall occupation, that Harvard ban all outsourcing of labor. Instead, the report says that “the University must ensure that outsourcing is used to increase quality and spark innovation, not to depress the wages of Harvard’s own service employees.”

This statement goes to the core of the committee’s analysis. Outsourcing has