John Brown's Body

John Brown's Body, Stephen Vincent Benet's Pulitzer Prize winning play of the American Civil War, will be performed one night only, Feb. 1 in the Morrison Center Main Hall.

The play will be used to increase Boise State University's endowments in the name of the late U.S. Senators Len B. Jordan and Frank Church.

"John Brown's Body illustrates how critical unity and statesmanship are to the solution of political problems," says Fred Norman, Morrison Center Executive Director. "Len Jordan and Frank Church were from different political parties, but they understood that message."

Through a series of vignettes and narratives, the three actors — backed by an acapella chorus of 22 — present the human dimension of the Civil War. The play revolves around the story of John Brown, the abolitionist fanatic who led a failed raid on the Harpers Ferry armory in an effort to free the slaves. Each actor plays several parts — Union and Rebel soldiers, a negro slave, Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, a southern woman, and others.

The Boise State production will employ photographs from the Civil War projected behind the actors to enhance the historical atmosphere.

The play is directed by Fred Norman. Frank Heise is technical director, responsible for an estimated 2,000 light cues. Pat Henderson is musical director and Ted Osborne, a recent economics and theater graduate from Stanford University, is production coordinator.

Attorney Carl Burke, campaign manager for Church, and insurance executive William Campbell, campaign manager for Jordan, are serving as co-chairmen of the event.

A $250 donation per ticket will admit people to a pre-performance reception in the lobby of the Boise Cascade headquarters, the performance itself, and a post-performance reception for the cast.

The goal is to fund each program at the $500,000 level, the amount needed to support an endowed teaching position.

"This is truly a bipartisan event devoted to the statesmanship these two men exemplified," said Burke and Campbell.

"We hope many people will take advantage of this opportunity to attend a memorable occasion to honor two of the finest statesmen in Idaho history," they concluded.
Bob Sims and Dave Taylor thought the offer was a practical joke.

Would the dean of the School of Public Affairs and the vice president for student affairs play lead roles in a Morrison Center extravaganza? Would these two non-actors join fellow non-actor, Hope Benedict, in a three-person play? Would they walk out on the Main Hall stage before 2,000 people (many who would pay $250 for a ticket) to act and narrate some 2,000 lines each from memory?

Sims' reaction was, "I thought it was funny at first. I thought he was kidding. When I realized he was serious I was terrified." Taylor had the same response. "I thought this was a big put-on," he recalls. Sims said he agreed to do the part but reasoned, "As soon as he (Fred Norman) heard me read I assumed he would come to his senses and remove me."

Why is Morrison Center Executive Director Fred Norman taking three people who have virtually no acting experience and directing them in what he acknowledges is an "extremely difficult play?" Not only is the play, John Brown's Body, an arduous task for actor and director alike, but the play will kick off the university's Hemingway Year and serve as a fundraiser for the Frank Church and Len B. Jordan endowments.

"It's not a risk on my part," says Norman. The primary requirement for an actor, he says, is sensitivity and intelligence. "These are three extremely bright people," he says. "I'm just basically guiding them."

And how did Norman convince three people to commit to five months of rehearsals — five evenings a week plus Saturdays — and the terrifying prospect of performing before hundreds?

Says Norman, "I basically took each of them to lunch and told them, 'if you think you can do it, I want you in the play.' "

All three say they were attracted to the play because of its intellectual substance, although none had read the play before Norman gave them each copies.

Taylor says he was interested in working with Fred and was challenged by "the mental discipline of trying to learn some lines." Some lines is a bit of an understatement. Norman notes that the play is usually done as a reader's theater — the actors simply reading from the script — because of the extensive memorizing required. "It's a difficult show," says Norman. "We're talking about 2,000 lines each."

Norman will no doubt be comparing it to the first production he saw of John Brown's Body. It was the original production with acting greats Tyrone Power, Raymond Massey and Judith Anderson, directed by Charles Laughton. Norman was 18. "It touched me," says Norman. "It's truly been a part of me for 20 years."

Twenty years from now Bob Sims, Dave Taylor and Hope Benedict will no doubt feel the same way.

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**2,000 will attend their acting debut**

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