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Under the Gaslight

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MORRIS (1/7/76) -- At least four times next week University of Minnesota, Morris senior Donald S. "Twig" Webster will be transformed into a man of more than twice his age in a matter of hours.

He will become Ambrose Bierce, journalist, short story writer, poet and gadfly to American political and social life, sent to Washington to fight the controversial Railroad Funding Bill at the turn of the century.

As Ambrose Bierce, lead character in the UMM Theatre production, "Bierce Takes on the Railroad!" Webster faces one of the most challenging roles he has had to meet in his theatrical experience.

"I find the role of Bierce difficult and challenging because he is a much more controlled and older man than I've played in other productions," explains Webster. "In other roles I've been more flamboyant and physically comical. This role also presents a challenge because the language is difficult. Bierce had impeccable speech and his lifestyle was also impeccable."

The play has been selected as one of four regional finalists to compete in the eighth annual American Theatre Festival at the University of South Dakota-Vermillion next Thursday, Friday and Saturday (1/15-17). The winner will go on to compete in the National American College Theatre Festival held in the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Webster, selected as best student actor in the play, will compete at Vermillion for the prestigious Irene Ryan Scholarship. The winner will receive an all expenses paid trip to Washington to compete in the national contest.

Webster has appeared in UMM productions of Moliere's "The Doctor in Spite of Himself," "The Serpent" and "She Stoops to Conquer."

In addition, he has been student director of the Meiningens production of "The Dirty Old Man," the UMM production "House of Blue Leaves," and the Morris High School production of "The Miracle Worker."

He also has spent two summers with the Straw Hat Players at Moorhead State University.

Asked which side of the footlights he'd rather be on, Webster replied, "I like acting better, probably because that's what I'm doing now. I feel that it is more challenging to act, and also more frustrating because I find it is harder to get what I want out of myself than it is to direct someone else. But even though acting is more frustrating for me, I also feel that it is more rewarding when I succeed."

"The play, 'Bierce Takes on the Railroad!' is especially significant in the Bicentennial year because it deals with a part of history not in history books. It deals with a man who was very intelligent and talented, who was, yet, somehow passed by in the history of American literature," said Webster.

"Because it is only the third time the play has been produced, and the first time the production has been done without the direct involvement of the playwright, Philip Bosakowski, we have had more leeway and freedom to do what we want to with our production. Our director, Dr. George C. Fosgate, has had the freedom to add his interpretation to the play," he explained.

Two special benefit performances of "Bierce Takes on the Railroad!" will be presented Monday and Tuesday evening (1/12, 1/13) at 8:15 p.m. in the Humanities Fine Arts Center Proscenium Theatre on campus.

A donation of \$2 is requested at the door with proceeds going to help defray the costs of taking the show to Vermillion.

Webster, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Webster of Morris, isn't sure what his future will be. But he feels that theatre will always be a part of his life. He hopes to study theatre in graduate school at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, and perhaps eventually to go into professional repertory theatre and possibly teach at the college level.

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