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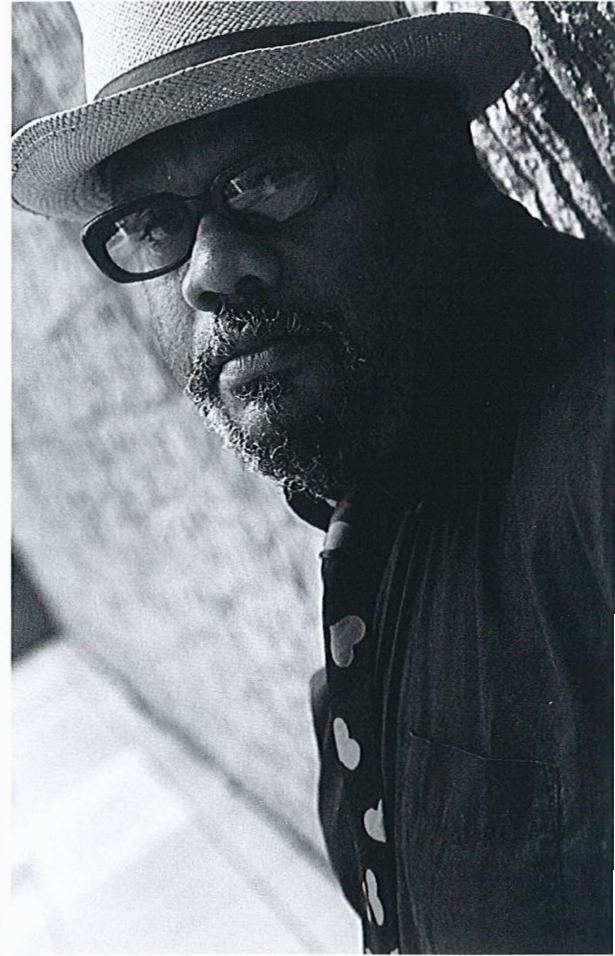
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Stew & The Negro Problem

Stew
Heidi Rodewald



Thursday, February 2, 7:30 pm — The Englert Theatre
Hancher Commission

Tonight's performance will feature a new collection of songs
about Iowa City commissioned by Hancher.

NOTE: Performance rescheduled and relocated:
Thursday, September 27, 2012, 7:30 & 10:00 p.m.
Club Hancher at The Mill

Playbills for original performance date had been printed prior to rescheduling.

Iowa Center for the Arts
The University of Iowa



> “It’s a love and pain thing, a no one can explain thing, it’s simply complicated folks,” goes a line from “Curse,” one of the central pieces on *Making It*, not only the new album by the Negro Problem, but the first collection of new songs by the collaborative partnership that is Stew and Heidi Rodewald since *Passing Strange*, their Tony-winning play turned Spike Lee Joint.

Making It weeps, moans, and sings, as its makers — once coupled, now apart — deliver in equal measure, a male and female, yin and yang, black and white story of love and art, in all its colors and parts. Of course that’s what singer-composer Rodewald and the singularly named singer-songwriter-playwright Stew have always done, en route from rock ‘n’ roll trouble to theatrical triumph, since forming their band the Negro Problem in Los Angeles in the early ‘90s (Heidi joined in ‘97).

“For some people, ‘making it’ means having enough money where you don’t have to make art anymore,” says Stew. “But I’ve always told people I became successful when I was 17 and realized that this was what I was going to do with my life — not when we got to the Public Theater or went to Broadway or when Spike shot the movie — but when I made that decision: To be in a band.”

Over the course of nine albums, while Stew’s concerned himself with making art, making love, and making peace with all of it, Heidi’s co-composed and vocalized the push-pull, down-bound yet supersonic melodies that largely characterized the Negro Problem. But her notations to the songs on *Making It* are perhaps that much sweeter because of the resistance she initially brought to the project.

“I didn’t want to do this record,” she admits. But when she heard a bit of her own truth in the climactic “Leave Believe,” she says, “We decided that I should be involved — that I’d tell Stew what lyrics

he should write for me.” The new twist on the creative process was especially gratifying for Heidi, while Stew gave and took what he needed from it too. “Stew said *Making It* was like his ‘therapy’ and I told him that therapy only works if you tell the truth.” The resulting song, “Therapy Only Works If You Tell The Truth,” is as bare-naked as it is straight/no chaser rock ‘n’ roll.

“Heidi’s voice is just a part of our thing; it’s definitely moved into the foreground on this record,” says Stew, who was inspired by the moods of early Leonard Cohen, and the way he works with female voices. “I always loved that vibe a lot, where the female voice becomes a character from the song, not just a backing vocalist. To me it was very theatrical.” But, Stew adds, his influences are more often more abstract than that: “More like what I imagined something sounded like, than what it actually sounded like.”

Opening with an exuberant instrumental theme, comedown and chaos quickly combine while the first voice you’ll hear is Heidi’s. Trading echoing lines of dialogue in “Pretend,” the play’s the thing, as Stew foreshadows what’s about to unfold: “When times get tough the song does too.” Love and war, overseas and at home, are no joke in the downbeat duo “Pastry Shop” and “Suzy Wong.” And in Aspen, where “Black Men Ski,” you could say the path is designated “most difficult.” Meanwhile, Heidi and Stew roll with the emotional changes and go down swinging, lost and found in a swirl of rock ‘n’ roll feedback, futuristic jams, flute, and funeral jazz, with a shot of showbiz flair.

continued on page 6...

During a week of sold-out *Making It* shows at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn, theater-goers who expected *Passing Strange* part two had their minds revamped, and yet this was Heidi and Stew doing what they've always done, working out their songs as the Negro Problem, a band in (im)perfect harmony. Call it an uneasy listening experience that's easy on the ears, or like eavesdropping on the human condition, ultimately *Making It* is a rock album concerning heartache — and who can't get with that?

"The albums we put out always show where we are at the time," says Heidi. "This collection of songs is filled with inaccuracies and that is absolutely accurate in describing our lives during that rough period. The inaccuracies are what make it that much more accurate."

Stew counters with the facts (as he sees them): "It's a fact that we broke up during *Passing Strange* and we had to be in a play for two years together which was pretty intense and largely *Making It* is about that — not every song, but most of it . . ."

No matter that he sees it his way and she hers, the creative partnership that remains Stew and Heidi is still clicking. Following a series of shows and the release of *Making It*, their next collaboration debuts in February 2012 at New York's Public Lab: Stew's play *The Total Bent*, with music by him and Heidi, concerns a gospel singer going rock in a time of epic social and political change. Again, it's a tussle, this time between the sacred and the profane, at the intersection between life and art.

"It doesn't take much to figure out, this is sort of a reoccurring theme with me," says Stew. The ideas and the songs keep coming; he simply shows up to write them. "We didn't expect to make a play . . . or to break up . . . all these things just *happened*."

"Stew can write anything, put it in a song and people think it's the truth," says Heidi.

But it's where the two get together that things start to get interesting. Call it love or call it art, fact or fiction, whatever it is or isn't, *Making It* is an affirmation of Stew and Heidi's trip as they shift gears, passing — quite naturally — into the next phase. ♦



Hancher Education Update:

Danny,



King of the



Basement

By Erin Donohue,
Hancher Education Program Director

Hancher presented *Danny, King of the Basement* in collaboration with the Iowa City Community School District (ICCSd) this fall at Horn Elementary School. This is one of my favorite new programs that we've started after becoming a presenter without a building—probably because I get to go back to elementary school for a few days. And I don't have to do any of the homework.

Danny, King of the Basement is a production by Roseneath Theatre, a company based out of Toronto, Canada. The group visited Iowa City last year with its production of the *Incredible Speediness of Jamie Cavanaugh*, which was met with rave reviews from teachers and children alike. We decided to bring the company's production of *Danny* to Iowa City this year, open to all 5th and 6th grade students in the ICCSD. Hancher and the ICCSD have a long partnership together, working to bring professional arts experiences to students in the Iowa City community. Hosting performances in an ICCSD elementary school allows us to reach a number of elementary students in a similar manner to our matinee Stage Door performances that took place in the old building. It's really amazing how

great a colorful 10-foot tall set looks in an elementary school gym.

Danny, King of the Basement is a story about Danny Carter, a 12-year old boy. Danny and his mother are always moving because there is never enough money to pay the rent. Danny has an active imagination that helps him deal with these difficult situations, especially assisting him in making friends. The show focuses on Danny and his two friends and how they manage to deal with hard life circumstances as young people. The play emphasizes themes such as coping with difficult situations, accepting different family structures, making friends, building self-esteem, and succeeding at school.

Hancher worked with professors and students in the University of Iowa's College of Nursing to develop follow-up activities for elementary students who viewed the performance. The UI professors and students visited individual classrooms to lead elementary students through the lessons. Eight out of ten schools participated in the follow-up workshops which took place in the two weeks following the performances. Students reflected on their experience at the performance, thinking of questions they would like to ask Danny and brainstorming their own definition of poverty. The students also worked in groups to choose items to purchase at the grocery store if they only had \$7 to spend.

The teachers had many positive responses to the performance. One teacher wrote to me: "The students really enjoyed the performance today! They were so engaged with the show and were asking a lot of questions afterwards. Thank you for all you do." Another excited teacher responded about the event: "The performance was wonderful!!! The kids really enjoyed it, and they have a lot to say about it! We are looking forward to the follow-up activities." An ICCSD principal noted: "PLEASE ask us again in the future to be a part of these activities. THANK YOU! We really appreciate the opportunity to be a part of this kind of thing." I love our in-school performances for elementary students because the kids are so excited to see a production in

one of their own schools. They are willing and ready to talk about the show afterwards and have no problem asking the actors a few hundred questions (we usually have to drag them away to get back to their scheduled classes!). One precocious student asked the Toronto-based group during a post-show Q & A if Canadian bacon was really just ham—and the actors did their best to clear up that confusion between fits of giggles.

Hancher and ICCSD plan to continue these types of in-school performances for Iowa City students for years to come. We hope to do even more shows like this in the future to reach a wider range of students and expose them to different forms of art. Hancher's vision is to bring transformative artistic experiences to every Iowan—and it's my hope that we're able to do this specifically for our youngest generation, creating the next group of arts patrons, artists, and arts leaders. ♦



The artist as cultural observer

– or what will **Stew & The Negro Problem** have to say about Iowa City?

By Maria Vorhis

I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.)

And so with empty pockets and a desire for simplicity, Henry David Thoreau moved into the woods. Thoreau's departure from society was provoked by his opposition to the rapid takeover of industry. Railing against technology, he rants, "Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?" Over his two year sojourn, Thoreau discovered a refuge in nature. His many adventures on Walden Pond caused critical self introspection, resulting in a better understanding of his environment.

As Orson Welles writes, "A good artist should be isolated. If he isn't isolated, something is wrong." Isolation, in Thoreau's case, bred perspective, and a vision of what life could be. Not all artists desire to detach themselves from their environment in order to comment on it. Regardless, an artist's role is to reflect her environment, and hopefully offer new perspective. John Lennon similarly described his purpose: "My role in society, or any artist's or poet's role, is to try and express what we all feel...as a reflection of us all." By welcoming Stew and his band, The Negro Problem, to Iowa City, Hancher presents us with the opportunity to join Stew in rediscovering Iowa City.

So what qualifies Stew to share his impressions of Iowa City? Stew might not know how to build a log cabin, but he's compelling in his own right. Hailing from Los Angeles, which he

sarcastically describes as "the future cultural capital of the world," Stew has made a name for himself as singer and songwriter, distinguished by his witty wordplay and thought provoking satire. In the early 1990s, Stew formed his rock band, The Negro Problem, with which he won two album of the year titles. In 2004, New York's Public Theatre took notice of Stew and commissioned him to write a musical. Surprising even himself, Stew added one more title to his resume: playwright. Stew remembers his and collaborator Heidi Rodewald's initial response: "We hated most musical theater, especially rock musicals." Like all good artists, Stew improvised: "I lied and said we're working on a musical." Three years later, in 2007, *Passing Strange* opened in New York. This largely autobiographical coming of age story follows Youth, an adolescent Stew, from his childhood in L.A. to his adventures through Europe. Youth greets life head on in Berlin and Amsterdam, ultimately coming closer to his authentic self.

Counting Crows front man, Adam Duritz, saw *Passing Strange* in its early stages at its Berkley run. Duritz raves, "It's a fantastic musical odyssey that traces the life of a young black musician from his church choir and garage punk band roots in L.A.'s Crenshaw district through the pot haze of Amsterdam's coffee shops to the

art riots of late 20th Century Berlin and finally back to L.A. again.” Duritz claims the adventure is about the search for “identity” and “whether or not he is actually ‘passing’ for black.”

From the play’s conception, Stew played the Narrator, and has only recently resigned from the role. The production received seven Tony nominations, and won a Tony for Best Book of a Musical. *Passing Strange* has garnered a lot of attention, playing across the United States, and even South America. Two months before the original show was set to close, film director, Spike Lee, jumped on board, agreeing to make *Passing Strange: The Movie*.

While many artists might be inclined to ride the wave of past success, Stew is already on to new projects. Heidi Rodewald, Stew’s artistic partner in crime, began work on a side project, *Brooklyn Omnibus*, a collection of songs about the New York borough. Over a year ago, Stew and Heidi visited Philadelphia to promote *Passing Strange*, and while there, developed Heidi’s idea of profiling towns through song. Stew explains the idea: “We

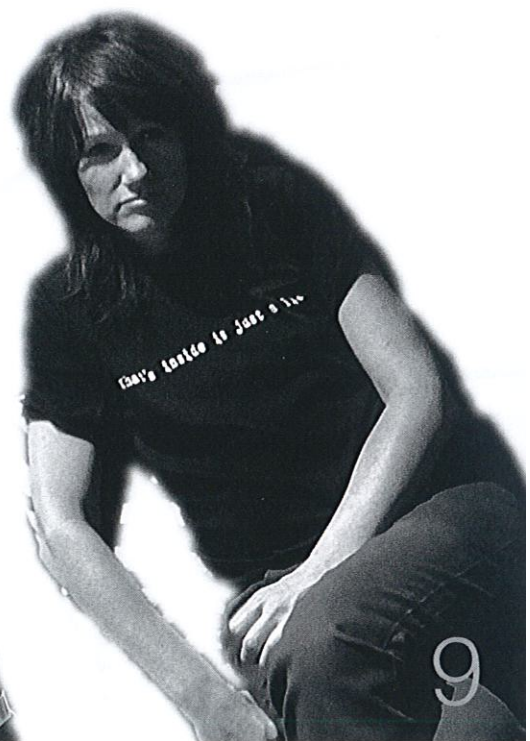
want[ed] to get cities to commission us to write a song cycle about their city.” Celebrating the positive feedback in Philadelphia, the duo packed their bags and set their sights on the Midwest.

Before arriving in Iowa City this past October, Stew made clear that he wanted to see the living, breathing Iowa City, rather than tour run-of-the-mill landmarks. In other words (close to his own), he wanted to eat ribs and visit the barber shop. In keeping with those plans, the first success was getting a haircut on Burlington Street. He then passed the day buying groceries at John’s, discussing new work with Working Group Theatre, browsing the aisles at Prairie Lights, and meeting the Oakland Cemetery’s Black Angel. After a day of extensive note and picture taking, Stew rewarded himself with dinner and drinks at the Sanctuary. Though he has not divulged any ideas, Stew will surely provide us with a refreshing portrait of our town.

Journeying back to the log cabin in the woods to visit our old friend, we are reminded of how technology has truly changed us. Thoreau was not

completely anti-technology, but he did prophesize its inherent dangers. Though our gadgets claim to connect us, we are more disconnected than ever. Theatre director, Anne Bogart, is not alone in her search for connection: “My directing became an attempt to remember and to reconnect with an artistic heritage” (Bogart 27). At its best, live performances allow us to publicly wrestle with social issues, open a conversation within the community, and connect us through a new perspective. By inviting artists such as Stew and the Negro Problem to Iowa City, Hancher is engaging in this deeper exploration: one that will bring Iowa City natives and students closer to a common heritage. ♦

Maria Vorhis is a senior Theatre Arts major at the University of Iowa and one of two Hancher Arts Management Interns. She is currently directing Maria Irene Fornes’ Mud, which opens February 9 and runs through the 13. After she graduates in the spring she plans to move to Chicago to pursue a career in acting and directing. In her free time she enjoys cooking, going to shows, writing, speaking Italian, and fantasizing about living and eating in Rome.



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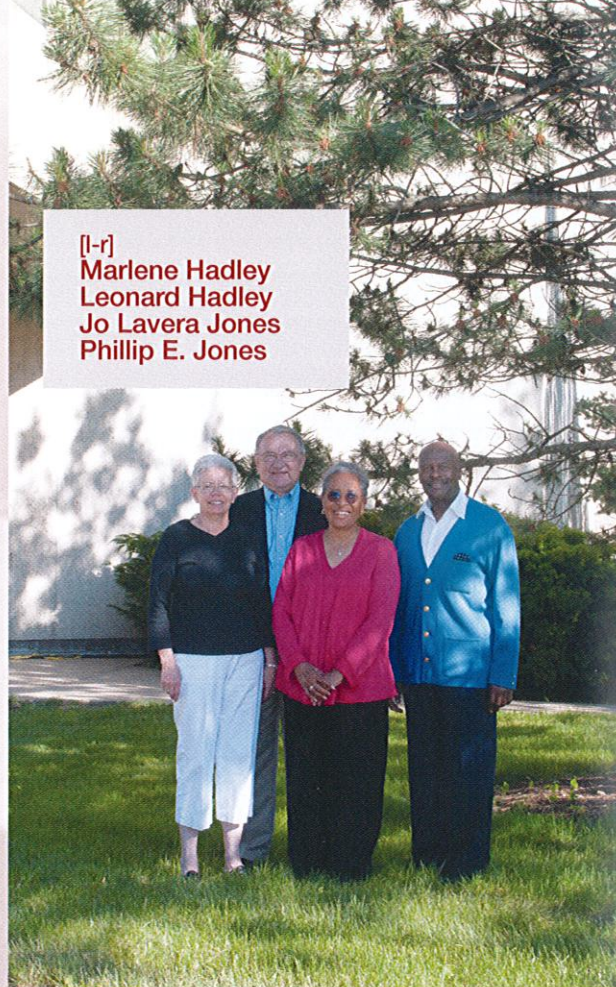
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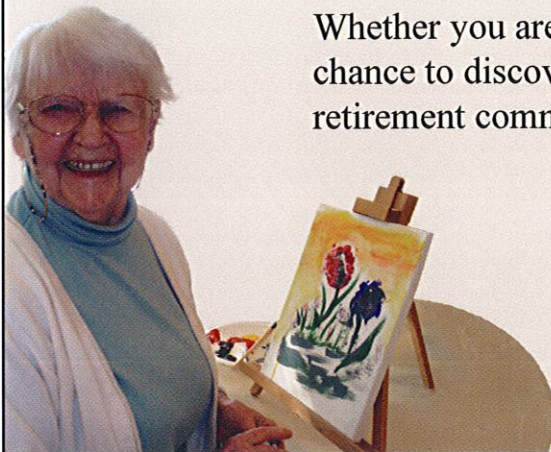
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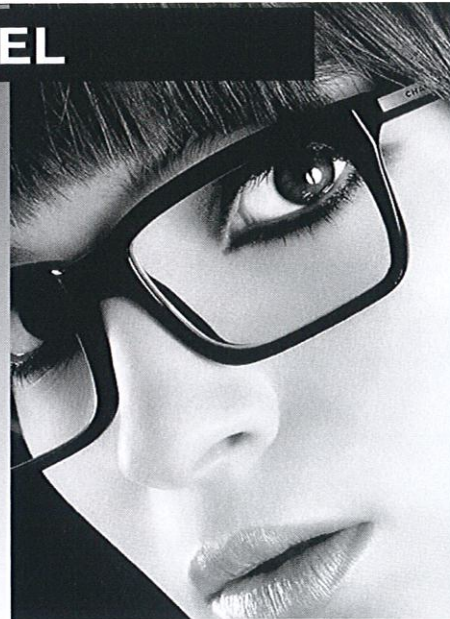
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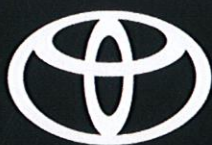
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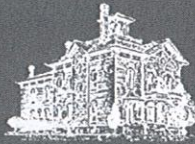


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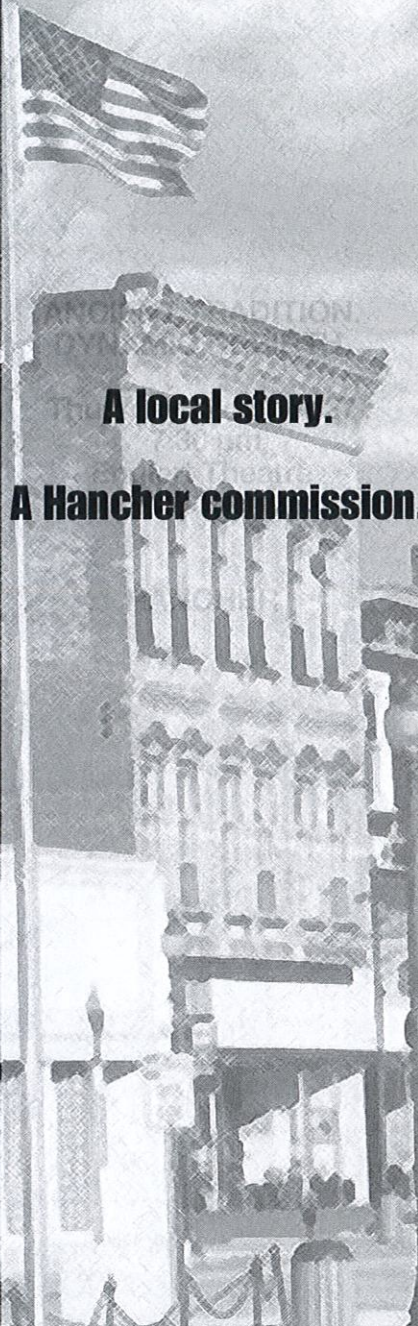


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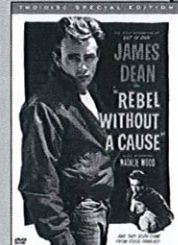
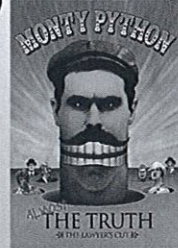
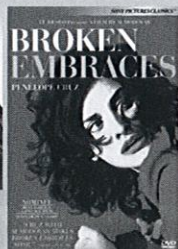
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Dave Pietro
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Sean Christopher Lewis
and Working Group Theatre, Mayberry
Friday-Sunday, April 27-29

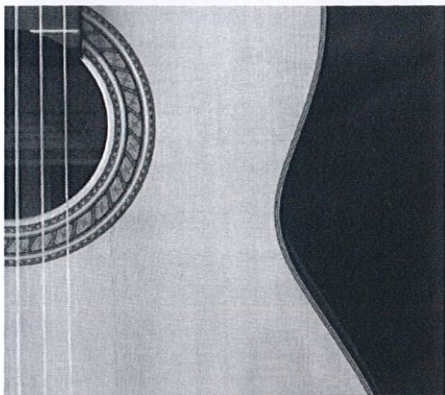
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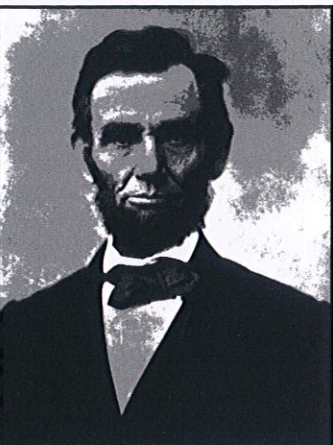
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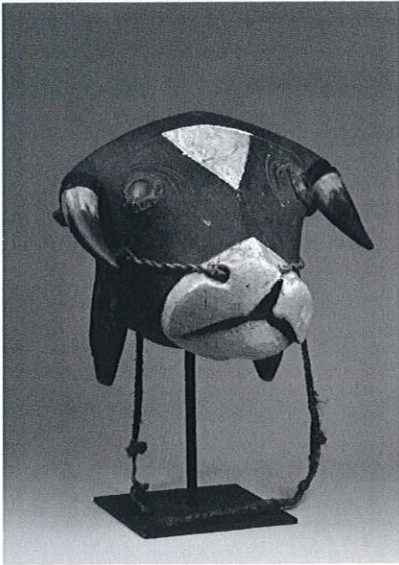


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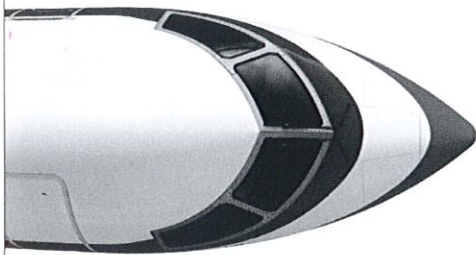


Left: People of the Bissagos Islands
Bull mask
Wood, glass, cow horns, fiber,
pigment
University of Iowa Museum of
Art, Friends of the Museum of Art
Foundation
2008.25

Right: Pablo Picasso
(Spanish, 1881-1973)
Untitled (vase), n.d.
Glazed ceramic
University of Iowa Museum of Art,
Gift of Owen and Leone Elliott
1986.53

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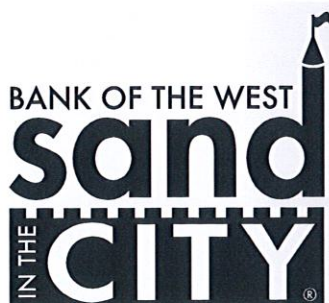
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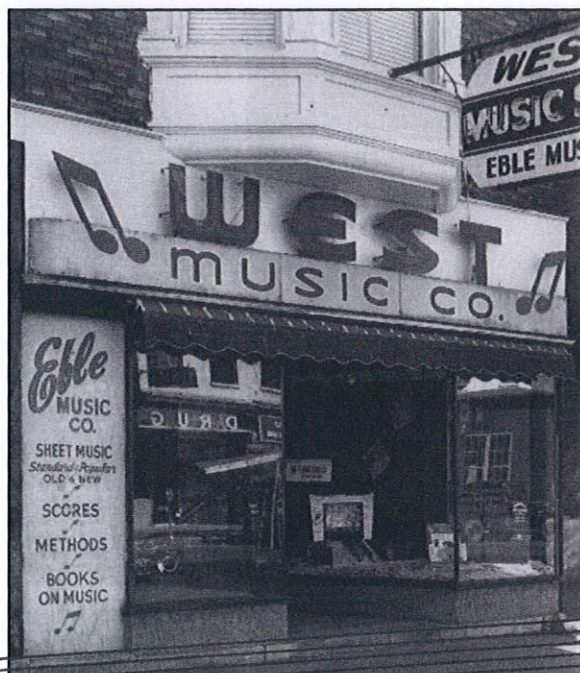
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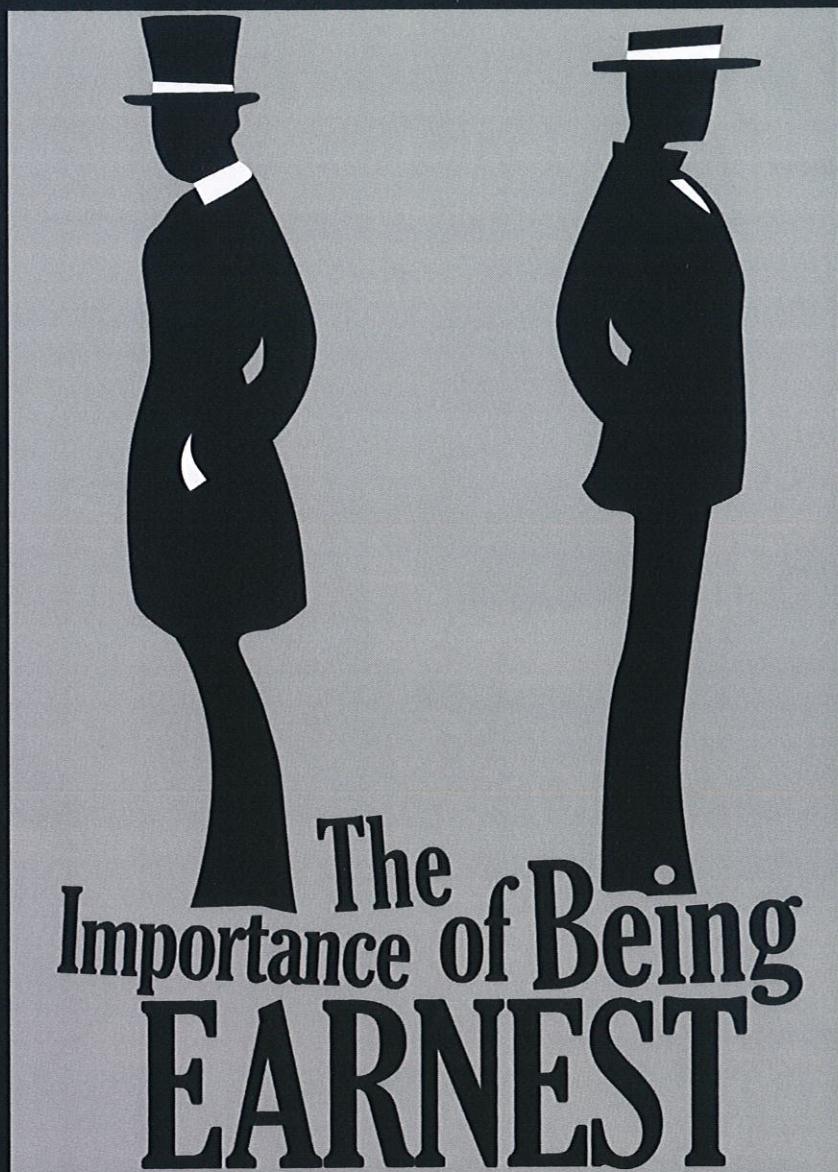
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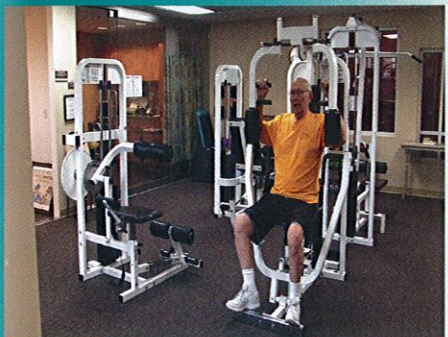
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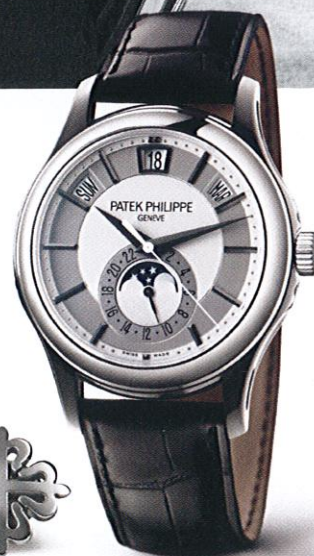
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