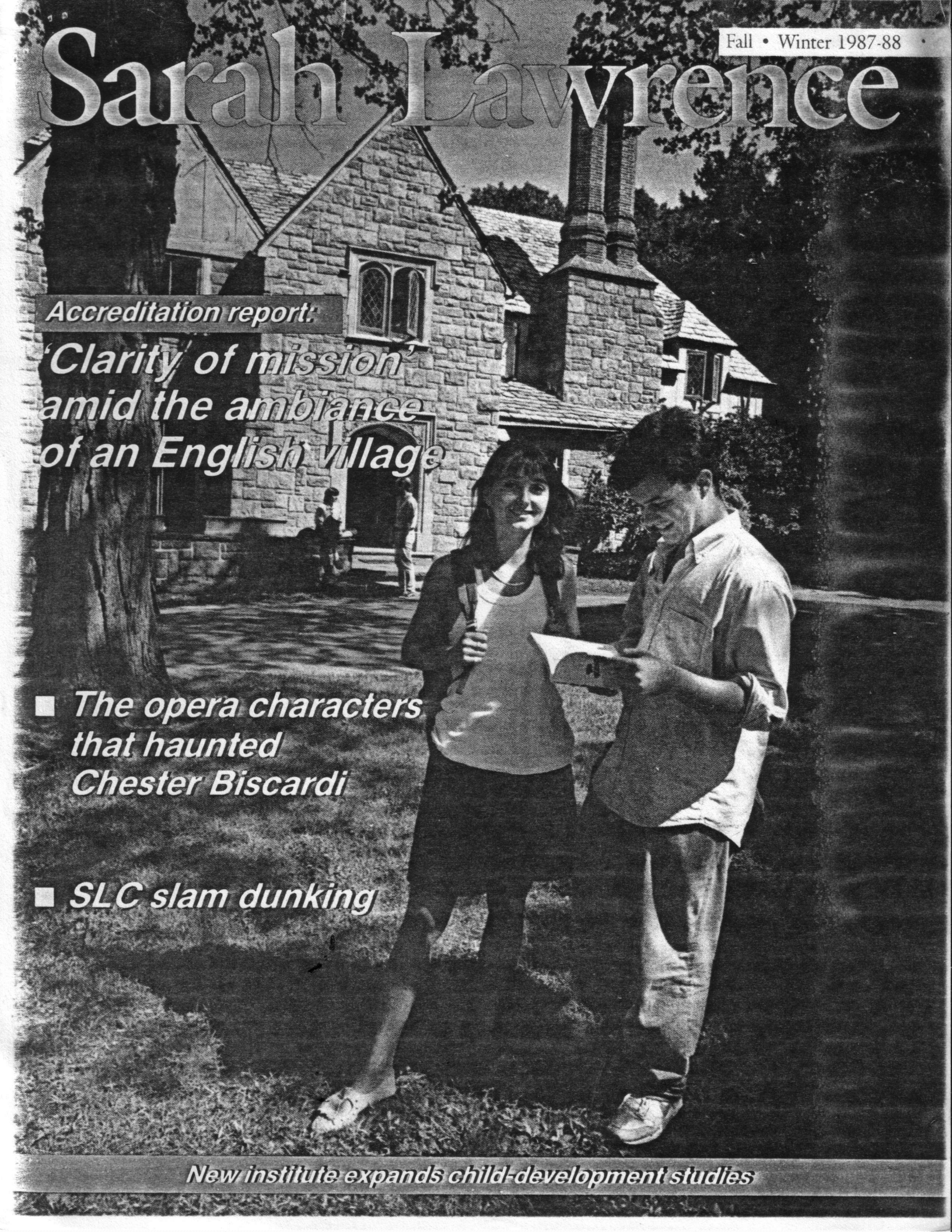
Sarah Lawrence

Fall • Winter 1987-88



Accreditation report:

'Clarity of mission' amid the ambiance of an English village

- The opera characters that haunted Chester Biscardi
- SLC slam dunking

New institute expands child-development studies

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'Clarity of mission' 2

A once-a-decade evaluation commended the College for the quality of its faculty and its well-defined mission. But the accrediting team shared some of the College's concerns about the years ahead.

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Alumnus Uri Berliner '77 remembers the great year when he coached the Green Machine through a near-faultless first half against Manhattanville, and a mumble-mumble record overall.

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The largest outright gift ever made to the College establishes a new institute to consolidate and expand SLC's venerable child-development programs.

'Perfect Weekend' draws 365 12

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Biscardi afflicted by created characters **14**

On our cover. Alexandra Poer '91 and Philip Shneidman '89 *(foreground)* and Lindsay Fass '87 and Peter Coughlin '89, in front of the classic Tudor lines of Tweed, one of the buildings lending an English-village aura to the Sarah Lawrence campus. Cover photo: John Meyers.

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Keeping a long work alive

By Chester Biscardi

At some point in my personal journal I wrote: "The process of working out a life, personally and artistically, is what my life is all about." Although it now strikes me as being a bit pretentious, I do feel that it is valid. In fact, the other day while talking to a young man in the public relations office here at the College, I made that exact statement. At the end of the conversation I begged him not to have the director return my call because I was unplugging my phone to go back to work. He

said: "Well, have fun working on life!"

What more can you wish to anyone, not just to the creative artist? And by the way, everyone has the same flashes of inspiration, moments of understanding and perceptions of beauty that we usually assign only to the "artist." If the artist is singular at all, his only singularity is that he hangs on to and is fascinated by those moments of revelation that most people look at and let go. The artist notices those moments of insight earlier, pays more attention to them and spends more time questioning them. But he pays a price for that insight.

Many people think that the artist is driven by his inspiration along a single, uncluttered path toward the completion of his work. In my experience that is far from the truth. That straight path to accomplishment is cluttered with many roadblocks, the most disturbing of which is the inevitable self-doubt. I found some words of playwright David Rabe that said it for me perfectly:

> Much of the early struggle in writing is with what I call "The Censor," the voice that says, "It's not good" or wants to know what the third line will be before you've written the first one. That voice is very, very untalented, and when I really get going, it just vanishes. (*The New York Times,* June 17, 1984)

If I had the notion that the sense of doubt would disappear the longer I work as a composer, I learned I was wrong when I began my opera, *Tight-Rope.* Suddenly I had to deal with two elements that were quite strange to me: the words, and the stubbornness and contrariness of characters. Up to that time, my creative vocabulary had been limited to all the elements of musical structure. As for the perversity of characters, most novelists are used to that as I am used to the musical scale. I was warned that they would move into my studio, try to dictate their own music, flatly refuse to sing mine, and I didn't believe it. I was wrong. Characters take away your freedom to sit and compose as your imagination carries you. They do take over. And that is precisely what keeps the work alive, however many years it may take, because you have no way of predicting in a tidy fashion how characters choose to explain themselves.

It reminded me of a remark of Simenon, the French mystery writer, who said in his *Memoires:* "I put myself into a state of grace before beginning a novel." And when asked to explain, he said:

> The Catholic idea. The state of grace, the idea of being without sin. I didn't believe in that. I did believe in a sort of vacuum. To be completely receptive, to become empty so that the characters may inhabit me. I become the characters. I am a slave of my characters. But not of myself. (*The New York Times,* April 22, 1984)

Or, as Charles Dickens phrased it: "I put my fictitious companions in the upper place at feasts."

What brought those words of Simenon and Dickens to my mind was receiving a phone call inviting me to accept a commission for a new chamber opera to be premiered two years later at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. If I accepted the commission, and after much hemming and hawing and soul-searching I did, then I was going to have to deal with living characters in a music drama.

Tight-Rope is a chamber opera in one act, nine uninterrupted scenes. The libretto is an original idea by Henry Butler. The story is as follows:

> The legend of Luther Dane, poet and cult hero, enhanced by his mysterious disappearance and presumed death, is now the subject of a film biography. On the first day of shooting, work is disrupted when the actor portraying Dane angrily insists that his lines could not be the words of the man whose life and poetry he so admires.
>
> Left alone to sort out his feelings, the Actor is suddenly face-to-face with Luther Dane, very much alive, an unsuspected witness to the filming. Intrigued by the Actor's concern for integrity in his portrayal, the poet offers to piece together the not-so-well-known story of his life and "death."
>
> Through Dane's memories and actual encounters, the Actor experiences the poet's explosive career, the men and women who shaped his life, and his powerful influence when he spoke to his dedicated followers. Most important, the Actor learns the truth about Dane's escape from an unbearable public image.
>
> When the poet abruptly takes leave of him, the Actor begins to find the words and images he must use if he is to portray with honesty the life of Luther Dane.

I realized that I had to be every one of the characters, hear his or her music and find out how could it possibly work with everyone else's music. Fine. So I understand that. So where do I begin? Do I begin with musical themes? Some of my fellow composers insist that's the only way. Do I begin with individual arias, that is to say "songs," for each character? Or do I begin with abstract expressions of the entire theme of the opera? To some extent I ended up doing all three, and I never knew for sure which one was going to come first.

On Thursday, June 7, 1984, I was at the MacDowell Colony with the librettist. From my personal journal:

> I finished a first sketch—after a week—of the poet's aria "I did not intend to be a poet...." Played it for Henry: "It's somber, don't your think? The line has a narrow range," he said. "It's confined." *I* thought it was *too* Broadway, *too* naive and open sounding!

Needless to say I was depressed. I felt that I didn't have the talent for characterization, or to write something as big as an opera. Of course, that was pure self-pity. But I was scared. I had been working intensely and I wanted some relief. The last thing I said to myself in that entry was: "I need to go on now. I am defining my version of this. And at this moment this is the *best* I can do."

***Adria Firestone as* Kathryn *and John Reardon as* Luther Dane.**