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SPECIAL NEWS RELEASE TO: Public Opinion

"John Brown's Body," the Stephen Vincent Benet poem that puts the Civil War into a dramatic nut-shell, will be staged by the Otterbein College Theatre as their next attraction, where it will open on March 1 and be acted for three performances through March 3. Hans Conried, star of stage, films, radio and TV will guest star in the production.

Prof. Charles Dodrill is directing the production in the same pattern that achieved theatrical success for the famous epic for two seasons, from the fall of 1952 to the spring of 1954, in New York and on tour. A whole gallery of characters, and sections narrating and setting the scene of the great American sectional conflict, will be rendered by a cast of just three actors, Hans Conried and two student actors with a chorus of eighteen supplying battle songs, love songs, chants and sound effects.

Ever since "John Brown's Body" was first published and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1928, it has been one of the most popular of poems. An astonishing 600,000 copies of the epic have been sold in hard-cover volumes, and the poem has come to be a part of American lore as fundamental as Walt Whitman. The 377 pages of the work, in the original edition, telling the terrible story of the Union and Secessionist ordeal, have been reduced for this staged version to be played within a normal two hour performance.

When "John Brown's Body" was first staged in New York in 1953, Walter Kerr, critic of the N. Y. Herald Tribune, noted how the performance provided the validity of a "forgotten literary notion, that epic poetry was meant to be read

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aloud." Brooks Atkinson, then critic for the N. Y. Times, acclaimed it "a work of art, not only in print, but now also in the theatre, telling the truth about some anguished years that will always burden the soul of America."

Taking its title from the song that Northern soldiers sang in their camps and on their marches, "John Brown's Body" presents a panorama of the critical struggle of the 1860's that has become the haunting keynote of American history ever since. Prof. Richard Chamberlain is directing the chorus of eighteen voices which will supply a musical and orchestrated setting to the play.

The narrative is held together by the tale of two romances. One is the love of Northern recruit Jack Ellyat for the girl, Melora, he came across when fleeing captivity after a battle. The other is the love of the Southern aristocrat, Clay Wingate, for Sally Dupre. Both of these valiants will be portrayed here by Hans Conried.

Along with these imaginary figures representing the generation whose lives were disrupted by the Civil War, the poem also dramatically highlights some real historical figures -- John Brown, the fanatic whose doomed slave-emancipating raid across the Potomac provided the startling overture to the war itself, Lincoln, Lee and some other leading participants.

A student actor, as yet uncast, will portray these great figures of the nation's drama. A student actress will depict all the feminine roles -- the sweethearts of the heroes, the defiant Northern mother who dares to pray for John Brown, and the proud and disdainful mistress of a Southern plantation.

"John Brown's Body," with the condensation that good poetry always provides, will render for audiences here the surge and sweep of the whole Civil War, in a nut-shell.