

# Local musician writes 'Elephant Man' score

Friday night, when "The Elephant Man" opens at the San Antonio Little Theatre, the nationally-acclaimed drama will be loaded with local talent — more, perhaps, than any other interpretation thus far.

For, in addition to the cast of characters trodding the boards in this, the nation's oldest community theater, local talent is providing original music.

Onstage at the piano is **Robert White**. Next to White, on the cello, is either **Mark Volkov**, or his substitute, **Ken Ischli**, depending on the performance date. Because Volkov is a regular member of the San Antonio Symphony, he can't make every SALT performance.

White and Volkov are providing thematic background music throughout the play. Further, the score is original, written (barely completed in time) by White in a little more than a month from inception to completion.

This is the first time an original musical score has been used in a production of "The Elephant Man."

White and Volkov are accustomed to playing together; they began performing as a team in December 1979, right after Volkov fled from his Russian homeland and came to San Antonio where he joined the symphony.

The team, called the Volkov-White Chamber Duo, gave 19 concerts throughout Texas last year. That's in addition to Volkov's involvement with the symphony, and White's private piano lessons and weekly organ recitals.

"They became a part of the "Elephant Man" production almost by happenstance.

White related the story, a musical score on his lap and the play script nearby, in a room dominated by a concert grand piano.

## Broadway

"Last spring, when SALT director **Jerry Pollock** thought they might be doing 'Elephant Man' the following month, he said he had seen the Broadway production," White explained. "A cellist performed onstage during that production. He thought it was very effective and asked if I thought Volkov could do this. But, then, because the show was still on Broadway, the rights to perform it would not be released until it closed."

## Compose

White said he heard in November that Pollock was planning a production in early 1982. So he called and offered to compose original music.



**ROBERT WHITE, left, and Ken Ischli rehearse with 'Elephant Man' cast for the play's opening Friday night at SALT.**

PHOTO BY JB HAZLETT

At the same time, the Volkov-White Chamber Duo had applied for a grant from the San Antonio Arts Council for two upcoming spring concerts.

At council director **Bob Canon's** suggestion, the grant also requested funds for creating the original score and performing in the theatrical production.

The council awarded the Chamber Duo \$1,900 with the provision that they match it to complete the amounts necessary for both the concerts and the SALT performances and score.

Next problem: a piano. White explained the existing piano at SALT needs "drastic rebuilding." Further, it sits in the pit and there is no way to elevate it to stage level, which would be necessary for the "Elephant Man" production.

**Alfredo Flores Jr.**, of Alamo Music Center, came to the rescue. Flores was able to obtain a Kawai grand piano from California. And he provided — in just the past two weeks — the piano, the moving costs and the necessary insurance coverage.

Meanwhile, White began working on the original score in early December.

## Themes

"The first thing I had to do was to come up with specific themes for the various characters in the play. Each has its own melodic material. But it's a small cast — just eight major parts."

White jumped to his feet, went to the grand piano, and played a very dissonant, crisp, repetitive and orderly theme.

ful theme. "This is the theme for the main character, Merrick, who is the Elephant Man." He played it again and commented: "He's a character of tremendous pathos."

"He's very honest and straightforward. And he has suffered not just because he is disfigured, but because of the reaction that his disfigurement has on others. And because Merrick — played by **Steven Ware** — is the central figure in the play, this theme recurs more often than any other."

White got up from the piano and paced the floor, obviously totally involved with that music, those themes and the characters they represent.

"As these characters undergo changes, so do the musical themes," he said. "I feel that this is very important, mainly because music is not static. And the development of the characters, and the music for the characters, should both be understood — in tandem — by the audience."

## Excited

He turned and sat down, reflecting. "I was very excited about writing this score — I've never written a score for a dramatic production before, although I have composed music for ballet, chamber ensembles and songs."

"There's a definite advantage in writing music for dance or for theater. In short, it's the human element. There's an inspiration to be derived from watching and listening to actors or watching ballet dancers in their creative processes."

"The Elephant Man," which received rave reviews during its Broadway run — "A work of

"This is the theme for the doctor who takes the Elephant Man under his wing, so to speak," White said. "He's by far the most difficult character because the doctor is a very structured individual with a strict daily routine — I had to reflect this in the music. But I couldn't even begin until I had seen **Marion Sweatmon**, who plays the role, in rehearsal."

White then rippled through a very lyrical, very sensuous theme. "This is the theme for the actress, played by **Joyce Lambrecht**. It was much easier to create the mood for this character, because the playwright establishes her character with her first entrance. And the character does not undergo the dramatic transformation that the others do."

White paused. He played a dynamic, force-

art," said the Boston *Globe*, and "must-see fare" said Associated Press — should receive the same in the current SALT production.

With a rave for the cast. And a rave for the original score and its treatment by the White-Volkov Duo — that, in itself, a work of art.