

BACKSTAGE*

by Julie Caldwell

EMPTY HANGERS are clinking lightly in the drafty room. Although both of the box-like windows are open to reveal the evening sky, the rectangular cubbyhole is stuffy and musty. Hanging on the opposite wall is a mirror which, though filmed with a thin layer of dust, reflects the cracks that cut the surface like rivers on a road map. The wooden dresser beneath the mirror is defaced with carved initials and water marks. Glaring down, a naked light bulb illuminates the center, but the corners remain shadowy. A scratched porcelain sink clings to one corner, with its rusty pipes twisted underneath. After becoming too heavy, a drop of water falls lightly only to be replaced by another. In the other corners are straight-backed, wooden chairs that clutter the room even more. Covering the floor is a worn piece of linoleum, its pattern erased by many scuffling feet.

Now the soft clinking and dripping sounds are interrupted by the noise of quick, light footsteps. A young lady, costumed in the style of the Sixteenth Century, swishes through the doorway. While she sings a merry madrigal and dances before the mirror, the dismal chamber seems to respond. The light in the maiden's eyes brightens every corner. The mirror, now gleaming, reflects the flowered walls and draped windows. From crystal bottles on the hand carved dressing table, a delicate scent of blossoms fills the air. The dancer swirls around the room, past the satin and velvet gowns that hang in the cabinet, past the chairs upholstered in gold brocade and the small fountain that sprays a fine mist into the air.

Returning to the mirror, the girl curtsies deeply. As she raises her head, an audience applauds and shouts approval. But no, the performer is mistaken. Again comes the sound of footsteps and now of many voices. At once she awakes from her dream and, slipping quickly through the doorway, dodges the onrush of fictional characters. Three ballerinas fight for a place in front of the mirror. Clothes and props are scattered across the floor and piled on chairs. A clown tries to practice juggling, only to run headlong into a muscular tumbler. The dressing room, now crowded with pushing, shoving unpretenders, becomes realistic once more.

* Freshman Writing.