

Larry Gates of 'Gin Game' speaks out

By ETHEL SIMMONS

Veteran actor Larry Gates sprawled comfortably, stretched full-length atop one of the twin beds at the Somerset Inn in Troy. He wore khaki pants and over his white shirt a blue-grey cashmere cardigan that accented his deep blue eyes.

He was unperturbed by the maid who continued cleaning his hotel room while the reporter, perched on a sofa in front of the window, questioned him about "The Gin Game."

Gates thanked the maid politely when she left, calling her by name. Even when, a short time later, window washer ascended and then descended to clean the window from outside, he took it all in stride. His only comment was concern for their safety, hoping that their ropes were secure.

Last Thursday morning's interview preceded this week's opening at the Birmingham Theatre. Gates costars with Phyllis Thaxter, whom he has "had a very distinguished career and is a marvelous actress."

The two performers worked together for the first time last January in Palm Beach, where they appeared in "The Little Foxes."

GATES SEES HIMSELF as quite an ordinary fellow. He impresses the interviewer as one who has high artistic standards that will not be compromised.

Television is not his favorite medium. "I'm getting enraged by the network news," he said in a mild voice. "We'd like to know the truth," he declared, after blasting "those bastards" for narrow news coverage.

Gates recently appeared on television in the role of Herbert Hoover in "Backstairs at the White House." He said, "The script was wonderful." But he complained that after the first episode, the mini-series was chopped up by commercials.

He thinks, "On TV the best pays the least and the worst pays the best." He considers commercials an under-

mining force and won't do them. "A dozen friends have become multimillionaires" doing commercials, according to Gates.

He paused, then said, "They're not very good actors, by the way. Let them get on stage and do 'King Lear!'"

"THE GIN GAME" continues through mid-December at the Birmingham Theatre. The plot concerns two people who meet in a convalescent home and play cards together.

"It isn't about death and dying," Gates said of the show. "It's very much about life."

He said growing old doesn't bother him personally. In fact, this is his 41st year in the business, and he thinks his age is in his favor, since other aging actors "are dropping dead like flies."

"The Gin Game" is a very tough show to do, Gates said. He likened it to patting yourself on the head at the same time you try to rub your stomach, and attempted to illustrate the opposite maneuvers.

What makes the show so tough is keeping track of the 14 gin games and scores while keeping the dramatic action of the play going.

As Weller Martin (Gates) and Fonsia Dorsey (Thaxter), the two reveal weaknesses and shortcomings. The play has no excess verbiage, Gates said. "It all works." He praised its author, D. L. Coburn, as another great playwright come along.

DESPITE THE FACT that Gates had had a career with many notable stage, screen and television credits, he said, "Most of us who last this long in the business are lucky to be paying our bills just like everybody else."

He commented, "Most actors feel any job, it will be your last, no one will ever hire you again."

Born and raised in St. Paul, Minn., Gates has always loved the outdoor life. "My wife and I have a small tree farm in northwest Connecticut. In the last 8-10 years, I have spent 7 out of 12 months of the year up there."



Phyllis Thaxter and Larry Gates play 14 games of gin during the course of the evening in "The Gin Game," which opened Tuesday at the Birmingham Theatre.

'A dozen friends have become multimillionaires (doing television commercials). They're not very good actors, by the way. Let them get on stage and do "King Lear!"'

— Actor Larry Gates



Of life and death

A distinctive production for the Birmingham Village Players is "Shadow Box," a play dealing with individual reactions to life and death and the interaction of the three main characters with loved ones. (Left) The play's action shows Helen Parrish, who is also the producer, and Brian Clothier; at right is Diane Lodewyk in another scene. "Shadow Box" by Michael Christoffer will be performed Fridays and Saturdays, Nov. 23-24 and Nov. 30, Dec. 1, at the playhouse, Chestnut and Hunter in Birmingham. Tim Wittlinger is directing the adult entertainment, presented in its original uncensored form. For ticket information call 644-2075. (Staff photos)



Curtain calls

Southfield Civic Theater seeks challenging shows

By DONALD V. CALAMIA

and produced by David Jorlett," Puchalski said.

Although the Southfield Civic Theater has been in existence for only four years, its artistic director, John Puchalski, has seen it grow from infancy to a thriving and innovative leader in local theater.

"The goal of the Southfield Civic Theater," Puchalski said, "is to do the kinds of theater that challenge our professional directors and technicians, as well as to challenge our performers. We try to do the kinds of plays that most community theaters do not produce."

Puchalski has been with the Civic Theater since its birth. He began his studies at Wayne State University and the Hilberry Theater. He directed "Fiddler on the Roof" last summer for the Southfield Summer Music Theater Series and is currently directing "Death" for Theater of the Arts. He is also the artistic director and vice president of Crossroads Productions, a professional touring theater company based in Southfield.

"We began the Civic Theater four years ago at Thompson Junior High School with the production of 'The Odd Couple' directed by Rebecca Schmidt

"That first show, though, was delayed a while when one of our actors, Dale Franks, took the saying 'break a leg' a little too seriously. The show finally turned out to be quite successful, and so we decided to tackle 'Lion in Winter' next."

Since then, the Southfield Civic Theater has performed all of its shows in the Southfield Parks and Recreation Building.

According to Puchalski, the Southfield Civic Theater is different from a community theater. "A civic theater is supported by a city. In our case, it's the City of Southfield's Department of Parks and Recreation. Though much of our audience comes from within the city, we draw a number of people from outside the city. We also utilize talent from all over the area. We do not limit ourselves to using just Southfield residents."

"On the other hand," he said, "a community theater is theater performed by and for that community. Only citizens within that community are generally permitted to take an active part in their production."

'We've had doctors, truck drivers, teachers and bagel deliverymen work for us, and we're finding that there are performers willing to work for us for free when they could be working elsewhere for money.'

— John Puchalski,
Southfield Civic Theater's artistic director

Director Don Johannes said, "That's why I find the Southfield Civic Theater a rewarding company with which to work; it's an open group, and everyone involved is quite competent."

JOHANNES HOLDS a master's degree in theater and has taught speech and theater since 1950. He has been involved with the Civic Theater for about two years.

"I had directed about 50 plays in my first few years of teaching, and I was director and manager of a community theater for a while," Johannes said. "I came out of a 15-year retirement last year to direct 'The Glass Menagerie' for the Civic Theater, and I'll be direct-

ing 'Our Town' which has about 25 speaking parts in it."

Puchalski and Johannes are quite proud of the theater's auditions, which were held in October. Johannes said, "We had about 22 people show up on the first night — a good sign. We had people audition for us with very little theater experience and others who had over 20 years of experience."

Puchalski boasted, "We've had doctors, truck drivers, teachers and bagel deliverymen work for us, and we're finding that there are performers willing to work for us for free when they could be working elsewhere for money."

"We currently have a core group of 12 professional directors and techni-

cians and about 50 performers who work regularly with us.

"WE'RE ALSO lucky to have a good rapport with the high school students. Our older, more experienced personnel help instruct the high school students who are involved with us. They take an interest in them. It really works out well for everyone."

Other professionals currently involved with the Civic Theater are director and costume designer Barbara Oleszczuk and choreographer Jane Shaffmaster, both of whom are well known in both professional and community theaters.

For its fifth season of operation, the Southfield Civic Theater has scheduled

three special anniversary productions. Puchalski said, "Our Town" will appear 40 years after the release of the film version of the show. "Bus Stop" will celebrate its 25th anniversary next year. Barb Oleszczuk and Jane Shaffmaster will recreate their production of "Godspell," which they originally had done at the Grand Circus Exchange."

In the future the Southfield Civic Theater hopes to develop a studio theater series to appear in the old Tennis Center at Southfield Parks and Recreation.

"We're using the building as our offices and auditions, and shows with small casts and few sets would be quite intimate there," Puchalski said.

3 productions coming up

SOUTHFIELD CIVIC THEATER

All Thursday, Friday, and Saturday performances will begin at 8 p.m.
Nov. 29 and 30, Dec. 1 and 2.
"BUS STOP" performances will be March 13-16.
"GODSPELL" performances will be May 15-18 and 22-25.

All Sunday performances will be at 2 p.m.
Performances are held at the Southfield Parks and Recreation Building, 26000 Evergreen, Southfield. For ticket information, call 354-9503.