

OCC teachers, administrators enact meeting between famous educators

By LOUISE OKRUTSKY

Education's last 200 years are telescoped into one evening's conversation when five who influenced the field meet to trade reports, exchange notes and sip wine with their host Jean Piaget.

The scenario was made possible through the newly-tapped writing and acting talents of five instructors and administrators at Oakland Community College's Orchard Ridge campus. The group presented their "Meeting of the Educators" this week on campus.

Art Wiggins, an instructor in the science and physics department portrays Piaget, the only member of the famous educational quartet still alive.

The imaginary evening in Piaget's Swiss home includes Marie Montessori (OCC trustee Suzanne Reynolds), W.E.B. DuBois (history instructor Curtis Anderson), John Dewey (Don Nichols, dean of liberal arts) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (Jerry Paye, political science instructor).

When he took the role of Piaget, Wiggins read interviews and biographies of the educator. Since Piaget writes in French, a language in which Wiggins isn't proficient, readings of Piaget's own works were limited to translations.

"I tried to immerse myself in what he said and did. Many of the things I say in the script are direct quotes," said Wiggins.

WHEN THE ONSTAGE discussion turns to subjects on which Piaget hasn't a written opinion, Wiggins used the Frenchman's stated views to discern what he might possibly have thought. Wiggins hopes to have the script translated into French and sent to Piaget.

Piaget is portrayed as a careful yet energetic man. Now 83, he devotes his summers to writing in the isolated comfort of an old farmhouse.

His writings are those of a man who is flexible, Wiggins explained.

"He's not interested in saying things; it will be this way. He recognizes complexities," Wiggins said.

That trait comes through in the scene between Piaget and Montessori

concerning the validity and importance of testing.

Montessori insists to Piaget that testing isn't of the first importance. The instruction should be properly approached by the teacher.

Her method of first giving the lesson to the child then having the student practice using the new material before any testing allows children to escape feeling like failures for not immediately grasping the new lesson, argued Ms. Reynolds in the persona of Montessori.

Ms. Reynolds, who teaches preschool children doesn't agree totally with Montessori's method.

"THE MATERIALS are excellent," she said of the Montessori method. "But there is more structure there than in my own philosophy of education."

She maintains that the gifted child does better than the less talented in the Montessori system.

Montessori perfected her method for underprivileged children who had been written off by the Italian education system of the 1890's as being almost imbeciles.

She founded the Montessori training center in Laren, the Netherlands which her son still oversees.

The emphasis on structure rather than testing is puzzling to Piaget in the play. He helped to formulate the early IQ tests in Paris during the 1920s as a way of measuring knowledge.

Such testing continues to cause a furor in educational circles.

DuBois, a black radical until his death at 95 in 1963, argued against intelligence tests which could be used to prove the superiority of one group over another. Intelligence tests incorporate questions geared to middle and upper class men, argued Anderson in the persona of DuBois.

Piaget wanted to educate a black elite to lead blacks. He disparaged Booker T. Washington's philosophy of teaching blacks to be craftsmen. Sometimes the skills they acquired, DuBois argued, were obsolete as soon as they were learned. DuBois wanted blacks in the professions, too.

HIS OWN education reflected that desire.

"At a time when very few whites had a Ph.D., he had a Ph.D. from Harvard," Anderson said.

DuBois earned his degree in 1895. He was a professor of economics and history at the University of Atlanta from 1897 until 1910.

He edited "Crisis" a black journal from 1910 to 1932.

Of Sacco and Venzetti, DuBois sarcastically wrote, "They had the inalienable right to be lynched in America."

DuBois retained his political stance until his death.

"DuBois was an old warrior at 93," Anderson said. "He was still critical of capitalism. It wasn't living up to all those groovy things written about it."



John Nichols, OCC dean of liberal arts, concentrates on representing educator John Dewey. (Staff photo by Randy Borst)

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