

Broadway's not this playwright's goal

By KATHY PARRISH



Omaha playwright Megan Terry advised Cranbrook writers not to let location stand in the way of their success. (Staff photo by Dick Kelley)

None of Megan Terry's 50 plays ever played the Great White Way.

But that fact doesn't bother the award-winning playwright, who believes her Omaha Magic Theatre is doing the "best new work in America."

Speaking to the Cranbrook Writer's Conference, recently, she urged young Michigan authors to follow her example and not to let location stand in their way.

"Sometimes people feel put down because they're not in New York," said the Seattle native. She is firmly convinced that Broadway is "just a showcase for Hollywood reviewers."

"But if you're thinking clearly and doing good honest work, it doesn't matter where you are. They'll come to you."

One of five nationally known writers who spoke at the 14th annual Cranbrook conference in Bloomfield Hills, Ms. Terry encouraged the college students to try their hand at writing plays.

"There have never been more opportunities for people who can really write. You could make a living winning contests," said the 48-year-old, herself a recipient of several grants and awards.

To show the students how alive theater can be, she enlisted University of Detroit actors to perform some of the scenes which brought her success.

"SANIBEL AND CAPTIVA," a sensitive look at a loving elderly couple, posed a sharp contrast to "Pro Game," which focused on a mother and her three sons watching football on the TV. In the farce dedicated to the "football widows of America," roles were reversed and the mother was played by a male and the sons by actresses.

The students also viewed portions of "Approaching Simone," her biographical work about French theologian Simone Weil, which won an Obie award in 1970 as the best play of the year in New York.

The play ran off-Broadway with student actors from Boston University and Ms. Terry cited it as "another instance where you don't have to be in New York to do good work."

She chose the three diverse plays to show the Cranbrook writers the "wide range of possibilities."

"A lot of them haven't seen good theater. When theater is alive, there is nothing more alive," she said. "It's an incredible challenge to beguile a group of people."

EXPOSURE TO good theater at a very early age led her to becoming a playwright. At 7, she and her schoolmates were given free season's subscriptions to the Seattle Repertory Playhouse, where she "fell in love" with the stage.

"I knew then what I wanted to do for the rest of my life," she said.

With her parents' blessings (her father kiddingly called her Sarah Heartburn), she wrangled a job in the playhouse at age 14. The stage-struck teen cleaned toilets, ushered and studied all aspects of theater under the direction of Burton and Florence James, a husband-and-wife team who were her tutors.

School was an annoyance that she endured, eventually earning a bachelor of education degree from

the University of Washington. Theater studies were continued at the University of Alberta, Banff School of Fine Arts, and Yale University.

Although her first interest was design — and she still creates costumes and stage sets — Ms. Terry began writing plays at 19. She recalled being fascinated with the improvisations Mrs. James worked on with actors who had a "hard time" without scripts.

She reorganized the Cornish Players and helped found New York's Open Theatre, which produced several of her plays. In 1963, playwright Edward Albee produced "Ex-Miss Copper Queen on a Set of Pills," a play about the first drug addict she ever met.

Still, it wasn't until she was 30 that she had the "guts" to call herself a writer. At 35 she received \$5,000 from the Rockefeller Foundation and was able to stop working as a secretary and write full-time.

"I DID ALL my work in two hours and then wrote plays," she said. "My plays were all in story form."

Although she now gives out grants — and advises young writers to seek them — applying for one was hard work.

"I was brought up in the west with the work ethic. All these people were getting grants, but the

hardest thing I ever did was get up the nerve to apply for one."

To her surprise, the Rockefeller Foundation was "delighted" to give her the \$5,000, which lasted three years and enabled her to produce her major work of the 1960s.

Ms. Terry is now playwright-in-residence at the Omaha Magic Theatre, which produces new American musicals. The actors are also athletes, since the productions stress gymnastic work.

The theater's production of "Running Gag" appeared by invitation at the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, this year.

"When I went into the theater, people only acted from the neck up," said Ms. Terry, who quit acting at 30 to "create environments."

"We use physicalization to project character," she said.

Now working on two plays, she is studying world economics and keeping her theater and her extended family going.

"I have 16 mouths to feed and some of those men eat a lot."

Partly in tribute to her own teachers, she encourages young writers like those at Cranbrook.

"They need to show more courage in their work. Young people aren't as bold as they used to be. In their work they're not taking enough risks," she said.

Area artists show their skills at annual sale

About 90 artists from Oakland County and throughout the United States are expected to participate in the seventh annual Northfield Hills Condominium Association Art-On-the-Lake show.

Exhibits will be on display and for sale from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Aug. 17 on the condominium complex's northwest corner, Coolidge and Long Lake roads, Troy.

Artists signed up for the show include weavers, potters, photographers, toymakers, jewelry makers, portrait painters, quilters, stained glass, graphic artists, metal sculpture and wood sculptors.

The show includes the following area artists:

Troy — Joyce Elliston, water colors; Peggie Koronec, water colors; Victo-

ria Cox, mixed media; Pat Blosser, jewelry; Donna Beaubien, water colors; Lee Watkins, jewelry; Charlotte Raymond, batik; and Sharon Stebur, weaving.

Birmingham — Ted Striewski, jewelry; Shari Cohen, jewelry; Barbara Dalton, potter; Charles Schweigert, stained glass; and Ann Savell, fiber sculpture.

Rochester — Rick Burger, water color; Sherry Belma Gelmine, pen and ink; Sam Scottle, metal sculpture; and Terry Luke, photographer.

Southfield — Cynthia Leven, intaglio; Fay Herman, jewelry; and Laszlo Steiner, potter.

Auburn Heights — Denise Szadyr, potter.

In case of rain the show will be held Aug. 24. There is no admission charge.

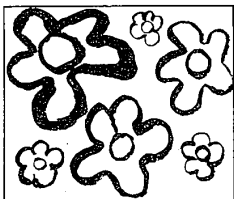
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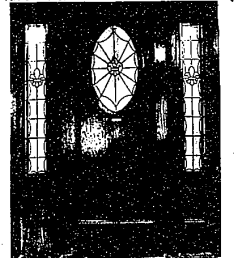


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