

# Developing creativity is her challenge

By Ethel Simmons  
staff writer

**E**DUCATOR HELEN LANESE of Birmingham has always tried to help children find within themselves the ability to create, in the arts and the theater. She continues to work with young people, as well as adults, at Lycee International. Lanese is realizing her fondest dream as director of the Academy of the Arts and executive director of the Actors Alliance Theatre Company at the Lycee, a bilingual college preparatory school at 3080 Evergreen in Southfield.

She's responsible for administration of both the academy, a school to train professional actors, and the Actors Alliance, a professional theater company at the school.

Lanese has a background in art, drama and teaching. She helped develop programs both at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills and at Will-O-Way Apprentice Theatre in Bloomfield Township before coming to the Lycee last year.

**THE OPPORTUNITY** at the newly established Lycee enabled her to develop this program just the way I thought it should be.

"I always thought the right way to have a professional theater as part of it," she said. And the Actors Alliance is an adjunct of the drama school.

Just as at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, where students are taught by highly respected professionals, the acting academy at the Lycee uses teachers with impressive credentials in the theater, she said.

The professional theater company gives students an artistic standard to measure their work by, Lanese said.

Creating the arena theater where the actors perform was "a great challenge. It's set up magically and used over the weekend. Then it disappears into the gym and lunchroom."

For its first season of plays, the Actors Alliance, led by Artistic Director Jeff Nahan, has already staged a variety of productions including "Hosennatz

## crusaders for kids

& Guilderstern are Dead," the family musical "Story Theater," "The Women Here Are No Different" and "Marat/Sade." Its current show is the Michigan premiere of the Off-Broadway comedy hit "Album."

**TWO YOUNG PEOPLE** are among those enrolled in the acting academy. They are Brendan Heffernan, 14, of Detroit, and Leslie Burns, 9, of Troy, who has been working with Nahan as a private student.

Brendan appeared in "Camelot" with Richard Harris at the Masonic Temple Theatre in Detroit and also has performed at the Attic Theatre in Detroit's Greektown.

Leslie has done some theater work at Greenfield Village. She is studying at the academy on an advanced level.

"We tend to serve the very gifted, very talented young. It's a professional theater training program, and the emphasis in the program is different than a college-level program that's really educational theater."

All instructors are working professional artists and members of Actors Equity, Lanese said.

"They know the nuts and bolts. They know the ropes of the theater. They have practical knowledge of the working theater."

Any young person can register for an introductory class at the academy but must qualify for advance placement. A young person taking an academy class for the first time would work in a studio showcase, doing scenes or a one-act play, combining training, rehearsal and performance.

"We try to give them a realistic idea of what the working theater is about." Students learn it's a very competitive profession, and what it's going to take to succeed.

Just a few of the important elements

they need for success are to be very disciplined, have a good idea of how to market their skills, know their shortcomings, be persistent and be prepared, she said.

"What having a working, professional theater here does is make the student realize just what it takes." All students are encouraged to audition for productions being cast by the Actors Alliance.

"They learn what an audition in professional theater is like. It can be really tough. They don't get inflated ideas. They measure their own achievement."

Back in 1974, Lanese organized a seminar on Creativity in the Curriculum at the Cranbrook Academy of Art and also was involved with the AAUW, working with a grant. "My experiences (at Cranbrook) made me so aware of what the arts can do."

**THEN SHE GOT** involved in consultant work, staying in the local area but putting on programs through the Human Development Training Institute in San Diego. She was, she said, "teaching teachers how to relate to children more effectively."

The purpose is to provide an environment in the classroom that encourages children to think more creatively.

As an example, Lanese might share with the children an idea of something she thinks is beautiful. In describing what they think is beautiful, the students learn there are no wrong answers. They feel safe making these statements and build confidence.

"You create an environment in which children are free to express themselves



Helen Lanese directs the acting academy and is executive director of the professional theater

company affiliated with Lycee International in Southfield.

DEBORAH BOOKER/staff photographer

and be creative. In the theater, there's no one right way to play a scene. In the studio process, you can take those chances."

Lanese was exposed at a very young age to what was the best in arts, she said. Her father's avocation was art, and her mother was a teacher of the deaf.

"I HAD THE most wonderful father," she said, with a glow in her eyes. "He started buying pictures from me when I was 8 years old." He set an example with his love for the arts and of music, she said.

"I got a degree in art education and got into administration because I felt so strongly how it should be done."

Lanese misses teaching in the class-

room, which she did until just recently at the Lycee, but administrative duties have kept her too busy.

"Just yesterday, a child said to me, 'Mrs. Lanese, why can't you teach art?' It was so much fun when you were there. We got to built things. It's heartwarming."

Although she likes to teach, "When you develop a whole program the way it should be, it is much more satisfying. I think of everything I do as having an influence in the classroom."

While she has a special interest in working with young people, Lanese also has been actively involved in programs for older people. After her stint at Cranbrook, she was artist-in-residence at the Pontiac Art Center. She received a grant to work with older

people and for three years taught art and drama at nutrition sites.

**SOFT-SPOKEN AND** conservatively dressed, she is anything but picture of the flamboyant artist.

"Some people, that's their way of saying, 'I'm an artist.' I'm not that kind of person. I'm a mother."

She has two daughters, Lynn, studying for a master of architecture degree at the University of Illinois, and Jeanne, a sophomore at Michigan State University, who is interested in law.

"Both girls are very creative."

Describing her own art, she said, "My paintings are large and strong. They don't look like they were made by a little person. That's how I express myself."

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