

Creative Living

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Charles Mitchell continues work on his proposal for a civic sculpture in memory of Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

Human form endures in art

By Dale Northup
special writer

There is a dichotomy within the field of sculpture — figurative vs. non-figurative. The role of "either-or" seems to be one of human preference, although it can sometimes be both.

The figure, however, is reflected in the work of two local sculptors who maintain a studio in Pontiac: Charles Mitchell of Northville and Sue Shaw of West Bloomfield who have chosen the human figure as a vehicle for artistic expression.

In their studio they work with models, anatomical books for reference and, sometimes, photographs. They define in clay or plaster (modeling clay that doesn't dry) the sinew, the flex that best defines human conditions: aspiration, ambition, joy, pathos (Greek word for suffering) and tension.

BOTH ARTISTS were chosen to participate in the James Wilbur Johnston Sculpture Competition with the International Sculpture Center held annually at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C. It was established to reaffirm the importance of the figure in contemporary art. The competition involves sculpting the figure in 24 hours over a five-day period.

Mitchell, a former chief designer with Chrysler, was forced into early retirement during the corporation's reorganization in the early 80s. Not the retiring type, he returned to

school at the Center for Creative Studies College of Art and Design where he earned a bachelor of fine arts degree in sculpture.

As he expresses his new direction philosophically, "I may not be remembered as a designer, but I would like to be remembered as a good sculptor, maybe not great but good."

He recently completed a commission for a fountain in Sea Island, Ga.

Shaw, who also attended the College of Art and Design, left the business world to return to school where she ended up concentrating on sculpture. She said she felt the need to "get out" and think independently which is reflected in some of her work dealing with the condition of women.

RECENTLY she won first place in the Silver Medal Competition at the Scarab Club in Detroit with a figurative bas-relief.

Her work reflects a rich diversity of interests which not only involves the human figure but animals as well, particularly horses.

Currently she is working on a private commission for a Franklin couple of Maj. Gen. John Fulton Reynolds, a Civil War officer, astride his horse.

As once the great figurative sculptor Auguste Rodin put it, "The body always expresses the spirit whose envelope it is." And in much the same manner Mitchell and Shaw attempt to capture a similar spirit in their work.



Sue Shaw works on shaping the form of a horse for a commission she received commemorating a Civil War soldier.



Ray and Wells interpret a tender scene between Faust and Marguerite in the opera by Faust.



CHUCK STOFFER/Photo

Wells and Ray in a dress rehearsal for "Twelfth Night" at the University of Michigan-Flint.

Added dialogue They set the stage for deaf audiences

By Barbara Ziomba
special writer

IMAGINE STAGING any theatrical production with a major challenge to be faced: all or part of your audience is deaf.

Then imagine your production is a musical or an opera, and the complexities of such a project seem overwhelming.

For two Madonna College instructors who have taken on such an effort, the challenge has also proven enjoyable and stimulating.

JOHN RAY OF Troy and Mary Wells of Rochester have been involved with interpreting plays for the deaf since 1978, when Oakland University decided to stage a production of "Romeo and Juliet" and incorporate sign language to benefit the hearing impaired.

The Michigan Council for the Arts came forward with the money for two performances, and the play was so popular another performance was added to the schedule.

In staging any production for the deaf, defining the theme is vital to its success in reaching the audience. In "Romeo and Juliet," the theme was that of warring families, the Montagues and the Capulets, and the love that flourished between the Montagues' Romeo and the Capulets' Juliet.

INTERPRETING THIS Shakespearean drama demanded that Wells learn not only Juliet's role but all the Capulet dialogue as well, while Ray tackled Romeo and the Montagues.

The production also utilized the technique known as "zoning" — directly involving the interpreters with the actors on a multi-level stage, allowing them to exit and

have access to the stage at different points in the play and keeping them in vicinity of the action.

Deprived of the sense of sound, the deaf are particularly dependent on visual images to perceive mood and music. In a musical or operatic work targeted toward hearing-impaired audiences, special emphasis is placed on costumes, lighting, makeup and movement to simulate the music and dialogue, Wells and Ray point out.

Choreographers must analyze and adapt movement to evoke a certain response in the audience. For instance, prior to the lovers' first meeting in "Romeo and Juliet," the cast waltzed off stage to set the tone for the gentle dialogue between the star-crossed lovers.

THE SUBTLE DRAPE of a costume can also allow the interpreters to shed and assume characters effectively. In the opera "Faust," the theme was the eternal struggle between good and evil. Interpreting the roles of the devil and Faust, Ray relied on the positioning of his cape to assume the personas of the two characters.

Since producing a musical or an opera for the hearing-impaired requires long preparation and technical support, only two are staged per year.

Six months in advance of the opening, Wells and Ray receive their script and begin to immerse themselves in the play, even listening to tapes in their cars to completely familiarize themselves with the work.

As mind-boggling as this sounds, it's not the most difficult aspect of the project, they said.

The subtle drape of a costume can also allow the interpreters to shed and assume characters effectively. In the opera "Faust," . . . Ray relied on the positioning of his cape to assume the personas of the two characters.



John Ray as Mephistopheles, in a scene from "The Magic Flute" by Faust, threatens to put away Mary Wells portraying Pamina.

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