

Alas, a philosopher with both feet planted

After sipping on a cup of java in a downtown Birmingham coffee shop, Kelly Rogers pulls her long wavy hair around her shoulders. Her eyes are filled with wide-eyed wonder.

She has neither the ponderous countenance, nor the aged appearance of the typical philosopher.

But she is one, and has the official paper to prove it — a doctorate of heavy thinking from prestigious Columbia University.

At a relatively young age, 32, the Birmingham resident is taking a

breather from the academic world where studies are called by strange names like epistemology, phenomenology, and a lot of other "ologies," for that matter.

In her words, she has "come down to earth," working as a builder of residential homes for Ideal Construction Co. of Southfield, a business owned by her father.

But Rogers hasn't forsaken her philosophical calling. She still thinks about BIG QUESTIONS.

On Monday, she will lead a discussion, "What is Morality?" at Borders in downtown Birmingham.

No short cut

In the true tradition of philosophers, Rogers remains humble, even embarrassed by the attention.

"I'm not a moral expert," she said. "But I do know that there's no short cut answer to morality."

Her goal is to bring clarity where there seems to be confusion.

Clear thinking, according to Rogers, is the result of rigorous contemplation about life's central issues.

These days, who has time? Maybe that's where we should begin to understand the urgency of Rogers' question about morality.

■ If there's a need for that kind of common sense, it's now. A time of talk-show babbling when alleged philanthropy can improve a president's approval ratings.

Maybe it's time to make time to discuss morality.

Far from the ivory tower, Rogers is doing her part.

When she isn't giving public lectures, she serves on an ethics committee at Sinai Hospital.

From sky to earth

"A lot of people approach morality as if their views should be inherited," said Rogers.

"I hope to help people look at the principles of morality, and how they have to reason for themselves about right and wrong, good and bad."

If there's a need for that kind of common sense, it's now. A time of talk-show babbling when alleged philanthropy can improve a president's approval ratings.

Invariably, the discussion turns to politics, leadership and the MTV-ADD culture.

To expect most people to engage in rigorous reasoning about morality seems like a pipe dream. Arguably, that's where moral leaders should fill the gap.

But look around. Where have all the role models gone?

"Morality has to be presented with an aesthetic view to it," said Rogers. "People need to be convinced that the 'good' is beautiful and noble."

As she sits, sips her coffee and talks about philosophers named Hume, Kant and Russell, suddenly several beeps resound from her purse.

The conversation is halted. She pulls out a cell phone. It's the office.

"I'm a builder," she laughs. "I deal with earth and concrete."

And maybe that's where a discussion about morality should begin.



Angels are descending

Bold production offers promising sign of new collaboration

If a few lewd jokes, and a flash of a man's bare bottom during the recent play "What the Butler Saw" upset some traditional theatergoers at Meadow Brook, then the simulated nudity in the upcoming "Angels in America: Millennium Approaches" should send the comment line screaming.

The controversial play, which opens Wednesday, is a first-ever collaboration between the professional Meadow Brook Theatre and the Department of Music, Theater and Dance at Oakland University.

Written by Tony Kushner, "Angels in America" won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for drama and four Tony Awards, including Best Play.

"This play rates up there with 'Death of a Salesman' and Eugene O'Neill's finest work," said Geoffrey Sherman, artistic director at Meadow Brook Theatre.

Originally written to be performed in a small theater, "Angels in America" finds a suitable and intimate space at OU's Studio Theater in Varner Hall.

Arguably, few other plays written in the last three decades could transform the intimate Studio space into the proverbial dysfunctional American family room where scars covering a range of hush-hush issues are indelibly peeled away.

"I see 'Angels' as a play about spirituality," said Sherman. "The playwright asks: 'Who are the gods, myths, legends?'"

Covering that type of metaphysical range, it's no wonder "Angels in America" has been described as irreverent, apocalyptic

as well as a collective catharsis.

Province of angels

Dealing explicitly — and provocatively — with homosexuality, "Angels in America" makes "Equus" and "Oh! Calcutta!" seem like standard fare on the Family Channel.

To say the least, the characters in the play aren't the type of "angels" that religious-minded souls have in mind. Or as one Lutheran church-goer observed: "Angels belong in heaven."

Then again, if earth-bound Joan of Arc, poet William Blake and Della Reese can communicate with angels, then why not the play's main characters — the infamous unscrupulous attorney of the McCarthy era, Roy Cohn, a heterosexual couple and a husband and wife?

Of course, any question pertaining to religion and homosexuality is loaded with controversy. Devout parishioners invariably cite a Biblical passage calling homosexuality a sin.

Since "Angels in America" (part one and part two, entitled, "Perestroika") premiered in 1993, Kushner's play has been a lightning rod for contentious issues about gay lifestyle, relationships, religion, politics and a society in denial about the worldwide AIDS epidemic.

Two years ago in Charlotte, N.C., it took a district court order to stop local police who planned to arrest cast members for indecent exposure.

Yet often overshadowed, amid all the political posturing, is the emotional depth, unflinching



Intervention: (Top photo) A timely visitor is the metaphorical centerpiece of "Angels in America," Oakland University student Jacquie Floyd, (left), and Meadow Brook Theatre veteran John Biedenbach. (Photo above) John Michael Norman of Northville, left, plays one of the lead roles opposite longtime actor Robert Grossman.

ANGELS IN AMERICA

■ What: "Angels in America," a play by Tony Kushner, a co-production of Meadow Brook Theatre and the Department of Music, Dance and Theatre at Oakland University.
■ When: Previews — 7:30 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday, April 29-30; 7:30 p.m. Wednesday-Friday, May 6-8, May 13-15; 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday, May 2, May 9, and May 16; 2 p.m. May 3, May 10, and May 17.
■ Where: Varner Studio Theatre, Varner Hall, on the campus of Oakland University, Rochester Hills

■ Tickets: \$18, (248) 377-3300
■ Cast: Directed by Geoffrey Sherman, John Biedenbach (Prior Walter), Lewis Bowen (Beltr), Jacquie Floyd (Angel), Robert Grossman (Roy Cohn), Karel L. Hart (Harper), John Michael Norman (Joe), Roy Schultz (Louis), Karen Sheridan (Hannah), Peter W. Hicks (Scenery), Kerro Knox (Lighting), Suzanne Hanna (Costumes), Brett Rominger (Sound). Stage managers Jodie Kuhn Ellison and Paul Hopper.

Conference searches for wholeness

Even the most cynical would have to admit there's a striking disparity when it comes to the representation of women in the arts.

For instance, while 40 percent of working artists are women, 97 percent of art in American museums was made by male artists.

That's for starters.

Of the 2,000 Oscars presented since the inception of the award in 1928, only 12 percent have gone to women.

Local filmmaker Sue Marx knows the odds all too well. Ten years ago, she beat them.

Her documentary, "Young at Heart," a film about the courtship of her 83-year-old father, won an Academy Award in 1988.

On Saturday, Marx will present the keynote address on her success in the arts. Marx's speech opens "A Call to Wholeness: Women Emerging," a conference in three sessions, covering health, politics, family, the workplace, business and art. Presented by the Oakland Community College Orchard Ridge Campus Women-center.

When: 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Saturday, May 2
Where: Oakland Community College, Orchard Ridge Campus, Truitt Hall (1 Building) 27055 Orchard Lake Road, Farmington Hills

Registration fee: \$35
For information, call the Women-center, (248) 471-7602.

Women Emerging, a conference sponsored by the Womencenter at Oakland Community College. The one-day seminar, now in its sixth year, covers a range of topics, including health, politics and business.

"Women still occupy a second-class place in our society," said Arlene Frank, director of the Womencenter.

"We're not viewed as people who can do what they want to do. There are still barriers."

In some ways, today's barriers are less overt. For instance, many women feel overwhelmed at trying to balance the demands of a career and a family, said Frank.

On average, she noted, women's pay is only two-thirds of what men receive.

Yet arguably, the greatest frustration is trying to get the government and corporate world to create more affordable and accessible child care, she said.

"Many women are taking care of other people, and don't find the time to take care of themselves," said Frank.

And to many women, a role model

Please see CONFERENCE, C2



Role model: Filmmaker Sue Marx gives the keynote address at Oakland Community College's women's conference.

FESTIVAL



Very Special festival: Birmingham music therapist Margaret Hull leads the choir of Pontiac Northern High School and Washington and Madison Middle Schools in a rehearsal for "Celebrate Arts-Ability" Friday-Saturday, May 1-2 at Wonderland Mall in Livonia.

Very Special Arts Festival builds bridge to community

Margaret Hull believes whole heartedly in the saying "music is universal." The Birmingham music therapist uses music to expand the communication skills of her special education students in Pontiac Schools.

Hull and a 35-member choir from Pontiac Northern High School and Washington and Madison Middle Schools will showcase their growth through music therapy at the eighth annual Very Special Arts Festival May 1-2 at Wonderland Mall in Livonia. Produced by the Southeast Region Committee of Very Special Arts Michigan.

Please see SPECIAL, C2

"Celebrate Arts-Ability"

What: The Southeast Region Committee of Very Special Arts Michigan showcases the singing, dancing and performing talents of children and adults with disabilities. A touring art exhibit and hands-on art activities celebrate the ability of all to make art. For more information, call FAR Conservatory, (248) 648-3347.

When: 10 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Friday, May 1; and noon to 3:30 p.m. Saturday, May 2.

Where: Wonderland Mall, 28859 Plymouth Road at Middlebelt, Livonia.

Cost: No charge.