

Conversations from page C1 Survey shows area theaters are thriving

Solomon found what long-winded philosophers conveniently refer to as "essence."

Silhouetted against the early evening light, the mystery of Leonard's literary genius soon revealed itself.

Like a carpenter or sculptor, Solomon realized that for Leonard, writing isn't a cerebral or abstract exercise. Rather, writing is tactile and spontaneous.

"I concentrated on the details of where he writes," said Solomon. "My favorite photo is Dutch holding a pen. He has such dramatic hands."

Chin in hand. Pen to paper. And soon the longhand scribbles on a yellow legal pad transforms into an imaginative universe of Chilli Palmers and the like.

In her still shots, Solomon reveals Leonard's gritty familiarity and down-to-earth spirit. Solomon's Leonard also reveals that creativity isn't a mysterious process, but ultimately,

**I concentrated on the details of where he writes. My favorite photo is Dutch holding a pen. He has such dramatic hands.'**

Linda Solomon  
photographer

nothing less than an expression of a writer's humanity.

"At heart, I'm a student of personalities."

Aiming beyond superficial appearances, Solomon has found an Elmore Leonard that readers always knew existed beyond the pages of his book.

Pen to paper. Heart to hand.

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Most of the participants and representatives of local and professional theater groups at our roundtable discussion agreed the resurgence of downtown's theater community will lead to more interest in theater.

Our survey verifies what Cate Foltin of Stagecrafters said during the discussion - "The state of theater in Southeast Michigan is wonderful." Our results show that community theater membership and attendance at community, professional and college shows are growing.

Cost is the first consideration when deciding which plays to select for a season schedule, fol-

lowed by challenge to the cast, popularity and whether or not the show is something the audience is familiar with.

Movies, sporting events, concerts, and to some extent, TV are what theaters perceive as their biggest competition.

Targeted direct mail is how most theater groups reach their potential audience, followed by word of mouth, newspaper articles and calendar listings. Few theater groups have the money to advertise.

Community theater members are often younger than the audience that comes to see their shows. Our survey results show the theaters are attracting a mature audience with the largest percentage ranging in

age from 50 to 60 and older, followed by ages 40-50.

A play review in the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, good or bad, helps theater groups fill the house. Bill Mandt of SRO productions in Southfield said his show sold out after a positive review appeared in the Observer Newspapers. There was no room in the Eccentric Newspapers, so the story just appeared in the Observer Newspapers. Mandt said he was surprised to receive requests for tickets from people in Livonia.

A bad review can be good for business too. "People will come just to see why the show is so bad," said Cate Foltin of Stagecrafters.

If they had to choose between

a review and a story about their show before it opened, most theater groups said they would choose the preview.

Most of the theater groups have an outreach program and collaborate with theater groups, local schools, and arts organizations. For example, St. Dunstan's Theatre Guild of Cranbrook has a costume exchange loan with the Village Players of Birmingham. Stagecrafters and Farmington Players.

Selling tickets to shows is how most theater groups pay their bills. There isn't a whole lot of corporate support for theater, though the groups are working on getting it.

Theaters from page C1

ened, surprised, but not reminded."

**As a laboratory**

Some professional theaters view their stage as a laboratory to study human behavior. That sometimes means presenting unsettling issues about identity, race, gender, sexuality, discrimination and exploitation.

"We deal with issues of community and humanity from a Jewish perspective, but we're not exclusive," said Evelyn Orbach, artistic director at the Jewish Ensemble Theatre.

In the past several years, Meadow Brook Theatre has produced several plays - "The Piano Lesson," "I Am A Man!" "Thunder Knocking at the Door," and "Angels in America, Part I" - intended to broaden their somewhat conservative-minded audiences.

But after negative reactions from audiences - and the fear of losing subscribers - the financially strapped theater on the Oakland University campus decided on less controversial fare this season.

"We are concerned with who is our audience," said Gregg Bloomfield, managing director of Meadow Brook. "We're concerned with what compelling stories can we tell them to sell tickets and bring in revenue."

As the largest nonprofit, professional theater in Michigan, Meadow Brook Theatre has had to balance the interest of their subscribers with their mission to produce compelling contemporary theater.

Loss of revenue for Meadow Brook has meant cutbacks in staff and outreach programs intended to cultivate younger audi-

**'If we're going to be a theatrical center, we need our civic leaders to say the arts are important.'**

Blair Anderson  
Wayne State University

ence.

These days, theater companies must balance artistry with entrepreneurial ingenuity. Having a clear mission statement and well-defined marketing strategy is as important as choosing which plays to perform.

Inevitably, raising funds and applying for grants confuses in justifying the relevance of theater.

"We get some corporate support," said JET's Orbach. "But it's no longer about philanthropy. Now, the view of corporations is they're looking to present their dollars where there will be some return."

"They ask, 'Do you have an audience that will respond to the fact that I have contributed to you?'"

Stagecrafters' Foltin contends theater groups must tailor their marketing plans to the needs of donors and corporate givers.

"We try to build long-term relationships with corporate supporters," she said.

Foltin noted that Chrysler played an integral role in Stagecrafters' 3-5 year plan.

**Yeah, we're from Detroit!**

Three years ago, Michigan Allied Professional Theatre was formed as a collabora-

tive attempt to broaden public awareness of the professional theater community.

"We pick on ourselves a lot, (but) we're a good training ground," said Anderson from Wayne State. "We are comparable to Chicago or Toronto."

"If we're going to be a theatrical center, we need our civic leaders to say the arts are important."

Today's realities, however, have more to do with competing for audiences who have myriad entertainment options, from watching television, videos, movies, or attending a sports and concert event.

Apparently, building a broader audience in the future will depend on how current audiences view the power of theater to foster a sense of community.

"I think children exposed to theater will be theater fans," said JET's Orbach.

"If parents don't go to the theater, it's hard for their kids to find their way."

Staff writers Hugh Gallagher, Keely Wygonik and Linda Ann Chomin contributed to this story

Henry Ford Museum builds new theater

PRNewswire - On August 31, 1987, Thomas A. Edison patented the kinoscope, the forerunner of the movie projector. More than 100 years later, Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village plans to build on Edison's dream.

Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village will open what will become the only two-dimensional three-dimensional large-format theater in the state of Michigan.

"This theater is one of the most visible aspects of the transformation this institution is undergoing," says Steven K. Hamp, president of the institution. "It is what the museum is becoming - adding life, motion and power to our world-class resources representing a changing America."

The \$15 million facility, scheduled to open in November, 1999, will be built adjacent to the museum's clock tower entrance and will boast a visitor reception area, a 62 by 80-foot flat screen, on which two- and three-dimensional films will be shown and seating for 400.

The large-format theater will be the newest attraction nestled on the cultural campus of West Dearborn that includes Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village. Henry Ford Estate - Fair Lane, The Automotive Hall of Fame and the new Spirit of Ford, scheduled to open in April, 1999.


The large-format theater is one of many project openings and program improvements the institution currently has on its calendar.

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The Captive Audience Lecture Series is sponsored by the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, Inc.

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