

TV show lures actress to area

By BARBARA MICHALS
Actress Claudia McNeil recently accepted the invitation to spend a week performing and teaching at the Will-O-Way Repertory Theater because she was curious to see Bloomfield Hills first-hand.

Her interest in the area stemmed from the controversial television documentary aired a few years ago detailing the attitudes and aspirations of a "typical suburban family" living in Bloomfield Hills. During the show the father remarked that his children had never seen a black person in the flesh.

Claudia McNeil is a black actress who said she likes to go "where angels fear to tread." Although she has very rarely experienced racial bigotry in her many years of performing throughout the United States and abroad, she explained that many of her friends back home in New York were seriously worried about what troubles she might encounter in Bloomfield Hills.

"I think they expected me to get lynched or something," she laughed.

"PEOPLE ARE people," Miss McNeil said. "You can generally find more good things about people than bad. I wouldn't go as far as Will Rogers and say I never met a man I didn't like, but people are generally too busy getting their bread and butter to worry about the color of your skin. You can't walk around with a chip on your shoulder."

She was a houseguest in the Bloomfield Hills home of Will-O-Way Theatre director Celia Merrill Turner while she played here.

At Will-O-Way Miss McNeil recreated the role of the dominating mother in "A Raisin in the Sun," the part she originated on Broadway in 1959. She played Mama for a year-and-a-half on national tour, 10 weeks in summer stock, and another three months during the filming of the screen version.

Since then Miss McNeil has done five other Broadway plays plus numerous film and television roles and has earned an Emmy award and a Tony award nomination. Her name still remains most firmly associated with "A Raisin in the Sun."

The actress said she sometimes resents being stereotyped as Mama. However, today Miss McNeil bears little resemblance to the plump, matronly star of "A Raisin in the Sun." Minus the grey wig and having recently shed 150 of her 300 pounds, she now looks more like Mama's daughter.

The weight loss came over a five-year period and had to be achieved "cold turkey" because of the actress's diabetes and high blood pressure.

MISS MCNEIL mentioned that many years ago she was refused the part of the mother in the remake of the movie "Imitation of Life" because the producer wished to avoid the "fat black mammy" stereotype.

Recently the now-alm Miss McNeil was considered unuitable for leads in television's "Good Times" and "That's My Momma" because she no longer looked like a "black mama." She dismissed such as a "black mama" as a "black mama."

From 1962 until last Christmas Miss McNeil deliberately stayed away from further productions of "A Raisin in the Sun." She explained, "So many people connected with the play had passed away. I just couldn't touch it. I'm a little bit sentimental. Also, you can get a little bored with something no matter how much you love it."

When she realized that a whole new generation hadn't seen her in "Raisin," Miss McNeil decided it was time to return to the play. Today she finds even more values and levels of meaning in the play and considers it will always be a classic. "I don't think I'll ever give it up now," she remarked.

"A Raisin in the Sun" deals with the dreams and family tensions of a black family in a Chicago tenement. "It's a universal play; you can identify with it. We all get up with an alarm clock, eat our breakfast, worry about getting to work on time."

"WE ALL KNOW the dominating mother who won't let her son grow up, the teenage daughter searching for her identity," Miss McNeil explained. "It's a viable piece for today, when young people are concerned with doing their own thing."

Miss McNeil has a way of molding her children, Miss McNeil said. "Animals have more sense. The mother cat raises her kitten and then sends it out into the world to do as it pleases."

"In my generation you did what your parents said," she commented. Her own parents opposed her going into the theater and never forgave her. Her mother was an Apache, she explained, and Apaches don't allow their women to put themselves on display.

For "Raisin," Miss McNeil said she portrayed Mama as a combination of her mother, her grandmother, and a Jewish woman who raised her. "I see my mother whenever I put on that grey wig, even though mother didn't have grey hair."

MISS MCNEIL now spends a good portion of her time working with community theater and repertory groups throughout the country. "I like young people and I like working with novices. It's harder than working with professionals, but I like the challenge," she stated.

She explained that novice actors benefit from the experience of working with a professional, and it adds prestige to their job resumes. She also enjoys teaching acting and finds that "you always learn from your pupils, too."

The actress regards movie and television work as necessary evils to supplement her income.

"Only on Broadway or in com-

munity theater can you do what you really enjoy," she said. "I wish more actors would be willing to leave New York and experiment with community theater."

SHE LAUDED plays like "Hair" and "Jesus Christ Superstar" for being experimental and breaking down theater stereotypes. In contrast, she pointed to Broadway's current musical version of "Raisin" as an example of how professional theater would usually rather play it safe by turning a proven success into a musical.

Although she began her career as a singer in the 50s, Miss McNeil, was not seriously interested in playing Mama in the musical version of "Raisin." She had been led to believe it would feature rock music, which turned out to be the case. Also she objected that

much of the drama's content had to be taken out to make room for the musical numbers.

"When you hit 50 you forget the money and do the things you want to do," she commented. "Once you build the name, how much bigger can your name get?"

Now when she comes home she leaves her luggage in the middle of the room for two days and goes right to sleep to avoid getting cranky.

"I'm only home two or three months a year now, but four weeks home and I want to go back to work again," she said.

Pastimes include frequent redecorating and looking after 10 elderly ladies living in her apartment complex. The actress says she loves the elderly and loves nursing people, but she cautions, "I've not that sweet a nature. I just have to be needed."

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Planetarium features star

Was the Christmas Star really a star? A comet? A meteorite? Just what was in the heavens on the night Jesus was born?

"The Christmas Star" - exploring all possibilities - is the December topic at Cranbrook Institute of Science planetarium, 500 Lone Pine Road.

Special holiday shows will be at 2 and 3 p.m. Dec. 26, 29 and 30. In addition, regular planetarium demonstrations are at 4 p.m. on Wednesdays, 2, 3, 4 and 7:30 p.m. Saturdays and 2, 3 and 4 p.m. Sundays. Planetarium is free with museum admission - \$2 for adults

and \$1 for students and senior citizens.

Visitors to the planetarium will see the sky as it appears during Christmas 1975 and as it probably appeared in the year Jesus was born, about 6 or 7 B.C., according to the stars.

Guests can also view the Institute's extensive collections, including geologica displays, scientific experiments and a current exhibition, "A Sense of Pride: North American Indian Art Yesterday and Today." Books and gift items are sold in the giftshop.

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