



Estelle Parsons brings her award-winning performance in "Miss Margarida's Way" to the Birmingham Theatre.

Controversy amazes star

By ETHEL SIMMONS

Theater

Estelle Parsons, star of "Miss Margarida's Way," is flabbergasted by the controversy surrounding her upcoming performance at the Birmingham Theatre.

Interviewed by phone from New York on Friday, Ms. Parsons said she had read all about it in the New York Times. "I didn't like it one bit," she declared.

WXYZ-TV in Detroit has refused to air the Cllo prize-winning commercial about her show, calling it obscene, and some callers have protested to the Birmingham Theatre that the play demeans the teaching profession. Ms. Parsons shifted off the objections, saying it's impossible to respond to this kind of criticism because the play is an intellectual piece, a satire on power.

"There's nothing naturalistic about this piece," she said. "It's a theatrical event. There's no way any of those words could be applied to it."

THE ONE-WOMAN show, about a schoolteacher who tyrannizes her eighth-grade classroom—the theater audience—is by 27-year-old Brazilian playwright Roberto Alamyde.

As far as comments that "Miss Margarida's Way" makes teachers look bad, she said, "That's weird. Almost half the audience is teachers. They love it more than anyone. Teachers understand power problems."

In fact, most of Ms. Parsons' performances of the show have been on college campuses, including Princeton, Dartmouth, Smith and Bennington.

"I'm only stuck in this Birmingham thing," she said, because of an old booking. "I knew Pierre LaMarre," LaMarre, former manager of the Birmingham Theatre, booked most of this first season.

Continuing with her rapid conversation, frequently interspersed with laughter, she said, "I'm not interested in your ordinary, run-of-the-mill, dumb audience."

She said the playwright and Joseph Papp wanted to go on Broadway with

the show, but she is actually only interested in doing "Miss Margarida's Way" before audiences at universities and theater festivals.

MS. PARSONS SAID the Birmingham Theatre asked her to continue the show for a second week (it is now scheduled to open Tuesday and run through Sunday), but she declined.

She is, however, very interested in performing in Birmingham because "it's the kind of community where the piece has been well received, like Westport, Conn."

THE AUDIENCE is Miss Margarida's classroom during the play, and verbal interaction between the teacher and her students is frequently part of this intellectual game.

Ms. Parsons said she has stopped doing the show in New York. "When I play in a place for very long, they (some of the audience) come to show off."

"They're only invited to take part with me, or I throw them out," she said firmly. "I have a responsibility to the audience." She also said a lot of the audiences are passive. "I quote like that way."

After a performance, it takes a long time to unwind. "I dream about it all the time. It's very wearing. I don't even do a week anymore."

She usually does two or three performances, and prefers to do only one.

Miss Margarida "is just a theatrical creation, a metaphor. It's a satire. She's not a person at all. There are many styles in the piece. She represents five or six kinds of power you see in your life."

For her performance as Miss Margarida, Estelle Parsons received a Tony Award nomination for best actress, the Drama Desk Award for Most Unique Theatrical Experience, and Cue Magazine's Golden Apple Award.

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