

# Period Pieces On Local Stages?

By SUE SHAUGHNESSY

Can early American drama be adapted for community theater?

That was the topic of a conversation with Dr. Joseph N. French, manager of theater arts for the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village.

FRENCH is the man behind each summer's American Drama Festival in the theater of the Henry Ford Museum. He has also directed children's productions for the Livonia-Redford Theatre Guild.

The summer festival started in 1964 with a two-play repertory and a four-week run. When the 1970 festival opens July 3, there will be four plays in the repertory, and the run is slightly more than 10 weeks.

Included on next summer's bill will be a repeat of last year's production of "China town," the first American musical comedy; another production of the favorite, "Our American Cousin"; "My Fartner," a new play in the company's repertory, and a fourth play which still must be chosen.

Requirements are that a play must be American and must have been written before 1907.

CAN ANYONE afford to



DR. JOSEPH N. FRENCH

produce early American drama or is a subsidized form of theater—such as the Greenfield Village project—required?

"We haven't shown a profit any season," French admits, "but each year we come closer and closer to the goal. As we build our audience I am certain that the festival will be self-supporting."

Three-quarters of the festival budget is used to pay the actors who are members of the Festival Company. The remainder goes for promotion, sets, costumes and ticket and program printing costs.

Who makes up the festival audiences?

"Our audiences come from throughout the metropolitan area and are not the dedicated theater goers," French explained. "We produce family shows, and this is something that an entire family can come to see at a reasonable cost. One thing that I have discovered is that our audiences love the sentiment on the stage, because of the more sentiment there is in a play, the better the audience reaction."

Last year tickets for the festival were priced at \$2 for adults and \$1 for children under 16, and that's an inexpensive evening by today's standards.

COULD A community theater group successfully stage early American drama?

"I think so," says French. "I gave a speech at this year's Community Theater Association of Michigan (CTAM) convention on this very topic. Many people asked questions, but I haven't heard of any group scheduling an early drama."

What makes early American theater so adaptable?

"For one thing, there is no royalty cost for anything published prior to 1907 and that is a big item in community theater budgets. Secondly there is the audience factor. Community theater groups want to increase their audience, and the family entertainment field is wide open."

REPRESENTATIVES of two local community theater organizations said that the idea of producing an early American play was something that could be considered.

Judy Pierson, president of the Livonia-Redford Theatre Guild, says that there is a question in her mind about whether or not the guild members would consider the pro-

ject enough of a challenge to read for parts.

"The audience might like the sentiment in the plays, but I don't know if the actors would," Mrs. Pierson said.

Hope Nahstoll of the Farmington Players said that she had thought for a long time that the players should consider the idea. "We are in the enviable position that our audiences seem to like whatever we present," Mrs. Nahstoll said.

"Yes the idea has definite possibilities," Mrs. Nahstoll concluded.



IN COMMUNITY THEATER? -- This is a scene from the Early American Drama Festival production of "Horizon." Are such plays adaptable to community theater?

## Opera As Musical Comedy?

Theatrical ventures at Wayne State University moved into a new area with the opera workshop production of Don Pasquale.

The comic opera opened Feb. 27 for a three-weekened run in WSU's Bonstelle Theatre in Detroit. It is the first production at Wayne since 1963.

Director was Robert H. Cowden of 35580 Oakdale Drive, Livonia. Cowden is organizing a graduate opera division as a cooperative venture between the WSU music and theater departments.

The Feb. 23 issue of the "Wayne Report," a newsletter published by the WSU University Relations Department, carries an interview with Cowden and outlines the Livonia's thoughts about the similarity between opera and the modern musical comedy.

HIS COMMENTS: "The image that opera has gotten over the last 50 years is that it is a sophisticated art form for those in the know from the right background and that sort of thing.

"This isn't true of opera. Opera in the 19th century and the 18th century was the popular art form, the exciting thing to do. And of course, there were no classes in those days. When someone wrote an opera it was played for 20 performances or 30 or 40.

"Next season people said 'Oh yes, we've already seen that. Will you please compose a new opera. We don't want the old one anymore; we want something new.' And this kept the form vibrant.

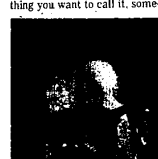
"Today we enshrine certain operatic works as the 'classics' which must be repeated because they are the best. There's nothing wrong with that certain amount of this, but I think it snuffs out any desire of the public to learn or any desire of the composers to write because the repertoire becomes solidified.

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"It becomes very narrow, and after awhile, as has happened in this country, no one will take the financial chance of producing anything new.

"I WOULD like not only to produce things like 'Don Pasquale,' which is a marvelous piece, but at the same time encourage young people to come up with new ideas, new approaches — folk opera or rock opera, jazz opera, anything you want to call it, something that has a new outlook or understanding of life.



ROBERT H. COWDEN

and, say, musicals — and this isn't always firm either — is that musical comedy and operetta tend to emphasize entertainment value as opposed to opera, which hopefully is aiming at an insight into human nature or how the human being functions or trying to help us understand the relationship of man to man, man to the universe, man to God.

"To me is what art does as opposed to entertainment."

"To me the only distinction you can make between opera

## Pianist Classes Set

Two Beethoven master classes for pianists will be given by Dady Mehta, assistant professor of music at Eastern Michigan University. A master class is a format for focusing musical growth with emphasis on penetration and projection of the score.

The first series of classes, for high school students, will be held from 10 a.m. to noon on four Saturdays, April 4, 11, 18 and 25 in Pease Auditorium. The cost for the series is \$20 for performers and \$12 for auditors. The session is limited to 10 performers.

For piano teachers and advanced students, a series will be held June 8, 10, 12, 15, 17 and 19. For a total fee of \$50, performers receive two private lessons in addition to the six classes. Auditors may enroll for \$20. This group is limited to 12 performers.

Following the April series, a concert will be given April 26.

A concert, June 21, will conclude the advanced classes. All works played, which must be memorized, are to be chosen from a selected list of Beethoven sonatas, variations and bagatelles.

Mehta, who came to Eastern last fall, received his musical training in Shanghai, at the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris, and at the Vienna State Academy of Music. At the time of his debut in Vienna in 1968, Mehta was recognized as a Beethoven disciple.

Registration information may be obtained from the Department of Music, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Mich. 48197.

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## Singles Fair Is March 15

Another "Fair for Singles" will be held Sunday, March 15, in the Crystal Ballroom of Detroit's Sheraton Cadillac Hotel.

The fair, sponsored by the Tri-City singles group, follows events held last spring and in December. Hours of the fair are 2 p.m. to 9 p.m. with admission tickets priced at \$3.

Almost every imaginable club, group and service designed for singles will be represented in the exhibits.

Information about social events and places in the metropolitan area will be provided along with the details about apartment complexes, the stock market, maid services and civic affairs groups.

The "Artisans" will provide the music in the hotel's ballroom as background for a cocktail party sponsored as part of the fair.

## Casting Call

Auditions for the final Wayne Civic Players production, "Slow Dance on the Killing Ground," are scheduled March 13, 14 and 15. Starting times are 8 p.m. on Friday and Saturday and 7 p.m. on Sunday in the Players Rehearsal Building, 1940 Harvey, Westland.

Director Bob Weibel says that the small cast of three makes everybody a lead character. The characters are an elderly German shop keeper, a 18-year-old Negro boy and a 19-year-old girl, who meet as strangers one night. Each discovers a compassion and need for one another by uncovering individual shortcomings.

Performance dates are April 24, 25 and 26.

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