

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/953-2105



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Trinity House is a success story

By Victoria Diaz
special writer

CYNICS MIGHT HAVE said they didn't have a prayer. After all, they were just a little ragtag church group putting on a play almost nobody had ever heard of (one of them had written it) inside a small Baptist church in Livonia. When the Saturday night performance was over, they had to dismantle the stage to make room for a church service the next morning.

Now, 10 years later, Livonia's Trinity House Theatre is celebrating

its anniversary by making plans to soon "go professional." Already, the approximately 60-member group has hired on full-time artistic director Peter Senkbeil, fresh out of Chicago and Northwestern University's prestigious dramatic arts program. The group hopes to pay performing artists, directors, technical and management staff within the next five years.

In addition, it is extending its season to four plays instead of the usual two, adding to the number of performances of each play, scheduling two staged readings per session, workshopping plays by area playwrights

and setting up classes for actors and technical directors.

And, oh, yes, it now has that church building, on Six Mile Road near I-275, all to itself, renting it from the congregation that moved to larger quarters several years ago. (It is not affiliated with that church.)

SENKBEIL, WHO took over his job last September, thinks the key to the group's success lies in a couple of directions.

"First of all, we offer a high-quality product," he says. "Then, we provide, I suppose, a kind of entertainment alternative for Christians. From what we can gather, a good segment of our audience is made up of church members, many of whom simply don't attend a lot of other theater. So, we're tapping into a new audience, and into an audience that tends to be very loyal."

Having said that, Senkbeil emphasizes strongly, however, that all auditions and crowd calls are open to the general public, and that Trinity House has never limited itself to any kind of "evangelistic drama."

"The overriding principle for choosing scripts is our desire to examine the depth and complexity of the Christian world view through theater," he told group members in a recent newsletter. "(We are) not doing Christian Theatre; rather, we are Christians doing theater."

Through the years, the group has examined that Christian view by staging such diverse and well-known plays as Shaw's "Arms and the Man," T.S. Eliot's "The Cocktail Party" and Harold Pinter's "The Dumb Waiter."

ALONG WITH the works of name playwrights, Trinity House also has offered a number of original plays by area writers. In fact, almost half the 40-plus plays it has staged since 1981 have been such productions.

This anniversary season will conclude in June with a musical, "The Paradine" by Henry Woodworth. Sarah Hedeen and Paul Patton. All are members of the Trinity group, and Patton, then youth minister, now pastor at Livonia's Trinity Baptist Church on Meridian Road, put together that very first production, a rock musical called "Gravy," 10 years ago.

One of the main goals at Trinity House, Senkbeil says, has been to present plays that aren't "done to death."



Jeff Hedeen (back, left) conducts an acting class for Trinity House Theatre at Trinity House, Julie Cullen of Westland and Sarah Church in Livonia. Students are (clockwise) Hedeen of Livonia.

"We may choose plays that don't have especially big names, that aren't among the most popular productions in the world," he says. "For instance, we haven't done 'Steel Magnolias' and probably won't do it. Not because it isn't a good play, but what metropolitan Detroit does not need right now is another production of 'Steel Magnolias.'"

Through its choice of plays, the group sometimes finds itself in a rather controversial situation.

"THIS SEASON, we thought it was very important to be doing a play like 'When the Wind Blows,' which makes a very colorful statement about the consequences of war," says Senkbeil. "We chose the play back in July before any of the things in the Middle East happened. So, when we produced it in January, we found ourselves in the strange position of being the only theater in the Detroit area doing an anti-war play when the war broke out."

As this season nears its end, the community theater group already is looking forward to next year, and the plays that will go on the boards then. Senkbeil says the play selection

committee now is "seriously looking" at about 20 plays, trying to decide on the final four for the 1991-92 season.

"As we consider plays, we ask basically two questions: Does the play say something we as Christians want to say, and does the play stand as art?"

The new plays submitted by area writers always receive special attention because one of our main goals is to cultivate Christian playwrights. Frankly, I think that's where most of the future of Christian theater lies. Certainly, we can always pull scripts from the mainstream. But if we want to have a distinct voice, we need to cultivate those writers."

"We can provide an opportunity to workshop those scripts. And we're systematically setting up staged readings now. We're also in the process of putting together a system where each playwright will have a couple of people whose job it is to mentor that person. They're committed to meeting with that person, giving them feedback in a nonjudgmental way, essentially helping that playwright realize his or her vision for the work."

IN THE MEANTIME, Trinity's future appears to look as bright as an angel's smile.

Our budget was tripled this year, but we're still operating in the black, says Senkbeil, adding that Trinity House is financed solely through members' annual dues, ticket sales and contributions.

"We did four shows this year instead of two, plus two staged readings. Our first show did what we expected it to do. When the Wind Blows made money far beyond what we expected."

Advance sales for Trinity's current production "Dracula" have been brisk. Opening night and Saturday night were sell-outs, although tickets are still available for other weekend performances through Saturday, April 6.

This version of "Dracula" is not simply a retelling of the original play and all the "Dracula" movies that followed, Senkbeil stresses. Adapted by Kerry Cederberg Meads and Robert Smyth, it was first performed by the Lamb's Players Theatre in San Diego in 1988, and examines the spiritual nature of the classic tale by Bram Stoker.



Peter Senkbeil, artistic director of Trinity House Theatre, on the set of "Dracula," the current production he is directing at Trinity House in Livonia.

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