

Entertainment

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Standing ovation Theater school honors founder

By Mary Jane Doerr
special writer

THE HOT summer day did not seem to bother the teenagers concentrating on their entrances on the open air stage of the Cranbrook Greek Theatre.

The teens were casually dressed in shorts. Their facial expressions and movements gave a clue to the characters they were portraying. Up on the hill, a group of young children sat on the grass. One child was having an animated conversation with another, both pretending quite believably to be arguing on the telephone.

The 85 students attending the Cranbrook Theatre School in Bloomfield Hills are a part of a legacy that has taken place since 1941.

On Saturday, the school is honoring its founder and director, Annetta Wonnberger at a reunion with alumni. Activities for the day range from swimming and box lunches, to performances at the Greek Theatre, and a children's play. The city of Bloomfield Hills has designated July 25 as "Annetta Wonnberger Day." The newly renovated Greek pavilion is being renamed for Wonnberger and her late husband, Carl.

"I WILL never forget my first day at the school," said Dan Castle, a Birmingham actor and director who won a scholarship in 1975. "Annetta Wonnberger gave a charming talk and painted such a grand picture of the theater. I was captivated and

'Age is more than a factor of years. I have spent 50 years working with people of the same age. I think that is why I have stayed so young.'
— Annetta Wonnberger

have been ever since." The quiet spoken 82 year old Wonnberger is still directing the theater as she has for 50 years. 38 years as co-director with her husband, and 12 seasons after his death in 1980. "Where did the time go," said the small statured, dignified great-grandmother. "It seems like yesterday we began."

In 1929, Wonnberger left Smith College as a freshman to marry, and came to Cranbrook School to live. Her husband had accepted a job teaching in the English department. The couple would make their home there for the next 38 years until Wonnberger moved to Birmingham. The couple has two daughters, Jo Anne Wheaton, also of Birmingham, who does the public relations for the school and Nancy von Steeg of Detroit.

Besides her own family, Wonnberger was busy completing a master's degree from the University of Michigan, and a master's in English from Wayne State

University. She also taught English at Berkeley High School, Oak Park High School, Wayne State University, Detroit Institute of Technology, and Eastern Michigan University.

"THE CHILDREN in the school today are the same in many ways as they were in the early days," said Wonnberger. "Today's children have had, of course, wider experiences in travel and more self confidence and they are capable of a great deal. They are not adults though. They still have not lost the natural qualities of being children."

As an active theater arts representative on the Executive Board of the Oakland County Cultural Council, Wonnberger is concerned with the government funding for arts programs. While she has reservations about how this funding has been used she is very supportive of funding for the arts. She also is disturbed by the use of the word "talent" recently in relationship to arts programs.

"Our community is fortunate to have many fine theaters, amateur, if you will, in some cases. If you look at the professional theaters like the Attie, the Bonstelle, Meadow Brook, and the Fox with a number of community groups, and college theaters, we have a rich heritage."

The Wonnbergers started in 1941 with 25 students. Now the average is about 75 ranging from third grade to college. A number of students have gone on to pursue professional careers in theater such as Robert Englund, who was Freddy in "Nightmare on Elm Street" and Dana El-



Annetta Wonnberger (right) helps Cranbrook Summer Theatre School students Maccah Spivak Birndoff (center) and Ben Cousins rehearse at the outdoor Greek Theatre.

car who is Pete in "MacGyver." Many have enjoyed the community theater as an outlet for their talents. "I received a letter recently from one of our alumni saying how much the experience had helped her as an architect making presentations," said Wonnberger.

"I think the skills one needs for the theater are skills one needs in life; good communication, poise, confidence, and knowing what to do meeting people." "Age is more than a factor of

years. I have spent 50 years working with people of the same age. I think that is why I have stayed so young."

On Friday, Aug. 2, and Saturday, Aug. 3, the school's senior division will bring the 50th season celebrations to a close with an evening of four one-act plays. The program starts 8:30 p.m. in the outdoor Greek Theatre on Lone Pine Road.

The program includes "A Visitor from Forest Hills," from Neil Simon's "Plaza Suite," Frank Gorman's "A Case for the Detective/

Private Eye" which demonstrates how a mystery is solved in two different ways by the same person. "Aria da Capo," a comic/tragedy by Edna St. Vincent Millay, a play-within-a play depicting the stylized antics of Columbine and Pierrot commingled with shepherds who inadvertently guide each other to an untimely end, and "The Applicants" by Patrick J. DeLargo, which satirizes the process of applying for a job.

Tickets are \$4 and available at the gate or by calling 644-9668.

Acting, directing add up to first-rate 'Last of the Red Hot Lovers'

Performances of "Last of the Red Hot Lovers," presented by SRO Productions, continues through Aug. 4, at Southfield's historic center, the Burgh. Tickets at the Southfield Senior Adult Center or call 354-8362.

By Bob Weibel
special writer

Barney Cashman is an honest, decent, and loving husband. And, he has an honest, decent, loving wife. But something is missing. He is 54, and has led a rather bland life. Just one before he dies, he'd like a little excitement — like a rendezvous with another woman.

That is the setup for one of Neil Simon's funniest creations. And Ralph Rosati brings Barney to life with imaginative hilarity in the City of Southfield's "Last of the Red Hot Lovers."

In the capable hands of Rosati, Barney's fumbling, bumbling attempts at illicit romance never become nerdy. Rather, there is an appealing humanity to his unwise try at becoming the macho-man he is not.

The lair for his conquest is his mother's apartment (while she is out for the afternoon doing volunteer work) Barney's first attempt at an affair turns out to be more than he bargained for.

MARGARET GILKES, as Elaine Navazio, sizzles as a lets get it on, and get out of here paramour. The inexperienced Barney prefers to talk. She wants a forceful man. While Barney warms to the task, she'll settle for a cigarette. He only brought Scotch, no smokes. And well, it's obvious they're incompatible. Barney swears never to try again.

Rosati's real-life wife, Judi, plays his second misadventure with hanky-



ponky Judi Rosati lights up the stage as a motor-mouthed flaky actress, Bobbie Michelle. She effectively spins a web of improbable tales their dog was kidnapped by the police, she lives with a Nazi-like vocal coach, etc. It's all too much for Barney. Especially when she talks him into taking a few puffs on her marijuana cigarette. Having struck out with strangers, Barney attempts a liaison with his

best friend's wife, Jeanette Fisher. This is by far the most difficult woman's role. Irene Hengstbeck plays it superbly. SHE MANAGES to maintain the hectic comedic pace of the show in the role of a severely depressed woman. She doesn't find Barney physically attractive. She only wants to get even with her two-timing husband. It's strike three for Barney, but he (and we) learn something

about human foibles. Director Marjorie King has fashioned a first-rate production in "Last of the Red Hot Lovers." Kudos too, to William Mandt, executive producer, and founder of SRO Productions for the City of Southfield. The show is presented in an 1854 church that is part of a historic arts

center. "The Burgh." Seating is limited to less than a hundred, but the venue is most charming.

Bob Weibel of Westland is a freelance writer, who has spent more than 25 years in community theater as a director, designer and performer.

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