

# GeVa Dramaturge Juggles Academic & Theater Skills

By Emily Morrison

She calls her fascinating profession "a balancing act between academic and theater skills."

If Sister Ann Patrice Carrigan's job as literary director for GeVa Theatre is indeed the highwire feat it appears to be, then it stands to reason the former St. Agnes High School English teacher would feel as much at home in metaphor as are the characters she explores, develops and brings to life in GeVa program notes.

Education continues to play a significant role in the multifaceted career of Sister Ann Patrice, a Sister of St. Joseph who left classroom teaching after 18 years when St. Agnes closed its doors in 1982. In addition to reading some 400 new plays sent to GeVa every year, she maintains a library of "effects" from the production of each GeVa play, helps playwrights develop their scripts, researches details vital to the accurate portrayal of historic periods, advises the director, and writes copy for GeVa programs, lobby displays, and the theater's newsletter.

She also acts as the theater's liaison with Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) in carrying out the theater's interpretive series for deaf and the hearing-impaired. Other duties include working with such cultural organizations as the Memorial Art Gallery and Strong Museum in developing drama-related projects, and directing GeVa's educational outreach program to students, senior citizens, and other theater patrons interested in expanding their background knowledge of the plays GeVa stages.

Such an apparent juggling act recalls the title of a recent exegesis that appeared in the program notes for former Rochesterian Thomas Babe's "Planet Fires." "The Author, The Circus, and the Metaphor..." was what "Sister Pat" called her comprehensive analysis of a construct that serves as "a world in and of itself, existing only in terms of the drama."

It is here, of course, that the circus metaphor and Sister Ann Patrice's dedication to her craft part company: Far from allowing the necessary absorption required by such a demanding job to pull her energies entirely inward into an insular world peopled strictly by the offspring of playwrights' imaginations, she has managed to maintain community contacts in a way that few less motivated people could find time for.

For a theater professional moving into the expanding realm of resident professional theater in Rochester, the timing of Sister Pat's employment as GeVa's literary director was critical. "The position of literary director is relatively new," she explains. "Within the last 10 years, only two universities in the country — Yale and Stony Brook — have offered a doctorate in dramaturgy."

Sister Pat was hired by GeVa's producing director, Howard Millman, only two years ago, as plans were just being formulated to find a new home for the 12-year-old theater. Part of the rapidly developing national resident professional theater movement, GeVa is the Rochester representative of an unofficial alliance of regional theaters that employ only members of Actor's Equity (the union of professional actors), yet offer an

alternative to the more commercial theatrical experience of the Broadway stage. Theaters like GeVa pride themselves on being in the vanguard of the production of new plays (as GeVa was this past spring with the world premiere of "Plahet Fires") — yet, in addition to the financial and artistic risks involved in taking a chance on works that have never before appeared on stage, someone must also be available to wade through the reams of new scripts sent to the theater each season.

Sister Pat, who had directed three plays a year at St. Agnes and later worked as theater coordinator for Rochester Association of Performing Arts in Webster, read scripts for Millman on a freelance basis for several months before he offered her a permanent job. With a new theater in the works and the potential for an expanded season as well as a second, experimental theater space in the new building, a literary director was desperately needed.

GeVa finally moved this past March into its new home in the renovated former Naval Armory and Convention Hall on Woodbury Boulevard, after a great deal of preparation, unavoidable construction delays, and well-deserved fanfare. During and since the transition to the new theater space, Sister Pat has played an invaluable supporting role in the wings of the new enterprise. In addition to keeping abreast of reading scripts and maintaining correspondence with the playwrights and agents who submit them, she has also been instrumental in developing new GeVa programs and services that take full advantage of the new building's expanded seating capacity and technological capabilities.

Her primary responsibility, of course, has been to keep GeVa supplied with viable new scripts for consideration as possible mainstage productions. "First and foremost, my job is to surface new plays and to develop ongoing relationships with the playwrights," says Sister Pat. "If a play is going to be done here, or have a staged reading, it isn't likely to be a one-shot deal." Such plays are often subsequently produced by other resident theaters, or sometimes even achieve eventual commercial success in New York City, and the playwrights are at least considered for future local productions.

"What we used to do was have in-house play readings, with actors from mainstage casts reading new plays," she continues. "We plan to have public play readings in the near future (possibly in the new theater's second stage area). A thoughtful reading of the text will surface its strengths and weaknesses, the dramatic impact that the play will have." If a play is thought to have mainstage potential, Sister Pat must then contribute feedback to the author, provide support and research during the rewriting process, and arrange for more formal stage readings. If it's a definite go, she'll also advise the director, go to rehearsals, and write the program copy and notes for the theater newsletter.

During the initial phases of production, Sister Pat thoroughly researches the historical details that make the play believable. "We set up a library of books, pictures, music, and other things that tie into the production," she explains. "Frequently, the directors will want other things. For 'And a Nightingale Sang,' the director wanted to



Sister Ann Patrice Carrigan pauses a moment while reviewing some of the many scripts she receives.

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know what 'Ha-Ha' meant. I discovered that Lord Ha-Ha was the German equivalent of (wartime Japanese radio propaganda broadcaster) Tokyo Rose. I was able to get his picture, and snatches of his broadcasts. When we did 'Uncle Vanya,' they wanted me to find out how the sign of the cross was made in the Russian Orthodox church."

This research process involves a great deal of outreach to the community, in terms of cultural resources, according to Sister Pat, who has researched everything from early American quilting techniques (for "Quilters") to war games, propellers, and plane parts produced during World War I (for "Billy Bishop Goes to War"). "In terms of the history surrounding a play, I come up with psychological profiles of people living in a certain historical time, or research that would provide the total historical feel of the period," adds Sister Pat.

In order to achieve the desired effect, she finds networking within both the theatrical community and the community at large to be a crucial part of her work. "When you're dealing with the resident theater, that kind of ongoing communication with people who've worked here before, and who often send us scripts to read, is very important," she points out. "Plays are just not presented to us full-blown. They get written, they get workshopped, they get refined. There's a great volume of material, and part of my job is to try to keep up with it. I try to read a script a day."

Beyond her part as a vital cog in the internal workings of individual productions, Sister Pat has found that both her background in teaching and her religious training have prepared her well for the other dimensions her position entails. "A lot of things I do here directly touch on diocesan concerns," she affirms. She has played a central role in developing GeVa's services to the deaf and hearing-impaired, senior citizens, and area students.

"I work with Patrick Graybill, a deacon in the diocese, and one of the leading deaf actors in the country, and Howie Seago, an actor and director now in residence at NTID," she notes. "These men, who are both theater artists, work with interpreters from NTID to make their signing of GeVa performances both precise and theatrically viable."

During each GeVa production, one signed performance is offered for the benefit of deaf or hearing-impaired theatergoers. Those with partial hearing may also take advantage of the new theater's recently installed induction loop system, which employs a loop of wire placed around the perimeter of the theater to eliminate distracting background noise usually picked up by hearing aids.

"These programs have brought us closer to the hearing-impaired population in western New York," Sister Pat notes. "I do mailings to all of the area churches with hearing-impaired members, and have also worked through audiologists and hearing-impaired advocacy groups."

Sister Pat also offers a noontime lecture series given by area residents whose backgrounds or expertise may help to illuminate various aspects of individual plays for senior citizens and downtown workers. Another outreach program has a direct correlation with her teaching background.

"I work with Vicki Duvall, GeVa's education director, on a program of six workshops for area teachers on individual plays — from text to elements of lighting, costume, and scene design — to hopefully illuminate the choices GeVa makes on the production of each play, so that when teachers bring their students to our matinees, it's more than a field trip, but, rather, a really comprehensive experience of the play."

Sister Pat finds this grounding in the essential elements of the play's production to be especially helpful to audiences for new plays. "Theater is an interpretation of human experience," she posits. "There's no more powerful experience, I think, than seeing a play in your teens or twenties, and then seeing it again in your forties. Theater is a living, organic thing. It evolves; it records and interprets where we are and what we're doing. It not only adds to the store of dramatic literature that can be performed on a stage, but it also presents and interprets us to ourselves — and not always comfortably." That in itself, she feels, is reason enough to seek out new theatrical experiences.

"Like religion, theater is an expression of our culture," she adds. "To do new plays is to risk a lot. People can be very comfortable with the classics. They can also be very unsure of or even angry at the new, because there's no established way to react to it."

GeVa, she believes, is a truly exciting and vital community resource, as well as a fount of even spiritual inspiration. When the theater staged "Quilters," one local pastor called to ask for a script, to be used as the basis for a sermon.

While Sister Ann Patrice Carrigan doesn't claim to find the text of a sermon in every GeVa production, she still espouses a great deal of faith in the potential of the resident theater to uplift, educate, and inspire.

"Theater has intellectual and emotional resources that are rich and varied," she concludes, "and I think people in this community can certainly tap into them."



Sister Ann Patrice discusses a newly received manuscript with GeVa's Producing Director Howard Millman.