

A Lifetime of Learning

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Unmasked: Dramatic devices help educators see selves beneath the facades

By Lee Strong



Roberta Nobleman presents the "mother figure" from her play "Blessed: Mary, the Mother of God".

Bonnie Trefalet/Courier-Journal

Roberta Nobleman believes education is a process of shared discovery, and that an important part of the process is discovering oneself.

Consequently, the actress, storyteller, teacher and self-described spiritual pilgrim said teaching is not just "shoving knowledge down students' throats."

"If you take Jesus as a role model, he didn't teach like that," Nobleman explained. "He'd ask people, 'What do you think?' He'd tell a story like the story of the good Samaritan and ask 'Which man showed him kindness? He wanted his audience to supply the answer themselves.'"

Nobleman follows the same method of teaching in her performances, workshops and classes. "I don't think anybody teaches anybody anything," she explained. "It's a matter of one beggar showing another bread."

Nobleman presented a series of talks and workshops employing dramatic techniques to focus on scriptural themes for the Spirituality Institute held at Colgate Rochester Divinity School July 18-22. She also performed her one-woman play, "Blessed: Mary, the Mother of God," on Tuesday, July 19. In the play, which examines Mary as a woman who faced both joy and suffering, the actress uses music, mime and a variety of props, including a kite, a may pole and a series of masks.

The following day, during one of the workshops for church professionals, Nobleman discussed the performance with participants in the institute, which was jointly sponsored by Colgate Rochester Divinity School, St. Bernard's Institute and the diocesan Office of Continuing Education. She focused the talk on the devices she uses in the play, particularly the masks.

All people wear masks, some good, some bad, Nobleman said, emphasizing that it is important for people to be aware that they are wearing masks and what those masks represent.

In her performances and in her workshops, Nobleman, who teaches in the education department at Kean College in New Jersey, uses masks because they can "put us in touch with a part of ourselves that we've suppressed or forgotten or covered up." Those hidden parts are often the darker sides of life — the guilts, the fears, the pain. Rather than avoiding the dark side, however, "the most whole, complete person learns to integrate the dark side of life with the lighter moments and to embrace the darkness too," she noted. Before one can become whole, he must be willing to look at the masks he wears and become self-aware.

Wearing masks without self-awareness can help to create a false self, which can

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Amid declining enrollment and a volatile economy, Sister Mary Walter Hickey, principal of Elmira's Notre Dame High School, produces innovative ideas to keep students and parents enthused about Catholic education. Page 8.

Both the enduring power of Thomas Merton's thought and the lasting lure of learning can be credited for drawing dozens of men and women aged 60 or older to a weeklong Elderhostel program on Merton at Nazareth College in July. Page 6.

Committees on school planning are continuing the effort to ensure the future of Catholic education in Monroe County as small-town schools throughout the diocese search for new resources to maintain their proud traditions. Pages 3, 4.