

## Features

# Play examines conflicts of beatified Carmelite

By Lee Strong

Arthur Giron clearly remembers the day he first encountered Edith Stein.

The year was 1959. Giron, a theater major at the University of California at Los Angeles, had gone to a friend's house to pick up the friend's mother for Mass. While waiting in the living room, he glanced through a religious magazine and found a full-page picture of a Carmelite sister who, he said, reminded him of Ingrid Bergman.

Below the picture was a simple caption: "Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross: in the world, Edith Stein."

"I wondered, 'How can you be two people at one time?'" Giron recalled.

Edith Stein became an obsession for him, Giron said. The latest manifestation of that obsession is *Edith Stein*, a play inspired by the life of the woman who was beatified in May, 1987, by Pope John Paul II. The play will be performed October 22 through November 20 at the GeVa Theatre.

Giron, who now heads the theater program at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, was in Rochester last week to work with the cast and to speak at GeVa's noontime lecture series, "Theatre Talk," on Wednesday, Oct. 12.

During the talk, Giron described the long gestation process that led to the current production of the play.

After his encounter with Stein's picture, Giron began researching her life. He discovered that except for the major details of her life, little had been written about her by the early 1960s.

Born Jewish and for many years an agnostic, Stein converted to Catholicism in 1922 at the age of 31. She was one of the first women in Germany to earn a doctorate in philosophy, and likewise earned a reputation as a philosopher and a leading feminist. She taught from 1923 to 1932, then was dismissed from her teaching position by the newly elected Nazi regime because of her Jewish ancestry.

Deprived of the right to teach, Stein fulfilled a long-term dream: in 1933 she entered the Carmelite Monastery at Cologne. When Nazi persecution increased in Germany, she was moved to a Carmelite Monastery in Echt, Holland. After the Germans occupied Holland, the Dutch bishops issued a pastoral letter denouncing Nazi persecution of the Jews. In retaliation, the Nazi government arrested all priests and sisters of Jewish descent, including Stein and her sister. On August 9, 1942, Stein died in the gas chamber at Auschwitz.

The more that Giron read about Stein, the more intrigued he became, in part because he discovered some similarities between his life and hers. One of the first facts of her life that jumped out at him was that she was both Jewish and Christian. "I continued to be intrigued by that fact — how can you be Jewish and Catholic at the same time?" Giron remarked. The playwright himself had experienced the same split: his mother's family was Jewish, his father's Catholic.

He was also intrigued that such a passionate person, one of the Germany's leading feminists, a philosopher and teacher who was developing an international reputation, would enter a convent. "Must you live a life of solitude if you are passionate?" he asked. "What is the price of passion?"

Giron, too, felt a passion in himself — a drive to give his all to acting and later to writing plays, in the same way that Stein gave herself completely to her faith by entering the convent.

"At the time that I was writing the play, I was desperate to express myself," Giron noted. "I identified with her wanting to make something of her life, and having a long, hard time doing it."

Although he had decided to write a play about Stein, Giron couldn't find the right approach. A particular problem was that because she was a Carmelite, she had lived under a vow of silence for the last nine years of her life. "How can you write a play about a leading character who can't speak?" he asked.

Giron found a solution to his dilemma when he and his wife visited Guatemala. There, he met a man believed to be a German spy. The man, in Giron's eyes, was truly evil, and the playwright began to toy with a question: What would happen if Edith Stein met this spy?

"Suddenly, I was able to write the play," he said. "Edith had somebody to test her, to get her to open up." The spy's name was Karl-Heinz, and Giron used the same name for the Nazi spy character who would become Stein's

chief antagonist in the play.

Giron began to write the play while taking a graduate play-writing course at Hunter College. He submitted as his first assignment a scene that remains in the play: the point at which Stein told her mother that she was going to enter a Carmelite monastery.

Week by week he handed in more scenes, and the play-in-progress began to draw attention from producers. Before the semester was over, Giron already had two offers for options to produce the play on Broadway. He turned them down, believing the play was not ready yet. He later accepted an offer from the Arena Theater in Washington, D.C., and an earlier form of the play was performed there in 1969.

Still dissatisfied with the script, Giron continued to rework it. Meanwhile, he wrote other plays, including *Becoming Memories*, for which he won the Drama-Logue Award for Outstanding Achievement in Theatre.

The GeVa production features a play that differs greatly from the 1969 version, and even from January's successful Pittsburgh presentation. Giron has added one scene involving Stein and her family, and cut or revised other scenes.

Giron said that the play is not an attempt to document Stein's life. "It's my attempt to dramatize her inner conflicts."

Some of those conflicts were caused by external forces. Although recognized as brilliant by her fellow philosophers, Stein was denied the right to teach in major universities because she was a woman, sarcastically referred to as "the philosopher lady," Giron noted. "As a woman, she complained a lot about not being taken seriously." For most of her teaching career, the only college that would hire her was a Catholic women's college.

Her conversion to Catholicism — and later the rise of Nazism in Germany — led her to study her Jewish heritage. In the convent she even celebrated Jewish holidays.

Giron also noted that the Carmelites, though Catholic, have strong Jewish roots. The order is named after a mountain in Israel. The nuns pray in cells inspired by the cave of Elijah, whom Giron called the "spiritual father of the order." He added that Stein converted after reading the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila, the foundress of the order and a woman whose ancestry was Jewish. Stein later took St. Teresa's name when she entered the convent.

Stein's family opposed her desire to enter the convent, and she delayed making that decision until the Nazi government deprived her of her teaching job and she was free to leave the world.

Once in the convent, however, conflict about her Jewish background continued.

"What I felt was the central conflict for her was that she was on the inside while her people were being killed on the outside," the playwright said, noting that while in the convent, Stein prayed for the Jewish people and their persecutors. "She had the conflict of wanting to love (her) enemy, (but) wanting to destroy him. She had to learn to love her enemy in order to conquer him."

Giron's Nazi spy gave Stein someone with whom and against whom she could reveal this conflict. Giron noted that although the historical Stein was in the convent under the vow of silence, she wrote voluminously to keep in touch with her family and to speak out against what was happening to the Jewish people under Nazi rule.

Giron also pointed out that Stein continued to write philosophical works while in the convent, producing some of her most important and influential work. She was blessed, he said, with a prioress who understood the importance and the abilities of her new nun.

Still, Giron acknowledged, people sometimes ask why someone who was dedicated to a life of intense thought would dedicate herself to a life of prayer. He explained, however, that Stein's life in the convent was basically a continuation of her life before. The intensity she brought to her philosophical work was the same intensity she brought to prayer, the playwright remarked.

"She was a mystic," Giron said. "Before she came to the convent, when she was teaching at the women's college, she would spend all her free time — eight hours — in front of the cross and come away refreshed. She had a very powerful mind, and thought became prayer to her."

Stein's decision to enter the convent, her



Edith Stein, a Jewish woman who converted to Catholicism, died at Auschwitz and was later beatified, is the subject of the current GeVa production, 'Edith Stein.'

prayer life, her mystical qualities and her death at Auschwitz led to her beatification and to continued discussion about her possible sainthood. Giron, however, is not comfortable with what he sees happening to her memory as a result of such speculation.

"I think it's a disservice to whitewash her," he said. "She was a human being — saints are human beings. She suffered. She was selfish. She smoked. She's much too interesting a person to be the embodiment of good."

He added that Stein would be the last person to credit herself with superhuman endowments. "She was someone who struggled. That makes her more interesting, a saint to me."

The playwright also commented on the conflict that has arisen because of her beatification. A number of Jewish groups have protested her being declared a martyr, noting that she was killed because she was a Jew and not because of her Catholicism. They also protested the building of a Carmelite convent near Auschwitz and plans to name the convent after Stein. Out of respect for Jewish concerns,

the order eventually chose not to give the convent Stein's name.

In the play, these conflicts are recognized through a framing device in which a survivor of Auschwitz confronts the prioress of the new convent. "I wanted to give more expression to Jewish feelings about it," Giron said.

In light of this controversy, a GeVa panel discussion of issues raised in the play will follow the November 13 performance. The panelists will be: Rabbi Judea Miller of Temple B'rith Kodesh; Cantor Barbara Horowitz of Temple B'rith Kodesh; Joseph G. Kelly, professor of religious studies at Nazareth College; and Father Joseph P. Brennan of the University of Rochester's Interfaith Chapel.

Giron added that if Stein is declared a saint, one possible positive result is that people will remember her and, because of her, what happened in the concentration camps.

"Three hundred years from now," he noted, "people will remember the Holocaust because of her, and that's a good thing."

## Applications available for national CHD grants

Application materials for 1989 Campaign for Human Development national grants are now available from the Diocese of Rochester.

To be eligible, programs must be controlled by at least 50 percent low-income representation. Grants are given to innovative projects that address basic causes of poverty by effecting changes in laws, policies or institutions, and to innovative projects designed to develop economic strength and political power within low-income communities.

Only requests of more than \$10,000 are currently being accepted. The average national grant size is \$31,300.

All groups interested in applying to the Campaign for Human Development are re-

quired to submit pre-applications by November 1, 1988. Projects that meet the minimum criteria and guidelines will be encouraged to submit a full application by January 31, 1989.

Call Melissa Marquez at (716)328-3210, Kevin Hennessy at (315)789-2686 or Kathy Dubel at (607)734-9784 for pre-application forms and criteria.

## 1988-89 retreat schedule planned for young adults

The 1988-89 Antioch schedule for young adults has been released. Antioch retreatants are single or married men and women between the ages of 18 and 35.

Retreats are as follows: Antioch XLII from October 28-30, 1988, at the Rotary Sunshine Camp in Rush; Antioch XLIII from January 6-8, 1989, at the Rotary Sunshine Camp in Rush; Antioch XLIV from March 17-19, 1989, at Cayuga Nature Center in Ithaca; Antioch XLV from June 2-4, 1989, site to be determined.

Antioch is sponsored by the diocesan Department of Youth Ministry and the Young Adult Commission. Call (716)328-3210 or 586-9825 for information.

## New support group for Yates County widowed to meet

Widowed people are cordially invited to attend the newly formed Yates County breakfast group on Tuesday, Oct. 25, at 9 a.m. The group will meet monthly at the Wagner Motor Inn Restaurant, 124 Elm St., Penn Yan.

Call (315)536-3955, 536-2440 or 789-2686 for more information.