

Features

# MCC Musical evokes memories of Catholics in audience

By Rob Cullivan

As a child attending a Catholic elementary school, Marlene Shuptar used to move over in her seat to make room for a spiritual friend the sisters assured her was present — her Guardian Angel.

Shuptar, now a parishioner at St. Cecelia's in Irondequoit, remembered that habit and related experiences last week when she attended John R. Powers' *Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?* The musical comedy — presented by Monroe Community College's departments of music communications and student activities — centered on the reminiscences of a young man named Eddie who returns to St. Bastion's Elementary School to learn the whereabouts of his childhood sweetheart, Becky.

Act I flashes back to the experiences Eddie and his fellow students had during their elementary school years. Eddie befriends Becky, who is overweight and taunted by the other children. Meanwhile their class is taught a theology designed to ward off sin and temptation — dangers the sisters say await them at every turn of their growing years.

Becky and her classmates mature throughout Act II, which explores their days at St. Patrick Bremmer High School. Eddie's affection for Becky blossoms into romance, but she is reluctant to commit to being his girlfriend. Becky's early piety, sparked by her Marian devotion, prompts her to tell a heartbroken Eddie she wants to enter the religious life rather than marry her longtime friend.

Returning to the present in the last scene of Act II, we see Eddie years later as he goes back

to the school after learning Becky has left her religious order. Sister Lee gives him Becky's address, and the long-separated friends marry at the musical's end, surrounded by their former classmates and teachers who all sing "Thank God."

Set in the late 1950s and early '60s, the musical's dialogue pokes fun at numerous pre-Vatican II Church regulations. The youngsters sometimes ignore but generally follow the guidelines set forth by their instructors.

Sin — both venial and mortal — continually preoccupies the students, who are instructed by the sisters to keep lists of their various infractions of divine law. "Should I number my pages?" Felix (Michael J. Mansfield) asks.

Regular confession is one of the many aspects of Catholicism depicted as setting the students' lives apart from those of their public-school peers. "Remember," Father O'Reilly tells the children, "there are only two religions — Catholic and public."

Relationships with Catholic members of the opposite sex bring enough troubles of their own, as the students learn. The musical's title refers to the mirroring powers of shiny black shoes — a danger Sister Lee warns the girls about at the end of Act I. Girls must dress modestly if they want to avoid near occasions of sin, she tells them.

Modesty must extend to the students' social lives as well. At their first high school dance, the sisters measure the length of each girl's skirt before admitting her, and the youngsters are reminded to dance far enough apart to "leave room for the Holy Spirit."

The scene reminded Shuptar and several oth-



Linda Dow Hayes/Courier-Journal  
Becky (Ruth Caselli) places a wreath on the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

er Catholics of their own high school dances. "The nuns used to be in the balcony of the gym and watch the students with their dates," Shuptar said.

The show's classroom scenes left much of the audience in knowing stitches. Father O'Reilly's lecture to the boys as they begin their adolescence brought back memories for Jack Pegoni, who laughingly remarked that the students in his class "knew more than the priest did."

The sense of superiority the play's Catholic-school characters held with regard to their public-school peers also struck a familiar chord with Pegoni. "We used to think (public school

students) were pagans," he said.

One of the "pagans" in the audience remembered his own feelings of inferiority. Victor Vachetto, a public school graduate, grew up in East Irondequoit and attended Catholic religious-education classes. The sisters who taught him made sure he knew the real reasons for his misbehavior in class. "You were the way you were because you went to public school," he said.

If holy water didn't work, the wrath of God would. Vachetto's wife, Gloria, who also attended religious education classes, recalled teachers who warned her against talking in church. "God won't love you," they said, describing alleged incidents of the eucharistic host flying off the altar toward talking girls, who cowered as the church walls crumbled around them.

To the play's characters, God must be even tougher than the sisters. The dark and foreboding confessional strikes terror into their hearts as they nervously admit their sins. Eddie is speechless the first time he enters a confessional — as was Dominic Cosmano, the actor who portrayed him. "I blanked out completely," Cosmano recalled from his own youth. "I forgot the Act of Contrition."

Despite the generally terror-ridden images of the teachers, the play does convey the sisters' concern for the youngsters, as exemplified by Sister Lee's interest in Becky.

As Cosmano said, the sisters were "stern but sweet," and the show leaves one nostalgic for an era when being Catholic meant embracing a way of life that set one apart from the rest of society.

## Neediest Cases

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everything after the Viet Cong invaded her country and managed to get out of Vietnam safely with only two of her children. Her medical problems require her to take antidepressant drugs daily, but the medication causes her to have emotional swings. She misses her two other children who were left behind in Vietnam.

**7** Mr. Y. is an Ethiopian who has resettled in the United States to escape political persecution. He had been a student in Ethiopia, and arrived the United States in August, 1985. He is an enthusiastic and hard-working individual, but while employed at a nursing home in Rochester, he suffered a severe spinal injury assisting an elderly patient who had fallen. Today, that injury prevents Mr. Y. from working while he awaits surgery that could enable him to return to work but could also lead to paralysis if it fails.

**8** Anna is a 96-year-old woman who lives alone in a tiny studio apartment in downtown Rochester. During World War II, Anna was taken from her home in Poland and marched to a work camp. Anna was so cold and tired that she lay down in the snow, and was left to die. A soldier who was a physician recognized that the unconscious woman was still alive and brought her to a hospital. The ordeal left her with a multitude of medical problems. What Anna wants for Christmas is something impossible to give — just one day of feeling comfortable.

**9** Mr. H. is an 82-year-old retired Kodak engineer. Although his professional life was full and productive, Mr. H. always derived his greatest satisfaction from his wood-carving hobby, which he is now unable to continue because of arthritis. "I used to do it for the money, but now I would pay anything just to be able to use my hands again," he says. So he sits, day after day, staring at his private gallery of lovely figurines, refusing to sell them because "they are all that is left of me." He longs for a few days when the pain might subside so that he could finish the ballerina that he began for his great-granddaughter years ago. He would like to be able once again to give something of himself.

**10** After some years of marriage to a husband whose drinking caused him to lose jobs and subjected the family to physical and emotional abuse, J. is now the sole support of her four daughters, ages 8, 5, 4 and 1. She has been helped with some public assistance and day care for her three youngest, and is now attending business school and working in a nursing home five mornings a week. This family could use some special help this Christmas.

**11** Alice is 92 years old and has lived alone since her husband passed away in 1980. She has no family and maintains her two-story house by herself, with a little help from a

home-health aide. Alice sleeps on her couch every night because she is nervous about living alone. She is depressed and very lonely, but sometimes responds negatively when people try to help her. She had a friend who visited with her at least once a week, but that friend has since moved to Arizona and has lost touch. Alice has a special Christmas wish — to find a new friend.

**12** Sally — a young, divorced mother of three girls — has several health problems. She has a benign brain tumor, is totally blind and has a neurological disease that has left her partially paralyzed. She is confined to her bed or wheelchair. With all of these problems, Sally still laughs and smiles. She never complains about her situation. Her daughters help as much as they can. The oldest recently moved out, and the responsibility of grocery shopping and errands have fallen into the hands of the 15-year-old. Her Christmas wish? "To be with my girls."

**13** George is 81 years old. He lives alone in two dimly lit rooms, and has only one small window for air. In this window, he stores food items that he can't fit into his refrigerator. His income is very low, and he is barely able to pay his rent and buy food, much less have anything left over for a telephone or clothes. He is a real loner and finds it difficult to relate to others. George is very independent and proud, and dislikes the fact that he must depend on others for some of his needs, such as transportation. George has a neighbor who brings him hot dinners once in awhile, and never forgets him on Thanksgiving and Christmas. Because of this neighbor's generosity, George says his Christmas wish is satisfied.

**14** Mr. and Mrs. J. have been married several years. They are an older couple, and struggle emotionally and financially. Mr. J. has had a drug-abuse problem for more than 20 years. He has been incarcerated several times, and although he has managed to stay "clean" for several months, he still fights the battle of temptation against resuming drug use. Because of his drug and jail record, Mr. J. has had a difficult time keeping a job. Mrs. J. is minimally employed, and although she has the credentials for a better position, she suffers from age discrimination in the job market. Mr. and Mrs. J. could benefit by, and would use well, any financial assistance that came their way.

**15** Mrs. M. is a single mother raising three teen-age children. She has multiple handicaps, including difficulty with mobility, extensive learning and speech disabilities, and severe asthma. In spite of these handicaps, she is enrolling in a literacy program and works hard to maintain high standards for her children in school. Mrs. M.'s income is very low and it is difficult for her to make ends meet. It is very important to her to provide for her children, and she would like to be able to give them a nice Christmas this year.

**16** Ms. T. is separated from her husband, who was an alcoholic and has refused to deal with his problems. She is raising her two children along with two nieces of her alcoholic sister. From time to time, she also has the responsibility of two grandchildren. The family is on public assistance and is barely making it from day to day. Despite her situation, she just received her high school diploma and is in school to learn a skill to eventually get off welfare. She and the children would really appreciate any assistance to help them to enjoy a happy Christmas.

**17** Terry is a 28-year-old divorced mother with one son. She is very sad about the fact that in order to give her son the things he needs, she has had to place herself on welfare. She sobs as she tells of her humiliation at pulling out food stamps at the grocery store. She tries to provide for the needs of her 9-year-old son who is often alone while Terry cares for elderly patients to supplement her public assistance. Terry desperately strives to set a good example for her son and would very much like to be able to afford repair parts for his bicycle. Terry is working very hard to complete studies for an associate's degree by taking night classes at a community college. She believes that with more education she may be able to get off welfare and provide a better environment for her son. Terry has been unable to visit with her counselor this month because of unexpected car troubles which she cannot afford to have repaired.

**18** Ms. P. is in her mid-20s and has three children. She is pregnant with a fourth, and although she is in the process of a divorce, her Catholic beliefs are leading her to carry the baby to term and not abort. She receives public assistance since her husband is not able to provide child support. Ms. P. hopes to go to college and develop a career so that she may support herself and her children independent of public assistance. She could use financial assistance to make the holidays more enjoyable for herself and her children.

**19** This 32-year-old woman is pregnant, in jail and has lost her public assistance benefits. When she leaves the jail, she will have to find a place to stay. She needs a month's rent for transitional shelter while she reapplies for benefits.

**20** This 18-year-old woman is living in a motel. She is pregnant and needs to find an apartment, her first month's rent and a crib. She is separated from her family, having left home when she was 16.

**21** Susan is a 28-year-old single mother of four children. She experienced physical and emotional abuse as a child, which created a pattern of willingness to tolerate abuse from her spouse and others. Through work with preventive services, this young woman has begun to value herself and has been able to sep-

arate from her abusive partner. In spite of chronic health problems, she has struggled valiantly to provide a secure and loving home for her children. She is currently enrolled in a school program as a step toward economic independence.

**22** This young mother is dying of bowel cancer. She only has a few months to live, according to doctors. She has two little boys, ages 3 and 5, who depend on her. She is frightened about the prospect of dying and leaving them without a mother. The father of one boy lives hundreds of miles away. The other father lives with the mother, but is having a hard time dealing with her illness and continues to behave as if everything is normal. The mother tries to cook and clean and take care of her boys, but her health is deteriorating rapidly and soon she will not be able to do much. The boys' father has an unemployable job. Their financial resources are minimal, leaving them without money for a telephone, which they desperately need for medical reasons. Sometimes they don't have enough to eat. This family would benefit from help tremendously.

**23** The S.P. family arrived in Rochester in September, 1986, after spending many years in a Thai refugee camp. The husband is attending classes to improve his knowledge of English. This education will give him a greater opportunity to find a job so that he will be able to support his family. There are seven people in the S.P. family. One daughter, age 13 has had many serious medical problems and requires monthly treatment. Mrs. S.P. is expecting a baby in December. Their six-year-old son was in an automobile accident in which he suffered injuries that have required extensive medical treatment.

**24** Mrs. M.S., a widow from Laos, arrived in Rochester in August, 1987, with eight children. She was a weaver in Laos, but has never worked in the United States. She is unable to attend English-language classes because she must accompany her twin five-year-old sons to the bus in the morning and meet them in the afternoon. They are too young to be home alone. Numerous health problems also prevent Mrs. M.S. from working outside the home.

**25** Mr. and Mrs. X. are on public assistance. Mr. X. was diagnosed as schizophrenic. He has been living in a group home for about one year, and visits his family on weekends. Their son has a learning disability. Mrs. X. has the responsibility of taking care of the family and making sure that their basic needs are met. Mrs. X. needs a lady's coat, size 14; long pants to wear when the weather is cold, size 11; a girl's coat, size 14; and boots, size 8 1/2. The son says he dreams of riding his own bicycle someday. This family will appreciate and be happy with any items they get.