

Play reveals women misplaced under history's heavy labels

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — History tells us little about these five women.

Four of them were real people. One is a composite based on thousands of women.

The names of two of them were never recorded. But each one had a label: Wife. Mistress. Mother. Fiancée.

And each is identified by the man in her life: St. Peter; St. Augustine; a medieval priest; John Donne; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The five women are characters in the one-woman play "All That I Am," performed by New Jersey actress Roberta Nobleman on Tuesday, Feb. 13, as part of the University of Rochester's Women's Week.

The play was written by Sister Irene Mahoney, OSU, at Nobleman's suggestion.

"I had this idea that somewhere or other there's a whole part missing in many of the stories that we hear," Nobleman said of

the play's genesis. History omits the stories of the "little people" — the secretaries, the cleaning women, "those who got pushed under the rug" — she said.

In Sister Mahoney's play, the little people — both men and women — are represented by five women who were in some way connected to important Christian religious figures.

The two characters without names are St. Peter's wife and St. Augustine's

mistress. The composite character is Hilde of St. Bremer, who is based on the thousands of priests' wives who, during the Middle Ages, were forced to leave their husbands when the Catholic Church began to enforce its celibacy regulations. The other two women are Ann Donne, the wife of poet John Donne, and Maria Von Wedemeyer, the fiancée of Dietrich



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
Despite the 16 years St. Augustine spent with his mistress, history portrays her as a vamp.

for 20 years with "Roger," her priest husband, after being told by the Catholic Church that her marriage is invalid.

"The wife role here is seen very much as ... a piece of disposable property," Nobleman said. "I feel it is a total distortion of the Adam and Eve story. Eve is created not to serve Adam, but to serve God."

Von Wedemeyer, on the other hand, offers a glimpse of what life can offer for women. The suffering Von Wedemeyer experiences with Bonhoeffer — who was imprisoned by the Nazis for treason — helps her to grow beyond the role of the "virgin bride," the fragile creature needing protection. Instead, she has come to realize, "I have my strength as he has his."

These five characters, like the many men and women they represent, all contribute to the church, Nobleman noted. Rarely have their contributions been recorded, and frequently these "little people" have been concealed by the roles they have been forced to play.

"The play does not give answers," Nobleman said, "but it asks a lot of serious questions — and terribly necessary questions about these roles."

Appropriately, the play ends with questions. St. Peter's wife, looking at her lot and that of the other four women, asks for them and for all of the forgotten people, "What about me? What about us? What about all of us?"



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
The "Virgin Bride," presented as a fragile creature, comes to realize "I have my strengths as he has his."



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
Roberta Nobleman un masks Hilde of St. Bremer, a fictitious character whose 20-year marriage to a priest is declared invalid.

Bonhoeffer.

St. Peter's wife provides the prologue and the epilogue, and serves as a link between the audience and the other characters, Nobleman noted. It is this character who voices the question she and the other women share with regard to the changes being experienced by the men in their lives: "And what about me?"

Each of the other four women begins her scene wearing a mask that symbolizes the role she has been given. "What's happened with these characters is that they have been labeled, and the labels set limits," Nobleman observed.

The characters then remove their masks and begin to speak, revealing the real people beneath the stereotypes. In the process, the characters call into question the validity of the stereotypes and the limits placed on their lives.

Ann Donne, for example, is portrayed during her 12th pregnancy in 15 years of marriage. She would later die at age 33 while giving birth to that child.

She is the "Mother," Nobleman said. "The mother role (as revealed by Ann Donne) is one I see Jesus rejecting. She is just a womb to bear and a breast to feed her children."

Hilde is the "Wife." She is seen as she prepares to leave the home she has shared

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Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
Nobleman's favorite is "the Wife," a composite character she created based on the thousands of priests' wives forced to leave their husbands.