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Actors Workshop Stresses Flexibility

By CONNIE SICA

IT'S called a black box stage. In the world of the theater, that loosely translates into a flexible seating and stage arrangement, used to create a particular environment for the audience. This can be an arena or a center, thrust or proscenium stage.

The flexibility and agility delights many theatrical groups, especially those involved in innovative and experimental presentations. It is the perfect instrument for the cast of "Farmland," a new contemporary play produced by the Actors Workshop of Long Island at Dowling College in Oakdale.

"The world intimidates; I try to build," said John Monteleone, artistic director and founder of the Actors Workshop and dramatic arts instructor at the college. "Nobody is allowed to say I can," he said about his stu-



Cast members rehearsing a scene from "Farmland" at the Actors Workshop of Long Island at Dowling College.

Through the intricacies of family relations, the play, through absurd moments of farce and tragedy, examines the triumph of human survival despite crushing events in people's lives. For some people, death is a welcome relief; for others, an illusionary crutch of wealth and fame offers a reprieve from despair.

"As the family unit dissolves, the children pursue the American Dream," said the playwright, explaining how a farmer's son dons a hard hat to construct brick buildings in the fields where he once "jackhammered corn."

Using the black-box concept, sound effects, emanating from the catwalk above the audience, and slide projections highlight and extend the action and imagery on stage. Environmental scenes, from Long Island's landscapes and seashores to contractors' bulldozers, flash before the audience.

"It's always easier to give an act, a little line, than build," said Gary Valentine of Stony Brook, who portrays the play's character of Sammy. Although a member of the Actors Workshop for only eight months, his background as a standup comic qualifies him as a seasoned performer.

Another acting veteran, Diane Harrington, strongly identifies with her role. "I fully understand the frustrated actress in Sue Ann," said the Kings Park resident, who has returned to acting after a hiatus of six years.

Mark Ingrassia of Smithtown is on the other end of the spectrum; this is his first acting exposure. "I try to get the underlying feeling of Joe's surrounding," he said softly, staying within his understated stage personality.

The basis of John Monteleone's philosophy is that the center of improvisation is the moment-to-moment experience and that this transformation is a vital, pivotal process for the workshop's participants. "It's the opening; the craft of how the actors and the actresses work themselves and work by themselves that is paramount because the actors of a play are interpreted by them," said the artistic director.

During his acting career, the artistic director took part in 40 productions and he is the author of eight plays. His formal education includes a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the New York University Theater School of Arts graduate program and he expects to get a master's degree in educational theater from Adelphi University next year.

His first acting experience, however, did not occur on the stage. "At about the age of 3," he said, smiling, "my mother dressed me in an Italian folk costume: black hat, shirt with ornaments and black pants. She put me on the seat of a chair to dance and sing 'Papino the Italian Mouse.'" It was a form of play between a mother and child, he said, and it was a natural expression for his mother; she studied opera for 13 years.

Today, John Monteleone's creativity of acting, writing and directing is channeled into Actors Workshop, which is divided into segments. The beginners' work serves as an orientation to opening up to the experiences of observation and imagination, and the second stage, the intermediate, is learning the expressive moment and to go with one's feelings.

In the final analysis, the director concluded, acting is the personal instrument of the artist, adding that he always tells his students, "It's O.K. to be expressive. You're important. You're important to yourself. You're the miracle."

(The play opened Friday at the college's Performing Arts Center. There will be performances at 8 P.M. this Friday and Saturday and Dec. 16 and 17. Tickets are \$7. Call 737-6911 for reservations.)

Farmland is a metaphor for purity.

ents, "they can only say I am discovering how."

The concept of the Actors Workshop of Long Island originated four years ago in a small studio in Bayshore as a "means of employment." Today, it enjoys the privileges and facilities of Dowling College, and is operated through the college. "Our production can be multimedia events, incorporating music, dance and fine arts because of the center," Mr. Monteleone said.

"You can play through a straight story line, but I want my audiences to think," said the artistic director, who is also the author of the current production. In the play, farmland is a metaphor for purity. Real-estate foreclosures in the farming community serve as a larger metaphor for the system's bureaucratic invasion into an individual's personal dignity. "A farmer once said, 'The white man took land from the Indians. Now, the politicians are taking the land from the farmers,'" the playwright said.