

'More From Story Theatre' comes to Dowling

by Rene Babich

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"I train people to be artists, not soap opera stars," said Monteleone. "I want to integrate the mainstream public and the artist. My vision is to do something for the arts on Long Island. The college has shown an interest in my presence and has done a great deal to help me."

Monteleone said since he joined the staff at Dowling in 1986, he has been trying to build up the theatre aspect of the school. He has partially renovated the theatre and is constantly working on improving the features of the performing arts building.

"I believe a playwright should strive for excellence and a unique voice," he said. "This century has seen more changes, more experimentation and more styles emerge than ever before. The greatest art seldom receives the attention it deserves."

Despite the efforts of Monteleone, one of the biggest problems his Actor's Workshop has had is in drawing audiences to innovative plays, experimental or original.

He attributes this to what people have become accustomed to seeing in movies and plays today, which he calls "cheapened mythologies geared at tapping into the weak, most surface subconscious." Such emotions as revenge, violence and blatant, meaningless sexuality are what many filmmakers and playwrights use to attract people to their work, Monteleone says.

"We want to sell a product," said Monteleone. "The majority of people occasionally enjoy complex plots, but most of the time, they are tired (from working) and they want to be entertained. I can't blame them. If a play has merit I don't mind doing it. I have nothing against entertainment. I just don't want to do anything trite."

Monteleone also works closely with children in theatre. He has put on plays at Dowling, acted by children, which have been written by Dowling theatre students. In March, he plans to put on a play that deals with children coping with divorce issues.

"It's about finding the answers," he said. "There is music in it that lets the questions be dealt with in a positive way. It's geared at uplifting the audience."

Monteleone said he believes theatre should be used as an educational tool. By learning how to act, by learning how to adopt a role, children can relate to others in a better way.

"Theatre is a place where we can discover ourselves," Monteleone said. "Education to me is an art. It's the most valuable thing we have. Everything you are is from an experience you've had. Education has to be taken seriously. We're not here to educate the teachers, we're here to educate the students. Art is a utility — a tool in their lives."

Monteleone is currently embarking on a theater project with problem children in the Longwood School District. He said he feels that theatre is an effective tool in helping to iron out emotional problems in children and helping to build confidence.

"Every person is a whole human being," he said. "When we learn how to understand them, it is more difficult to hate. We flatten the image of humanity. By learning to understand the creation process, it can often teach us about ourselves. Mistakes are part of life. If you're afraid to write poorly, for instance, you will never write really well."

While John Monteleone says theater is more than just entertainment, the next production of his Actor's Workshop of Long Island Repertory Theatre Company is described by him as a "playful, beautiful, wonderful exploration of the imagination."

Beginning March 9 and running until April 1, *More From Story Theatre* will be presented at Dowling College's Performing Arts Center. The author of the play is Paul Sills, the founder of Chicago's Second City Improvisational Company.

An improvisational workshop for actors and comedians during the 70's, Second City was responsible for hoisting the careers of such comedic giants as *Saturday Night Live* stars Dan Akroyd, John Belushi and Gilda Radner. Second City eventually evolved into the Second City Television (SCTV), which featured the likes of John Candy, Eugene Levy, Andrea Martin and Martin Short.

Based on American, Celtic and Arabian folk lore, *More From Story Theatre* is a form of improvisational theatre in itself, as it is taken from a written text, yet at the same time is a flexible text that can be manipulated by each director who uses it.

"It's a funny, warm play for the whole family," said Monteleone. "It brings out the child in us. Each of the nine stories has an underlying message."

Monteleone, who is the artist in residence, instructor in dramatic arts at Dowling, and the producer of the college theatre department productions, said that characters such as imps, mothers and princes are used in the play because they can be interpreted in so many ways.

"They could be created into as colorful of characters as we want," he said.

Aside from his work at Dowling, Monteleone also runs the Actor's Workshop of Long Island. Encompassing a Repertory Company, an acting school for adults, teens and children, Monteleone has been running the school since 1984. He is the author of eight plays of his own and is currently working on a ninth. In January, he starred in the Oberon Theatre Ensemble's rendition of the "Devil's Advocate" at the Chelsea Theatre Festival in New York City, a company comprised of former students from Monteleone's Actor's Workshop.