

Musil, Rosemary

Pretending without pretense

By Carolyn K. Colwell

"It's only half a day to Christmas," the young voices sing, even though it's only October.

To the accompaniment of a lilting tune, these actors and actresses block out positions on an empty stage. The work has begun which will polish their play into the Western Springs Children's Theatre winter production, a musical adaptation of Dicken's "A Christmas Carol."

One person who acts as a special audience to this rehearsal is Ella Heimbrodt, the children's theater director. Tapping her feet to the tune, she basks in the glow of the turned-up house lights and the enthusiasm of the cast on the stage below.

A few days later an Elmhurst junior high school cafeteria becomes a rehearsal hall. Nearly sixty girls try out for roles in "Cinderella Herself." A little scared and a little self conscious, the girls begin to relax as Rosemary Musil demonstrates how easy it is to pretend to be a clumsy Cinderella.

Traditionally, Europe, not Elmhurst, has been regarded as the cradle of children's theater. Rumania dates the birth of its children's theater in the fourth century. And many place the beginnings of modern children's theater in the 18th century French court. But suburban Chicago also is a landmark in the development of theater by and for children.

Two of the oldest and most outstanding young drama groups here are the Western Springs Children's Theatre and the Elmhurst Children's Theatre. This year they embark on their 25th anniversary seasons, still led by the women who first put them on the map, Ella Heimbrodt and Rosemary Musil.

Over coffee one afternoon before her casting session, Mrs. Musil tried to explain her attitude toward the role of children's theater. "We try to give professional theater to children within the realm of their understanding," she said.

"This theater exists for the audience. It doesn't exist to make children actors and actresses. It makes it more interesting for children because we have children actors."

Moving to the edge of her seat, her huge blue eyes glowing, Mrs. Musil stressed the difference between an audience of children and an audience of adults. "A child never watches a live performance. He lives it."

Child actors are also different. "A child never really is an actor. A child acts constantly, trying on slices of life to see how it feels. All you have to do is love children and respect them and you can get them to act."

Mrs. Musil has very specific opinions about the content of children's plays. She is the author of more than 30 of them. A good children's play must be believable, entertaining and imaginative, she said. "It should make them think about people and problems they've never thought about before."

The Elmhurst Children's Theatre is supported by 18 parent teachers associations, while the Western Springs group is part of the autonomous adult Theatre of Western Springs. Mrs. Heimbrodt directs their program of drama classes for children from fifth grade through high school.

About 150 children participate in this drama program each year. First-year students learn improvisation, pantomime, movement, voice and characterization before they ever tackle memorization of lines and scripts. Each class not involved in the children theater's two major productions puts on a one-act play.

Sitting in the lobby of the community theater, Mrs. Heimbrodt watched her students parade through the door and go into the auditorium for the rehearsal. Between personal greetings to each by name, she told her views of the importance of drama classes.

"Like any creative activity, it releases children. It frees their capacity to think, to believe, to put themselves in someone else's shoes," she said.

Studying characterization, for example, "makes people aware of really looking and seeing and listening," she said. "It's seeing what makes other people tick. If you don't learn that in your formative years, you're really out in the cold later."

The woman who's spent a lifetime in the theater still believes in the value of fantasy. "Sure a lot of theater is fantasy," she said, "but I would hate to see a child brought up to become an adult who couldn't day dream."

"Our society today is so geared to materialism and the pace of living is so great that many of our children are so organized," Mrs. Heimbrodt said. "They need time to have something of beauty and imagination to supplement what they see in society. Today our children's theater is so important." □

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Director Rosemary Musil uses the creative dramatics approach as she demonstrates one way to approach a character.

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She leads children to Elmhurst stage

By PATRICIA STEMPER

Rosemary G. Musil, a founder and director of the Elmhurst Children's Theater, will resign as its director next spring.

That's nothing new for the exuberant and energetic 69-year-old Mrs. Musil, of 293 W. Freemont, Elmhurst, for she has resigned as director at the end of every season since the theater's opening in 1948.

"I've been rehired for the last 24 years," Mrs. Musil said. "I would retire tomorrow if I could find someone to carry on as director. I'd love to have the theater carried on by someone else."

Mrs. Musil's interest in children's theater dates back to the 1920s when she taught children's dramatic classes in Kansas City, Mo.

"I couldn't find plays for the children to work with so I began writing them," she said.

"The first was the 'Seven Little Rebels,' which is about the original sitdown strike," Mrs. Musil said, adding that she rewrote the play 18 times before she was satisfied with it.

The establishment of the Elmhurst Children's Theater in 1948 and the writing of her best known children's play came about as the result of a visit to the Children's Theater of Evanston in the early 1930s.

She said she was so impressed with the production and the theater's director, Winefred Ward, of Evanston, that she offered to write a play for one of the theater's productions.

The result was 14 plays, including "The Ghost of Mr. Penny." It is considered among the best of modern children's plays and is in almost continuous performance somewhere. It has been presented on Broadway and in London, the theater capitals of the world.

"In 1948, Elmhurst College decided it was time for Elmhurst to have a children's theater," said Mrs. Melvin Peters, of 292 Arlington, Elmhurst, a theater spokesman.

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"A meeting of interested persons was called and Mrs. Ward was asked to speak to the group about the organization and goals of such an undertaking.

"The plan was adopted immediately and upon suggestion of Miss Ward, Mrs. Musil was appointed as the theater's director," Mrs. Peters said. That November, Mrs. Musil's "Hurricane Island" was the theater's first production.

To date the theater, which is considered among the best in the Midwest, has presented 73 plays, many of which were written by Mrs. Musil. An estimated 1,000 children and adults have been involved in the theater's productions.

And now, to the delight of Mrs. Musil, some of the first child actors to perform in the theater productions are bringing their own children to participate in productions.

"I wrote children's plays because it's such an opportunity for children to experience a play," Mrs. Musil said. "They never watch it; they live it."

Mrs. Musil's philosophy on writing children's plays is based on that of Madame de Genlis, an 18th Century French educator who believed that children would learn more if they enjoyed themselves while they were being taught.

"It's not difficult to please a modern child if the performance is well done. Basically the child has a longing for poetic justice and emotional release."

Based on this, Mrs. Musil leads her audience into a problem, be it in a fairy tale, classic, or modern adventure story. "We get thousands of fantastic reactions," she said. "What's more dramatic than a wicked witch who plots a killing right on stage? The children see what evil does and the extremes it can be carried to."

Musil, Rosemary



Mrs. Musil: resigns every year

"If a child in the play does something rotten to another child there is no laughter from the audience. But, if a child does something to an adult who has taken advantage of the child, the kids roll in the aisles."

The theater begins its 25th season Saturday with a presentation of "Cinderella, Herself," at Sandburg Junior High School, 345 E. St. Charles. The performance will be repeated Sunday at Sandburg and Nov. 18 and 19 at Bryan Junior High School, 111 W. Butterfield.



Little Trib
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Rehearsing "Cinderella, Herself" in Sandburg Junior High School, Elmhurst. (Trib photo)

24th anniversary

Elmhurst to host 'ghost' writer, kids' theater

Elmhurst residents are saluting the Elmhurst Children's Theater on its 25th anniversary by joining in a dinner party at the Sheraton Oak Brook Hotel on Oct. 13. They are also honoring Rosemary G. Musil, a founder of the theater and its director since 1948.

Mrs. Musil is retiring at the end of the season and will devote herself to her first novel, which is described as "Gothic," and is about ghosts. Mrs. Musil wrote many of the nearly 80 plays the theater has produced.

Mrs. Musil has a "thing" about ghosts. One of her most often produced plays (presented in theater capitals of the world, including

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Broadway and London) is "The Ghost of Mr. Penny." It is considered among the best of modern children's plays and is in almost continuous performance somewhere.

Mrs. Musil's husband, John, has also been an active member of the Elmhurst Children's Theater and was its technical director for many years.

Three persons formerly active with the theater are handling party arrangements. They are Mrs. Melvin Peters, Mrs. Walter Conner, and Antone Hotle. Tickets are \$10 and are available from Mrs. Peters, 834-0090.

In honor of the affair, Oct. 6 thur 13 will be Elmhurst Children's Theater Week by proclamation of Ray W. Fick, mayor of Elmhurst.

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Elmhurst Children's Theater

Her labor of love for 25 years

By Gary Washburn

IN 1948, WHEN Rosemary Musil helped found the Elmhurst Children's Theater, she agreed to direct the first play. Now, as plans are being readied to celebrate the theater's 25th anniversary, Mrs. Musil still finds herself guiding young thespians thru their paces.

"I wanted to devote my time to writing," she said, "and I still do." However, Mrs. Musil, authoress, playwright, and teacher, admits she loves to direct the plays that delight several thousand Elmhurst children and parents three times a year.

Associates who help run the theater are happy she decided to stay at the helm. They speak in glowing terms of her talent and "unbounded energy."

THE CHILDREN'S theater has about 900 alumni, including some who now teach drama at colleges and universities, act in television commercials, and have remained in the entertainment field in various capacities.

Mrs. Musil usually shies away from conversation about her pupils, stressing that the most important person in the theater's productions is the youngster sitting in the audience who perhaps has never seen a live production before. Her greatest satisfaction, she says, is "the feeling of intense participation of the children in



TRIBUNE Photo by Hardy Wieting

Rosemary Musil [center], director of the Elmhurst Children's Theater, helps two young actresses, Donna Noonan [left] and Cathy Dzierwa, with their parts for "The Mouse That Roared."

the audience. They never watch a play. They LIVE a play. Just watching their faces is adequate reward."

Mrs. Musil reminisced about a 10-year-old girl named Amelia who became part of the Cinderella fantasy a decade ago.

After each play, the actors and actresses in the Elmhurst productions, who range from grammar school to college students, customarily come back on stage and talk with the children they have just enter-

tained. Amelia had talked to Cinderella's fairy godmother.

LATER THAT night, Mrs. Musil received a call from the girl's mother who said that "the fairy godmother touched her and now she won't do the dishes or go to bed."

Amelia was summoned to the phone, Mrs. Musil recalled with a chuckle, and Mrs. Musil told her, "I am speaking for the fairy godmother. You are now disenchanting. You are now Amelia." A mere mortal

once again, Amelia was able to go to bed.

"That's the reason I guess I keep doing it," Mrs. Musil said of her directing. "It's rewarding."

The current season's productions will end this weekend when "The Mouse That Roared" is presented in the auditorium of the Bryan Junior High School, 111 W. Butterfield Rd., Elmhurst.

"It's a happy thing," Mrs. Musil said. "We've had a happy time these 25 years."