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Conservatory preparing children and adults for the stage

by Scott Timm

DThe faint sound of piano music and rhythmic footsteps drifts down into the small office of the Playhouse Conservatory, located in the depths of Playhouse Square on Craft Avenue. The relative quiet of the office belies the activity of the hundreds of students who study acting, movement and creative dramatics here.

The Playhouse Conservatory offers Pittsburgh-area children and adults a wide variety of classes covering all aspects of theater. Students may concentrate on either a dramatic or musical theater program of study. Courses include acting, scene study, improvisation, musical theater, dance/movement, audition preparation and stage combat, and are offered in fall, winter and summer terms.

The Playhouse Conservatory has been in existence in its current form for 10 years, but there has been a rich tradition of theater training at the Playhouse for more than three decades. Although the Playhouse Conservatory is a division of Point Park College, it is not a part of that school's

theater department. More like its sister organization — the Dance Conservatory (located in Point Park's downtown campus) — the Playhouse program is primarily a center for education.

The Conservatory program has two divisions: a youth/teen division for children from the first grade to age 18 and the adult division for those 18 years and older. While most adult students range in age from 20 to 40, there have been some adults in their 50s and 60s who have successfully completed studies here.

"The Playhouse Conservatory program offers a chance for anyone who is interested in theater to take a class and see if they will enjoy it," says Janet Fanale, assistant to the executive director. "Some students simply enjoy the opportunity to meet people with similar interests in theater, and to just have fun."

Whether for fun, or a more serious purpose, the Conservatory draws approximately 200 students each term from Pittsburgh and the surrounding areas. Many of these students go on to work in productions

throughout Pittsburgh and beyond, and some eventually find fame in their profession: Shirley Jones and Lenora Nemitz are just two of the successful alumni of the Conservatory training program. Many of the students in the Conservatory also appear in productions staged by Gargaro Productions, the Playhouse Theater Company, Civic Light Opera and others.

Since the ultimate goal of any training program in the performing arts is the development of artistry in performance, the Conservatory's intensive summer term culminates each year with a fully-staged performance of both a play and a musical. These performances give students an opportunity to use their classroom skills in front of an audience, help students synthesize their theoretical knowledge with their inherent theatrical instincts, and develop their professional "polish." They also allow Pittsburghers to witness the great range of talent and abilities of the casts, and to speculate on the stars of tomorrow.

In addition to serving as a

training center, the Conservatory recently has found itself providing another service — casting assistance. With the increasing number of feature motion pictures and television productions being filmed in Pittsburgh, several local casting agencies use the Playhouse Conservatory to find children and adults for upcoming productions. They also serve as a clearinghouse for information on upcoming auditions and opportunities in the theater.

One of the key elements to the Conservatory's success is found in its instructors. Executive Director Ken Gargaro describes them as "practicing professionals," individuals who work primarily as actors and directors, and have advanced degrees in acting, direction and production. In addition, they have a great love for the theater and a need to share this passion with their students.

Several of these instructors have been with the Playhouse Conservatory for many years, among them Doug Pona, who also teaches at the Rogers School for the Performing Arts; Ruth Willis, a founding

member of the Open Stage Theater; and Denise Pullen. A recent addition to the faculty is Alex Cordaro, who taught movement and stage combat during the summer term. Cordaro, now in Arizona studying stage combat, was himself a student at the Conservatory as a child, along with his sister Kate, who now studies at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

Fanale has been working at the Conservatory with Gargaro for about two years, but met him a few years earlier, when she was a sophomore at Chatham College. Fanale, whose mother ran a children's theater company in Rochester, N.Y., was trying to decide in what direction she wanted her theater career to go. She asked Gargaro, one of her theater instructors, for guidance. Instead of advising her to enter a graduate program in theater, he encouraged her to remain in Pittsburgh and try to find work. In addition to her work with the Conservatory, she can be found on local stages in a variety of roles. She currently

is in the long-running hit *Nunsense*.

Registration now is being accepted at the Playhouse Conservatory for the fall term, which will begin Sept. 18. For more information on registration or classes, call 621-3948.

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