

New theater festival is one big play ground

By MARTIN F. KOHN
FREE PRESS THEATER WRITER

For Rick Sperling and the Mosaic Youth Theater of Detroit, it's the opportunity to have their work seen by an audience of adults. For Mary Locker and Heartlande Theatre Company, it's a chance to show off the play they've been developing for more than a year and maybe tempt others to stage it. For 26-year-old James Ingagiola of the Brass Tacks Ensemble, it's the fulfillment of a longtime dream to direct "King Lear."

With its TreeTown Theatre Festival, which opened Thursday and runs through through Aug. 29, Performance Network in Ann Arbor opens its stage to selected other producing organizations in southeast Michigan.

Some of the troupes, such as Mosaic and Heartlande, are well-established; others, less so. There's a simple reason the public might never have heard of the Brass Tacks Ensemble or others like it.

"A lot of them are names they created for this," says Johanna Broughton, executive director of Performance Network. This doesn't mean that the festival picked the first half-dozen would-be thespians who jumped up and said, "Let's do a show." Selection is made by a formal application process and a committee that weighed each proposal's merits.

Do unto others

Helping other artists produce plays is one of Performance Network's two reasons for existing. The other is to produce its own plays. "We used to alternate between the two" in a regular season, Broughton says. "That was a killer. Neither one got our full attention."

Thus was born the idea of a summer festival devoted exclusively to others' productions. Performance Network is committed to the idea; they call this year's festival "the first annual."

"It's important for artists to be self-sufficient," Broughton says,

TreeTown Theatre Festival

8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday

(No performance July 4)

Through August 29

Performance Network

408 W. Washington, Ann Arbor

\$12, \$9 students and seniors,

\$50 TreeTown Ticket provides unlimited admission to all shows

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Finding new plays

Heartlande Theatre shares that enthusiasm, but in terms of experience it's at the other end of the spectrum. In 1993, Heartlande staged the Midwest premiere of "A Piece of My Heart," a play about American women in Vietnam. The production, at the Hilberry Theatre in Detroit, drew glowing reviews and enthusiastic audiences.

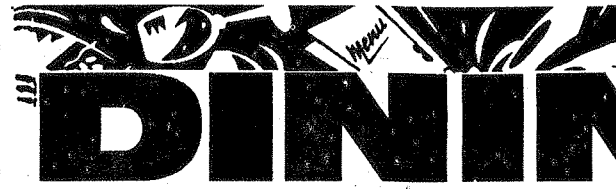
"Out of that, we became interested in original scripts," says Heartlande producer Jan Radcliff. Since then, Heartlande has concentrated on developing new plays and playwrights through its ongoing series of staged readings and its New Plays Initiative, a series of workshops and writers' retreats.

Livonia playwright David MacGregor's comedy "Mainstream," the first script developed through the new plays initiative, will have its world premiere production July 15-18 at the TreeTown Festival. "Mainstream" follows the misadventures of Henry, a shy professor of medieval studies. "His entire life is encompassed in Chaucer and Boethius and Gower," says director Mary Locker. All that changes when Henry discovers pop culture and writes a best-selling novel.

Locker, who directed a staged reading of "Mainstream" last year, envisions the play "having a long life in regional theater."

Grown-up youth theater

Most of his performers are teenagers, but don't equate Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit with children's theater, says artistic director Rick Sperling. Children's theater is fine, Sperling adds, but



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"It's important for artists to be self-sufficient," Broughton says, but that isn't always possible and that's where the festival can help. While Mosaic Youth Theatre can (and does) mount full-scale productions entirely on its own, many creative people don't have those resources. Performance Network can provide a theater and expertise in producing and marketing.

For example, Brass Tacks Ensemble, whose production of "King Lear" is scheduled as the festival's second offering, July 1-11. The principals involved all have stage backgrounds, "but they've never tackled something that large," Broughton says.

Quite so, agrees Brass Tacks' Ingagiola, who is directing "King Lear." Brass Tacks "just sort of formed recently," he says. For all practical purposes, Brass Tacks is Ingagiola and two friends, Rob Sulewski and Jeff Steiger. They have assembled a cast of 16 — "12 principals and four in the ensemble" — which might not have been possible without the festival.

"I've acted in Shakespeare and directed, but I've never directed Shakespeare," says Ingagiola, who majored in drama at the University of Michigan. Now he has his chance, and "King Lear" might just be the beginning. Ingagiola would like to work in theater full time.

"We have a sort of dream list," he says.

TREETOWN FESTIVAL SCHEDULE

- **Today-Sunday** — "Everybody's Talkin'," a musical based on Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing," Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit
- **July 1-11** — "King Lear," by William Shakespeare, Brass Tacks Ensemble
- **July 15-18** — "Mainstream," by David MacGregor, Heartland Theatre Company
- **July 22-25** — "Echoes," by N.

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Grown-up youth theater

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That's one reason Sperling welcomes the opportunity to present "Everybody's Talkin'," a Motown-style musical adaptation of Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing," today through Sunday as the TreeTown Festival's opening show. "The majority of people who come to see our show in Ann Arbor are adults and college students. We have this wonderful following in Ann Arbor."

Mosaic's following extends far beyond Michigan. The troupe played the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., earlier this year and has been chosen to represent the United States at World Youth Theatre 2000, a festival scheduled for July 2000 in London, England.

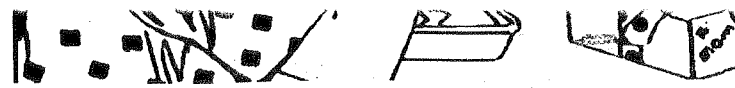
There's no Shakespearean language in "Everybody's Talkin'," but Sperling and company have left many of the original themes intact.

The show also modifies the original to allow for plenty of singing and dancing. "Instead of an army coming back from a war, they're all performers coming off a nine-month tour: Don Pedro's Road Show," Sperling says.

MARTIN F. KOHN can be reached at 313-222-6517 and at kohn@freepress.com.

Richard Nash, Shadow Theatre Company

- **July 29-August 1** — "Summer Dances," new dances by Terpichore's Kitchen
- **August 5-15** — "Strange Love & Unusual Sex," by various playwrights, RAH/KIVA Productions
- **August 19-29** — "Office Hours," by Norm Foster, Mercury Theatre Company



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