



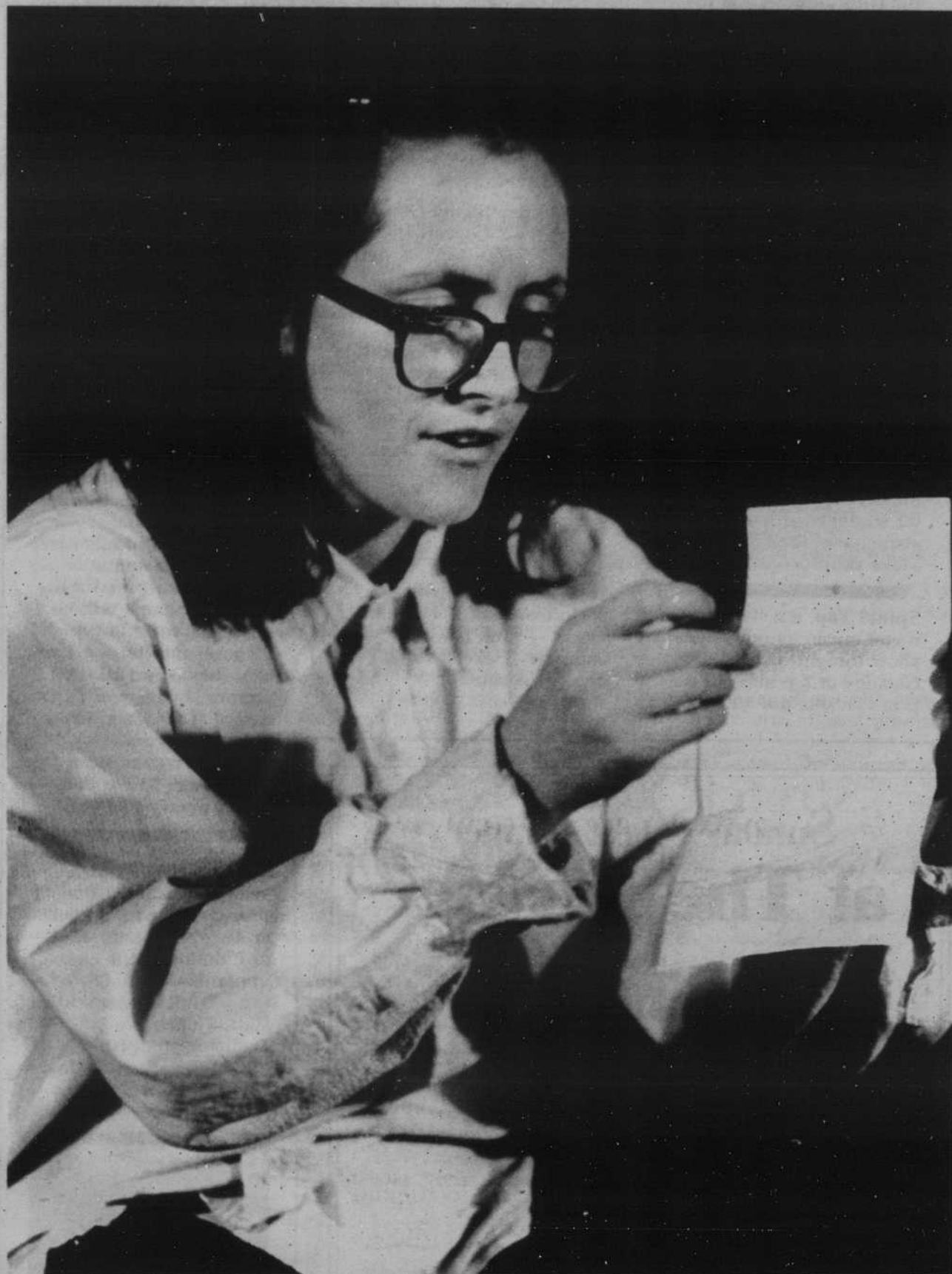
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Charlie Akers plays Carter in the upcoming Mixed Pieces Theatre production of Wendy Wasserstein's "Uncommon Women and Others."



From left to right: Brenda Jones, T. K. McDonald and Shaughn Shuey prepare for "Uncommon Women and Others," a play which opens Thursday, at the Knights of Pythias Hall.

Mixed Pieces: Obscure plays, unknown performers

The actors in Mixed Pieces Theatre know their situation is risky. In the past few months the group's 25-or-so members have invested most of their extra time, spent a great deal of their own money and allowed their "relationships to suffer" — all for the sake of their company.

Mixed Pieces is a six-month-old Eugene theater group that brings together virtually unknown performers and obscure plays. And they do it as a non-profit, non-federated group.

Story by Kim Carlson
Photos by Michael Downey

"This is a real experiment," says D. Roberts, who directs one of the upcoming Mixed Pieces productions. "It's a real effort and a financial risk. It's something that other companies are reluctant to do."

Not only are many other fledgling companies often unwilling to take risks producing shows that aren't proven box office favorites, neither are they always ready to employ actors who aren't also box office favorites.

But Mixed Pieces Theatre is different. Calling itself "hands on theater," the company prides itself on being accessible — accessible, that is, to amateur actors, especially women and ethnic minority members, who might not have the opportunity to perform elsewhere in Eugene.

And accessible to community theater-goers; tickets for the group's three different upcoming plays are \$3.50, fairly inexpensive compared to ticket prices charged by many Eugene theater companies.

While their adventure might be considered daring or even risqué, the members of Mixed Pieces believe there is a Eugene audience that's interested in seeing the type of theater they are producing... works that are primarily written for and by blacks, Latin Americans and women. Most of the plays they put on are not well-known, mainstream works. So why would a young company take on such a task? Because, they say, they want to fill a gap.

"One of the reasons is that Eugene theater has been predominantly all-white theater," says Barbara Susman, a Mixed Pieces actor. Susman says that Mixed Pieces is fulfilling an important need; providing a realistic reflection of the city, for the city. "Eugene is not an all-white town," she says.

Roberts agrees, and considers what they're doing "an enhancement" to the existing theater groups in town.

Many companies, she says, aren't willing to take risks to produce the kinds of plays Mixed Pieces is producing. For example, Mixed Pieces won't produce plays that have stereotypical women's roles written into them. Instead, says Roberts, they offer opportunities for women to play roles as "real people."

Although it is "rare to have nine wonderful women's roles in one play," says Roberts, Wendy Wasserstein's "Uncommon Women and Others," a production that Mixed Pieces will put on in November, is a glimpse at the lives of five graduates from an exclusive, all female college...when they gather six years after graduation.

The original Mixed Pieces: Hands On Theatre was formed by Bob Manning and Kathy Petersen in May, 1984. Their objective in forming the company was to create a theater group that offered a place for ethnic minority and women actors to perform. When Manning and Petersen moved to Seattle at the end of the summer, there were 10 or so remaining Mixed Pieces people "who wanted to carry on the flame," says Susman, a "veteran" Mixed Pieces actor.

The group members chose three directors, D. Roberts, Kitty Johnston and Kenneth Shaw, and simplified their name.

Three plays were selected to be performed in November: "Uncommon Women and Others," directed by Roberts, portrays the hopes, dreams, failures, and successes of the five women college graduates; "Ethnic Eclipse," directed by Johnston, offers a collage of Latin American dance, poetry, dramatic reading and music; and "Analices," which director Kenneth Shaw describes as episodes taking place in a "modern surrealistic wonderland."

All Mixed Pieces productions will be held at the Knights of Pythias Hall, on the corner of 12th Avenue and Lawrence Street. All shows begin at 8:15 p.m., except for two matinees: "Uncommon Women and Others" plays Nov. 1, 3, 7, 10, 15 and 18; "Ethnic Eclipse" on Nov. 9, 16, and 18 (2 p.m. matinee); and "Analices" on Nov. 2, 8, 11, (2 p.m. matinee), 14 and 17.

The future of Mixed Pieces Theatre will depend largely on the success of the upcoming productions. But Roberts is optimistic. "I'm not sure the shows will be perfect, but they'll be the most interesting things in this town," she says. "It's real community theater. We're making do with what we've got."