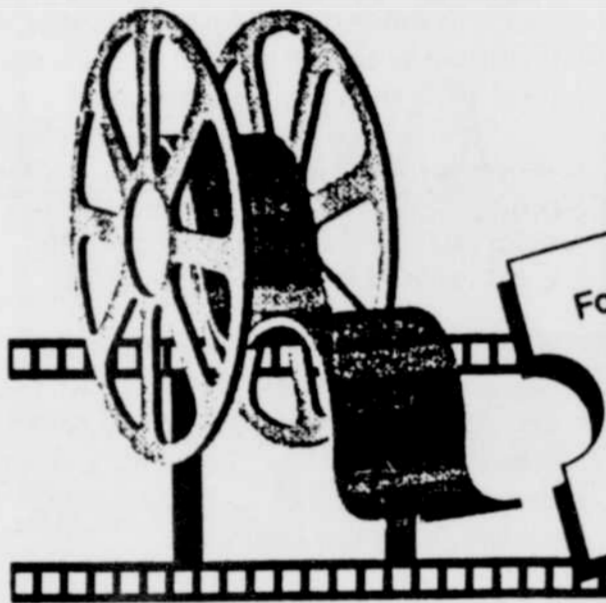


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## THEATER

# Play time

Sandra de Helen savors her current successes  
and ponders the future of theater

BY WILL O'BRYAN

For Portland playwright Sandra de Helen, April started on the right foot. Her play *The Clue in the Old Birdbath*, a musical Nancy Drew parody co-written by Kate Kasten, opened Friday, April 2, in Eugene. Opening night was sold out, as was the April 3 performance.

"The script is usually well received," de Helen says confidently. "It's actually done well everywhere. I think it's because so many women like Nancy Drew."

The play's success could lead one to believe that de Helen is on a roll. After all, she was recently named the International Center for Women Playwrights' new membership director, which she's excited about.

sented at the festival, as only her play had queer content.

De Helen says she and, she imagines, most women of the ICWP feel a kinship to Geller and her situation. "However successful people have been, there's still that element of being rejected," de Helen notes, explaining that vulnerability, like Geller's, is something to which all playwrights can relate.

To further her aim to involve more young people in theater and also support Geller, de Helen plans to produce *Life Versus the Paperback Romance* once it reaches its final form. "I will produce something for Portland," de Helen insists. "I want to do it as a benefit for our local youth."



Sandra de Helen

"Our membership is increasing weekly," de Helen boasts. Currently, the center has more than 1,100 members in 33 countries.

But for all de Helen's theatrical success and involvement—she's also a member of the National Writers Union and founded the Portland Women's Theater Company in January 1981—does it mean much in a world increasingly dominated by two-dimensional moving images? How does a playwright who lives and breathes theater regard theater's standing in modern society?

"I think plays are going to be the salvation of this type of culture," de Helen theorizes. "So much of what we do is technologically produced, as opposed to humanly produced.... Plays can be more interactive. It's different from looking at a big screen or TV. It's more thought provoking. To see a live person is just different. You can hear them breathing, see them sweating."

The future of theater, observes de Helen, depends on young people getting involved. She cites young people's street theater that she considers "just wonderful."

Samantha Geller is an example of theater simultaneously changing society and involving young people, and de Helen is closely monitoring her situation.

Geller is a 17-year-old student in Charlotte, N.C. Her play *Life Versus the Paperback Romance* was one of five plays that won Charlotte's annual Young Playwrights Festival contest. Of the five, only Geller's play was not pre-

De Helen herself doesn't recall much involvement with theater when she was young. "I didn't see a live play till I was in my early 20s," de Helen laments. "If I had, I'd have been writing plays, believe me."

But eventually she did start writing plays, her first in 1976. De Helen says she began writing plays as part of her involvement in the feminist movement. Apparently, writing had quite a cathartic effect—she came out as a lesbian less than a year after she began her new endeavor. "Feminist play writing and being a lesbian go hand in hand," she states matter-of-factly.

Twenty-three years later, being a lesbian is still reflected in her plays. De Helen posits: "Not every one of my plays has a lesbian character, but every one of my plays was written by a lesbian."

Soaking in de Helen's relaxed demeanor, today the politics don't seem quite as important as the craft. And the craft doesn't seem important unless she's enjoying herself.

"Why do you think they call it play?" she queries. "If you're not having fun, don't do it.... I have a memoir I want to write, but plays just keep getting in the way. They're more fun."

■ Little Apple Productions presents *THE CLUE IN THE OLD BIRDBATH* weekends through April 25, at Tsunami Books, 2585 Willamette St. in Eugene. For more information, call (541) 465-9240.