

# High school students get dramatic

By ELIZABETH WYATT  
This is the fourth article in a series on theatre for youth in the Markham/Stouffville area.

Throughout history, theatre has had its good times and its bad. Today in this country it is enjoying a boom. New theatres are springing up everywhere and probably not since pre-movie days have people flocked to plays in such numbers. Not surprisingly, there is a con-

current demand for theatre for, or by, young people. Newly-formed children's acting classes and teenagers' theatre groups are local answers to this demand.

But for some years now, theatre studies have been available in our high schools. Stouffville District High was among the first in the area to offer them, when Carol Stanatiou joined its staff in 1971. Markham District High School followed a year later with Ron Hindle's classes for grade 11 only. The popularity of these courses has steadily increased. Today Hindle has a staff of four other teachers, three studios and close to 500 students registered in drama classes from Grade 9 to OAC (Ontario Academic Credit, formerly Grade 13).

While Stanatiou remains the sole drama teacher at the much smaller Stouffville school, where she has an enrolment of over 150 students. "It's growing incredibly," she says. "So many more are interested (in drama). And at first it was mostly girls, but now there's a very, very healthy rep-

resentation of boys in my classes."

And with the rapid growth of the Town of Markham, new high schools now augment older institutions like Thornlea, MDHS and St. Robert's. The arts-oriented Unionville High School and Brother Andre High School, on 16th Avenue, opened in 1985. This means more schools offering courses in drama — and many more students to take advantage of them.

Another significant change is in terminology. The Ontario Ministry of Education has decreed that what used to be known as "theatre arts" now be called "dramatic arts". Brother Steven Fatum of Brother Andre explains the rationale behind the change of name:

"Theatre implies what's good for the audience; 'dramatic', what's good for the performer. In other words, the emphasis is on the process, not the end product."

There have been changes, too, in the approach to teaching this process. Traditionally, the

dramatic arts have been affiliated with English departments, with the chief drama teacher usually serving as an assistant head. This still holds true in most of York Region.

But in some new schools they belong to an arts department, along with music and the visual arts. And the day is probably not far off when drama will form a distinct department of its own, as it already does in some Toronto schools.

This early association with the study of English often led to a "scripty approach" to teaching, according to Brother Steven. "It was literary," he says, "and many teachers took a director's, rather than a performer's, view of drama. They used material written for the stage right from the start."

This meant that students were dealing with, to him, artificial characters and situations that had nothing to do with real life as they knew it. Recognizing this, the Ministry adopted a theory of the teaching of drama formulated in England. "Simply put," says Brother Steven, "it is that theatre evolves from experience, not the other way around. As a subject, it deals in imagination, rather than performance."

Now, regardless of department affiliation, teachers of dramatic arts in Ontario high schools put the emphasis on creativity, on the development of imagination, self-expression and communication. But within this concept, wide latitude is given individual teachers to exercise their own creativity.

Says Unionville High School's Jeff Young, "The Ministry's guidelines are very definite regarding methodology and process, but not all that descriptive in terms of course content."

Nevertheless, a pattern emerges in the descriptions of courses offered in four of our local schools. Subjects like the history of theatre, performance techniques and stagecraft tend not to be introduced until the higher grades. In the lower grades, teachers concentrate on drawing out students' imaginations, in helping them to understand themselves and express themselves.

"It is intended to show how drama can assist personal development," says Hindle of Markham High's grade course. "We try to make the students more self-aware and aware of others and to build up a tolerance for risk-taking." Theatre games like tableaux, sensory journeys, dance in drama are the tools.

At Stouffville, Stanatiou's introductory Grade 10 class uses similar methods, with the addition of mime, choral work and story telling. "We focus on using voice and body effectively (to foster) cooperation, concentration, problem-solving, group dynamics. They can use these skills anywhere — not just on the stage, but at work, for instance."

Brother Steven agrees. "I help them see how important effective communication is in everyday life, even in ordinary things like asking Dad for the car." Family rows are often set off "because the kids simply can't express their real thoughts or feelings. So (in Grade 10) we encourage self-exploration in a non-threatening way. We don't get to a study of theatre proper for the first two years."

To be continued next week.

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