

Northwestern College, Iowa

NWCommons

Narrative

Documents

2008

Setting the Stage: Dr. Theora England and the Theatre Program

Joan Terpstra Anderson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/theoranarrative>

Recommended Citation

Terpstra Anderson, Joan, "Setting the Stage: Dr. Theora England and the Theatre Program" (2008).
Narrative. 1.

<https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/theoranarrative/1>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Documents at NWCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Narrative by an authorized administrator of NWCommons. For more information, please contact ggrond@nwciowa.edu.

Setting the Stage: Dr. Theora England and the Theatre Program

The theatre program at Northwestern College was in low gear until the arrival of a remarkable individual.

Theora (Mrs. Harry) England was hired to teach math at the Northwestern Classical Academy in 1942. However, her association with drama began promptly. The 1942-43 Northwestern Junior College and Academy catalog reports that the annual play put on by the senior class of the academy was directed by Theora England.



Apparently this experience in drama awakened an interest in theatre that, it turns out, led England to pursue graduate study in the field. And in the 1949-50 academic year she became a member of the speech department at the junior college, teaching dramatics, while at the same time teaching English and speech at the academy. (England received her PhD in 1964 from the University of Minnesota.)

The shift into high gear: expanding the curriculum

Up to 1950, college catalogs list one course in dramatics, described simply as a course “offered during one semester, and if there is sufficient demand may be repeated the second semester.” Typical plays were to be studied, with emphasis placed upon dramatic technique and stage presentation. Students would give public performances.

With England “at the helm,” it didn’t take long for the dramatics program to grow. The 1950-51 catalog lists two courses in the field. And course content was expanded. Introduction to Dramatics was a one-semester course offered “to give students a bird’s-eye view of the theatre in all of its phases, such as history, plays and playwrights, acting, directing and producing.” Two plays were produced that year; the academy play was “Seventeen,” by Booth Tarkington, and “Little Women,” by Louisa M. Alcott, was the college play. England was credited with giving her “capable leadership” in the direction of these plays.

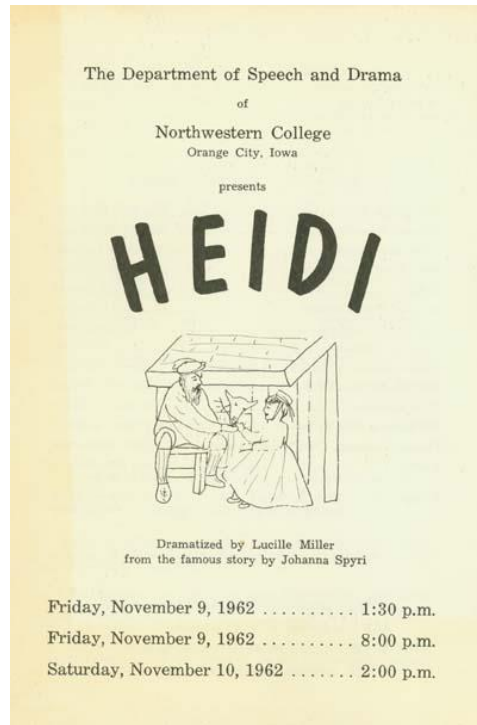
Advanced Dramatics, the second course offered that year, gave students added practical experience in dramatic procedure. Included was a unit in creative dramatics for children that entailed observation of actual groups of school children—and indication of Mrs. England’s growing interest in children’s theatre. The course also stressed the importance of drama in church and offered lessons in beginning acting, opportunity for actual experience in acting, and in directing and producing one-act plays and radio programs.

Drama for children. Drama in church. Directing and producing plays and radio programs. The expansion of the theatre program was well underway.

Children's theatre and religious drama: broadening the curriculum

Theora England had a growing passion to produce plays for children and to work with children in the process. A new course offered in the 1952-53 academic year—Creative Dramatics—emphasized principles and methods of developing original dramatizations with children. The focus on children's theatre was accentuated when, in 1960, a course by that title was added to the curriculum. "Heidi," a play by Lucille Miller, was a project of the Children's Theatre in 1962-63.

Children's plays were produced for children, which meant that area school children were invited to attend the performances at the college. According to *The Classic*, nearly 3,500 students and adults from schools in five counties were in attendance at four performances of "The Wizard of Oz," presented by the Children's Theatre group of Northwestern in 1964. The speech class in Children's Drama planned and produced the play, which was directed by Mrs. England.



The Prince, Bob Bonstra, dances with Cinderella, Mary Ann Williams, during NW's performance of the children's play.

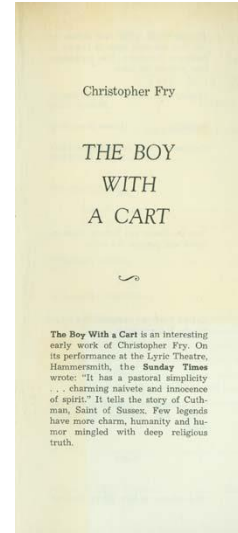
Cinderella's fairy godmother, Pat Mullinberg, appears to grant Cinderella's wish to attend the Prince's ball.

So popular were the plays produced by the Children's Theatre that the number of performances had to be increased to accommodate all who wanted to attend. "Cinderella," the children's play in 1966, was presented to nearly 5,000 school children in six performances, and upwards of 5,000 area school children attended the 1968 production of "Androcles and the Lion," a joint effort of Dr. England (as she could then be addressed) and R. Keith Allen, a newcomer to the faculty. At Christmas that year, "Amahl and the Night Visitors" was performed.

"Jack and the Beanstalk," the 1969 children's play, was directed by Dr. England, but making the beanstalk "shoot up into the sky was the task of technical director Keith Allen," as reported in *The Classic* (Winter 69-70). Allen came to Northwestern in 1967 as assistant professor of speech, having had experience teaching English, speech and drama at Trinidad Junior College, where he also directed dramatic and forensic programs.



England's conviction of the theatre's relevance to the church was bolstered by the addition of another course, Drama in Religious Education. This course was a study of the history of religious drama from classical Greek to the present, as well as adaptation of the dramatic form to the chancel. There was emphasis on the use of dramatics in young people's and children's worship services as well as recreational activities. "Boy With a Cart," by Christopher Fry, was the annual religious drama presentation for the year 1962-63.

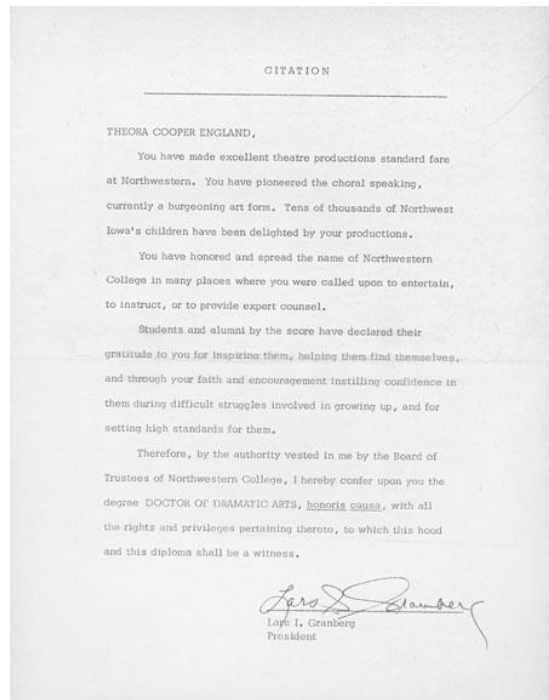


Continuing to promote the appropriateness of incorporating drama into worship, England arranged for students from her Play Direction class to conduct a workshop in religious drama at the Central



Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1967. And when the old American Church building in Orange City was obtained for a college drama center, England found the transition from church to theatre to be very fitting. "From church to theatre is not a drastic step," she wrote in *The Classic* (Winter 70-71). "Drama and worship were born together." And, drawing on her graduate studies in drama, she could say with authority that "Great plays of genuine religious significance have been written by the foremost playwrights of England, France, Germany, Russia, Scandinavia, and Spain," emphasizing that they "turned the tension[s] of life that have to do with man, his meaning, and his relation to values and purposes that are fundamentally religious."

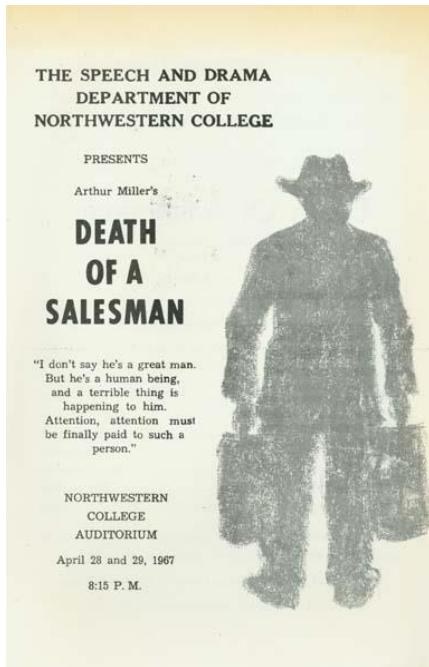
The last children's play that Theora England was to direct at Northwestern was "Beauty and the Beast," presented to over 8,000 children in several performances in the fall of 1973. She retired from Northwestern College at the end of the 1973-74 academic year, but not before she had made her mark as a champion for children's theatre. Her reputation was such, in fact, that Northwestern president Lars I. Granberg awarded her a citation honoring her for her "excellent theatre productions," noting that "[t]ens of thousands of Northwest Iowa's children" had been delighted by her productions.



Increasing productions, expanding venues: taking drama on the road

Recognition of the theatre program at Northwestern grew significantly after its modest beginnings in 1950. A 1956 issue of *The Classic*, a publication sent to alumni and supporters of the college, noted that during the year “many honors” came to the college through the department of dramatics “under the able leadership of Mrs. H. L. England,” head of Northwestern’s speech department.

Courses continued to be added to the drama curriculum. Beginning Acting, Play Direction, and Play Production were included in 1963-64. And off-campus presentations were taking place. Mrs. England took drama students to Central College in Pella in 1964 to perform at the National Youth Conference. “The Wind and the Wall,” by Don A. Mueller, was the dramatic production for the event.



But going to Pella was not the most exciting travel experience Mrs. England was to offer students. A particularly innovative course, Foreign Study in Speech and Theater, was offered in 1966-67. Participants in the tour could obtain six semester hours credit by attending regularly scheduled seminars en route. At the end of the study tour a research paper on an approved topic was required.

Travel abroad did not halt the production of drama on campus. Four major productions were planned yearly. In the spring of 1967 the Speech and Drama Department produced Arthur Miller’s play, “Death of a Salesman,” and the alumni banquet that year was an occasion to recognize Dr. England for 25 years of “outstanding service” to Northwestern College. She received a bouquet of roses from the local chapter of the national dramatic honor fraternity, Alpha Psi Omega.

Dr. England led another European theatre tour the summer of 1971. This tour focused on the study of dramatic art in the British Isles and Scandinavia and included theatre visits, seminars, visits to museums and other places related to the history of the theatre. Again, writing a research paper on an approved topic earned a student six semester hours of credit.

FEES AND SERVICES
All-inclusive cost, New York to New York, is \$1,325.

TRANSPORTATION
New York to London and Copenhagen, and Copenhagen to Glasgow, Dublin and New York by regular scheduled Jet Flights. Second Class train (Tourist Sleeper on Night Trains) and host include berth or special motorcoach within the British Isles and Scandinavia.

HOTEL ACCOMMODATIONS
Twin bedded rooms in good tourist class hotels or modern college dormitories; single room and/or private bath at a supplement, where available.

MEALS
Breakfast and one main meal (lunch or dinner) at hotels or in good restaurants.

Also, sightseeing and admission fees, excursions, theatre tickets, etc. as per the final itinerary (except the theatre in London, where members will purchase their ticket(s) to the performance(s) of their choice.) English-speaking guides wherever necessary, baggage handling and gratuities throughout the itinerary.

Ample leisure time for the pursuit of individual interest is provided everywhere.

NOT INCLUDED
Airport taxes, purely personal items (alcoholic beverages, etc.) and the fee for securing a passport (\$12.00).

THE 1971
EUROPEAN STUDENT THEATRE
STUDY TOUR

Six weeks of study and pleasure in:
ENGLAND
SCANDINAVIA
IRELAND
SCOTLAND

To receive application form, detach, fill in, and mail to: European Student Theatre Study Tour, Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa, 51041.

Date _____

Please send me application forms (and description bulletins) for the European Student Theatre Study Tour, July 12 to August 25, 1971.

Name _____
Occupation _____
Age _____
Address _____

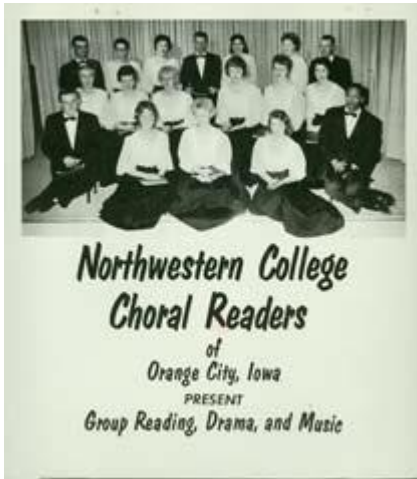
U.S. POSTAGE PAID Orange City, Iowa Permit No. 4

EUROPEAN STUDENT THEATRE STUDY TOUR

Four Countries - 45 days
July 12 to August 25, 1971

Sponsored by
NORTHWESTERN COLLEGE
Orange City, Iowa

The Choral Readers: a new dimension in theatre



As if teaching and directing plays was not enough for her, Dr. England developed a group of Choral Readers who attracted a great deal of attention with their presentations. In December of 1964 they gave a series of five performances in Minnesota, appearing as guest artists on a program with the Macalester College Drama Choros group in St. Paul, and at Bethel College, the Riverside Reformed Church of Minneapolis, the First Reformed Church of Willmar, and the Reformed Church of Roseland. In January of 1966 they appeared in churches in South Dakota and Iowa to present their Christmas concert, "The Story of Christmas."

The reputation of the Choral Readers was such that they were able to attract Professor of Theatre Arts David W. Thompson of the University of Minnesota to an interpretation workshop as guest critic. The readers demonstrated the use of choric speaking in interpretation. And there was an appearance on "College on Camera," during which they presented an abbreviated program drawn from their 1966 spring tour. December of that year saw them again in the Twin Cities area, where they presented their Christmas program, "The Child of Peace," at various churches as well as at the Southdale Shopping Center in St. Paul.



As word of the Choral Readers spread, Dr. England received invitations to conduct workshops on the art. In the fall of 1967 she conducted two workshops on the subject, one for a Teacher's Institute at Dordt College, and another at a South Dakota Teacher's Conference. Meanwhile the Readers continued to make numerous appearances, locally and in the Tri-State area. They also made extended tours of churches and schools during spring vacations.



The 1972-73 touring season began in December, when the Readers gave special performances at shopping centers in Mankato and Minneapolis. Their spring tour included performances in churches and schools in Iowa, Illinois, Ohio, New York, and New Jersey. Perhaps the most memorable experience for the Readers, though, was their appearance in two special programs in Washington, D.C., at the Capitol Building and the Washington Cathedral!

An invitation for the Choral Readers to perform at the RCA's 5th Women's Triennial at San Diego, California, took them to the West Coast in April of 1974. This resulted in a tour that included visits to various churches, schools and colleges in California, Arizona, Colorado, Kansas and Nebraska.

When Dr. England retired at the end of the 1973-74 school year, President Lars Granberg commended her for the choral reading program which she pioneered at Northwestern, and for her role in "honor[ing] and spread[ing] the name of Northwestern College" in the many places where she was called upon to entertain. He conferred upon her the degree, Doctor of Dramatic Arts, at the college commencement ceremony in May, 1974.

From City Hall to The Playhouse: campus facilities

In the beginning, academy and college plays were performed in the Orange City Community Building. A greater emphasis on theatre at the college, however, led to development of better facilities on campus for the speech and drama department. Several rooms in the old Science Hall were remodeled and redecorated. In 1954 the college play was presented on campus for the first time. There were four performances of "Elizabeth the Queen," plus an afternoon matinee for students from surrounding high schools.



**Act 1, Scene 2,
From Church
to Theatre**

THEORA ENGLAND

Northwestern College has a long history of drama. In 1954, the first play was presented on campus. Since that time, the drama department has grown and flourished. In 1970, the old American Church building was obtained for a college drama center, a facility large enough to house costumes and props, and with a large entry where refreshments could be served during intermission. The building was renamed "The Playhouse," and the dedicatory program "was highlighted by...a brilliant production of 'A Man for All Seasons'" (*The Classic*, Winter 71).

**We Call It
"The Playhouse"**

KATHY ALLEN

When a school has a college drama center, it is called a "playhouse." This is the name of the new building on campus which will house the drama department. The building is a beautiful one, and it is a pleasure to see it. The building is a beautiful one, and it is a pleasure to see it. The building is a beautiful one, and it is a pleasure to see it.

The popularity of the theatre program necessitated further expanded facilities, and in 1958 a dramatic production was held for the first time in a new Multi-Purpose Auditorium. Mrs. England was credited with the "outstanding...production" of the play, "Anastasia."

A notable event took place for the theatre program in 1970, when the old American Church building was obtained for a college drama center, a facility large enough to house costumes and props, and with a large entry where refreshments could be served during intermission. The building was renamed "The Playhouse," and the dedicatory program "was highlighted by...a brilliant production of 'A Man for All Seasons'" (*The Classic*, Winter 71).

The end of an era: Dr. Theora England retires

After 32 years of teaching at Northwestern, Dr. England retired. At a banquet held in her honor in May of 1974, an address by the Rev. Paul Nulton, a former student and then pastor of The Reformed Church in New Baltimore, New York, emphasized Dr. England's wisdom and inventiveness, as well as the personal attention she gave so many Northwestern students. A scholarship fund, to be used for those interested in a major in theatre and drama, was established in her name.

Theora England's personnel file is filled with letters of adulation from former students, expressing the many ways in which she influenced their lives. One spoke for many when he wrote that, "beyond the good memories of activities and events, there is my abiding appreciation and thankfulness for the influence, of a very personal sort, that you exerted on the lives of young persons like myself. Thank you, Mrs. England, for being a source of guidance, understanding and strength to one young man when he was going through a difficult time of growth and of exploration of the boundaries of responsibility and irresponsibility."

Another student shared a "Mrs. E." story illustrating the indomitable person that she was. It happened during the production of "Anne Frank." She recalled, in her letter to Dr. England, "Peter's father was supposed to throw me over his shoulder and carry me to a chair. The young man flatly stated that he could not, I was too heavy. Mrs. England marched up on stage and said, 'What do you mean you can't? A big, strapping fellow like you! This is how it's done.' And using the proper leverage you lifted your own weight plus about thirty pounds."

Scrapbooks

Theora England was diligent in keeping scrapbooks which contain material that serves as a sort of history of the activities of the Speech and Drama Department during her tenure at Northwestern. Photographs of play scenes, programs, and newspaper articles fill many pages. Not to be ignored, however, are the many letters of appreciation of her work, and the valentines, Christmas cards and birthday cards given by devoted students. Dr. England presented this collection of scrapbooks to the Ramaker Library in 1973.



Written and researched by Joan Terpstra Anderson.