

# Women explore theatrical 'Frontiers' at Otterbein



Dispatch photo by Mary Circelli

Charlotte Dougherty, left, and Liana Peters in 'Frontiers'

By Michael Grossberg  
Dispatch Theater Critic

First *Quilters*, now *Frontiers*. Everyone seems to want to learn more about America's pioneer women. Actress-playwright Do-reen Dunn certainly did. She wrote *Frontiers* with three other actresses: Valery Daemke, Kathleen Gaffney and Nancy Sellin. None had written about frontier women before. For that matter, none ever had attempted a full-length play.

"All four of us were actresses who had had one-woman shows," said Dunn from her home in Woodland Hills, Calif. "That's an unusual thing. We didn't like to not work between jobs, so we ended up creating work for ourselves. We wrote *Frontiers* because we were attracted by the courage and spirit of these pioneer women."

*Frontiers* had a well-received premiere last summer at the Victory Theatre in Los Angeles. Dennis Romer, Dunn's husband, directed and D. Martyn Bookwalter designed the set. Both are Otterbein College graduates. Thanks to

Otterbein College will present *Frontiers* at 8 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday; and 2 p.m. next Sunday in the Campus Center Arena Theatre. Performances continue June 3 through 6. For tickets, call 890-3028.

its alumni connections, Otterbein will stage the show's Midwest premiere Thursday. The show will continue through June 6 at the Campus Center Arena Theatre.

"AFTER WRITING *Frontiers*, we found out that *Quilters* and several other recent pioneer dramas were all written in the same six-month period. Apparently, it's an idea whose time had come," Dunn said. "Instead of women blaming someone else, we're taking responsibility for our lives and looking at our history. *Frontiers* is a celebration of women's history."

To familiarize themselves with their subject, Dunn and her collaborators read the diaries of wom-

en who helped settle the West. Several diaries were borrowed from friends whose great-grandmothers were 19th-century pioneers.

"They wrote the facts, but they didn't write their feelings. They didn't have time to analyze how they felt," Dunn said. "It became fascinating dramatically to think about the emotional impact of being confronted with so many tragedies."

Although *Frontiers* has more than two dozen characters, it focuses on the adventures of four women who leave civilization for an uncertain future in the West. Along the way, they survive fire, blizzards, illness, childbirth and Indian raids. Each of the play's six actresses plays about five roles.

"*Frontiers* is very much like *Quilters*, except it's not a musical," said Ohio State University theater professor Ionia Zelenka, who will direct Otterbein's *Frontiers*. "By the time the four main characters gather at the end for a husband's funeral, they've

changed from dainty, soft-spoken young ladies into muscular, fairly loud women."

"WE TEND to think of the settling of the West as men and cowboys and the driving of steer across the range," Zelenka said. "We tend to think that women had their babies, kept house, had meals ready for the men and that was it. Indeed, as *Frontiers* shows, women accomplished a lot more than that."

Charles Dodrill, chairman of Otterbein's theater department, has been fascinated by the period drama ever since he read the first version of the script three years ago.

"We felt it was the kind of play that would challenge us artistically while exciting our audiences," Dodrill said. "With its universal portrait of the human spirit, *Frontiers* really transcends any particular period. Exploring America was not that different from space exploration. It becomes a metaphor for people facing any frontier."



# Theatrical premieres springing up

By Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

Advertise a play as a central Ohio premiere. Normally, that's enough to pique the interest of novelty-starved theatergoers.

Not this season. In the next five months, Columbus audiences will be able to choose from far more than the usual number of provocative, regional premieres and star-studded Broadway touring productions.

Local theater groups are vying with each other to offer original productions, Ohio premieres, a post-Broadway premiere, a Midwest premiere, a Western premiere and even a world premiere.

"People are tired of seeing the same things over and over. They want something fresh, new and different," said Charles Dodrill, chairman of Otterbein College's theater department, which will present the Midwest premiere of *Frontiers* in May.

"PLAYS THAT five years ago might not have had much of an audience now are getting good audiences," Dodrill said. "It's a terrific trend that reflects the growing sophistication of the central Ohio audience."

Giving the local season an international flavor will be Columbus Ensemble Theatre's Western premiere of a Chinese play. 15, opening Feb. 13, is a contemporary comedy-drama about love and marriage. It was first presented by the Central Experimental Theatre, one of three professional groups in Beijing, China's capital city.

"This will be the first production of the play outside China," said Barbara Lane-Brown, CET artistic director. "As far as we know, it also will be the first

**For a complete calendar of winter-spring theater, see page 7 G.**

public production of a contemporary Chinese play by an American theater company in 40 years. That's exciting."

Adding to the mid-February excitement will be Gallery Players' *Albert and Eve*, which will have its world premiere run Feb. 14 through 22. A romantic comedy-fantasy by Cincinnati playwright Janis Keating, *Albert and Eve* won Gallery Players' 1985 playwriting contest. It will be the first contest winner to receive a full-scale production in the Leo Yassenoff Jewish Center's Roth/Resler Theatre.

"WITHOUT NEW playwrights, theater wouldn't have a future," said Ric Halterman, the center's drama director. "Our contest promotes the writing of more plays and thereby gives community theaters more choices. This world premiere is a culmination of Gallery's commitment to the arts."

Promoting *Albert and Eve* as a season bonus, Gallery increased its subscription base from 620 people last year to about 850 people this year. With *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, *Oliver* and the central Ohio premiere of *Isn't It Romantic?* rounding out its current "Share the Romance" season, Gallery hopes to build its subscription base to a record 900-plus next fall.

Players Theatre of Columbus, gearing up for what it hopes will be a record-setting move to Equity professionalism next fall, will cap its 63rd season with a post-Broadway premiere Feb. 5 through 28. *Harrigan 'n' Hart* is a period mu-

sical comedy about popular 19th-century composers Ed Harrigan and Tony Hart. The show's musical composer, Michael Showalter, plans to attend Players' production, the first since the show opened in Connecticut in 1984 and went to Broadway in 1985.

Other Players' shows — all central Ohio premieres — include the satirical *Greater Tuna*, opening Thursday; Agatha Christie's *Black Coffee*, opening March 19; *Nonsense*, opening May 7, a wacky off-Broadway musical comedy that substitutes for the previously announced *Cotton Patch Gospel*; and *Little Shop of Horrors*, opening June 4, the long-running off-Broadway musical about a man-eating plant.

OTTERBEIN COLLEGE will conclude its 81st season with the Midwest premiere of *Frontiers*, opening May 28, a period drama about America's frontier women.

Ohio State University concludes the first season of its new graduate-level Theatre Company with *The Dining Room*, opening Jan. 21, a contemporary drama in which a seven-member cast plays 50 characters, and *Gemini*, opening April 29, a crisis-filled con-

temporary romantic comedy.

Contemporary American Theatre Company, settling down in its new performance space at 512 N. Park St., will offer two central Ohio premieres: *My Sister in This House*, opening Jan. 29, Wendy Kesselman's all-woman thriller based on a 1930s murder case, and *Orphans*, opening March 12, Lyle Kessler's off-Broadway comedy-drama about two eccentric brothers.

Other season highlights include CET's Ohio premiere of *Stage Struck*, Simon Gray's British mystery thriller; Otterbein's central Ohio premiere of *Noises Off* (Feb. 5 through 8), Michael Frayn's funny backstage farce; and Reality Theatre's *Moral Minority*, opening March 19, an original company-improvised drama about censorship.

In the end, however, a simple Columbus premiere may turn out to be the season's most spectacular show. *Cats*, Andrew Lloyd Webber's glittering musical fantasy based on T.S. Eliot's book of feline poetry, arrives here March 31 as the long-awaited centerpiece of Frank and Will Pierson's Best of Broadway series at the Palace Theatre.



# 'Frontiers' captures hardships

By Michael Grossberg  
Dispatch Theater Critic

With *Frontiers*, Otterbein College focuses on the unsung heroines who helped settle the West — often at great cost.

Watching six actresses play five roles each in rapid succession in this pioneer drama is like flipping through a 19th century diary or scrapbook to discover previously unread pages. One wants to linger over each entry.

One young woman, riding in a covered wagon, gets her first glimpse of the vast American prairies that "glow with an inner light." One can almost see that glow reflected on her face. Another young woman travels hundreds of miles to marry an older man, sight unseen.

**OTHER WOMEN** endure Indian raids, a Confederate massacre, illness, childbirth and natural disaster. Some face setbacks with quiet courage, angry defiance or a rough, home-grown humor. Others pray for deliverance or sink into despondency. Not all survive.

Loosely tying *Frontiers* together are the episodic adventures of Alma (Patricia Cockburn), Susana (Liana Peters), Carrie (Heather Huprich) and Petrel (Cathy Collins), a British pioneer.

## REVIEW

Otterbein College will present *Frontiers* at 8 tonight and 2 p.m. Sunday, and Wednesday through next Saturday in the Campus Center Arena Theatre. For tickets, call 890-3028.

*Frontiers* most powerful sequence is the kidnapping of two women by Indians.

*Frontiers* opens in 1847 as the four women prepare to leave Philadelphia for the West. It ends in 1891, a year after the government has declared the frontier "closed," as they get together for a memory-filled final reunion.

**IN BETWEEN**, *Frontiers* sketches its minibiographies with dialogue and frequent monologues taken from personal diaries. Its monologues, in particular, give *Frontiers* the authority of a well-researched oral history.

With so many of the women's adventures told rather than shown, *Frontiers* depends upon its word-pictures to sustain the audience's sense of historical revelation. Under the experienced direction of Ohio State University's Ionia Zelenka, Otterbein's actresses deliver most of their lines with a soulful poetry.

Collins opens Act 2 with a bang as an angry woman suffering a crisis of faith. Hers may be the show's most convincingly sustained monologue.

**PERHAPS CHARLOTTE** Dougherty's most compelling scene is as a besieged mother. She reassures three daughters about pioneer life while secretly asking God to send them back East.

Unquestionably, *Frontiers*' most powerful sequence is the kidnapping of two women by Indians. After 239 days, Sara Beth (Cheryl Gaysunas) dreams of death. After 327 days, she dreams of taking one scalp for each day of her captivity. After 350 days, Sara ups the ante to two scalps per day.

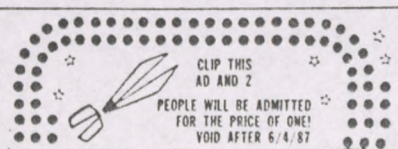
Meanwhile, ironically, the other captive (Peters) has adapted to life as an Indian. Ironies multiply when the two are rescued. Sara is overjoyed at her escape from the

"heathens," while Golden Cloud, as the other captive now calls herself, is heartbroken. Later, during the reunion, Golden Cloud's fate is revealed. She wound up in an insane asylum.

**FRONTIERS DOESN'T** stop at contrasting the women's initial rosy expectations with the harsh realities of frontier life. It also celebrates the pioneers who carved out a new home in the West.

If you liked Players Theatre's *Quilters* last fall, you're likely to enjoy *Frontiers*. In many ways, it's *Quilters* without the music. Like *Quilters*, *Frontiers* is too fragmentary to be great theater. Yet, Otterbein's commendable production makes for an interesting history lesson.

*Frontiers* was co-written by the wife of an Otterbein graduate. Here's hoping that this Midwestern premiere won't be the only dividend Columbus receives from Otterbein's growing theater alumni network.





May 28, 1987

# Struggles of pioneering women explored in "Frontiers"

by Marcie Hochwalt

You may be reminded of "Little House on the Prairie" if you attend the Otterbein Theatre Department's production of "Frontiers."

"Frontiers" is the story of pioneering women in the 19th century, showing the hardship and joy of their lives.

The show involves six actresses: seniors Charlotte Dougherty and Liana Peters; sophomores Cathy Collins and Heather Huprich; and freshmen Patty Cockburn and Cheryl Gaysunas. Each actress plays a range of roles from young children to old women.

Dougherty said, "It was a challenge to play such a variety of roles due to the differences in age and situation."

Collins agreed. She said it was especially challenging as an actress to be a young child in one scene and an old woman in the next.

Besides challenging these six women as actresses, the production also challenged their ideas about a woman's life in the 19th century.

Gaysunas said: "I've learned a lot about the history of the frontier period. I've grown to sympathize with the struggles they faced."

Peters added: "I think it gives light to the struggle of the women in this period. It shows the imagination they had to have in order to survive."

"Frontiers" is being performed in the arena theatre. It is being directed by Ionia Zelenka, a professor at Ohio State.

Dougherty said, "It was a pleasure to work with a director outside of the department because all directors work differently and it's always exciting to learn new approaches."

"Frontiers" will be performed at 8 p.m. May 28-30 and at 2 p.m. May 31. It will also be performed at 8 p.m. June 3-6.



*Otterbein actresses discover life in the 19th century.*

*Photo by Cindy Abrams*



# Stage set for area colleges' theater

By Michael Grossberg  
Dispatch Theater Critic

When most central Ohioans consider visiting a local college or university to see a play, they usually end up at Ohio State University or Otterbein College.

Their theater programs are well-known, well-funded and well-developed, and have established a regional reputation for high-quality productions.

Yet OSU and Otterbein are not the only central Ohio schools with flourishing theater programs. There also is Capital University in Bexley; Denison University in Granville; Kenyon College in Gambier; and Ohio Wesleyan in Delaware.

Their annual production budgets may be smaller than OSU's \$135,000 or Otterbein's \$85,000. Their facilities may be more limited. They may have fewer faculty members and fewer drama students, but all of these schools have established their own theatrical traditions — some older than OSU's program, founded 40 years ago, and Otterbein's program, now in its 81st year.

**DENISON IS** beginning its 56th season and Capital is starting its 57th season. Ohio Wesleyan's program is in its 104th season, and Kenyon's program has been going on intermittently for more than 120 years.

"We have a lot smaller program than Ohio State. And Otterbein has a lot more students than we have, although their faculty is about the same size," said Bo Rabby, chairman of Ohio Wesley-

**For a complete college theater schedule, see Page 6H.**

an's theater department. "But we work hard to make sure our students come up to our high standards."

Ohio Wesleyan is devoting its 1986-87 season to contemporary, international plays, such as *A Lesson From Aloes*, by South African playwright Athol Fugard, and *We Won't Pay!*, by Italian satirist Dario Fo.

"We felt a need to bring this material to the students and the community," Rabby said. "There's just too much material that's not being done. Our philosophy is to establish a broad, liberal arts base under a strong professional theater program."

Ohio Wesleyan's productions are staged at Chappellear Drama Center on campus.

"It only takes 14 minutes to drive to the theater from I-270 and Rt. 23," Rabby said. "We get a sizable number of Columbusites coming to our plays."

Denison's productions are staged at the Ace Morgan Theatre on the campus in Granville, about 45 minutes east of Columbus.

**"DENISON TENDS** to be more daring in its choice of plays than many other small college theater programs," said John Farris, chairman of the department of theater and cinema. He described this season as more "eclectic" than last year's season of contemporary plays.

Denison's reputation has been enhanced by its illustrious graduates, who include Hal Holbrook, John Davidson, Michael Eisner (president of Walt Disney Studios) and Franklin Cover (Mr. Willis on *The Jeffersons*).

Denison has seven professors of theater. Most colleges of Denison's size — about 2,000 students — only have two or three theater professors, Farris said.

At Capital, the theater program is integrated with the speech and communication arts programs.

Capital productions are staged in Mees Hall, 2199 E. Main St. They primarily attract a university audience and a large contingent from the Bexley area, plus "a smattering of people throughout

the Columbus community," Smith said. "Just like everyone else, we have our own following."

**LIKE OHIO** Wesleyan, Denison and Capital, Kenyon places its theater program squarely within the liberal arts tradition.

Located in Gambier, an hour's drive northeast of Columbus, Kenyon presents its student productions in Hill Theatre, and its faculty-directed productions in Bolton Theatre. For the past five years, Kenyon also has hosted the Goldston School for Mimes, led by Marcel Marceau.

During its 1986-87 season, Kenyon will perform an updated version of Moliere's *The Misanthrope*, based on a new translation by Thomas Turgeon, a Kenyon associate professor of drama.

## *K.A. News 9/27/86* Theatre season tickets on sale at college

Otterbein College 1986-87 season theatre tickets are on sale.

The season includes: *Amadeus*, Oct. 16.; *Noises Off*, Feb. 5-8; *The Crucible*, March 12-15; *Carousel*, March 7-10; and *Frontiers*, May 28-31 and June 3-6.

The 1986-87 season also includes a musical version of Grimms' *Sleeping Beauty*, presented by Otterbein Children's Theatre, Nov. 21-23.

For more information call 898-1657.