

Theater

Spirit of ancient Egyptian awakens in local playwright's offering

by Susan Kuhlmann

Omaha playwright Clarinda Karpov's longtime fascination with an Egyptian leader who ruled from 1363 to 1347 B.C. has resulted in a play about the ruler's spirit.

It will be performed by the Omaha Workshop Theatre at the Creighton Interim Performing Arts Center starting this weekend.

In the play, which is being produced by Jonathan Warman, Dr. Alexandra Philips, a contemporary archeologist, while on a "routine excavation," encounters the spirit of the 3,000 year old renegade pharaoh Akhnaton.

"The play basically deals with her struggle to learn from the ghost what she can and with Akhnaton's struggle to institute a monotheistic religion. His god is Aton, the energy of the sun's disk, said Warman.

"It has a lot of wit to it but it's also very serious," he added. And although it is a history play, dealing with an authentic character, Warman said it contains elements of psychology and tragedy as well. "It has a very broad spectrum of moods and language."

While there are a lot of unanswered questions about the life of Akhnaton, Warman said people who have studied the history of the period believe Karpov's interpretation is a "perfectly viable way of looking at his life."

Karpov originally envisioned it as a short story, but it eventually grew to novella length and, with help and encouragement from Warman and Judith Boss, the author's professor at UNO, she converted it to play form.

Also contributing to the completion of "Ankhtst" was Karpov's trip to a 1987 conference where she met scholars



The spirit of Akhnaton (J. Michael Lee) confronts Dr. Philips (Pegeen Reilly).

on the subject who were helpful in her researching the subject. They are planning to make guest appearances during the play's Omaha run.

Warman noted that the play is, in part, dedicated to the two scholars. Don Redford, director of the Akhnaton temple

project, which has done the primary archeological survey of the effects of his life, will be speaking on May 5. Joan Burr, an authority on the art of that time will make an appearance on May 13.

Their visits have been made possible through a grant from the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities, which is paying for the trips.

Karpov, who has a degree in creative writing from UNO, has written other plays including the "Masque of Dionysis" and "At the Silver Crescent," which have been performed locally. The latter is currently being made into an opera by John Sheehan.

Connie Sutherland Pearson, one of the founders of the Omaha Workshop Theatre, discovered Karpov's work during the production of her first play and an attraction for the author's works led to the group's performance of "Ankhtst."

Warman, a long time admirer of Karpov, described her work as "extraordinary" with its richness of language.

"She writes like no one else. There is a color to it that you don't otherwise find." Karpov's mother Bertha, a Florida resident, supports her daughter who writes on a full time basis.

The playwright tends to chose unusual subjects according to Warman, who noted that Akhnaton is a figure "she's always been fascinated with."

Because he displayed elements of both cunning and foolishness, Warman said the pharaoh "could have been a great or foolish king; he believed very strongly in a new

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religion.

"There are lots of ways to enjoy it," he said, noting that it can be viewed as a play about a ghost in a tomb or a pharaoh's spiritual life. It also has elements of new age philosophy.

The Omaha Workshop Theatre began under the direction of Sutherland Pearson, about three years ago with the intention of producing plays written by Nebraska playwrights. The group has performed in a variety of spots from Kane's First Mate Tavern to the Creighton Performing Arts Center but is looking for a home of its own.

Although a number of local writers have sent their work to the group for consideration, Warman said it has now reached the point "where we have to start looking again."

Speaking of the local theater community, Warman described Omaha as "an actor's market," and said it can be difficult to attract enough people for all the parts. "I've experienced that with every theater I've worked with."

Most do the work for love of performing rather than the money, he added. "There are only a few paying theaters in town and not one single union theater."

However, he added: "There is a small handful who will audition for anything she (Karpov) writes." As an example, he said William Hyde has appeared in all of her plays.

The play will run for four weekends with appearances on Friday and Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons. The workshop theatre has expanded its length of productions, Warman said, because "you can't reach enough people with less than four weeks."

It features a simple set with just a tomb and a stairwell but Warman pointed out that much of the set effects will be created with lighting.

The producer said no major problems have come up during staging although the original play was quite lengthy and had to be shortened.

"I don't think it will tax anyone's patience," he said. "She overflows with words and with development of character."

He noted that Karpov has been writing since her youth and has done poetry, short stories and novellas in addition to plays.

Karpov is also having a monologue from the play included in a book of competition monologues due to be released this spring and is having a radio play produced by KVNO.

Warman acknowledged the workshop's gratitude for assistance it received from the Nebraska Arts Council in the form of a \$2,000 grant. "That helped us enormously and allowed us to do the show we wanted. "We were very fortunate to receive it," he said. "Funds are very tight this year."

Warman said government support has not risen much and he does not expect that to change. While funds from private and corporate sources have gone up, that is now leveling off.

However, he said despite the lack of funding, theater nationwide is "getting more exciting."

Warman, who has worked on obtaining grants, said groups are too often under the assumption that they must put on classic works in order to receive grant money.

However, he believes the important thing is to convince the people giving the monies "that you really believe in what you're doing and that it is art.

"They are looking for vital new work. Most theaters miss the point and think there is no money to be had unless they produce 'Our Town' for the millionth time. What people want to support is new work," he said, explaining that producing original pieces is the best way to show a group's seriousness.

Warman acknowledged that audiences have a tendency to go to plays they are familiar with, such as Neil Simon works. However, he said if they can be made aware of a new work and convinced that it is exciting and worthwhile, "they'll come to it in droves."

He credits much of the success the workshop has enjoyed to word of mouth recommendations. "It is a challenge for people in publicity and producers to find exciting new work that can excite audiences," he said.

As an example, Warman noted that the workshop's production of "Nebraska Oklahoma" has been performed successfully for three years in a row. "It can really draw in an audience," he said.

"Our ultimate goal is to become Nebraska's premier regional theatre and with things like 'Ankhst' we're well on our way."

When he is not working on the play, Warman works for Idleman Telemarketing.