

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

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Editor: John J. Murphy
Editorial Associate: Patricia K. Phillips

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

O Pioneers! PBS Premiere May 17; Sneak Preview May 4 in Red Cloud

O Pioneers!, a haunting adaptation, with music, of Willa Cather's novel of the turn-of-the-century American West, will premiere on American Playhouse Friday, May 17, at 9:00 p.m. (EST) over the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). (Check local listings for broadcast date and time in your area.)

The two-hour production, starring 1991 Academy Award nominee Mary McDonnell (*Dances with Wolves*) and Randle Mell, tells the story of immigrant settlers on the Great Plains of Nebraska during the latter part of the 19th century. Ms. McDonnell stars as frontier woman Alexandra Bergson, a pioneer Swedish immigrant who inherits acres of wild Nebraska farmland when her father dies and, with her brothers, tames the land. Randle Mell portrays the idealistic Carl Linstrum, whom Alexandra loves secretly and seemingly in vain. Others featured in the cast include Neil Maffin, Jennifer Rohn, Thomas Schall and Peter Sokol-Hessner. The ensemble also includes John Carpenter, Kate Coffman, Christopher Coucill, Robin Eldridge, Taina Elg, Ted Ingram, Douglas Kirzner, Kevin McDermott, Joel Mitchell, Kate Phelan, Scott Rabinowitz, Eda Seasongood, Timothy Sawyer, Maggie Simpson and Jessica Walling.

The play was adapted from Cather's classic 1913 novel by playwright Darrah Cloud, who also wrote the lyrics to music composed by Kim D. Sherman. The adaptation began in 1988

when Cather's novel entered the public domain. Director Kevin Kuhlke began working with Ms. Cloud, composer Sherman, and set designer John Wulp to transform the novel into a play. The play was further developed in an April 1989 workshop at the



Mary McDonnell (left) and Robin Eldridge star in "O Pioneers!" — Photo Courtesy of Schecter Communications, 1776 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.

Seattle Repertory Theater. Staged by Kevin Kuhlke, *O Pioneers!* was given its world premiere in January 1990 by the Huntington Theatre Company, the professional theatre in residence at Boston University, where it was presented in association with American Playhouse.

Playwright Cloud and Lindsay Law, Vice President and Execu-

tive Producer of American Playhouse, will visit Red Cloud for the 2:00 p.m. screening on May 4, Cather Spring Conference Day. They will be joined that evening at the Conference Banquet by Cather critic Susan J. Rosowski of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Ron Hull of Nebraska ETV to discuss the adapting of novel into stage play into television production.

Law's distinguished list of theatrical productions includes *Stand and Deliver* and *The Thin Blue Line* for American Playhouse, and on Broadway *Working* and *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*.

Darrah Cloud is playwright in residence at the Perseverance Theater in Juneau, Alaska. She has written other plays, including *The Stick Wife*, for which she also did the screenplay for actress Jessica Lange, and *The Obscene Bird of Night*, produced earlier this year by the Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island.

O Pioneers and the Critics

Now that *O Pioneers!* has "made the media," many of us will want to review the novel and some of the criticism it has generated. It will be interesting to watch how Alexandra's character and dreams, her relationship to the land, to Marie and Emil, and to Carl are handled in the American Playhouse production. Reprinted below are some critics' views on these central issues of the novel:

Cather's originality lay in the ways she joined her American scene to [the Virgilian pastoral tradition]. Her initial setting of Hanover . . . is informed with metaphor that moves it from historical reality to pastoral timelessness. . . . The effect is to move a historical reality into a realm that has the potential for the unexpected, even the miraculous. . . . Alexandra is part of that world of miracles, a noble being disguised as an American immigrant farmer. (Rosowski, 48-49)

Alexandra is one-dimensional because as epic heroine she is idealized, and accordingly we can feel only a limited sense of identification with her. Her sorrows and triumphs are those of someone stronger than we are. We hold strength and virtue in high esteem and yet we cannot really share or emulate them. Rather our imaginative involvement is with that maternal protection she affords those around her. (Stouck, 27)

Cather was able to challenge the implications of the American pastoral, in which the masculine self flourishes separate from society, by drawing on the epic, in which the hero's triumph is also that of his culture. Wishing to portray Alexandra as a gardener on an epic scale, Cather begins . . . with a description of the land and the community before she focuses on her protagonist, placing her in a larger cultural context. . . . Cather surrounds her heroine with communal events . . . that integrate her story with that of her society. (O'Brien, 433)

Comments about Alexandra's mind being . . . without "the least spark of cleverness" . . . can be misleading She is able to dissuade her brothers from selling out by using her mother against them and by appealing to Lou's fear of being cheated She maneuvers them into selling cattle and taking loans to buy the Linstrum, Crow, and Struble farms. She has it all figured out — the duration of two loans, the amount of land to be purchased from each neighbor, the value of the land by the time the mortgages are due, etc. When Lou . . . balks, Alexandra applies family pride With Oscar . . . she applies sympathy, explaining that her plans will make life easier for him She experiments with new farming methods and has the first silo on the Divide. (Murphy, 117).

36th Annual Cather Spring Conference

SATURDAY, MAY 4, 1991

8:00-10:00 a.m.

Registration, coffee and kolache — Cather Foundation
Art Gallery and Bookstore, 326 North Webster

8:30 a.m.

Mass — Grace Episcopal Church, 6th and Cedar
Father James R. Cox, officiating

9:45 a.m.

Mass — St. Juliana Catholic Church, 3rd Avenue and South Walnut
Father Stanley Schieffer, officiating

11:00 a.m.

"Singing Cather's Song" — Nebraska Public Television
Video Tribute to Mildred Bennett
Lincoln Elementary School, South Entrance, 3rd and Cherry
Introductory Remarks by Joel Geyer and David Scherman

12:00 noon

Lunch — Lincoln Elementary School, South Entrance, 3rd and Cherry
Buses will be available for transportation to the Cather Prairie. Other noontime options: Cather Buildings, Downtown Red Cloud, Webster County Historical Museum (4th and Franklin), Your Own "Country Tour" (maps at Cather Foundation).

2:00 p.m.

O Pioneers! — American Playhouse Production (2 hours)
Lincoln Elementary School, South Entrance, 3rd and Cherry

9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.

4:00-6:00 p.m.

Photographic Exhibit
David E. Scherman's "The World of Willa Cather"
Burlington Depot
Refreshments, 4:30-5:30
Courtesy of Catherland Federated Women's Club

7:00 p.m.

Banquet
Darrah Cloud, Lindsay Law, Susan Rosowski, Guest Speakers
Panel Format
Ron Hull, Master of Ceremonies
High School Gymnasium, 7th and Webster

★ ★ ★

Wine and Cheese Party

Immediately following the Banquet — Red Cloud Country Club
2 miles east of Red Cloud, Hwy. 136, and ½ mile north

★ ★ ★

Cather Buildings are opened courtesy of
The Cather Historical Center, Nebraska State Historical Society,
John Lindahl, curator.

[In the last section Alexandra] is moved out of her pastoral context for the first time, and we see her "ill at ease," registering in a Lincoln hotel, carrying her handbag down to supper, walking round the campus It has an extraordinary effect, as though she has suddenly been put into another kind of novel This is the realistic end for the pastoral novel, which ought to, or could, move into a dislocated, Kafkaesque urban scene. In this landscape, Alexandra loses all her magic powers — she can do nothing for Shabata. Cather . . . can see this as a possibility, but chooses to deny it; she lets Alexandra go home and re-find Carl. (Lee, 116-17)

The final marriage between Carl and Alexandra has something of a wish fulfillment quality about it — the wish perhaps of being united with the eternal mother. For Alexandra it is the attraction a strong woman sometimes feels for a weak, biddable man. The only lover mightier than Alexandra herself is the man of her dreams, a figure identified with the harvests and the seasons who, toward the end of the novel, is revealed to be the personification of Death. (Stouck, 29)

Seeing the male figure [in the dream] as a vegetation god, the animus, the Genius of the Divide we run into one problem: Cather does not portray the land as male. In the earlier passage describing Alexandra's response to the "Genius of the Divide" with "love and yearning," Cather is careful to refer to the spirit as "it," leaving gender indeterminate; and her actual descriptions of the soil create a strong, procreative, maternal presence. . . . Trying to establish the dream-figure's identity is difficult since he changes as the dream changes over time, suggesting that his "meaning" can be found only in relationship to the dreamer Alexandra. (O'Brien, 437)

The land appeals to Alexandra as a living creature with a personality. As a student of the classics, Cather was surely aware of the ancient concept of a land spirit, a "Genius," and accordingly she used the term to describe Alexandra's closeness to the land. Alexandra responds to the Genius of the Divide as she will not allow herself to respond to the figure of male sexuality in her dream, for in alliance with the land she can retain independence. She

Building Hours of Operation, May 4

- Foundation Art Gallery/
Bookstore
8:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.
4:00-5:30 p.m.
 - Cather Historical Center
Museum
8:00 a.m.-5:30 p.m.
 - Cather Childhood Home
9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.
4:00-5:30 p.m.
 - Grace Episcopal Church
12:00 noon-2:00 p.m.
 - St. Juliana Catholic
Church
12:00 noon-2:00 p.m.
 - Burlington Depot
9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.
4:00-6:00 p.m.
- Photographic Exhibit
- Harling House
3rd and Seward
(New Site This Year!)
12:00 noon-2:00 p.m.

Harling House is open courtesy of Nancy and Bernard Picchi, South Orange, New Jersey.

need not submit to this Genius since it is a protective spirit, not a threatening one. (Ryder, 115)

There are a number of elements in the novel that derive as much from Cather's own personality and viewpoint as from the logic of the story. Her views on marriage and love are reflected in the lives of various characters. The destructive nature of romantic love is exemplified in the tragic story of Emil and Marie, and her skepticism about marriage kills off Amedee. Alexandra's own plans to marry at the end of the novel illustrate the kind of marriage Cather thought safe. Alexandra says to Carl: "I think . . . when friends marry, they are safe . . ." This is to be a calm union of middle-aged people after the passions of youth are spent. (Woodress, 244)

The inclusion of the Emil/Marie story contributes significantly to Cather's characterization of Alexandra and our understanding of her role as a human being rather than a totally mythic figure. . . . The tragedy of Emil and Marie forces

Alexandra to confront her own weakness: an unawareness of the "fierce necessity" of human relationships, not to mention what Emil refers to as "her own realization of herself." (Baker, 221)

With the Marie-Emil action, Cather explores the idea of estrangement through characters who seek a personal paradise in defiance of their communities. . . . Marie's love for Emil is a guilty thing which she cannot admit even to herself. Emil's love for Marie is similarly dark. . . . Cather placed the Emil-Marie story within Alexandra's story, titling the last section of the book "Alexandra" and focusing on paradise lost. As the lovers vanish into death, Alexandra confronts a world of pain and separation. Balancing her ecstasy of a visionary future, Alexandra now faces death in a dark night of the soul. (Rosowski, 53, 58-59)

The lovers are finally absolved by Carl, who compares their relationship to "something one felt in the air, as you feel the spring coming, or a storm in summer." . . . Carl returns to . . . rescue Alexandra from her dark night of the soul and help her toward the cosmic vision for which her experiences have prepared her. (Murphy, 125-26)

SOURCES:

Bruce Baker, "O Pioneers! The Problem of Structure," *Great Plains Quarterly* 2 (1982): 218-23; Hermione Lee, *Willa Cather: Double Lives* (New York: Pantheon, 1989); John J. Murphy, "A Comprehensive View of Cather's *O Pioneers!*" *Critical Essays on Willa Cather* (Boston: Hall, 1984), 113-27; Sharon O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (New York: Oxford, 1987); Susan J. Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* (Lincoln: Nebraska, 1986); Mary Ruth Ryder, *Willa Cather and Classical Myth* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1990); David Stouck, *Willa Cather's Imagination* (Lincoln: Nebraska, 1975); James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: Nebraska, 1987).

CORRECTION

Vol. XXXIV, No. 4, page 40, column 3 — The Boston magazine published "Peter" in its May 31, 1892 (not 1882) issue.

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Bennett TV Tribute to Introduce *O Pioneers!*

"Singing Cather's Song" is the working title of Joel Geyer's thirty-minute television tribute to Mildred Bennett in this fortieth anniversary year of the publication of her seminal study *The World of Willa Cather* (Dodd, Mead 1951; U. Nebraska Press 1961). Geyer has written, directed and produced a video collage of Bennett interviews, Cather sites, and commentary by those who know Bennett and Cather lore. The theme is Bennett's use of Cather's works in her own personal life search, which turns out to be a very religious if unorthodox journey, says Geyer. The program will be shown during the morning of Spring Conference, May 4, and premiere on Nebraska ETV at 8:30 p.m. on May 17, a half-hour before American Playhouse's *O Pioneers!*

Scherman Exhibit at Depot

"The World of Willa Cather," an exhibit of original black and white photographs by David Scherman, retired *Life* magazine photographer and editor, will open at the Red Cloud Depot during Spring Conference, May 4. Scherman shot the pictures for *Life* in 1951 to illustrate scenes from the books of Cather. Most were taken in Webster County, Nebraska; one series comes from New Mexico, setting for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Like the showing of "Singing Cather's Song," the exhibit is intended to commemorate the anniversary of Mildred Bennett's *The World of Willa Cather*.

IN MEMORIAM

LEO P. PAVELKA — 1903-1991
Little Leo in *My Antonia*

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- By contributing your ideas and suggestions to the Board of Governors.

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AIMS OF THE WCPM

- To promote and assist in the development and preservation of the art, literary, and historical collection relating to the life, time, and work of Willa Cather, in association with the Nebraska State Historical Society.
- To cooperate with the Nebraska State Historical Society in continuing to identify, restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing of Willa Cather.
- To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial, through the Foundation, by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.
- To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.

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