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 Nell Maffin, Jennifer Rohn, Thomas Schall and Peter Sokol-Hessner. The ensemble also includes John Carpenter, Kate Coffman, Christopher Coulill, 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 Kuhike 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 Seattle Repertory Theater. Staged by Kevin Kuhike, 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 Executive 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).
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.

SOURCES:


CORRECTION

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