

Emphasis on work makes conference more democratic, participants say

By MIKE DUNHAM
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VALDEZ -- Two years after the abrupt departure of its founder, Prince William Sound Community College president Jo Ann C. McDowell -- and, with her, the roster of showbiz celebrities whose fame lent buzz to the event -- the Last Frontier Theatre Conference continues to grow.

The number of registrants increased over last year, organizers say, to about 350, though attendance of evening events by nonregistrants appeared to have declined.

Without the star-studded hierarchy of previous years, participants said, they felt a greater sense of democracy -- a word heard often in between-session conversations -- at the event.

"It's more egalitarian," noted Michael Hood, former head of the University of Alaska Anchorage theater department, now a dean at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Hood played a key role in the early years of the conference and returned as an instructor and panelist.

"It's focused far more on art than on personality," he said. "Which is not to say there aren't wonderful personalities here."

The best-known personality on hand was Oscar- and Tony-winning actress Patricia Neal, who has made the arduous trip to Valdez for several years. At a gala banquet June 24, she entertained the audience with "Send in the Clowns" and received an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters, presented by University of Alaska Anchorage chancellor Elaine Maimon and community college president Douglas Desorcie.

"Acting is, for me, the most glorious thing that I know," Neal told the crowd. "I will continue to be an actress as long as I can stand up. When I can no longer stand, I will play my part sitting or lying down."

The gala, rounds of dinner parties, a party cruise for participants, even a "water ballet" performed by Valdez fireboats were scenes familiar to participants at earlier



Actress Patricia Neal received an honorary doctorate at the closing-night gala. Master of ceremonies Joel Vig, looking on, reprised his controversial cross-dressing character Sinthea Starr in a conference fund-raiser. (Photo by GEN HASAGAWA / Prince William Sound Community College)



Anthony ()

conferences. So was the tireless energy of Desorcie, seen in his suit and tie picking up litter after a luncheon and ceaselessly shuttling participants from one venue to another in the college van. He received a thunderous standing ovation at the gala when he took to the podium to thank contributors and volunteers.

In some years the obligatory gala thank-yous have taken more than an hour. Desorcie did it in seven minutes. There were no video greetings from politicians or (despite the inevitable exploration of politics in theater) political rants from guest artists.

Several attendees commented on the improving caliber of full-length plays. The plays were selected by conference director Dawson Moore, who originally came to the festival as a participant, helped launch the after-hours "Fringe" events and became responsible for choosing one-acts to be read.

"Citizen Bernie," by Los Angeles artist and author Terence Anthony, was heard here two years ago as a short skit; at that time, one-acts were all that playwrights without connections to conference celebrities could hope to get read. It was back as a full-length play and received high praise for its construction, language and, especially, the instant believability of its characters. (An animated series, written and illustrated by Anthony, can be seen at www.orlandosjoint.com.)

Aside from being allowed to present his work in a fuller format, the biggest changes Anthony identified had to do with nuts-and-bolts theater: "More hands-on workshops directed at the craft; more hands-on learning going on than two years ago," he said.

Other changes from two years ago included one-on-one meetings between aspiring playwrights and the panelists evaluating their scripts; more weight given to the "Fringe" presentations, which were listed in the catalog this year and included a round of "Overnighters," the madcap 24-hour concept-to-production format pioneered by Moore; a less-hecktic pace of presentations, with Wednesday set aside for a midconference afternoon off; and a generally more let-your-hair-down feeling.

For instance, some years ago Broadway actor Joel Vig presented his comical aging-actress character "Sinthea Starr." In addition to being a cross-dressing routine, "Starr" is also an uproarious spoof of megalomaniacal show business egos. Some viewers took offense, and "Sinthea Starr" disappeared from subsequent programs.

But this year, Vig returned as Starr on the evening of June 20, a benefit performance to raise money for the historic La Petit Theatre in New Orleans, which was damaged in last year's hurricane season. The laughter flowed unfettered. No one seemed offended. Neal herself took part, introducing "the woman for whom the word 'megastar' was created."



Playwright and author Gary Garrison of New York University, a featured artist in the recent Last Frontier Theatre Conference in Valdez, leads the "Creating Character" workshop. (Photo by GEN HASAGAWA / Prince William Sound Community College)

Daily News assistant features editor Mike Dunham can be reached at mdunham@adn.com.

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