

# TEMPO

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## Women take CENTER STAGE

They're writing, producing and directing some of the season's most intriguing local theater

BY JACKIE DEMALINE  
The Cincinnati Enquirer

**W**omen are all over area stages for the next two months, working on some of the most interesting projects of the theater season. Eleven productions written and/or produced by women have either opened or are waiting in the wings.

Even better, in a time and place where the only two women playwrights most people can name quickly — Lillian Hellman and Lorraine Hansberry — are deceased, most of this work is by living women. Some are local.

"If it's a fluke, it's a great fluke," says Ensemble Theatre producing artistic director D. Lynn Meyers. "Don't you think everyone's time comes? We're more than 50 percent of the population. It only seems fair."

Last year was considered a breakthrough in New York, where, for the first time in 52 years, Broadway's directing Tonys (musical and play) were won by women. *Art*, by Yasmi-

na Reza, was named best play, and Paula Vogel won a Pulitzer Prize for *How I Learned to Drive*.

In Cincinnati, a series of coincidences led to this rush of activity. ▶ Ms. Meyers arrived at Ensemble in 1995, and the theater pulled itself onto more stable financial ground.

▶ University of Cincinnati professor Norma Jenckes formed Cincinnati Playwrights Initiative three years ago. (Mary Tensing's *Ice Floes* had an early reading by CPI.)

▶ Stage director Gyllian Raby arrived in Cincinnati in fall 1997. These women talk. They get involved in each other's projects. They build relationships.

"We have quite a sisterhood going," Xavier University's Cathy Springfield says.

The timing, Ms. Meyers suspects, is "no accident." Local theater is on its biggest journey, she says, and "that depends on a lot of people and a lot of those people are women. Women work hard, and they survive."

### Gyllian Raby, director

Canadian Gyllian Raby was a longtime artistic director in Nova Scotia when her husband's transfer

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brought them both to Cincinnati in October 1997.

"I thought that was it," Ms. Raby says. "I thought, I was committing professional suicide."

Ms. Raby, not one to sit around waiting for the bullet, started making phone calls while in Halifax. One of her first was to Cathy Springfield at Xavier University.

"I've been incredibly fortunate," Ms. Raby says. "I give her all the credit."

With the list of connections provided by Mrs. Springfield, Ms. Raby picked up a temporary teaching job at UC, directed one of the touring return shows for Playhouse in the Park last year and guest-directed a memorable, technically complex (*lots of video*) *Trojan Women* for Xavier.

Then she was off to the Toronto Shaw Festival in Ontario for the summer where she's had an opportunity

Back in Cincinnati she's been a "pretty slim pick," but she's been teaching a class at Xavier, directing for Ensemble's Off-Center and will return to Xavier for *The Enormous Turn of Mind* in February. Then she's off to Toronto in March to direct "Eastern European and angst-ridden" *Don Juan Comes Back from the Wars*.

She's enjoying her first working experience with ETC.

"It's this kind of grass-roots energy and professional theater" that draws her. Artist-driven projects and the people trying to produce new work, she believes, will become "the art heart of Cincinnati."

Ms. Raby's "slim pickings" is more work than most playwrights see and a testament to her personal drive.

"I'm feeling my way," she says. "My circle's still expanding. I'm getting cranking." She has the potential to make a major impact on the small professional theater scene.

*'I'm feeling my way. My circle's still expanding, I'm getting cranking.'*

— Gyllian Raby, director

### On stage

▶ Through Jan. 31 — *Sabina's Splendid Brain*, by Carol Sinclair, directed by Gyllian Raby and featuring Naomi Bailis, and *Vigil* with Dale Hodges, directed by Regina Pugh, Ensemble Theatre's Off-Center/On-Stage Festival, 421-3555.

▶ Through Jan. 31 — *Red Cornets* by Cecilia Fannon, Playhouse in the Park Shelterhouse, 421-3888.

▶ Feb. 4-14 — *Before It Hits Home* by Cheryl West, studio theatre and Arts Consortium, 381-0645.

▶ Feb. 16-March 14 — *How I Learned to Drive* by Paula Vogel in Playhouse in the Park-Shelterhouse (watch for Ms. Vogel's *Baltimore Waltz* by the Playhouse intern company in late spring), 421-3888.

▶ Feb. 17-March 7 — *Ice Floe* by Mary Tensing, directed by D. Lynn Meyers, Ensemble Theatre, 421-3555.

▶ Feb. 18-21 — *The Rover*, by Aphra Behn, directed by Gyllian Raby, Xavier University, 745-3939.

▶ Feb. 19 — *The Vagina Monologues* by Eve Ensler, 8 p.m., Leonard Theater, Peabody Hall, Miami Universi-

ty, Oxford, (513) 529-5122.

▶ Feb. 19-27 — *The Canterbury Tales*, adult puppetry performance piece by Joanie Leverone, Cincinnati Public Theatre, Fifth Third Bank Theater, Aronoff Center, 241-7469.

▶ March 4-6 — *Strength for Home* by Liz Presley Fields, Second Chance Productions, Jarson-Kaplan Theater, Aronoff Center, 241-7469.

▶ March 24-April 10 — *Love and Shrimp*, cabaret based on work of Judith Viorst, produced by and featuring Pam Myers and Scot Woolley, Ensemble Theatre, 421-3555.