

FDD Biography

It's small, but the playhouse is the thing for Judith Dresch

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By Phyllis Brown
Times Tribune staff

EAST PALO ALTO — Judith Dresch bought and built the Manhattan Playhouse.

The theater has been her life, the actors the children she never had. Now she fears that without new blood the Manhattan Playhouse may not be able to go on.

"I do only the theater; I hardly keep house. I do the costumes, that takes a long time, I do the sets. I do everything," she said.

The playhouse is nestled in the crook of the arm of Manhattan Avenue, a brief street in the Whiskey Gulch area west of the Bayshore Freeway. With liquor stores and low-rent apartment buildings on one side and the freeway on the other, it seems misplaced.

But for 17 years, the Manhattan Playhouse has shown more than its share of courage.

The playhouse is tiny, seating between 90 and 175 persons, but under the Dresch's direction the theater and its amateur actors have not blanched at tackling either the classics or the controversial.

The playhouse has become known especially as a place where black plays and actors have a home.

At times, Manhattan's productions have been excellent — and at times they have faltered.

But the important thing, Dresch said, is that the theater has been here, a place where actors can work and learn their craft.

"Absolutely the most important thing is to train the actors, so that they have the ability to always perform the best that they can, so it's not a trial and error, hit or miss, so that

they know what they are doing, and are able to retain that and maintain the level of the performance," she said.

Judith Dresch is herself drama to watch. As she adjusts her shawl and tilts her head to speak, you are hearing the voice of an aging, stately Russian countess. She exploits each word, rolling her R's and drawing out each vowel.

Dresch was born and raised in Moscow, coming to this country in 1934, after she finished high school. She has been directing for about 40 years, since 1940. She spent a stint in Hollywood, doing accent parts for radio and for recordings of radio dramas. She left Hollywood after her marriage to Francis Dresch, a researcher with SRI International.

Dresch, in her 60s, has been the theater's driving force since 1964, when she discovered it and transformed it from a silk screen factory.

Dresch came to own the Manhattan Playhouse on what can only be described as a fluke.

"One time, I was riding by here, and I saw this building for rent. It was a silkscreen factory. That's what it was, with aluminum ceilings. So, I went to look, I called the real estate man, and I was very much impressed with the high ceiling," Dresch said.

She and her husband were planning a trip to Europe at the time. But Dresch decided the theater would be a better investment.

"Why don't we just invest the money. I saw something I'd like to buy. And that's how we came to buy this theater. I worked on this theater myself, with a Hughes Electric saw," she said.

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With dedication

East Palo Alto's Whiskey Gulch area, with its liquor stores and low-rent apartments, seems an unlikely spot for theater. But Judith Dresch (left) is dedicated to the classics as well as the controversial at her Manhattan Playhouse. Page B-1.

PLAY

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Her first production at Manhattan Playhouse was "Platonov," a premier in this country which she translated from the Russian herself. Dresch said he has directed hundreds of plays, from "Othello," to "The Blacks," and "Purlie Victorious."

She has done a significant number of black plays. "I noticed, when I began here, that there were very few theaters in the area, if any at all, that are a chance for black people to perform. I said to myself, you have an awful lot of talent among black people, as well as you have among white. To me, it was a challenge, you see."

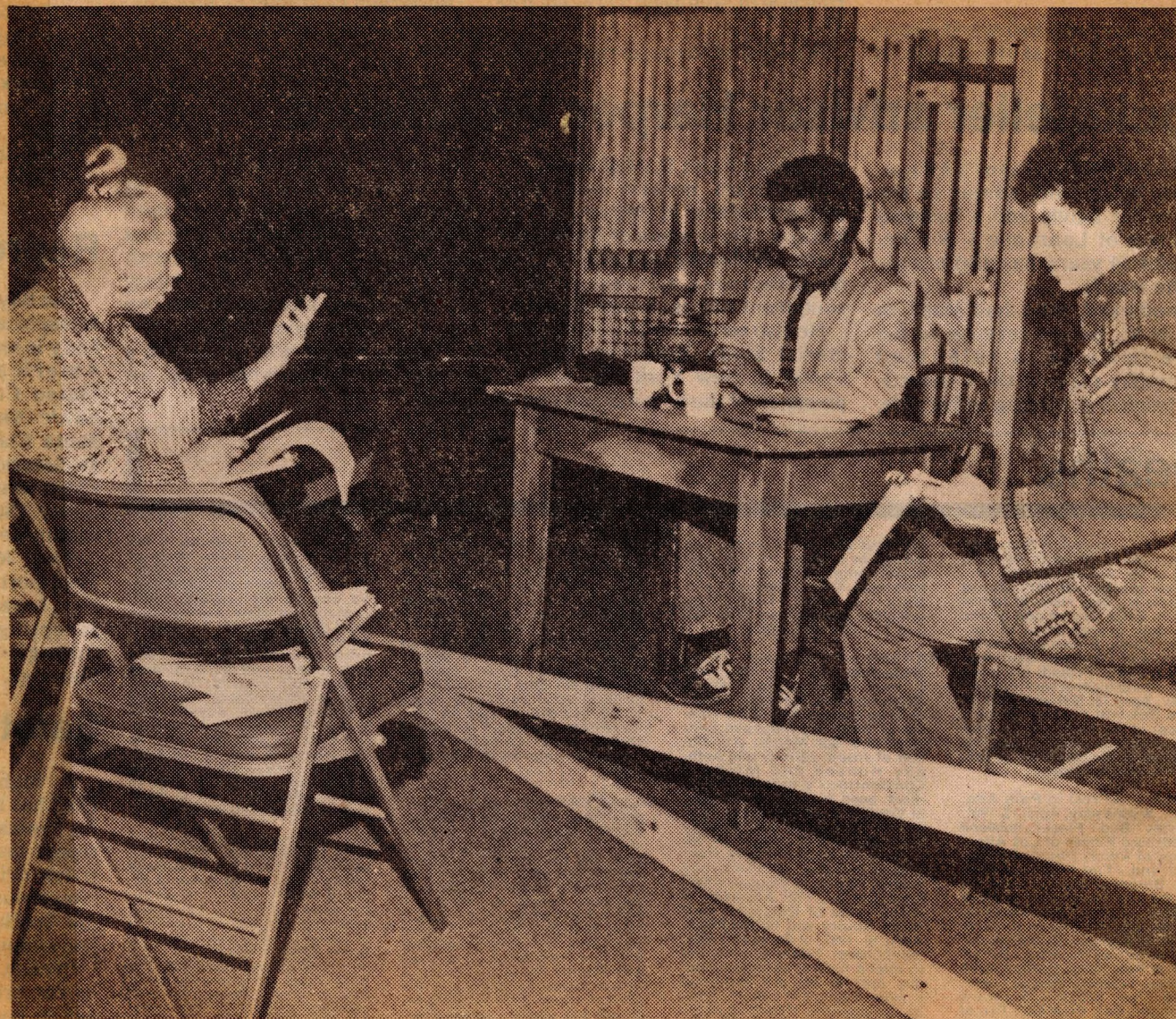
But the Manhattan Playhouse cannot continue in that tradition on the strength of Judith Dresch alone.

"I am very worried about the future of this theater. You see, it is very difficult to get very competent help. And, as we grow, there is much more demand on my time. And, if we don't do plays, we just go broke. We must do plays. And it is practically impossible for me to grind them out. I rehearse every phrase, every nuance. I cannot hurry, it's a tailor-made thing.

"So, when I finish the doing the costumes, and then many times I do the sets, and then rehearse privately and rehearse at night, and keep house, I'm exhausted. So I have to take a break between plays. Every time we take a break of a month or six weeks or two months, the theater goes down, people forget, they go to other places," she said.

"I need the help of a very talented director, and for that we have to pay. I had here a couple of directors, but I'd rather stay dark than have them. Talent does not grow on trees.

"I would go crazy, if this theater died," she said.



Times Tribune staff photo by Jean Dixon

Actors Rudy Morris (left) and Bill Wright fix their attention on director Judith Dresch during a rehearsal at the Manhattan Playhouse in East Palo Alto.