

arts & entertainment

Novelist tries following Cather, Sandoz footsteps

By Jim Williams

Marilyn Coffey, species: New York author, was back in Nebraska to research some essays and to participate in Masters Week.

She looks about like you'd picture a New York author: 40; brown corduroy pantsuit with green turtleneck sweater, brown loafers with tassels; pleasant smile, big glasses and slightly stringy brown hair. She talks like the poet and ex-journalist she is, pausing to think of a new, concise, pithy quote while waiting for you to get the last one down.

Marilyn Coffey said she is trying to follow in the footsteps of Willa Cather and Mari Sandoz. Species: Second-string Nebraska Woman Novelist, New York, some pretty good books, modest fame; then, when a new generation of novelists and novel-readers comes along, an awful limbo, with books preserved on freshman reading lists and name preserved on UNL residence halls.

Coffey, at least, is following the path with her eyes open.

She was born and raised in Alma. At UNL she wanted to major in English, but her mother thought she should study something that would help her get a job. She chose journalism, worked for the *Daily Nebraskan* and, after graduating in 1959, the *Lincoln Journal* and the *Hastings Tribune*.

She interviewed Mari Sandoz, Nebraska's second-string woman novelist of the time, for the *Daily Nebraskan*.

Seedy hotel

"If there was a single assignment that affected me most, that was it," she said. "I interviewed her in a seedy hotel. . . I found her there with her hotplate and her can of soup. It brought home to me a great truth, which is that you can be a great writer and not make much money at it."

Coffey headed for New York in 1960. "When I left Nebraska I swore I'd never return," she said. The atmosphere, she thought, was uncongenial to someone who wanted to be a poet and novelist. "I felt I was an oddball, I didn't fit in." Besides, New York was the center of the publishing world—and Cather and Sandoz had gone there.

Looking for work in New York, Coffey turned into a feminist. She said she was often refused jobs because she was a woman, and was told so directly.

"I wanted to do the same kind of work I'd been doing in Hastings, Nebraska," she said. "I wanted to be a reporter, but I didn't want to be on the society page."

Coffey eventually found work with various New York business publications. In 1966, though, she grew disenchanted with journalism and quit.

Coffey said she realized she'd have to support her novel and poetry writing somehow.

"I hoped, but never seriously believed, I'd be able to support myself with my own writing," she said, "but very late in my life, if at all."

She tried free-lancing and teaching, deciding she liked teaching better. She wound up at the Pratt Institute, a degree-granting institute for professional artists, where she now is director of freshman English.

Summing up

Coffey sums up her present neatly, like a resume: "I write poetry, fiction both short and long, and non-fiction essays. I've had one novel published. Its title is *Marcella*. I am currently finishing a second novel, which I'm calling *One for the Money*. I've also been doing a series of essays based on the period of time I spent in Nebraska." One of these, about the Starkweather murders, ran in *Atlantic Monthly*; another, about the dust bowl days before Coffey was born, has been accepted by *Natural History*.

She has a husband, John Powell, and a son, Ian, by a first marriage. She has an apartment in Brooklyn (she moved out of her Greenwich Village apartment two days before she flew to Lincoln). The new apartment has room for a piano—she said she likes to spend a lot of time at the piano. She also enjoys travel and friends, she said.

She summed up her writing, her future, and her Nebraska experience neatly:

"I definitely consider myself a feminist—but before I was a feminist I was a writer. I don't write deliberately from a feminist perspective. But because I'm a woman and because I'm a feminist, a certain part of what I wrote would fall under the umbrella of feminist writing."

"I intend to keep on writing. I expect the work to be published. I expect to keep on teaching—the two work well together. If my writing should ever be financially successful, I might cut back on my teaching. . . I'm pretty happy with my life now, and I don't expect to change radically."

"Nebraska rejuvenates me, but I need the distance to get the dispassion to write about it."

Will there be a Coffey Hall someday?



Photo by Bob Pearson

Marilyn Coffey, like Sandoz and Cather, has pursued a writing career in the Big Apple.

Public recital

The UNL School of Music Percussion Ensemble will present a free, public recital Tuesday at 8 p.m. in Kimball Recital Hall.

The ensemble is composed of 18 students and is directed by Albert Rometo, instructor of percussion and theory in the School of Music.

The program will include three works: "Toccata" by Carlos Chavez, "Introduction and Allegro" by Richard Schory and "Mau Mau Suite" by Thomas L. Davis.

Rometo said the Chavez piece will feature a large variety of membranophones, what he termed "any instrument with a membrane stretched across it" such as drums and tambourines. He said the composition will include conga drums, tom-toms, tympani, snare drums and other membranophones.

Students, faculty present concert

The Collegium Musicum of the UNL School of Music will present a free, public concert of early music including singing and choreography at 8 p.m. Tuesday. The concert will be in the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery auditorium.

The Collegium Musicum is a group of students, faculty members and other persons related to the School of Music. It was formed to give musicians an opportunity to perform music written before 1700, offering insight into the repertoire and performance practices of a vast, little-known music.

The works on Tuesday's program include selections from "Gregorian Chant" and early organ pieces; songs of the Troubadours and Trouveres; works by Guillaume de Machaut; a 15th century motet by Guillaume Dufay written for the consecration of the Cathedral of Santa Maria della Fiore at Florence, Italy; several pieces for a consort of viols; and a double-choir motet by the 16th century Czech composer Jacob Handl.

This will be the inaugural concert for the group's new portable organ, an authentic copy of a medieval instrument, made by the Noel Mander Organ Works of London, England.

Also featured in the concert will be members of the UNL dance department who will dance a number of Renaissance selections in period costumes.

The Collegium Musicum currently has 18 members, four who are vocalists. The remainder are instrumentalists who play viols, vielle, recorders, lute, harp, krumphorn, bells, nakers, tabor and finger cymbals.

Playhouse opera 'Trouble in Tahiti' reveals hypocrisies of married life

By Charlie Krig

The title may be *Trouble in Tahiti* but there are few problems with the Lincoln Community Playhouse Gallery Theatre production of this play.

The show is a short (45-minute) opera by Leonard Bernstein and it contains a basic plot that's far from unique: a married couple tries to revive the life in their marriage. However, Bernstein avoids the usual hackneyed characters and situations by concentrating on solo scenes where the actors explain their frustrations and thoughts.

theatre review

Paula Morris plays the wife, Dinah, with skill. She has a good voice that easily conveys each emotion in the part, whether it be disgust and despair over her husband or a lively, virulent discourse about the movies she watches.

Sam, played by Rob McMaster, is a workaholic, egocentric type who's too caught up in his own affairs to notice the depth of the marital/familial discord at home. The macho bravado displayed in his rabid quest to win the

handball tournament contrasts with McMaster's apparent nervousness on stage.

The remainder of the cast, a trio of singers (Laurie Norton, Deanna Mungaard and Bill Davis), supply choral backup that reinforces the cool, aloof sophistication that marks the couple's marriage.

The technical designs also show taste, particularly Don Yanik's set. The bland flats and stair-step stage levels allow fast, easy transition from scene to scene but the extremely stylized set pieces lend even more to the characters' distant, sanctimonious attitudes.

The result is a slick little production that reveals some of societal hypocrisy of married life. While the opera may not be as elaborate as other plays with similar themes (for example, Stephen Sondheim's *Company*) it provides a pleasant diversion with moderate amounts of both humor and pathos.

The play will be presented this weekend with performances at 8 p.m. on Friday, Saturday and Sunday in the Gallery Theatre at the Playhouse, 2500 S. 56th.

The UNL Cultural Affairs Committee deserves a special note for sponsoring a performance Saturday by the National Theatre of the Deaf. The ribald comedy based very loosely on Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* had a special humor made all the more enjoyable and vivid by the actors' use of sign language. Extraordinary groups such as this should be brought to campus more often.

Vocalists perform duet at 8 p.m.

A UNL School of Music voice instructor and a special guest vocalist will perform a program of duets spanning four centuries of musical work in a free, public concert at 8 p.m. in Kimball Recital Hall.

Donna Harler, a soprano in her second year as a UNL faculty member, and Drew Minter, a counter-tenor who has performed since he was 10, will sing 14 selections by Guillaume Machaut, Francesco Landini, Johann Sebastian Bach, Claudio Monteverdi, Henry Purcell, Georg Friderich Handel, Robert Jones, John Cooper, John Dowland and Borlet.

The featured piece will be the Harler-Minter duet on "Purtimiro" from Monteverdi's *Coronation of Poppea*, one of the most sensual duets in operatic literature.

Harler will accompany Minter on a new portable organ owned by the UNL Collegium Musicum to open the program. This will include four 14th century songs: "Douce dame jolie" and "Ma chiere dame" by Machaut, "Ecco la primavera" by Landini and "Ma tredol rosignol joly" by Borlet.

Two other UNL music instructors will accompany the duo during two risqué Elizabethan duets, "Lachrymae" by Dowland and "Will said to his Mammy" by Jones. Tracy Hanson will play the cello and Quentin Faulkner will play the organ.

Minter first sang a solo as a member of the Washington Cathedral Choir when he was 10. He has appeared in world premiere performances of two operas in Washington, *The Shepherd's Play* and *Erode the Great* by John LaMontaine, and has soloed in Leonard Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms* with the Washington Choral Arts Society and members of the National Symphony Orchestra.

Minter also worked with Washington's pre-professional troupe, Shakespeare & Co. in the Trapier Theatre, the Aspen Music Festival and the Kennedy Center. He has studied music at the University of Indiana and in Vienna. He also won second prize in the International Singing Competition in Holland.