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## Seeds of Innovative Drama

### PROFILE

By Aileen Jacobson

**I**T WAS THE FEEL of concrete underfoot, the sounds of jets and trains, the sight of a motorboat scattering a flock of geese that got John Monteleone started on his new play, "Farmland."

During the spring of 1987, he took his acting class to the canal on the campus of Dowling College in Oakdale, where he teaches drama. But, instead of the expected bucolic experience of grass and quiet splendor, they found a new parking lot and the sounds of civilization. Thus was born the seed of his play, which is about a family losing its farm. It is running this weekend and next at Dowling.

"The play is about foreclosure, but it has a lot of metaphors and symbols," said Monteleone. "It's about intrusion, pollution and noise." The 32-year-old playwright, who is also directing the play, said he is not opposed to all development but to "indifferent development" that destroys natural resources and the general quality of life, such as proposals that would build over the pine barrens on the East End.

"Farmland," the first full-length original production by his group, The Actors' Workshop of Long Island, marks a milestone for Monteleone in what he hopes will be a new theater company, one that will provide an alternative to the theaters on Long Island that generally produce revivals of proven audience pleasers.

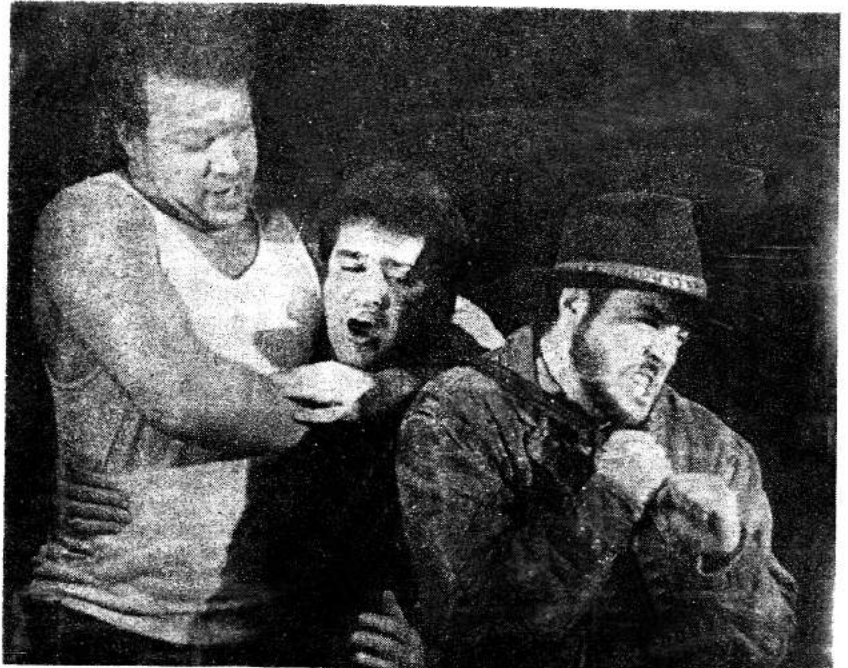
Since 1984 Monteleone has operated The Actors' Workshop as an acting school, occasionally presenting workshop productions at various locations. Now the workshop is in residence at Dowling, where Monteleone recently was named a professor in the drama department. The cast for "Farmland" includes a couple of Dowling students but is mostly made up of adults, several with professional aspirations.

"This, to me, is the beginning of a professional company," said Monteleone.

As part of a barter arrangement, Monteleone said, the workshop gets free rent at the college's Performing Arts Center in exchange for giving Dowling faculty and students free admission to its productions. (Tickets are \$7 for others; call 737-6911.)

A viewing of "Farmland," which is subtitled "a comic, absurdist, tragic farce in two acts," revealed a play as eclectic as its subtitle suggests. Some parts are broadly funny — particularly those involving a failed, much beaten prizefighter, expertly played by Dan Segruts — while other parts sag under the symbolism (one character can't find his feet, his eyes, his heart or his identity after the farm is lost) with which the play is laden. The acting covers a wide range, too, from solid to silly.

Referring to his writing — influenced by playwrights he admires, including Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Edward Albee, David Mamet and Sam Shepard — Monteleone said, "My style is still emerging . . . I'm a new playwright. We all start somewhere. We all start in obscurity."



Another influence on his play, he said, was watching the neighborhood in Inwood, where his grandfather built a house still inhabited by some of his aunts and uncles, change from a small-town ambience with open fields to a factory wasteland.

Though he continues to visit the Inwood house, he moved to North Babylon when he was 6 and now lives in Centereach. He attended Dowling two years before graduating from the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University.

An actor in Off-Broadway and regional productions for several years, he returned to Long Island six years ago to teach and act at Arena Players in East Farmingdale. Later he founded the workshop because he wanted to have his own school. It has had as many as 100 students, though now he is limiting it to 30, he said, because of his Dowling teaching responsibilities. He's also working toward a master's degree in educational theater from Adelphi University.

Monteleone plans to produce two of his one-act plays, "Visitations" and "The Propbox," in February. "He and She," another of the eight plays he has written, was given a public performance by The Actor's Workshop last year.

"I want to develop a different kind of theater on Long Island, one that offers new, innovative works," he said in his painted brick and cinderblock office in the performing arts center. How to provide that and still draw an audience is a problem, he said.

"I don't have an answer . . . I would like to see more innovative, new work, work that's risky, that deals with the issues of our world . . . I want to see art that's not being done just to pay the bills. I want to see the soul of the theater." □

From John Monteleone  
"Farmland"

THEATER