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Play provides 'insight' into suicide

By **Kristin Morency, The Suburban**

St. Lazare resident Sandy Ferguson, 63, will debut her professional acting career with the opening of *'night, Mother* at Mainline Theatre March 19.

The 1983 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, written by Marsha Norman, is the inaugural production of Altera Vitae, a newly created not-for-profit theatre company in Montreal.

A portion of *'night, Mother's* proceeds will go to Family Survivors of Suicide (FSOS), a support group founded 20 years ago by the McGill School of Social Work.

Ferguson is a former high school art teacher and ballet dancer who began acting as a hobby upon her retirement in 1998.

"A friend of mine [Heather Markgraf] created Village Theatre in Hudson, and encouraged me to get into acting," Ferguson said.

"Everything I've done up until this point has been amateur," she said, adding, "I was absolutely astounded [I got the part in *'night, Mother*] because this is a professional thing."

Although Ferguson considers herself inexperienced as a professional actor, she said her age gives her valuable insight into the craft.

"It's the joy of being old," she said.

In the play, Ferguson's character, Mama Thelma, faces a parent's worst nightmare when her daughter, Jessie (played by Alexandra Valassis), tells her she is going to commit suicide.

"The biggest challenge [acting in this play] is to have another daughter," Ferguson said.

"I already have a daughter [in real life]... And I have to make [Jessie] as real as my own daughter, for me," she explained.

"And the fact that she tells me she's going to commit suicide... I have to think of that in relation to my real life. It's probably the most horrible thing that could ever happen to a woman," Ferguson said.

Valassis said audiences will walk away from the play with "some insight into the mind of a person who's suicidal.

"You never really have answers when people commit suicide. They just leave their families in such a state of shock, and in so much depression for the rest of their lives," she explained.

"This play provides some [answers] about why they do this, and why it's the right choice for them."

Carolyn-Fe Trinidad, the founder and artistic director of Altera Vitae (which she said is Latin for "alternate life,") created the theatre company last June.

"I'm a visible minority, and I'm an older woman," said Trinidad, 47.

"As an Asian, there's not a lot of work out there for me as an actress," she said, adding that there are also very few roles for "mature performers."

She created Altera Vitae with the goal of providing roles for older or minority actors in the community, and to help raise awareness and money for local charities.

Trinidad, who owns a "high tech human resources firm," said she returned to a career in the arts with Altera Vitae after shutting down a dance studio she operated 20 years ago.

"Now I have the business skills to come back into the arts... I still have my day job, but my passion for the arts never died," she said.

Trinidad said she hopes Altera Vitae will become federally incorporated as a charity this year.

She added that she thinks it's important to raise awareness about FSOS as there are "not a lot of support systems for the family and friends who are left" behind when someone commits suicide.

CDs featuring original music from three local bands will be on sale at the performances, and \$5 from each sale will be donated to FSOS.

In addition, half of all ticket proceeds on March 25 will go to FSOS.

For Ferguson, working with Altera Vitae is exciting, because "every time we do a show, we're giving back... By fundraising for (FSOS). And that's really important."

She added that she loves the thrill of performing in a live theatre production

"Live theatre is very exciting. For that moment in time, you're someone else," she said.

'night, Mother, is playing March 19 to March 30 at Mainline Theatre, located at 3997 St. Laurent Blvd. For tickets or information: 514-823-8823 or visit www.alteravitae.com. Tickets are \$18 and \$15 for students and seniors.

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