

New Stage's new boss no newcomer

By GREG WAXBERG
Special to Northeast Ledger

Between performances of the comedy *Moonlight & Magnolias*, and with a meeting on the morning's schedule, Francine Thomas Reynolds was relaxing on a recent Saturday in the lobby of New Stage Theatre, where she is the new artistic director.

"From the time I was in graduate school, I thought that's what I would like to do — produce and be an artistic director," she said.

Reynolds had been interim artistic director since May, when Patrick Benton left for another theater. When she was asked to assume temporary leadership, she realized the potential.

"I thought, 'If I'm going to put in a lot of work and effort, of course I would like to build on something,'" she said.

According to Barbara Austin,



Reynolds

chair of the search committee, Reynolds' background and accomplishments in key areas were impressive.

The committee wanted broad experience in theater, credentials as a director, comfort onstage as an actor, ideas for advancing the education program and excellent programming within a budget.

"She had proved to us that she had these qualities and would do the job with an energy we've rarely experienced," Austin said. "We also believed that no other candidate would love, nourish and appreciate the institution that is New Stage as much as she."

General Manager Bill McCarty also singled out

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Northwest Ledger
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Reynolds' skills in educational leadership and her professional contacts.

"I think it is so helpful to know the Mississippi artistic market and Francine knows it and a huge number of actors and other artists. My role as general manager will be to help her continue to build our audience and improve our stage facilities."

In January, when Reynolds directed the drama *The Trip to Bountiful*, the cast included Jo Ann Robinson, who, when she heard that Benton was leaving, immediately thought of Reynolds to fill the position.

"I've known and worked with Francine since 1989 ... as fellow actors (and) she's directed me. Frannie is one of the hardest-working people I've ever known, and her ability to multi-task is truly amazing. She has great vision for the future of New Stage," Robinson said.

Originally from Michigan, Reynolds obtained her theater

degree from Northern Michigan University and was a graduate assistant in acting and directing at Florida Atlantic University. Her involvement with New Stage began in 1989, when she served as education director for six years, encompassing school workshops, student matinees, grant writing, summer day camps and directing children's shows. She was drama director at Jackson Preparatory School from 1996 to 2005 and president of the Mississippi Alliance for Arts Education from 1995 to 1997.

Being education director at New Stage gave her insights into building audiences that she will use in her current job.

She hopes to modify the performance schedule so that "Unframed," the current series of alternative theater shows, can start earlier in the evening. There might be a special presentation for high school students of *A Christmas Carol*, which has been performed for younger children in past years.

"It doesn't have an immediate impact, but you hope, 10 years down the line, that some students will remember it. But the one thing it does do, and I think this is key, is get teachers in, and teachers are a real potential audience, and I know that from when I was education director," Reynolds said.

Also on her wish list: an expansion of the Eudora Welty New Play Series for dramatists who submit new works, more teacher workshops, consistent high-quality productions, a mix of old and new works, a variety of comedy and drama, a combination of veteran local artists and guest artists (actors, directors and designers), a tour of a small main stage show, productions that appeal to a wider audience and more publicity.

To find actors for the upcoming season, open auditions take place during the summer, other

theaters recommend artists and Reynolds would like to audition graduates of Mississippi universities.

"We have the four professional acting interns, so we have four young people here. When they can perform, we would put them in a show," she said. "I'd like to see some local actors really apply themselves to improving their craft, and I'd like us to be able to assist in that. We have a lot of talented people here."

When planning a season, she chooses the shows first — before

casting them — based on what the theater needs.

"You know that certain shows are not going to bring in as large of an audience, but you need to do the shows. You need to do the serious plays," she said, using *Bountiful* as an example of a production that did not attract a younger audience but is a Southern drama that the actors and audience enjoyed.

"I hope we always will be able to do an American classic. I do hope that, in the future, we'll be able to do a Shakespeare. And I

want to stay in tune with what's going on in theaters around the country," Reynolds said.

Her new role continues a passion for the stage that began in eighth grade, when her mother suggested a theater workshop.

"The collaborative nature of theater creates a sense of belonging and family that is unbelievable," Reynolds said. "It's the sense of creating something that is live. It's never exactly the same, and I've always loved literature. What a great way to convey literature to people."