

Moving parallels bring 'Grapes of Wrath' to Bethlehem Township

By Myra Yellin Outwater
Special to The Morning Call

Ron Heneghan, Northampton Community College's newest theater professor, has been dreaming of directing John Steinbeck's "**The Grapes of Wrath**" for more than a decade. So last August when he arrived on the Bethlehem campus, he proposed that it be his first production at the school.

"Frank Galati has written a beautiful play," says Heneghan, referring to the stage adaptation of the Steinbeck book that Galati wrote for the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago. The play was such a success that it moved to Broadway in 1990, where it won two Tonys — one for best play and another for Galati's direction.

"Grapes of Wrath" tells the story of the suffering of the Joad family, who leave their home in Oklahoma and travel across the country to look for work in California. The Joads experience love, hate, death and persecution. And in one of the play's most moving moments, their daughter, Rose, gives birth to a baby, bringing hope and redemption to these tortured people. Galati enhances the story's poignancy and richness with musicians playing period music on stage.

Heneghan, who teaches acting, voice, and movement at the college, says it is this sense of displacement and the addition of music that attracted him to the play. Just as the Joads, he also has traveled across the country seeking work. In 1994 Heneghan left

Seattle and moved to California and found himself living near Salinas and Monterrey, two of Steinbeck's most famous locales. He began reading Steinbeck's books and became fascinated by his characters.

He then moved to Providence, R.I., where a neighbor gave him a CD of folk music recorded by the neighbor's daughter, Karen Dunstan. Heneghan later learned that Dunstan lived in the Lehigh Valley and was active with the Lehigh Valley Folk Music Society. When Heneghan began planning his production and realized he needed musicians, he turned to Dunstan, who not only agreed to be one of the musicians, but also wrote some original music for the show.

"All of these events create circles that relate to the play, and everything in this play moves in circles — life, death, birth," says Heneghan. "Nothing in this play stays in place. Everything is on wheels. The sets are all movable. The people are all moving along and the dust keeps blowing. Steinbeck mentions the word 'dust'

NIKKI McFARLANE plays Ma and Aaron Coyle portrays Tom in 'The Grapes of Wrath' at Northampton County Community College.

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more than 25 times in the first chapter of the book, and [art professor] Sherman Finch has created photo projections and images of dust to emphasize this feeling."

Heneghan also hopes that audiences will find the themes relevant to contemporary times. Although the play is set in the 1930s, he says that there are many people in this area seeking work with the closing of Bethlehem Steel and other businesses.

■ "**Grapes of Wrath**," 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday through April 24, 1 p.m. April 21, Northampton Community College, Lipkin Theatre,

Kopecek Hall, 3835 Green Pond Road, Bethlehem Township. Tickets: Free, but a donation of canned goods for a local food bank or a contribution to the NCC Actors' Scholarship Fund is requested. 610-861-5091.

GET IN ON THE GOSSIP

Want to know some gossip about Moliere or 17th-century French society? Ask the cast and crew of Lehigh University's "**The Misanthrope**," which opens Friday at Zoellner Arts Center. Augustine Ripa, chair of the Department of Theatre, says the play is part of a semester-long project that has

PLAN AHEAD

THURBER IS BACK

If you missed the Crowded Kitchen Players' delightful production of "**A Thurber Carnival**" in March in Allentown, a second chance is coming. The play will be presented next Thursday through May 2 at the Mauch Chunk Opera House in Jim Thorpe.

"A Thurber Carnival" is a very funny and sophisticated comedy by American humorist and artist James Thurber. It takes place at a cocktail party and the guests regale the audience with silly bon mots, skits and fanciful stories. Each act begins and ends with Thurber's humorous device, "Word Dances," a fast and witty interlude of one- or two-liners which bring to mind the brief skits of the 1960s television show "Laugh-In."

For tickets, call 610-395-7176 or 570-325-4439.

required the students to read and research 17th-century

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