

JEANNIE GRAY

WHEN THEY TALK, SHE LISTENS

By Eunice J. Hart

Staff Writer

It looks disorganized, but there is a method to this madness.

About 10 girls standing in the middle of a classroom in Sylvan Hills High School talking at the same time, in a tone which would not be considered conversational, and in the middle of it all, a teacher sits quietly watching with a slight smile on her face.

It's Competitive Speech, and the girls are working the kinks out of a particular scene in the play "Sweet Charity" by Neil Simon.

Jeannie Gray, their speech and drama teacher, seems to have let her class run awry, but it seems to be working to everyone's advantage.

"That's part of the education process," Gray said.

"I let them work it out themselves, then if they hit a stumbling block I come in."

The girls manage to work out how to segue from dialogue to a dance number and back to dialogue somewhat smoothly.

They give each other direction, only stopping to ask Gray her opinion when they get to a spot they can't iron out by themselves.

It's vintage Gray, rooted in the experience of a woman who found her own way in life the way

she encourages her students to find it on stage.

Recently selected speech teacher of the year by the Arkansas State Communicators Association, she has been enchanted with the theater since she was 6, but initially shunned all thoughts of acting.

"My great aunt and uncle took me to see a production and I just fell in love with it," recalled the 42-year-old native of Hazen who grew up in North Little Rock.

While people might think all theater people are gregarious and uninhibited, Gray says she was paralyzed by stagefright, afraid to get up and perform in front of the people she had grown up with in North Little Rock.

But she never took an acting class until she went to college at the University of Central Arkansas.

She had taken speech classes at North Little Rock High School, but after she edited her senior yearbook her English teacher encouraged her to go into journalism.

"I told her 'my heart's just not in it, I just can't do it,'" she said.

One introductory theater class at UCA, however, and she quickly realized she was home.

"I realized I had found my niche," she said. Soon she



DAVID SCOLLI

ay (second from right) works with students (from left) fferson, Jon Bilon and Kristy Barrington.

Teacher

■ From Page 1B

was double majoring in English and theater and immersed in the production rather than the performance side of university theater.

"I did it all," she said rattling off a list of jobs which included set construction, stage manager, lighting, costumes, publicity and props among other things.

Eventually she did her student teaching at Sylvan Hills High School 20 years ago "and never left."

Two decades of teaching speech and drama later, her department hasn't put on a major show since 1991, she admits, but her own personal project has been an extremely successful children's show each fall.

"I love to see small children in the audience," she said. "I love to see the expressions on their face and to see them get so involved."

This year she put on "The Stone That Sings" and as she describes the production, she still sounds like that 6-year-old watching her first production.

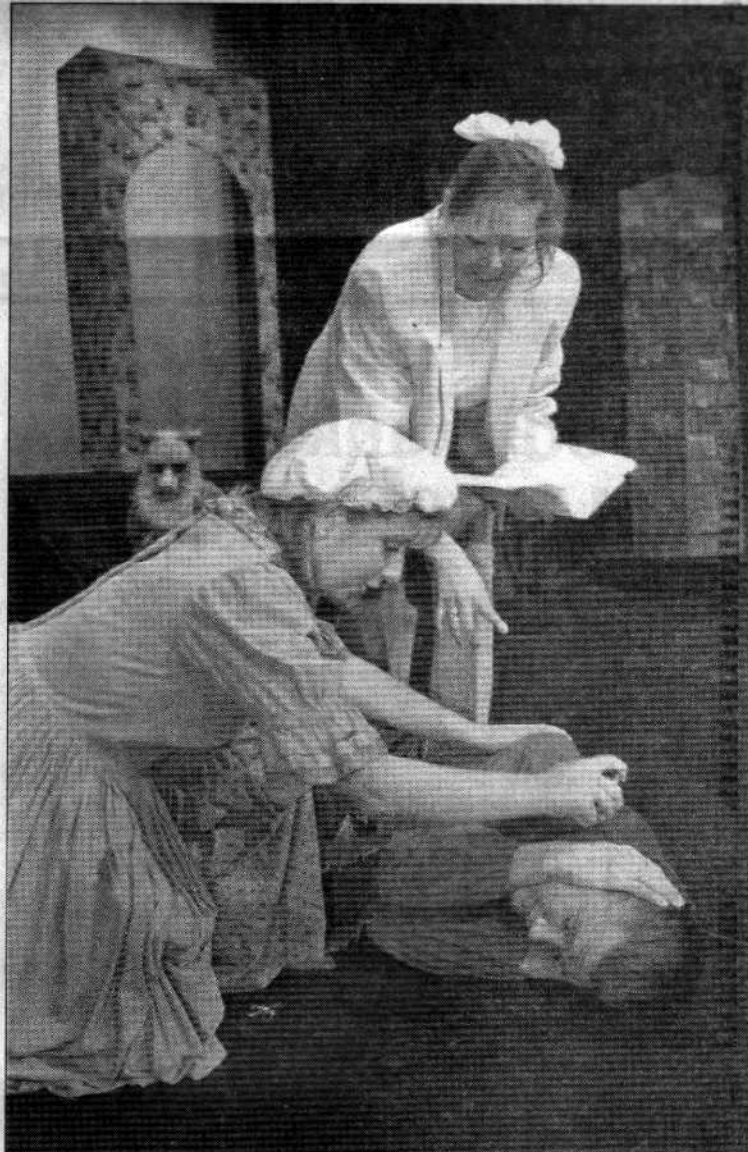
"It's so full of castles and dragons and knights," she says her eyes growing wider as she continues to explain her lifelong love for the theater.

"It's so much larger than life, nothing is real, the characters are so big," she said.

Even though the classes she teaches are electives, she still feels she has some words of wisdom, from experience, to offer those with the occasional

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—Jeannie Gray



DAVID SCOLL

Jeannie Gray works with Amber Glaze (left) and Jon Bilon.

she tells them.

But after 20 years, Gray says her greatest satisfaction has been seeing some of her students go on to glory in theater and other fields.

Scott Ferguson, a Sylvan Hills graduate of 1986 went on to produce "School House Rock Live," a play adapted from the popular educational ABC cartoon that only lasts about five minutes, but has a catchy tune.

The play has run in Chicago and off Broadway.

Along the way, "He was just one in a very bright group of very gifted and talented students," she said.

Another former student, Shannon Baker, teaches with Gray.

And yet another runs a dance

company in Memphis.

But Gray is proud of her former students whether they succeed in the theater field or any other field.

"I'm proud to see kids go on to achieve what they want to achieve," she said. "As long as they meet their goals."

In fact, Gray strongly recommends speech, especially for those who are not planning a career in the field of theater.

"If a person cannot communicate effectively, it would be extremely difficult to succeed in any field," she said.

And what of the little girl who fell in love with the theater so long ago.

Is it still her niche?

"The theater is where I belong."

bout of stagefright and speech fright.

"The better prepared they are the more confident they will feel when they present,"