

EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

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A group of skylarking children playing tag among the tombstones of a cemetery would be impermissible. It would be too irreverent to the sleeping dead if heedless brats hopped, skipped and danced upon the resting places of the departed.

However, a thoughtful stroll among the headstones of a very old graveyard -- where no one you ever knew or loved is buried, and preferably at the magical moment of dusk on a summer evening -- that is permitted, that can be a dramatic experience if one begins to wonder about all those people under the headstones, what their lives could have been like. And that, in effect, is what "Spoon River Anthology" is about.

"Spoon River Anthology" is the name of the play being presented by the University Theatre at Eastern beginning Friday at 8:00 p.m., April 25, in the Theatre of the Doudna Fine Arts Center. And "anthology," a strange word to be found in the title of a stage-play, is an accurate description of this comedy-drama, for it is a collection of fables; supposedly a collection of epitaphs from the graveyard of a little Illinois town called Spoon River.

These are not, however, epitaphs which could ever have appeared on a headstone. They too truthfully reveal the secret passions, joys, fears, aspirations, sins, heartaches, successes, failures and hypocrisies that stirred these people while they lived. Some are raucously comic, some angry, bitter or despairing.

In book form this album of spoken-from-the-grave autobiographies has enjoyed an enormous popularity ever since Edgar Lee Masters first published it in 1915. It had gone through more than 70 editions when Masters died in 1950 at the age of 82.

At first it scandalized many readers with its disclosure that small-town life was not as pure and wholesome as people had liked to believe. But it was also recognized as a paean to the sturdiness of Americans in the heartland of the country, to the dauntlessness of their spirit. "Spoon River Anthology" for years has been considered as much a loving tribute to America as the poems of Walt Whitman and the stories of Mark Twain.

One critic in 1915 stated that Masters in his book had articulate a whole ignored or forgotten part of the American soul, and even part of the human soul.

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The play being presented by the University Theatre is a dramatized version of Masters' now-classic evocation of a small town's life through grave-stone-vignettes of its passed-on citizens. The dramatization was made in 1963, forty-eight years after the book first came out, by Charles Aidman, who originated in Indiana, just one stateline away from Illinois prairie-land...the land which Masters immortalized in his book. ("Spoon River" is clearly a recollection of the two small towns where Masters spent his childhood, Petersburg and Lewistown, Illinois, before he hied off to a legal career in Chicago.)

The cast of fifteen will portray some seventy of Spoon River's citizens, blending readily from one role to the other, and frequently joining in double antiphonies of love and hate -- as when, for example, a married couple long released from the domestic harness that had galled them, exchange recriminations, proving that even the dead can quarrel.

The players are: Rich Haimann, Toni Canell, Julie Woosley, John Slavens, Mark Highland, Clay Peterson, Beth Adams, Kevin Rettke, Linda Neuzil, Jack Spaniol, Merel Ray, Dan Dionne, Nancy Hunt, Craig Ratcliff, and Susan Morse.

Interspersed in their portrayals will be a series of both old, familiar folksongs (like "Jimmy Crack Corn") and new folk ditties with words by Aidman and tunes by Naomi Caryl Hirshhorn. The musicians for the performances are Linda Neuzil and Clay Peterson.

Gerald Sullivan is directing this presentation which, when first performed on the Eastern campus in the Winter Season of 1967-68, was a salute to the Illinois Sesquicentennial Celebration: 1818-1968. The presentation this season is offered in conjunction with "Celebration '80: A Festival of the Arts" as well as The Coles County Sesquicentennial Celebration: 1830-1980.

Tickets for the production are available at the Fine Arts Ticket Office between 1 & 5:00 p.m. Monday thru Friday, and are priced at \$3.50 for Adults, \$2.50 for youth and senior citizens and \$2.00 for Eastern students. Reservations can be made by phoning 581-3110 during ticket office hours.

Other 8:00 p.m. performances are April 26, May 2 & 3 with one Sunday matinee at 2:00 p.m. April 27.