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DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE ARTS

PROBLEM OF HOW TO LAUGH ALMOST BAFFLED LEADING ACTRESS IN
"SUMMER AND SMOKE," AT EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY THEATRE

Anne Shapland, who will enact the sensitively-drawn leading role of a preacher's self-conscious daughter in "Summer and Smoke," when that Tennessee Williams play is produced by Eastern Illinois University Theatre at the Fine Arts Center, says that one of the hardest things about mastering this long and difficult role has been learning to laugh suitably.

And, according to her explanation, just the right kind of wrong laugh is a very important clue to the character of Alma Winemiller, the young woman she is to portray. Alma, says Miss Shapland, is a spinsterish sort of person, though still in her mid-twenties, and the play shows her terror at the growing realization that she's doomed to be a life-long wall-flower.

"The revealing little touches that Tennessee Williams has devised," says Miss Shapland, "are so clever in showing this quality in Alma, that you can see why he is considered the greatest playwright in America today. There's this timid laugh, for example, that she intersperses in her high-flown conversation.

In a stage direction of the script, Williams specified this feature of Alma. He wrote: "Out of nervousness and self-consciousness she has a habit of prefacing and concluding her remarks with a little breathless laugh. This will be indicated at points in the dialogue, but should be used more freely than indicated; however, the characterization must never be stressed to the point of making her at all ludicrous in a less than sympathetic way."

"Well, don't we all know rather painfully awkward people who try to cover their inner uneasiness by some such mannerism? When I began to rehearse the part of Alma, I didn't think this little matter was going to be any trouble. I said to myself, 'I know how to laugh, don't I? Any child can do it.'"

"But it wasn't easy. At the first rehearsal, Gerald Sullivan, our director, stopped me after the first few laughs, and said, 'Hey, you're giving chuckles as if you'd really heard something funny.' I tried giving little laughs that would not sound as if I were amused at something -- and nothing came. Sullivan said I should just remember the laugh had to come from Alma's nervousness. Still I couldn't do it. Sullivan said to me at last, 'Look, we'll have to have it, it's essential to the play.' I remembered a shy little girl I had known when I was about 12 years old who used to laugh shrilly at every sentence she spoke, and remembering her helped a little.

Then at a rehearsal I was in the middle of a scene with Randy Arney, who plays Doctor John, the one where he teases Alma about swallowing air when she talks. And all at once I had it -- I hadn't even meant to do it.

(more)

But there is was, and it sounded like it fit. It sounded right. It sounded 'sincere,' so to speak. It's been there ever since."

Miss Shapland says that there are a number of other helpful hints in Tennessee Williams' explicit stage directions, such as that Alma constantly twists a ring on her finger, that have aided her to reveal in her performance the turmoil and agitation of a frightened young woman putting up a front to win the affection of a cynical young doctor. "My job," she says, "is to try to make theatre-goers feel compassion for her, but never pity."