

PROV. 2R.

Women's Work

New play 'Mill Girls' offers a glimpse of 1840s mill life

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Imagine the future for a young girl in the 1840s who faced basically three choices: working on the family farm, toiling as a servant for another family or heading to the city for a job in a factory or mill.

The last seemed to some a glorious adventure, despite the grueling conditions: Living in a crowded boarding

house and working 13-hour shifts in a factory six days a week for \$2.25 a week — minus \$1.25 for room and board.

But it gave these young women a paycheck of their own and a taste of independence, while also providing a cheap, docile labor force that was vital for the flourishing textile industry of the times.

The All Childrens Theater commissioned Rhode Island playwright Eliza Anderson to write an original play about life in the textile mills of the 1840s, to show its impact on the economy as well as the lives of children — especially young women — to commemorate Women's History Month.

The result was *Mill Girls*, which Anderson describes as a "look back at the daily struggles and rewards of mill life, particularly for young women and girls."

Funded with a grant from the Gregson Foundation (named for the family that established the Worcester Textile Company in North Providence), the All Children's Theater in March will offer six public performances and 10 educational performances for students throughout the region.

Emily Westcott, director of development and marketing for the All Childrens Theater, explained

that part of ACT's mission is to give young people more exposure to the theater — especially when it comes to plays with educational or social value.

That's why ACT performs at least one play a year with an educational or inspirational theme, and the troupe hopes *Mill Girls* offers that and more to the estimated 3,100 school children who are scheduled to see the performance.

said, ACT wasn't sure it would be able to come up with the money and support needed to put it on.

They solicited the Gregson Foundation which was supportive of the effort and the idea that it would offer school children a glimpse at life during this important time in history, Westcott said. She declined to say how much the grant was for, except to say it was "an enormous amount of money."

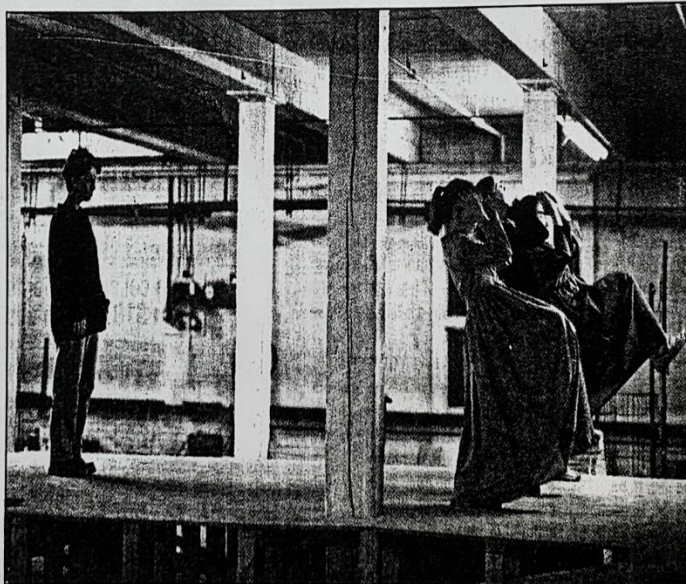
The play features a cast of 25 girls and 4 boys ages 8 to 17 who are members of the ACT Ensemble and are representative of the 10-to-25-year-olds who worked in the mills. They've researched their roles for the performances, including travelling to Lowell, Mass., to experience working on an assembly line.

As Goodrum said, she wants the actors and the audiences "to learn the importance of females to the history of industrialization . . . to see history from a young person's view . . . to hear Octavia (one of the characters) say: 'If

you want something, if you truly want something, then you must set your sights. Remain steadfast in your purpose. And work.'"

The performances will be held at the Vartan Gregorian School Theater, 455 Wickenden St., Providence. Tickets for the public performances on March 5, 6, 12 and 13 at 7 p.m. and March 7 and 14 at 2 p.m. cost \$8 for adults and \$5 for children. The educational performances will be offered at no charge to middle and high school students during two shows each on March 9, 11, 15, 17 and 18.

For reservations and information, call ACT at 331-7174. Group rates and educational packages are available.



Journal photo/KRIS CRAIG

Choreographer Deb Meunier, left, oversees a rehearsal of the All Childrens Theatre Ensemble production of *Mill Girls*.

THE PLAY IS the brainchild of Wrenn Goodrum, artistic director and founder of the ensemble, who had been searching for a strong script about young women, Westcott said.

A parent of one of the child actors in the program told her of the children who used to work in the Slater Mills, including a child who led a strike there. Goodrum subsequently began researching children working in New England mills, and commissioned Anderson as a possible playwright for the project.

They travelled to mill towns in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, and agreed to come up with a play focusing on the girls who worked in the mills and their quest for "independence, education and enlightenment."

Even after commissioning the play, Westcott

