

Recreating Historic Figures

By BARBARA DELATINER

MMARGARET FULLER, the prophetic 19th-century feminist writer, and Clarence Darrow, the 20th-century civil-libertarian lawyer, are making the rounds of Island libraries and the universities this month — in the persons of Laurie James and Mel Feit, two actors who are going through the throes of recreating in free one-person performances the lives, intimate and public, of the two complex individuals.

It is, Mrs. James said, an all-consuming task. Ever since she stumbled on a biography of the almost-forgotten pioneer, she has been devoted "to making her alive again in the hearts and minds of living persons who have lost sight of who Margaret Fuller is."

Over the last 15 years, Mrs. James who lives in Dix Hills with her husband, Clifton, a character actor who is appearing in "American Buffalo" with Al Pacino, and the last of her five children, ages 9 to 27, who are still at home, has been researching, writing and polishing "Still Beat Noble Hearts," her "dramatic portrait of an American genius."

She has taken time out for other things, notably to put her early drama training and summer-stock experience to use in developing and presenting arts-in-education poetry programs in the schools. But these were just interludes.

Her real "mission in life," she said, was Miss Fuller, the New England writer and critic who was Horace Greeley's first female reporter and war correspondent and whose book "Woman in the 19th Century" essentially laid the groundwork for the feminist movement in the United States.

Although just as intense, Mr. Feit's devotion to Darrow is shorter-lived. Mr. Feit, a 29-year-old neophyte actor whose dramatic experience has been in college productions and during a 10-month run with Theater East, the Town of Oyster Bay's Comprehensive Employment Training Act drama company, is a native of Plainview. He came across David W. Rintels's "Clarence Darrow: A One Man Play" last February.

"I had talked the CETA people into keeping me on even though Theater East was folding," he said, "and the Nassau County Office of Cultural Development had agreed to sponsor me. All I needed was something to do. And I found it in this play, which I was really unfamiliar with, although I had seen bits and pieces of it on public television when they ran Henry Fonda's performance."

"Well, it clicked. Especially, since I had a year of law school and was familiar with Darrow. Actually, I felt a real affinity to him, and he's always been as close to a hero as I could have, basi-

cally because of his concern for people and because he had always been on the right, honest side of issues. This was a play of substance and humor that captures his humor and emotions, as well as his philosophy."

With his red ponytail tucked into his collar — "I hated to cut it off for the role, and the makeup people at Nassau Rep showed me how to hide it" — his makeup studiously applied to look like a man of 67, his voice adopting the feigned Darrow Middle Western twang with just a trace of Southern drawl, Mr. Feit spends two-and-a-half hours on stage reminiscing about Darrow's career and life and re-enacting some of his more famous battles, like the Scopes and Leopold-Loeb cases.

It is a one-man show in every sense. Mr. Feit produced the drama, directed, does his makeup and props and even is the lighting technician.

"I guess you could say it was presumptuous of me to take such a big risk, take on such a demanding task," he said, "but I've worked hard on it — 16 hours a day for all this time at \$160 a week, and I think it's paying off. I mean, nobody walks out on my performances, and I've really been playing to standing-room-only audiences that seem to appreciate what I'm doing."

When Mrs. James, her blondish long hair pulled severely back and her slender body clad in a simple gray cotton frock to capture the no-nonsense Puritan background of her heroine, takes front and center stage, she comes with the benefit of expert advice. Her husband helped her cut and polish the script. He also directed her performance, which, instead of props, employs slides of places and people Miss Fuller came into contact with as a stage set.

In the first hour, "Part I: The American Years, 1810 to 1846," Mrs. James is Miss Fuller from the age of 4 through 36 — the bright daughter given a boy's education by a stern, farthinking father; the daring literary figure who was a member of the Transcendental School and hobnobbed as an equal with Emerson, Thoreau and Hawthorne, and the activist who organized what was probably the woman's movement's first rap session in which she tried to teach Boston matrons "some minding, not mending."

In "Part II: The European Years, 1846-1850," Mrs. James follows Miss Fuller as she covers the 1848 Italian Revolution for The New York Tribune, is lionized by European society as one of the world's literary greats, meets and marries an Italian nobleman 10 years younger than she is and bears a son, and, then, tragically at the age of 40, on her way home from Europe is drowned with her family at the height of her career in a shipwreck off Fire Island.

"As a feminist, I identify with her and her problems," Mrs. James said.



Making the rounds of the Island: Laurie James as Margaret Fuller and Mel Feit as Clarence Darrow

"That's what makes it such a labor of love. And there are times, up there on stage, when I feel that I am really feeling her emotions as well as agreeing with her thoughts. But you always have to step back and separate yourself. Otherwise you run into trouble."

Financed by a \$6,840 grant from the State Council for the Humanities and sponsored by the Wantagh Cultural Arts Program and the Nassau Library System, "Still Beat Noble Hearts," which Mrs. James hopes to have played throughout the United States and the world, will be performed as follows:

Part I: 7:30 P.M. tomorrow, Waldinger Library, Valley Stream; 8 P.M. on Nov. 18, Seaford Library; 8 P.M. on Dec. 2, Oceanside Library; 10 A.M. on Dec. 4 Shelter Rock Library, Albertson; 8 P.M. on Dec. 6, New Hyde Park Library, and 4 P.M. on Dec. 7, Stenson Library, Sea Cliff.

Part II will be seen at 2 P.M. today, Port Washington Library; 8 P.M. on Thursday, Wantagh Library; 8 P.M.

Friday, Hofstra University; 8:45 P.M. on Nov. 13, Uniondale Library; 8:15 P.M. on Nov. 20, Hewlett-Woodmere Library; 3:30 P.M. on Nov. 23, Manhasset Library, and 8 P.M. on Dec. 1, Baldwin Library. There will be discussions about Miss Fuller and the work after each performance.

Committed to an acting career, "but where I go from here I don't know when my CETA grant runs out at the end of the month," Mr. Feit will play Darrow at 8 P.M. on Thursday at the Rockville Centre Library; 8:30 P.M. on Friday, Freeport Library, and 2:30 P.M. next Sunday, Shelter Rock Library, Albertson; 8 P.M. on Nov. 10, Baldwin Library; 8 P.M. on Nov. 12, Glen Cove Library; 8:30 P.M. on Nov. 14, Malverne Library; 2:30 P.M. on Nov. 16, Merrick Library; 8 P.M. on Nov. 19, Elmont Library, 8:30 P.M. on Nov. 21, Hofstra University Student Center; 8:30 P.M. on Nov. 22, Owens School, Island Park, and 3 P.M. on Nov. 23, Tanglewood Preserve Band House, Lakeview. ■