

UIS Theatre to stage first Shakespeare play

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The instructions were coming fast.

Critique. Encouragement. Next.

"Orlando, 'How bitter it is to look at happiness through another man's eyes.' ... You can still go a little further with that being hard for you."

"Audrey, let's cut the sniffing of the armpits. But, boy, I appreciate trying stuff like that."

"Oliver and Celia, you're kinda-almost-sorta doing this, but we've got to add to the sex and the violence in the show."

It's a recent weeknight on the campus of the University of Illinois at Springfield, and Eric Thibodeaux-Thompson is giving end-of-rehearsal notes to the cast of William Shakespeare's "As You Like It."

As he speaks, opening night — set for April 17 — is still more than two weeks away, and a portion of the cast has just completed a rehearsal of Act V in the Studio Theatre.

Thibodeaux-Thompson, who is directing, intersperses his notes with encouraging remarks about the pace of progress on the ambitious production. It's the first time UIS Theatre has attempted to stage Shakespeare.

(One week ago today, the program reached another milestone when the campus Senate approved the creation of a theater minor. It's the first step toward creating a theater major and eventually an autonomous theater department.)

In Springfield, a musical can sell out a two-weekend run while some plays have a hard time breaking even. But since Thibodeaux-Thompson arrived on campus in 2002, UIS Theatre has carved out a niche specializing in plays.

"Not that we're the only one who does plays," Thibodeaux-Thompson said during an interview in his campus office. "There's other excellent people in town who do plays also — we're friends with most of them, I think — but we embrace that niche. We're sort of a little more on the — and I don't mean for this to sound stuffy — but we're a little more on the dramatic literature (side) on stage."

Something a little different

"As You Like It" is the culmination of a process that began last fall with the course Playing Shakespeare. Thibodeaux-Thompson said he and fellow UIS Theatre faculty member Milissa Thibodeaux-Thompson (who is also his wife) thought it would be helpful for students to have an entire semester to prepare for performing Shakespeare.

The course examined "what's the same as any other playwright, and then what's uniquely a little different when working with Shakespeare — you know, scansion (a way to mark the metric patterns in poetry), blank verse and all that stuff," Thibodeaux-Thompson said.

Kevin Purcell, an alumnus of UIS who plays two characters in "As You Like It," said understanding the text is key to performing Shakespeare.

"It's really about the language, learning to speak clearly, understanding the text, using what are called 'the givens' in Shakespeare — what he gives you — because there's so little stage direction," Purcell said.

After thoroughly studying the text, Purcell learns his lines while standing, sitting or moving as he will in performance.

"You want the mind and the body and the words to all get integrated together, much more so than just normal dramatic literature," he said.

The cast of "As You Like It" comprises 18 people in 22 roles: 10 UIS students, two UIS alumni and six people drawn from area communities.

Purcell said he's enjoyed the blend of students and community members.

"Because this is centered in the university, all these students here are getting credit in some way for what they're doing, and they're also integrating it with the learning that Eric and Missy are trying to develop here in the theater program. It's just fun for some of the community folks to be able to support that as well as engage with them. That to me is a big draw about this production.

"For years and years, this university had this space right here and they never used it," Purcell said, sitting inside the Studio Theatre during a rehearsal break. "And it's only been in the last few years that they even had a theater program here. And they get to do stuff here that's very hard to do in just the normal community theater."

"As You Like It"
 UIS Theatre
 * When
 8 p.m. April 17-18, 23-25; 2 p.m.
 April 19
 * Where
 Studio Theatre, lower level of the
 Public Affairs Center on the
 campus of the University of Illinois
 at Springfield
 * Tickets
 \$14 adults, \$12 seniors and
 children, \$8 students; available in
 person at the Sangamon
 Auditorium ticket office or by calling
 206-6160

Purcell said UIS can take more chances in programming than a community theater group.

But with that freedom comes what Thibodeaux-Thompson called a balancing act among resources, the talent pool, what audiences want to see and what audiences need to see.

"I try not to be presumptuous, but to me a lot of what makes theater vital and dynamic and fun is paying attention to what's going on in the world," he said. "Because I think audiences want two waves to wash over them: they want to be entertained on some level, of course, but they also want to be stimulated. Otherwise it's not a three-dimensional night in the theater."

He said that while "As You Like It" has funny moments, it's not a "knee-slapping comedy." Rather it's more of a character study, a meditation.

A feat of memory

The story centers on Rosalind (Aasne Vigesaa), who is cast from the court of Duke Frederick (Purcell) and decides to disguise herself as a man and seek refuge in the Forest of Arden. A series of love triangles ensue with a healthy dose of vintage Shakespearean mischief and misunderstanding.

Rosalind is one of Shakespeare's few major roles for women.

"It's the female Hamlet, they say," Vigesaa said. "This is a real showcase of a role. It's really difficult and really fun and very high-energy and I love it."

Vigesaa was performing without the aid of a script — off-book, actors call it — before most of the rest of the cast. But that, she said, is partly because of Milissa Thibodeaux-Thompson, who had previously played the role of Rosalind.

"She terrified me by telling me how hard it was to memorize this role, so I really pushed myself the first three or four weeks of rehearsal. I made it a goal for myself, get off-book one act per week for the first few weeks," Vigesaa said.

Sitting nearby, Dwight Langford, who plays Rosalind's love interest, Orlando, was asked whether he found that inspirational or intimidating.

"Intimidating," he answered without hesitation.

"Oh no," Vigesaa said, laughing.

"It was a really a little mixture of both," Langford said. "Some people saw it as inspirational and some people saw it as intimidating. I'm one of the actors that are generally not off-book until the day (it's required), maybe a couple days after."

Ashley Warren, who plays Rosalind's cousin Celia, counts herself among the inspired.

After one of the first rehearsals, Warren said she remembers feeling like she didn't know what was going on. But her fellow cast members helped her get up to speed.

"Not even giving me lines (or) how to say things, but just being who they are and doing their parts and their roles has really inspired me to learn more about it," Warren said.

Collaboration

For his part, Thibodeaux-Thompson said he considered himself lucky to be able to cast Vigesaa and Purcell.

"It's no secret that these guys are in that top tier of any kind of production in Springfield and beyond. I think our students learn a lot working alongside those types, and we all learn from each other," he said.

"None of us are done — I'm certainly learning every time, interestingly enough from the students a lot of times. It's a real cyclical process. I'm not just teaching them; they're teaching me. I'll come in the rehearsal hall, I'll have my preliminary idea of how I think the scene needs to go and then they'll have some great idea and I'll (say), 'That's better; let's do what you came up with.'

"Because it's real important to me, as part of the process, that I don't dictate too much. If a move, if a decision to get up at the end of this speech and walk over here and shake this person — if that idea comes from the actor, it's going to look more organic to the audience come opening night.

"But if it's overly, 'Eric wants me to raise up this arm when I say these words and then bend forward when I say the rest of the speech,' then we risk it looking a little too transparent to the audience, 'Oh, yeah, so-and-so's doing what Eric told him to do.'"

Thibodeaux-Thompson is not in the business of choreographing the actors. "You want to lead them loosely where you want them to go," he said, "but then also have the smarts to get the heck out of the way when this excellent actor is starting to come up with some great ideas.

Vigesaa plays her role with physical gusto, particularly when disguised as a man in the Forest of Arden.

"When I put on boys' clothes and get to roll around on the floor, it's so freeing and it's really fun," Vigesaa said. "I guess because she's pretending to be a boy, there's some element of getting youthful exuberance and action."

And it's that physicality, she says, that helped push her off-book so quickly.

"I wanted to lose this," she said, holding up a copy of the script, "because that's a crutch when you're trying to do things, get down and dirty and really

get physical with stuff.”

Now. And then.

Some of the stuff the characters will be getting physical with includes cell phones and guns.

“I’m not one to necessarily always rush to doing a contemporary version of a classic play,” Thibodeaux-Thompson said. “I don’t believe that all of Shakespeare’s plays easily lend themselves to that option.

“But this is one of many of his that does have options as far as setting — do you want to do it Civil War, do you want to do it in Shakespeare’s day and age, do you want to do it contemporary or what have you — I think ‘As You Like It’ is universal enough that it does succeed in a lot of different time periods.

“And one reason I wanted to do this one contemporary was one part out of necessity, quite frankly. While our costume storage area is growing, hey, we’re not yet where, ‘Oh yeah, the Elizabethan Wing? That would be over here.’ ”

He said the contemporary setting should also allow students to more easily relate to the performance.

“Sometimes they might get turned off by Shakespeare because some teacher is telling them, ‘This old play is really important. Why? Because I’m telling you it’s really important.’ And I think with that kind of delivery, it can be a little bit off-putting.”

“My hope is that by putting it in a contemporary setting, it might be a little more immediate, it might be a little more accessible to younger people. It might seem less distancing to them.”

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