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UIS theater department tackles a gritty Shepard drama

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BODY:

Anna Dow isn't sure just how far to go in a scene where she tearfully recounts the disturbing circumstances of her character's father's death.

"I know it's hard to do," says director Eric Thibodeaux-Thompson. "Just breathe and it will be there. It's not the crying that's dramatic, but trying not to cry." The scene is one of many wrenching moments in Sam Shepard's cutting family drama "A Lie of the Mind," the second play from the University of Illinois at Springfield's newly reconvened theater department.

"I chose this play because it's a wonderful opportunity, a great acting T-bone steak," says Thibodeaux-Thompson, an assistant professor and director of theater at UIS. "And the acting is going to be right on the audience's lap."

Known for his intense stories, Shepard weaves together the lives of two rural Montana families in this production. Brain-damaged and beaten by her husband Jake (Steven McDavid), Beth (Elizabeth George) has gone to live with her distant parents Baylor (Jim Gasparin) and Meg (Shelley Huck).

In Beth's absence, Jake is convinced he has killed her, but he remains with his over-protective mother Lorraine (Shirley McConnaughey) and disaffected sister Sally (Dow). Still obsessed with one another, though, Jake's and Beth's paths will again cross and bring their families' dysfunctions to the surface.

"More than anything, this play shows what living in isolated areas can do to our behavior," Thibodeaux-Thompson says. "They're hard people on the Montana frontier who have a hard existence."

Thibodeaux-Thompson selected the play knowing it would be neither run-of-the-mill nor easy.

"It's surprisingly funny while being serious," Thibodeaux-Thompson says. "We go from

laughing to something that's anything but funny. It has a lot of different gears and a lot of different ways to move us."

With actors ranging from first-timers to seasoned veterans, Thibodeaux-Thompson has found he must adapt his vocabulary to suit each performer's individual needs.

"The talent and the ability is all there and all the same," Thibodeaux-Thompson says. "The only real distinction is acting experience. While I don't talk to down to anyone, I do speak so that each person gets what they need from me."

Huck says it's good to be in a production that boasts direction and blocking contributed with time and effort.

"Eric is patient with us while keeping a hold on the reins," Huck says. "He has made it a very actively directed play."

Figuring she would start with something hard and move on to something a bit easier, the 28-year-old George is making her stage debut.

"When I tell most people what play I'm doing that with, they say 'What?'" George says. "I was at a point in my life where I had nothing to lose by doing this. It's better late than never, I guess."

Other actors in the play also have faced some obstacles with the production, some of them saying it's the most difficult they've ever done.

"I've been acting for many years, and this is one of the toughest," says Gasparin, 48. "Shepard's work is like jazz. It has its highs and lows, becomes disjointed, and then you have to pull it all back together."

"The biggest difficulty for me is combining Jake's anger and fear," McDavid says. "If something frustrates me, I just keep it in all day and let it all out here in rehearsal."

In addition to the naked emotion on display, many of the actors say Shepard's often-uninterrupted verbal heftiness has been difficult to master.

"You don't really have lines, you have paragraphs," says McConnaughey. "But the plus side of that is that you can really get yourself rolling in one of those speeches."

"In other plays, you might be able to paraphrase and get the point across, but not here," Huck says.

But the cast has not rested on its laurels. To compensate, they have shown up hours before scheduled rehearsals to run lines and even get together on their own time. Mostly, they are grateful for the chance to tackle a meaty, modern drama - something that doesn't often hit Springfield stages.

"I have this sort of reputation for being the mother or the church lady," McConnaughey says. "But here I'm brassy and cussing, telling people off. I've heard so many actresses say it's fun to be nasty, and now I can understand why they say it. I can't get rid of this character. I have to go home and think about her."

"People will walk away saying they couldn't believe we had the chutzpah to do that," Gasparin says. "I'm really impressed with him (Thibodeaux-Thompson) bringing this here because it's something Springfield would never have seen otherwise."

"A Lie of the Mind," 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday; also Friday, Feb. 28, and Saturday, March 1; 3 p.m. Sunday; also Sunday, March 2. Studio Theatre in the Public Affairs Building at the University of Illinois at Springfield. Admission is \$10 for the general public, \$6 for UIS faculty and staff and \$4 for UIS students. Tickets are available by calling 206-6738 or at the door one hour before curtain time.

GRAPHIC: Elizabeth George as Beth and Ed Barnett as Beth's brother-in-law Frankie rehearse a scene from "A Lie of the Mind" at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

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