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In Performance:

taking UIS theater to the next stage

By Phil Funkenbusch

Eric Thibodeaux-Thompson was hired last fall to head the new theater program at UIS. The Minneapolis native was drawn to the job here by the chance to create something new and ambitious.

"I'm interested in producing and directing plays that are great dramatic literature," he says. "I think truly good dramatic literature is not boring at all--in fact, it's quite exciting. I also think it's important to produce a healthy rotation of plays, acknowledging various profiles of people and worldviews, as well as various time periods."

Thibodeaux-Thompson's first production at UIS was Terrence McNally's comedy *It's Only a Play*, which follows a group of theater folk on the opening night of a Broadway show. The play was a little too much like an insider's joke, but in his second outing Thibodeaux-Thompson comes closer to hitting his target audience.

Sam Shepard's 1985 play, *A Lie of the Mind*, will be staged over the next two weeks. Shepard, whose plays have been popular in colleges for years, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1979 for *Buried Child* (a play that takes place on an Illinois farm), and another of his plays, *True West*, was revived on Broadway last year. *A Lie of the Mind* received raves in a revival two years ago at London's Donmar Warehouse.

"I think this play is amazingly sad and funny at the same time," says Thibodeaux-Thompson. "It manages to be disturbing, romantic, poetic, funny, and even a little surreal at times. Shepard is a keen observer of American life."

I recently sat in on a rehearsal, and the actors are more than up for the challenge. The cast combines college students with veteran local actors, which makes this production all the more exciting. There's definitely an electric charge in the air as the actors pull together as an ensemble. The characters in this epic, roller-coaster ride of a play comprise two families dealing with loss and love and the American Dream.

Thibodeaux-Thompson has also brought in local musicians Mark Mathewson and Jennifer Ramm to perform a musical score. The pair hosts WUIS's Sunday night radio program, "Bluegrass Breakdown."

UIS's theater department is off to a great start.

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