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UIS theater program up and running

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BODY:

At a recent audition for Terence McNally's "It's Only A Play," the fall play Thibodeaux-Thompson is directing at the University of Illinois at Springfield, he complimented an actress on a well-read monologue. "Good for you," Thibodeaux-Thompson said as he made marks on a notepad.

He looked up to see the actress' odd facial expression.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"You make me feel nervous," the actress said. "I know, I know. Every single day in oral communications (class), you say not to be nervous, but ..."

"Well, some people just need to hear it every day."

As an assistant professor and the new director of theater at UIS, Thibodeaux-Thompson has plenty of students to reassure. By midsummer, he learned that his principles of acting class was filled and had a waiting list.

"Students were e-mailing me at my last job before I even got here," Thibodeaux-Thompson says. "If that's not a testament to how excited they are about this program, I don't know what is. That's never happened to me before. It will certainly pave the way for all of us."

It is evident when talking to Thibodeaux-Thompson that he shares his students' excitement about regenerating the theater program at UIS. He brings with him an impressive acting resume and background that includes acting or directing in more than 30 plays, qualifications to teach several theater courses and instructing posts at five colleges prior to UIS.

In 1989, Thibodeaux-Thompson earned a bachelor's degree in theater arts in his hometown of Minneapolis at the University of Minnesota. The University of Nebraska

not only was where he earned his master's degree in acting, but it's where he met his wife, Missy, who also is an actor and professor of theater.

After some time spent acting and directing in New York, Thibodeaux-Thompson began lecturing at colleges in North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia. Having returned to the Midwest after instructing theater students at Spelman College in Atlanta, Thibodeaux-Thompson calls his new position a "loose homecoming."

"Part of the attraction of this job was the opportunity to really design a theater program here," Thibodeaux-Thompson says. "From the moment I stepped off the plane for my interview, I could tell there was a hunger for theater in this town. Thus, this town was right for me."

To any actor, the GOTE method is crucial: goals, obstacles, tactics, expectations. Thibodeaux-Thompson is applying those goals not to a character, but to the way he's establishing theater at UIS.

"I wanted to pull up my socks and get some stuff on the boards," Thibodeaux-Thompson says. "There's no better way to work than work itself."

He already has two full classes and "It's Only a Play" debuting in two weeks. Additionally, he's prepping Sam Shepard's "A Lie of the Mind" for a spring production and is a faculty adviser to a fledging UIS student theater organization - quick work, but not too quick.

"He has a very realistic vision for the first year, in that he realizes there are some limitations," says Sue Weber, an assistant professor of communications at UIS with whom Thibodeaux-Thompson co-teaches an oral communications class.

"He's not walking into a place where all of a sudden he can have a musical. One of the great characteristics about Eric is that he's willing to adapt. If he was not, he would probably burn out."

Once you see how Thibodeaux-Thompson begins his acting classes, burnout is the last thing one could imagine him suffering. Spine-lengthening exercises, meant to "remove the embarrassment" of actors' physical contact, are scheduled at the top of the hour. He compares it to a symphony doing scales prior to a concert; actors also must "ready their instruments."

"One of the most important things is to demystify the craft of acting," Thibodeaux-Thompson says. "People say 'You're born with it.' But what does 'it' mean? In a way, acting is analogous to math. Some are naturals at it, and others, like me, need to work harder at it. Everyone in acting needs to work hard at it. Acting is fun, but not in a way that it's like 'Woo-hoo! We don't have to think about acting again until Monday!'"

During one class exercise, Thibodeaux-Thompson pairs his students up. Their

objective is to make their partner smile.

"Look at the eyes. Look at the nose. Look at the mouth," he says. "Look at the 4-year-old child your partner once was. Look at the corpse your partner once will be."

Grant Johnson is a second-year UIS student in Thibodeaux-Thompson's principles of acting class. He has acted before at the Muni and performed with the Springfield Ballet Company but says he has never learned the art of "drawing from your character" as he is from Thibodeaux-Thompson.

"I like his interaction, and that he makes you willing to do things," says Johnson, 23 of Springfield. "He makes it easy to be yourself and not be nervous or shy."

Thibodeaux-Thompson says he's blown away by Springfield's small-town friendliness. And at this stage in his life, with a 19-month-old daughter at home, that's exactly what he wants.

"The attitudes and personalities of this community are wonderful," Thibodeaux-Thompson says. "I know that this is a nice place where I can slow down and settle in for a while."

GRAPHIC: Eric Thibodeaux-Thompson is the new director of theater at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

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