

A woman with glasses and a red jacket is smiling and standing in front of a building. The building has a blue awning and several posters on the wall, including one for 'THE ROOTS'. The woman is wearing a red jacket over a red top and a black scarf. The background shows a concrete structure and a wooden door.

washington theater review

spring 2005

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**JENNIFER
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TAKE A LEAP
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Woolly Mammoth and the University of Maryland

Collaborate on a New Partnership

By Deryl Davis

Mitchell Hébert with Kathryn Kelley
in Round House Theatre's *The Diary of Anne Frank* —Stan Barouh

There's a new synergy in Washington, and it has nothing to do with politics. Many Washington area professional theater companies are teaming up with college and university theater departments to create exciting new opportunities for both. These relationships often mean increased financial support and a broader audience base for professional theater companies. They also bring expanded training programs and better networking opportunities for local theater departments. Audiences also can expect to gain, as schools and theaters combine resources to mount more shows, collaborate more fully on production elements, and give student actors a unique chance to work alongside their professional counterparts. The momentum that these partnerships foster will be highlighted by the upcoming production of Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*, the first project of the newest of these professional/university collaborations between Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company and the University of Maryland.

While regional school-theater programs have existed in the past, the size and number of them has increased dramatically over the past decade or so. George Mason University established its professional equity company, The Theater of the First Amendment, in 1990. In 2000,

The Shakespeare Theatre and The George Washington University founded their Academy for Classical Acting. Just this year, Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company and the University of Maryland started a new partnership to include collaborations on performances, educational opportunities, and possibly down the line, an advanced training program.

These relationships may be new, but they reflect an older dynamic, according to Olney Theatre Center (OTC) Artistic Director Jim Petosa, whose own Potomac Theatre Project was started through a partnership with Vermont's Middlebury College in 1987. "This synergy really began in the '70s with students coming to the Washington area to study theater," Petosa says. "It would be interesting to track the connection between working actors, directors, designers, and technicians to see how they got here. I think you'd find a story of interconnectedness rather than autonomy, of a theater community built upon deep relationships."

Petosa is both the Artistic Director of a professional theater and Director of the School of Theatre Arts at Boston University (BU). He's observed that school-theater partnerships are a growing trend across the country, for economic and programmatic reasons, but he believes Washington is leading the pack.

"There's an openness here that's unusual," Petosa explains. "More doors open for young theater professionals in Washington, and there's a celebration of new and fresh talent that comes into the community. In addition, our theater relationships aren't just local as in most cities, they're national, spread out to places like New England."

OTC currently has ongoing relationships with three college or university drama departments. It has a partnership with the University of Maryland's MFA program in theater design, which allows student scene, costume, and lighting designers to acquire professional experience and academic credit by working on professional productions at OTC; and it has partnerships with theater departments at Middlebury College and Boston University, which allow acting and directing students at those schools to work alongside theater professionals in OTC's summer Potomac Theatre Project.

"We've traditionally thought of university programs as actor training grounds," Petosa says, "and left the experimenting to professional theaters. But I'd like to see university theater departments become more like



Daniel MacLean Wagner

laboratories themselves - safe places where student actors and directors can experiment and try out new work which could be brought to professional theaters. That's something I'm going to be doing at BU - looking at how the school can grow and evolve by providing this kind of aesthetic research."

By any measure, the University of Maryland's Department of Theatre is a major cross-pollinator in the Washington region. The department prides itself on its "working" faculty - actors, directors, and designers who are regularly employed at professional theaters all over town. To cite one example, all three of the department's design professors work at OTC, and Department Chair Dan Wagner is also an Artistic Associate at Signature Theatre in Arlington.

So, it was no surprise when Mitchell Hébert, head of Maryland's acting program and longtime Woolly Mammoth company member, suggested a new collaboration that will come to

fruition this spring. "We were looking for a theater opportunity, but not one with a resident company," Department Chair Wagner says. "Our real interest was in expanding contacts with a professional company, where there was some confluence of missions."

Talks between Wagner, Hébert, Woolly Mammoth Artistic Director Howard Shalwitz and Associate Artistic Director Tom Prewitt led to a new partnership launched in January. The partnership's first project is a "blended" production of *Curse of the Starving Class*. The production will involve actors, designers, and technicians from both organizations, with three Maryland students sharing the stage with professional actors, including Hébert.

"We wanted something that didn't just look like the traditional model, with students relegated to the walk-on parts," Wagner says. "So we found a play that would feature students and allow them to interact with equity performers in a significant way." Two of the show's largest roles, that of the son and daughter in a dysfunctional farm family, will be played by students. The production will be directed by Daniel De Raey, who has worked both at Woolly and the University.

Prewitt says the partner organizations were looking for as many crossover points as

possible in their first joint production. "We saw this as an important opportunity for us both to expand on a common mission to train young theater artists, grow our education programs, and reach out to a broader audience," Prewitt explains. In addition, Maryland students will have the opportunity to take master classes with Woolly-affiliated artists.

The teaching component of the initiative is one of the most exciting parts for both organizations. This spring, three Woolly members and/or affiliates are teaching new courses in the University's theater department designed specifically in support of the

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Mitchell Hébert as Cyrano in the University of Maryland's *Cyrano de Bergerac* —Stan Barouh

focused as its profile has risen nationally. That's good news for Woolly Mammoth, which looks to expand its own educational programs as it moves into its new theater facility in downtown Washington. Prewitt says the two organizations hope to establish an advanced theater training program, perhaps as part of an MFA degree, to attract working actors from around the country. "Washington is really growing as a theater town," Prewitt asserts, "and while there are plenty of training opportunities here for

collaboration: Tom Prewitt on community arts development; Daniel De Raey on professional auditioning; and new Woolly Associate Artistic Director Rebecca Taichman on creating theatrical scripts from found texts. All three classes were fully subscribed when the semester began, reflecting a major goal of the affiliation - to expose as many students and artists to one another as possible. "We don't just want the impact to be on the small number of students in the show," Wagner says, "but for the larger artistic context of Woolly Mammoth to pervade our program."

Wagner says his department is becoming more externally

beginning actors, other than the Shakespeare Theatre's classical program, there's very little in the way of the advanced training opportunities you find in New York. We would like to fill that gap."

Unlike the undergraduates in the Woolly Mammoth-University of Maryland partnership, none of the students in The Shakespeare Theatre's Academy for Classical Acting will be spending time with Sam Shepard. At least not class time. The program, jointly administered by The Shakespeare Theatre and The George Washington University (GWU), is unapologetically centered on the Bard of Avon, while incorporating modern acting, movement, and

breathing techniques. The brainchild of Shakespeare Theatre Artistic Director Michael Kahn, who also is Director of Drama at Julliard in New York, the Academy is the only DC area program offering an MFA degree in acting. And unlike other programs, it's not for generalists. Rather, the ACA is looking for working theater professionals who want to hone their classical theater skills.

Program Director Catherine Weidner likens the 12-month graduate program to a teaching hospital for actors. "It's very intense," she says. "We've put what is usually a two-year curriculum into a single year, in order to meet the needs of working actors. There's very little time off, but by the time students leave, they have specific skills and experience to do great work."

The Academy for Classical Acting was founded in 2000 to address what Kahn saw as a dearth in classical training opportunities for American actors, which did not bode well for the future of classical theater in this country. While the Academy is meant to produce specialists, and not generalists, Weidner believes the classical acting skills are transferable to just about any form of theater. "When people ask, 'Why focus on Shakespeare?' I answer, 'Because he uses every muscle I have,'" Weidner says. "If you can do this, and do it well, you can do any kind of theater."

Weidner calls the Academy "a groove in a niche market," albeit a popular one. When Kahn conceived the idea for a classical acting program, GWU seemed a natural partner because of its proximity, Shakespeare research, and commitment to producing Shakespeare in its undergraduate acting program. "We wanted to tie education and performance together," Weidner says. "It was important to be able to offer our students a strong academic component along with the rigorous artistic work."

Leslie Jacobson, chair of GWU's Department of Theatre and Dance, who teaches a socio-historical seminar called "Shakespeare in Context," says the five-year partnership with The Shakespeare Theatre has benefited her students. "Our undergraduates benefit by having guest artists who teach in the ACA program come into undergraduate classes," she explains. "A few of our alumni have been in productions at The Shakespeare Theatre, as well. So we feel there is a healthy, mutually supportive relationship between these two institutions."

Of all the joint programs surveyed in this article, only that between the George Mason University Department of Theater and the Fairfax-based Theater of the First Amendment follows the traditional resident company model. The Theater of the First Amendment was established in

1990 as a professional resident company at the University's new Center for the Arts. Its mission was to provide the kind of artistically challenging theater experiences which touring productions did not often provide.

TFA Artistic Director Richard Davis, who is also Associate Dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts, says undergraduates benefit from the arrangement in a variety of ways - observing and working with resident theater professionals; exposure to a wide range of productions and developmental

processes; and building resume credits and occasional equity points. "We're trying for a 'best of both worlds' approach to educating and training," Davis says. "By that I mean a strong theater program within a liberal arts context, stressing both breadth and depth, coupled with the chance to work on a professional level with all of the intensity and rigor of that strange place known as the 'real world.'"

Curse of the Starving Class, at the Clarice Smith Performing Art Center at the University of Maryland, Apr. 21 – May 7.



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