

TEXT//SHERRI MILES IMAGES//KINDRA KLINEFF & KEN MARTIN

infinity

a play about perception

"THIS PLAY WILL OPEN THE EYES OF THE AUDIENCE AND FORCE THEM TO SEE BEYOND THE STEREOTYPES OF THE HOMELESS COMMUNITY IN BOSTON WITH THE HOPE THAT ONE DAY WE WILL FIND A COMMON GROUND." —RACHEL KELSEY

Students gather for rehearsal on Boston Common. From left: Heather Mumford '05, Purnima Baldwin '08, Rachel Kelsey '08 and friend Adam Gosselin.



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ONE BY ONE, a small crowd assembled in front of the Parkman Pavilion on the Boston Common. People sat on the grass, taking in the April afternoon sun while a guitarist draped in an American flag strummed and strolled among them. Six girls in gray t-shirts and jeans, and another with a bullhorn, walked slowly to the 'stage' in front of the pavilion and stood in formation facing the audience. "America... land of infinite possibility," they chorused. "This land is your land, this land is my land. This land was made for you AND me. There are people who are lonely,

have done this to themselves?" asks Kelsey. "There are reasons that go far beyond the stereotype and into the reality of the world we are living in. If people can begin to recognize these untold stories, we will feel we have succeeded."

Kelsey, writer of the play, first began interviewing homeless people during fall 2007 as part of Professor Debra Harkins' Community Psychology class. Kelsey chose Neighborhood Action as the site for her required community service, a program at the Church of St. John the Evangelist on Bowdoin Street

because there are so many people who will just say he should get a job: 'I can find a job, he can get a job.' No, it's so much bigger than that. It's so much more complicated."

IF YOU BUILD IT...

Ron Tibbetts, executive director of Neighborhood Action, encouraged their performance concept. "The second I mentioned the idea for the project at the end of the last semester, he was all for it," says Kelsey. "He was so supportive. I've bounced ideas

"We see homeless people every day as we walk through the city, but how often do we stop to think about their stories?"

people who are in pain, people who need a vision, a perspective for their lives and our world which is purposeful and life changing..."

The actors, students from the Suffolk University Theatre Department, call out their lines above the city soundscape of sirens, barking dogs, an unexpected bagpipe nearby and planes overhead. And *Infinity*, the play, has begun.

"WE HAVE TO DO THIS"

The vision and mission of the outdoor performance is drawn from a semester of community service work, a daily awareness of the homeless population in Boston, and a personal connection two ambitious students, Rachel Kelsey '08 and Purnima Baldwin '08, have to those in homeless circumstances, and they have something to say about it. Theatre major seniors and friends, they developed the idea for *Infinity* to co-produce a play about homeless and non-homeless people finding a common ground.

"We see homeless people every day as we walk through the city, but how often do we stop to think about their stories? As you walk down the street and pass a homeless man, do you just assume that they

in Boston that provides food, clothing, and medical and social services to the homeless, aging, and poor. Helping with dinners there on Monday and Thursday nights, Kelsey gained a new perspective.

"I have always considered myself to be relatively open-minded, but something about meeting people and seeing their world did so much for me in my understanding of what exactly it is to be homeless. I was raised by social workers and priests and people who do outreach. This was my first experience going into it myself," she says. "When I was on the streets afterwards—the way I looked at people was different. I found myself wanting to talk to people more, smile at people more after seeing them in the soup kitchen and then seeing them on the streets."

For Baldwin, the play's director, *Infinity* was the chance to bring a vision to life. "Since I was a freshman, I wanted my last production here to be about homeless people," she says. "My mom is an advocate for Loaves and Fishes, a soup kitchen in Ithaca where I'm from, and I worked there a lot when I was a kid. On a more personal note, my brother is actually homeless, so it has always been in my mind. I have a very close connection and I want to do something

off of him. He is very well respected within the homeless community."

Kelsey and Baldwin visited Neighborhood Action numerous times to meet with Tibbetts. "They really wanted to get some stories and understand how people became homeless, and how the struggle to get out of their current situation was going for them," says Tibbetts. "We did face-to-face interviews, and they came over on a couple of evenings when we had dinners and they sat in the back room here with people and simply asked them questions. I tried to find for them as diverse a group of folks as I could, so they could get a good picture of what it really means to be homeless or living in poverty. They took all that information and ran with it."

"One person, Henry, gave me inspiration for the title of the show," says Kelsey. "He was talking about his addiction and the lifestyle, and he described it as the infinity symbol: you would go out, and you'd just get pulled back in. It felt like it was never ending. You think you're catching a break, and then it sucks you back in again. And when he said that, it opened a lot of doors for me as far as the creative process goes and I used references to the word in the show. It's a big theme. Thanks Henry!"



Facing Page: Rachel Kelsey '08, writer and co-producer of *Infinity*.

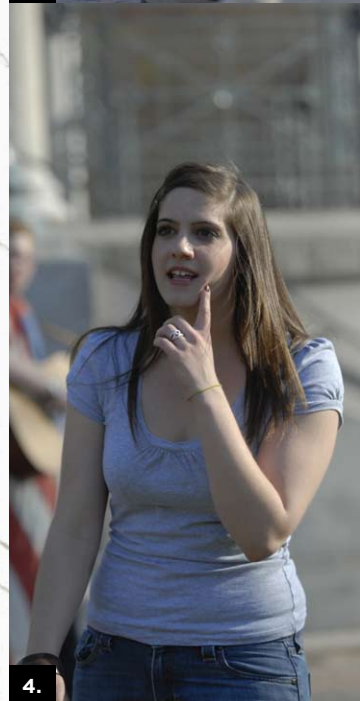
This Page: Cast members on performance day: (1) Meredith Mitchell '09, (2) Alex Kardon '11, (3) Adam Gosselin and (4) Kacie Kirkpatrick '11.



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abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province; establishing therein an Arbitrary



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Right: Purnima Baldwin '08, director and co-producer of *Infinity*.

Left Page: (1) Kelley Dooley '10 and Kaitlyn Flynn '11 in the audience, (2) sack lunches for all, prepared by the cast and crew, (3) Alex Kardon '11, (4) Purnima Baldwin and Rachel Kelsey after the performance.

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Kelsey and Baldwin were in new writing and directing territory with *Infinity*. "The script itself is very experimental," says Kelsey. "There is somewhat of a story line, but it's fragmented. It examines how we see each other, how we don't see each other, and what we don't realize about each other when we're walking down the streets every day—that there is no difference between us, we're all looking to just keep surviving and living our lives and finding happiness in some way."

All nine actors switch between homeless and non-homeless roles during the play. Characters start out the same but some face a job loss and begin

all worlds, theatre would really make us look at those bigger questions again. Why are things the way they are? Why do they have to be this way?"

...THEY WILL COME

It was April 23, performance day, and the turnout was terrific. "I was sitting in the front row," says Kaufman. "I'd been there all afternoon and then I remember turning around and there were all these people there. It was really exciting."

The actors walked back and forth, delivering separate and nearly simultaneous lines as they switched roles. "There are people who are lonely." "Do you

THE SOCIAL CAUSE LIVES ON

"I was impressed by how Rachel and Purnima saw beyond the stereotypes that many of us have of people who are homeless," says Kaufman. "People come to performance or art from different directions. I think for Purnima and Rachel, who really have a sense of theatrical art, they come to it from a sense of commitment for social change and as a means of exploring the world. Fortunately, they're good enough so what they do is actually entertaining, too. It's not just discreet or moralizing."

"There are a lot of reasons why people end up homeless or in situations like that," says Kelsey.

The script examines how we see each other, how we don't see each other, and what we don't realize about each other when we're walking down the streets every day.

a downward cycle of losing everything. The play then illustrates the difference between the homeless characters spiraling down and getting more desperate, and the other characters remaining at poverty level, and the widening gap between them.

One scene in particular illustrates this separation with a familiar exchange observed in the city on a daily basis. Some of the characters are scurrying to get to work, weaving around the homeless characters who stand motionless, asking for money, "Do you have a quarter?" "I need the quarter." "Well I need it more." "Well you're not listening to me." "You're a jerk because you're not giving me the quarter." "You're a jerk because you won't get a job."

"It was very courageous to try to explore such a painful topic about people who've been marginalized and vilified, who we all want to shut out of our lives," says Jim Kaufman, general manager of the Theatre Department and weekly logistics adviser to the students during the making of the play. "It's not very pleasant to think about that, to hold a mirror up to it and say, look, this is what's going on and is there something we can do about it? In the best of

have any change? I just need to get on the train." "All the money is gone, nowhere to go." Actresses on the pavilion pronounce the Declaration of Independence through bullhorns. "America, land of infinite possibilities..." "We hold these truths to be self-evident. That all men are created equal..." "We all have a path for life. There are different paths to take. My path could be your path but my path is my own path." "I am alive. I am breathing. I am walking the path that is my life." And in unison, the nine voices echo, "I will get there. I will get there."

Their voices join softly in "America the Beautiful." "Oh beautiful, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain..." "In reality I know very little," they continue, bullhorns raised to the sky. "I know what is around me. There are problems that surpass the basic needs for shelter. We're looking for a solution that may never come. Which voices are we listening to? How will we see ourselves? How will we see each other? How will we embrace all of life, how will we decide what to love about ourselves, and one another, and our world?"

The actors moved into a line formation, put the bullhorns down, and took a deep bow. And *Infinity*, the play, was complete.

"Many of the stereotypes, which have truth behind them, have to do with drug abuse, drug addiction, alcohol, and mental illness. A lot of schizophrenic people end up on the street, a lot of war vets, and I met all of those people.

"But then you'll meet someone who got in a car accident and didn't have insurance, and it's just really bad circumstances that led them to this place. That's what really changed for me: seeing beyond the stereotypes. It really could be anybody, any one of us. They're very kind and intelligent people who have a lot to offer, a lot of people realize that but there are so many who don't. And that's unfortunate, and that's one of the goals of the show—to get people's perception to change a little bit. Like mine did."

"Take a look at the other side for a while," says Baldwin, receiving flowers with Kelsey after the show. "Take a look at that other person. Consider who they are, instead of stereotyping them into who you think they are." ■

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