



Logan Capek (from left), Trey Porter and Nicole Carraher get stage direction from Jamie Bullins while acting out a scene during a rehearsal earlier this month in Crete. Bullins, associate professor of theater at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is the guest director of “The Cherry Orchard” — Doane’s spring production.

KENNETH FERRIERA, Journal Star

Making a big splash

Doane theater program competes with big schools

LAUREN PENNINGTON
Lincoln Journal Star

Compared to schools like the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Iowa State University, Doane University’s 1,000-student population feels like David facing Goliath on the competition stage.

But Doane’s theater program

has been able to compete at the highest level in recent years, winning 12 national awards at the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival at the end of 2022 and receiving six additional awards at the regional competition in January.

The region covers all undergraduate and graduate students across seven states — Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota.

“The students’ passion is extraordinary,” said Jamie Bullins,

associate professor of theater at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and guest director of “The Cherry Orchard” — Doane’s spring production. “Everyone is 100% committed and dedicated to the project. They really want to be there.”

In contrast to other competitions, KCACTF doesn’t differentiate between public and private schools, small and large student populations or athletic conferences, putting Doane on the same level as much larger universities in the region.

Doane

From A1

established programs.

“To see the success that comes from that show is not only a testament to the hard work from the students, but also to the support of the school for the program,” Morrill said. “KCACTF is a wonderful opportunity for small schools to make big splashes, and I think Doane theater is really good at making big splashes.”

Still, the contrast can be daunting for Doane students, who are used to classes as small as two or three students.

“These schools just have so many more students in general, they have what seems to be a more fleshed out theater program and they know what they’re doing,” Doane junior Jules Damme said. “You see them competing for awards and know it’s going to be an immense challenge, but it also feels incredibly rewarding to come home with a few

awards under the belt that could have gone to one of those larger schools.”

Damme, a theater major with an acting focus, has been in at least one show every semester while at Doane.

In the recent regional competition, Damme was selected for the Long Form Improv Team and was one of eight Doane students nominated for the Irene Ryan Acting Scholarship.

He was nominated for the scholarship for roles in “Love/Sick,” playing two different characters in different vignettes.

Although Damme didn’t make it past the preliminary round as a performer, Doane had four semifinalists and two finalists for the scholarship competition among hundreds of others.

“As cliché as it sounds, we really are one big family,” Damme said. “I don’t think we would have been as accomplished as we are now if we weren’t willing to have that vulnerability with each other. The work done for the shows that have won

the awards is apparent in the awards themselves, but also in the culture within each production.”

Part of that stems from the university’s size. Damme said it allows students to have a better connection with each other and the faculty, building a better sense of community across the program.

“The advantage, and what I really appreciate about Doane University, is the access that our students have to their professors,” Doane assistant professor of theater Joel Egger said. “We get to work right alongside them on the shows, not just in rehearsal but also in our workshops. On the technical side of things, we get to be designing and building right with the students.”

Egger said one of the greatest joys of his position is getting to know his students, and them getting to know him. That can be directly linked to Doane’s success on the stage, he said.

It also gives students a

chance to be more hands-on in the program and experiment with different parts of production — from acting to designing to directing.

“In my time at Doane, there hasn’t really been other small schools doing what Doane has been doing in terms of success,” Damme said. “We typically see this type of success in larger schools because they have more access to resources. ... However, there is support for Doane’s theater coming from all sides, and we make up for our size with our passion.”

Between support from the Blue River Arts Council, the Crete community and Doane students and faculty, Doane’s theater program is also building and maintaining community connections.

“It’s so important that a theater community isn’t just insulated in its own theater walls, that it breaches those walls and is able to bring stories to life and in the community within which it lives,” Egger said.

Please see DOANE, Page A2