

Theater on the move

Students travel across western Wisconsin to act as entertainers and educators for nearly 5,000 children

Story by Rachel Streich, Staff Writer



Graphic by Karl Enghofer, The Spectator

As a senior soon to graduate college, Claire Kafka Duda said she knows what it was like to sit in the audience as a child. She can still recall the impact a play with a good story and engaging actors had on her.

"I remember being a child and having a show really resonate and stay with me for a long time," she said.

Kafka Duda has now moved from the theater seat to the stage. Along with nine other classmates, she gives children throughout western Wisconsin experiences similar to the ones she had as a kid.

For her last show as a UW-Eau Claire student, she has been acting in a production that travels to elementary schools Tuesday and Thursday mornings.

The Touring Theatre is part of a class offered once a year, which impacts both elementary school students and college students.

Each week the students in the class pack everything they need in a mini-van and drive about an hour or an hour and a half away to elementary schools.

At the end of the semester, the upperclassmen in the Touring Theatre will have performed 17 shows reaching nearly 5,000 students in their school gymnasiums. The current show, "Wiley and the Hairy Man," also appeared twice on campus and once in the Heyde Center for the Arts in Chippewa Falls.

The performances allow elementary school students to use their imaginations and creative thinking skills, Kafka Duda said. She said they also allow children to connect to adults on stage and learn important life lessons.

"There's so much education that I am partaking in as an actor, it's mind-blowing to me that I can have such influence on a child as a part of this process," she said.

An appeal of the Touring Theatre for students is it satisfies the service learning requirement, Kafka Duda said. It allows students to use their talents for the good of the public.

"It's so easy to see the connection of how I'm serving the community," she said. "I'm bringing quality theater to kids, giving them messages geared toward them that they can connect with and bringing arts to the community."



NOTHIN BUT A HOUND DOG: Claire Kafka Duda performed her role as Dog at the Haas Fine Arts Center's dance studio. She made her costume and designed her own makeup for the performance. Submitted

The Touring Theatre also allows schools to host yearly theater productions that they would otherwise not be able to afford. Jennifer Chapman, the professor of the class and director of the play, said she offers the production to elementary schools at a low cost of \$300.

She said for many children, this is the only theater production they will see for the whole year.

Chapman said she has worked to give children the best experience possible by using a unique theater setting. Instead of the typical theater, she uses arena staging. The students create a circular stage space and seat the kids on the hard gym floor around them. This allows up to 400 kids to sit very closely to the action.

"It's really important to me in theater for young audiences that we always show the kids how the magic of theater happens," she said.

In "Wiley and the Hairy Man," children see magic and conjuring in a Southern folktale. The story is about a boy who must face his fears, without a grown-up doing it for him. Chapman said it honors how difficult and challenging being a kid is and it brings about a truthful message.

In addition to the children's gain of seeing the plays, the cast obtains a positive experience as well.

Sean Porten, a junior theater major who plays Wiley, said he has seen the benefits of collaboration and working with a group of students even when it may be difficult.

"It's challenging because it's learning to be professional and not letting your lack of sleep or grumpiness get in the way of putting on the show," Porten said.

Before they leave campus by 7 a.m. to perform every week, each student must work for seven weeks rehearsing and putting the show together, including making props and costuming.

Each student plays a part in building the show in some way. As Kafka Duda plays Dog in the production, she made her own costume and designed makeup in addition to acting. Chapman said the students must use elements of their theater education, such as set design and lighting, to create a show with integrity and interest.

"The Touring Theatre is really a culminating experience for students because they have to utilize all these different skills," Chapman said.

Although Chapman and other faculty members help students, they are ultimately responsible for the end product.

Porten said the process of making the show happen is more involved than a main-stage show because students do not just have one role. Yet he said the tiring amount of work all pays off when he can see the children's reactions and the smiles on their faces.

"It's very rewarding when within the first two minutes of the play you hear uproarious laughter," Porten said.

He said the production also has an interesting connection to him because his father played the same character in the show almost thirty years ago.

Growing up with parents who were once theater majors has exposed to an arts environment and has led him to pursue a career in theatre one day himself, he said.

Porten said the class provides him a good stepping stone in the future.

"It gives you the sense of what it would actually be like to professionally tour a children's show," he said.

Cade Sikora, a senior theater major and the assistant director of this year's play, said he has seen how working with the lighting and set design, among other things, has allowed him to understand what it is like to lead and put together a show.

He said it is a privilege to be able to give kids in small towns the chance to see a play on this level.

Two years with the Touring Theater have added to his education in a significant way, he said.

Apart from the abilities students develop on stage, Chapman said this class gives students everyday life skills.

“It is an incredible training ground for emotional intelligence, for endurance, and for a tolerance for failure,” she said.

At the end of each show, Chapman said she ultimately hopes the children can gain an experience that will impact their futures.

“We’re doing this to make kids see that they too are creative people,” Chapman said. “And that they too could be doing this just like us.”